

# The Mauryan Empire

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The Mauryan Empire is regarded as the first and one of the greatest empires in India. It is called an empire because it annexed and brought several smaller states under its control. Chandragupta Maurya founded the Mauryan Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC after overthrowing the Nandas from Magadha. His son Bindusara further extended the boundaries of the empire. Bindusara's son—king Ashoka—is regarded as one of the greatest kings of ancient India.

## Sources

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### Literary Sources

- *Arthashastra* written by Kautilya forms one of the most important sources of the history of the Mauryan period. Kautilya or Chanakya was the chief advisor of Chandragupta Maurya. The book contains important information on politics, rules in diplomacy, principles of administration and other state matters.
- *Indika* was written by Megasthenes who was the Greek ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He was sent to Chandragupta's court by Seleucus, a Greek ruler. Megasthenes lived in the court of Chandragupta for about five years. He observed the societal norms, culture and people in the country. His work on India was later referred by scholars such as Arrian, Strabo and Diodorus.

### Archaeological Sources

- Edicts are the royal proclamations issued by the ruler. Edicts of Ashoka are the oldest, best preserved and precisely dated records of India. Ashoka's edicts include 14 Major Rock Edicts, seven pillar edicts and several minor rock edicts.
- These edicts reflect the policies and events which took place during the reign of Ashoka. For example, the Rock edict XIII mentions that great miseries inflicted on the people during the Kalinga War changed the heart of Ashoka and he vowed not to wage a war again. Ashoka spread the message of peace, non-violence and universal brotherhood to the people through the edicts.
- The Sanchi Stupa is a semi-spherical dome structure which contains the relics of Buddha such as his teeth, hair or bones. The Sanchi Stupa was built by Ashoka in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Many stories taken from Jataka and the events of the life of the Buddha have been engraved on the gateways of the stupa at Sanchi.

## Chandra Gupta Maurya

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- He was the founder of the Mauryan Empire. He defeated the Nandas of Magadha with the help and assistance of Kautilya.
- He founded the empire after the Greeks under Alexander attacked India. After the Greeks retreated to their land, he first occupied Punjab and later attacked and annexed Magadha. He made Patliputra his capital.
- Seleucus, one of the army commanders of Alexander, again attacked India in 306 BC. Chandra Gupta Maurya defeated him and signed a treaty with Seleucus according to which he received the territories of Kabul, Kandahar, Heart and Baluchistan. He also married Seleucus's daughter, Helena.
- According to Jain literature, Chandra Gupta renounced the world after ruling for 24 years.



Silver coin of Seleucus Nikator, who fought the battle with Chandra Gupta Maurya in 305 BC

Bindusara succeeded Chandra Gupta Maurya. He ruled up to 273 BC. He is regarded as the 'slayer of foes' as he conquered many parts of South India after defeating sixteen rulers.

## Ashoka

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Ashoka succeeded his father Bindusara to the throne. After ascending the throne, he took the title of Devanamapriya (the beloved of the Gods) and Priyadarshi (the beautiful one). He ruled up to 232 BC.



King Ashoka

### The War of Kalinga

Kalinga was located at a strategic position. It was the centre of important trade and pilgrimage routes. Ashoka therefore decided to annex the state. The Kalinga War took place in 261 BC. According to Megasthenes, Kalinga had a powerful army. Ashoka faced tough resistance from its army. The state of Kalinga was conquered, but the battle resulted in great loss of life. About one and a half lakh people died in the war. The war had far reaching consequences on Ashoka.

### Consequences of the Kalinga War

- The miseries and deaths inflicted on the people during the war brought about a great change in the personal and political life of Ashoka. He gave up the policy of conquest by force.
- After the war, Ashoka stopped hunting and eating meat on certain days. He also abandoned the life of luxury.
- Ashoka was inspired by doctrines of Buddhism. He thus declared Buddhism as the state religion.
- The prisoners captured during the war were employed in agricultural fields as labourers. This increased the productivity of the land and brought economic prosperity to the empire.
- Ashoka abandoned the policy of waging wars and upheld the doctrine of non-violence. This led to the decline in the efficiency of the Mauryan army.

After conquering Kalinga, Ashoka's empire extended from the Hindukush Mountains in the northwest to River Pennar in the south. His empire also included the parts of Nepal, Kabul, Heart and Kandahar provinces in the west.

## Mauryan Administration

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The Mauryan Empire covered most Indian territories and encompassed the western, eastern, northern and southern parts of the country. The Mauryan Empire was pan India. It means that the establishment of the Mauryan Empire marked the end of small states. Because of the increase in agricultural activities, trade links were established with other countries. After Ashoka renounced wars after the conquest of Kalinga, the Mauryan kings began to pay more attention towards the development of social and economic lives of the people. India became economically prosperous.

