

The Significance of Maurya Rule

State Control

The brahmanical law-books repeatedly stressed that the king should be guided by the laws laid down in the Dharmashastras and by the customs prevalent in India. Kautilya advises the king to promulgate dharma when the social order based on the varnas and ashramas (stages in life) collapses. He calls the king *dharmapravartaka* or promulgator of the social order. That the royal orders were superior to other orders was asserted by Ashoka in his inscriptions. Ashoka promulgated dharma and appointed officials to inculcate and enforce its essentials throughout India.

An assertion of royal absolutism was a natural culmination of the policy of military conquest adopted by the princes of Magadha. Anga, Vaishali, Kashi, Koshala, Avanti, Kalinga, etc., one by one were annexed to the Magadhan empire. Military control over these areas eventually turned into a coercive control over the lives of the people. Magadha had the requisite power of the sword to enforce its overall authority. In order to control various spheres of life the state had to maintain a vast bureaucracy. In no other period of ancient history do we hear of as many officers as in Maurya times.

The administrative mechanism was backed by an elaborate system of espionage. Various types of spies collected intelligence about foreign enemies and kept an eye on numerous officers. They also promoted superstitious practices to collect money from credulous people. Important functionaries were called *tirthas*. It appears that most functionaries were paid in cash, the highest among whom, the minister (*mantrin*), high priest (*purohita*), commander-in-chief (*senapati*) and crown prince (*yuvaraja*), were paid generously. They

received as much as 48,000 *panas* (*pana* was a silver coin equal to three-fourths of a *tola*). In sharp contrast to them, the lowest officers were given 60 *panas* in consolidated pay although some employees were paid as little as 10 or 20 *panas*. Thus there was great disparity in the salaries of employees.

Economic Regulations

If we rely on the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, it would appear that the state appointed twenty-seven superintendents (*adhyakshas*), principally to regulate its economic activities. They controlled and regulated agriculture, trade and commerce, weights and measures, crafts such as weaving and spinning, mining, and the like. The state also provided irrigation facilities and regulated water supply for the benefit of agriculturists. Megasthenes informs us that in the Maurya empire the officials measured the land as in Egypt and inspected the channels through which water was distributed into smaller channels.

According to the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, a striking social development of the Maurya period was the employment of slaves in agricultural operations. Megasthenes states that he did not notice any slaves in India, but there is little doubt that there had been domestic slaves from Vedic times onwards. It seems that during the Maurya period slaves were engaged in agricultural work on a large scale. The state maintained farms on which numerous slaves and hired labourers were employed. About 150,000 war-captives brought by Ashoka from Kalinga to Pataliputra may have been engaged in agriculture, but the number of 1,50,000 seems to be exaggerated. However, ancient Indian society was not a slave society. The tasks that slaves performed in Greece and Rome were undertaken by the shudras in India. The shudras were regarded as the collective property of the three higher varnas. They were compelled to serve them as slaves, artisans, agricultural labourers, and domestic servants.

Several reasons suggest that royal control was exercised over a very large area, at least in the core of the empire. This was because of the strategic position of Pataliputra, from where royal agents could sail up and down the Ganges, Son, Punpun, and Gandak rivers. Besides this, the royal road ran from Pataliputra to Nepal through Vaishali and Champaran. We also hear of a road at the foothills of the Himalayas which passed from Vaishali through Champaran to Kapilavastu, Kalsi (in Dehra Dun district), Hazra, and eventually to Peshawar. Megasthenes speaks of a road connecting northwestern India with Patna. Roads also linked Patna with Sasaram, and from there they ran to Mirzapur and central India. The

capital was also connected with Kalinga via a route through eastern MP, and Kalinga in turn was linked with Andhra and Karnataka. All this facilitated transport in which horses may have played an important part. The Ashokan inscriptions appear on important highways. The stone pillars were made in Chunar near Varanasi from where they were transported to north and south India. Maurya control over the settled parts of the country may have matched that of the Mughals and perhaps of the East India Company. Medieval transport improved as a consequence of more settlements on the highways and the use of stirrured horses. In the late eighteenth century, when the dominions of the Company extended up to Allahabad, tax collections were transported by boat from eastern UP to Calcutta, and the transport system was much improved when steam navigation began on the Ganges around 1830.