### Administration

*Arthashastra* and *Indika* are two main books which provide us information about the administration during the period of Ashoka. The administration under the Mauryas was divided into two—civil administration and military administration.

**Civil administration** was divided into two main divisions—central government and provincial government.

#### Central Government

- The Mauryan administration was highly centralised as the king had all the powers and his decisions were considered final.

- The king was assisted by the council of ministers called mahamantriparishad. Each minister was responsible for his department.
- The council of ministers included the chief pujari or Purohit, the Senapati (commander of the army), the Sannidhata (head treasurer) and the Samaharta (the taxation expert).
- Some other ministers included the Accountant General, Superintendent of Ports, Superintendent of Weights and Measures, and Controller of Commerce.
- Ashoka appointed Mahamantras to look after the welfare of his subjects.

### **Provincial Government**

- The provincial administration of Ashoka was divided into five provinces—Patliputra, Ujjain, Taxila, Swarnagari and Tosali.
- Only the princes were made the head of the provinces. They were known as Kumars or Aryaputra.
- The Kumars were assisted by governors called the mahamatras. Pradeshika collected the taxes. The Rajukta performed the modern-day functions of a Tahsildar or revenue officer. The Yukta was a treasurer.

### **District Administration**

- The provinces were divided into various districts called the Janapads.
- At the district level also the administration was looked after by the Pradeshika, Rajukta and Yuktas.

### **Administration of Cities**

- Important cities of this time were Patliputra, Taxila, Ujjain, Swarnanagri and Tosali. The head of the city was called Nagardhakshya.
- In Indika, Megasthenes had mentioned that Patliputra, the capital city, was surrounded by a wooden wall which had 64 gates and 570 towers.
- The administration of Patliputra was looked after by a committee of 30 members. They looked into various matters such as trade and commerce, industries, collection of taxes and comforts of foreigners.

### **The Revenue System**

- The land revenue was the chief source of income. It was fixed between one-fourth and one-sixth of the produce depending on the fertility of the soil. Tax was slightly more for irrigated lands.
- There were two types of taxes—Bali and Bhaga. Bhaga was an agricultural tax, while Bali was a religious tax.
- Revenue from trade was another main source of income. Pataliputra, Ujjain, Taxila and Broach were some important inland trading centres. Overseas trade was carried on with the Greek kingdoms of Central Asia and the Middle East.
- Toll tax was imposed on articles which were brought for sale. Taxes were also levied on forest produce and minerals.



Mauryan cast copper coin dating back to late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC

### **The Spy System**

- The Mauryas had a very efficient spy system. Many women were also appointed as spies and were posted in different regions of the kingdom.
- The spies kept a watch on officers such as the revenue officers and senapati. Many spies were recruited to keep an eye on other spies.
- The spy system was introduced to keep a watch on the common people, officers and ministers of the state. The king was also informed of the public opinion on important issues and decisions taken by him.

## Military Administration

- The greatest strength of the Mauryan administration was the large and well-equipped army. It consisted of infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots.
- According to the Roman writer Pliny, the Mauryas had 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry and 9,000 war elephants.
- The chief weapons used were bows and arrows, shields and swords. Senapati was the head of the army. The king was the commander-in-chief of the army and all the important decisions were taken by him. Soldiers were paid in cash.
- The Mauryan emperor had built various forts at strategic locations for maintaining the safety and security of the empire.

## Religious Administration

Ashoka felt remorse after the Kalinga War. He became a firm follower of Buddhism and declared it as a state religion. He followed the policy of **Dhamma**. Its main principles were

- To respect elders and to love children
- To follow ahimsa or non-violence
- To do good deeds as this will reap benefits in the next life
- To respect all religions
- Not to perform unnecessary rituals

As a result of Ashoka's Dhamma, people began to follow a policy of religious tolerance and began to live a moral and ethical life. As wars were no longer fought by the kingdom, many welfare works were undertaken which helped people to live a peaceful life.



Fragment of the 6<sup>th</sup> Pillar edict of Ashoka, 238 BC, British Museum

Ashoka took the following steps to spread Buddhism far and wide. These were

- Many **Dhamma Mahamatras** were appointed by Ashoka for propagating Buddhism.
- Ashoka patronised Buddhism and sent his son and daughter to preach Buddhism in Ceylon (Sri Lanka).
- He banned the slaughter of animals for the royal kitchen. Fifty-six days in a year were fixed when animals could not be slaughtered throughout his kingdom.
- Ashoka's orders were inscribed on edicts. These stone edicts spread the message of peace, non-violence and universal brotherhood among the people.
- Missionaries were sent to countries such as Nepal, Egypt, Syria and Myanmar to spread Buddhism.
- Ashoka convened the Third Buddhist Council in his kingdom to resolve differences in Buddhism.
- Ashoka himself followed the policy of religious tolerance. People in his kingdom were not forced to accept Buddhism and were tolerant of other religions.