In the distant areas the Maurya imperial authority may not have been effective. Pataliputra was the chief centre of royal power, but Tosali, Suvarnagiri, Ujjain, and Taxila were seats of provincial power. Each of them was governed by a governor called *kumara* or prince, and thus every governor hailed from the royal family. The princely governor of Tosali administrated Kalinga and also parts of Andhra, and that of Suvarnagiri ruled the Deccan area. Similarly, the princely governor of Ujjain ruled the Avanti area while that of Taxila the frontier area. The princely governors may have functioned as autonomous rulers, and although some governors oppressed their subjects, Ashoka's authority was never seriously questioned.

The Maurya rulers did not have to deal with a large population. All told, their army did not exceed 650,000 men. If 10 per cent of the population was recruited, the total population in the Gangetic plains may not have been over six and a half million.

Ashokan inscriptions show that royal writ ran throughout the country except the extreme east and south. Nineteen Ashokan inscriptions have been found in AP and Karnataka, but rigid state control may not have proved effective much beyond the mid-Gangetic zone owing to difficulty in means of communications.

The Maurya period constitutes a landmark in the system of taxation in ancient India. Kautilya names many taxes which were collected from peasants, artisans, and traders. This required a strong and efficient machinery for assessment, collection, and storage. The Mauryas attached greater importance to assessment than to storage and deposit. The *samaharta* was the highest officer in charge of assessment and collection, and the *sannidhata* was the chief custodian of the state treasury and storehouse. The assessor-cum-collector was far more important than the chief treasurer. The damage inflicted on the state by the first

was thought to be more serious than any inflicted by the second. In fact, an elaborate machinery for assessment was first set up during the Maurya period. The list of taxes mentioned in the *Arthashastra* is impressive, and, if these were really collected, very little would have been left to the people to live on.

The epigraphic evidence we have for the existence of rural storehouses shows that taxes were also collected in kind. These granaries were probably also meant to help local people in times of famine, drought, etc.

It seems that the punch-marked silver coins, which carry the symbols of the peacock and crescented hill, formed the imperial currency of the Mauryas. They have been discovered in large numbers. Copper coins were also punch-marked. Besides punch-marked silver and copper coins, cast copper coins and die-struck coins were also issued. Without doubt, all these different types of coins helped the collection of taxes and payment of officers in cash. Also, because of its uniformity, the currency must have facilitated market exchange in a wider area.

The term empire is used for the territories conquered by the Magadhan kings, but this pre-industrial empire was different from the colonial empire of the industrial period. The pre-industrial empire was essentially territorial, based on taxes and tributes. The pre-industrial rulers collected taxes from a limited area under their direct control but also received tributes from distant rulers who acknowledged the suzerainty of the emperor. In the colonial empires of the industrial age, the rulers obtained raw material from their dominions for the manufacture of various goods which were sold to the dominions. Thus cotton was almost unknown to Europe, and Indian textiles were sold in Britain. However, with the establishment of their rule, the British imported huge quantities of cotton from India, and sold cotton cloth to India in addition to woollen fabrics. In this context the pre-British empires were quite different.

Art and Architecture

The Mauryas made a remarkable contribution to art and architecture, and introduced stone masonry on a wide scale. Megasthenes states that the Maurya palace at Pataliputra was as splendid as that in the capital of Iran. Fragments of stone pillars and stumps, indicating the existence of an 84-pillared hall, have been discovered at Kumrahar on the outskirts of modern Patna. Although these remains do not recall the magnificence mentioned by Megasthenes, they certainly attest to the high technical skill achieved by Maurya artisans in polishing the stone pillars, which are as shining as the Northern Black Polished

Ware. It was a very difficult task to transport the huge blocks of stone from the quarries and to polish and embellish them when they were erected. The whole process suggests a great feat of engineering. Each pillar is made of a single piece of buff-coloured sandstone. Only their capitals, which are beautiful pieces of sculpture in the form of lions or bulls, are joined to the pillars on the top. The erection of the polished pillars throughout India shows the spread of the technical knowledge involved in the art of polishing them. It also shows that transport had spread far and wide. The Maurya artisans also started the practice of hewing out caves from rocks for monks to live in. The earliest examples are the Barabar caves at a distance of 30 km from Gaya. Later, this form of cave architecture spread to western and southern India.

In the central phase of the Northern Black Polished Ware around 300 BC, the central Gangetic plains became the centre of terracotta art. In Maurya times terracottas were produced on a large scale. They generally represented animals and women. The women included mother goddesses, and animals included elephants. These terracottas were however modelled by hand. The stone statue of Yakshini in the form of a beautiful woman found in Didarganj (Patna) is noted for its Maurya polish.

Spread of Material Culture and the State System

The Mauryas created for the first time a well-organized state machinery which operated at the heart of the empire. Their conquest also opened the doors for trade and missionary activity. It appears that the contacts established by administrators, traders, and Jaina and Buddhist monks led to the spread of the material culture of the Gangetic basin to areas situated on the periphery of the empire. The new material culture in the Gangetic basin was based on an intensive use of iron, the prevalence of writing, punch-marked coins, an abundance of beautiful pottery called Northern Black Polished Ware, the introduction of burnt bricks and ring wells, and above all, on the existence of towns in north-eastern India. A Greek writer called Arrian states that it is not possible to record with accuracy the number of cities on account of their multiplicity. Thus, the Maurya period witnessed a rapid development of material culture in the Gangetic plains. Given the access to the rich iron ores of south Bihar, people used more and more of this metal. This period evidences socketed axes, hoes, spades, sickles, and ploughshares. Besides these iron implements, the spoked wheel also began to be used. Although arms and weapons were the monopoly of the Maurya state, the use of the other iron tools was not restricted

to any class. Their use and manufacture must have spread from the Gangetic basin to distant parts of the empire. In the end of the Maurya period burnt bricks were used for the first time in north-eastern India. Maurya constructions made of burnt bricks have been found in Bihar and UP. Houses were made of bricks, and also timber which was available in abundance because of the dense vegetation in ancient times. Megasthenes speaks of the wooden structure at the Maurya capital Pataliputra. Excavations show that logs of wood were also used as an important line of defence against flood and invasion. The use of burnt bricks spread in the outlying provinces of the empire. Because of the moist climate and heavy rainfall, it was not possible to have large, lasting structures made of mud or mud-brick, as was the case in the dry zones. Therefore, diffusion of the use of burnt-brick proved to be a great boon, eventually leading to the growth of towns in the different parts of the empire. Similarly, ring wells, which were first constructed under the Mauryas in the Gangetic plains spread beyond the heart of the empire. As ring wells supplied water to people for domestic use, it was no longer imperative to found settlements on the banks of rivers. Ring wells also served as soak pits in congested settlements.

The principal elements of the mid-Gangetic material culture seem to have been transferred with modifications to northern Bengal, Kalinga, Andhra, and Karnataka, but, of course, the local cultures of these regions also developed independently. In Bangladesh, the Mahasthana inscription in Bogra district is in Maurya Brahmi. NBPW has been found at Bangarh in Dinajpur district and sherds of it at Chandraketugarh in the 24 Parganas in West Bengal. Gangetic associations can be attributed to settlements at Sisupalgarh in Orissa. The settlement of Sisupalgarh is ascribed to Maurya times in the third century BC, and it contains NBPW, iron implements, and punch-marked coins. As Sisupalgarh is situated near Dhauli and Jaugada, where Ashokan inscriptions have been found on the ancient highway passing along the eastern coast of India, the material culture may have reached this area as a result of contact with Magadha. This contact may have started in the fourth century BC when the Nandas are said to have conquered Kalinga, but it deepened after the conquest of Kalinga in the third century BC. Possibly as a measure of pacification after the Kalinga war, Ashoka promoted some settlements in Orissa which had been incorporated into his empire.

Although we find iron weapons and implements at several places in Andhra and Karnataka in the Maurya period, the advance of iron technology in that area was the contribution of the megalith builders noted for various kinds of large stone burials including those of a round form. However, some of these places

have Ashokan inscriptions as well as sherds of the NBPW of the third century BC. For example, Ashokan inscriptions have been found at Amaravati and three other sites in Andhra and at nine places in Karnataka. It therefore appears that, from the eastern coast, ingredients of the material culture percolated through Maurya contacts into the lower Deccan plateau.

The art of making steel may have spread through Maurya contacts across some other parts of India. Steel objects relating to about 200 BC or an earlier date have been found in the mid-Gangetic plains. The spread of steel may have led to jungle clearance and the use of better methods of cultivation in Kalinga, and could have created the conditions for the rise of the Cheti kingdom in that region. Although the Satavahanas rose to power in the Deccan in the first century BC, yet in some ways their state was a projection of the Maurya. As will be shown later, they also issued inscriptions in Prakrit, and adopted some of the administrative measures of the Mauryas.

It seems that stimulus to state formation in peninsular India came from the Mauryas not only in the case of the Chetis and the Satavahanas but also that of the Cheras (Keralaputras), the Cholas, and the Pandyas. According to Ashokan inscriptions, all the three last-mentioned people came together with the Satyaputras, and the people of Tamraparni or Sri Lanka lived on the borders of the Maurya empire, and were, therefore, familiar with the Maurya state. The Pandyas were known to Megasthenes who visited the Maurya capital. Ashoka called himself 'dear to the gods', a title which was translated into Tamil and adopted by the chiefs mentioned in the Sangam texts.

The existence of inscriptions, occasional NBPW sherds, and punch-marked coins in parts of Bangladesh, Orissa, Andhra, and Karnataka from about the third century BC shows that during the Maurya period attempts were made to spread elements of the mid-Gangetic basin culture in distant areas. The process seems to be in accord with the instructions of Kautilya. Kautilya advised that new settlements should be founded with the help of cultivators, who were apparently vaishyas, and with that of shudra labourers who should be drafted from overpopulated areas. In order to bring the virgin soil under cultivation, the new peasants were allowed a remission in tax and supplied with cattle, seeds, and money. The state did this in the expectation that it would recover what it had given. Such settlements were necessary in those areas where people were not acquainted with the use of the iron ploughshare, and this policy led to the opening of large areas to cultivation and settlement.

How far the Maurya towns facilitated the diffusion of the material culture of the Gangetic plains into the tribal belt of central India, extending from Jharkhand

in the east to the Vindhya in the west, cannot be said. It is however quite clear that Ashoka maintained intimate contacts with the tribal people, who were exhorted to observe dharma. Their contact with the *dhammamahamatras* appointed by Ashoka must have enabled them to imbibe rudiments of the higher culture prevalent in the Gangetic basin. In this sense, Ashoka launched a deliberate and systematic policy of acculturation. He states that as a result of the diffusion of dhamma, men would mingle with gods. This implies that tribal and other people would take to the habits of a settled, taxpaying, peasant society and develop a respect for paternal power, royal authority, and for the monks, priests, and officers who helped in enforcing his authority. His policy succeeded. Ashoka claims that hunters and fishermen had given up killing and practised dhamma, which implies that they had taken to a settled agricultural life.

Causes of the Fall of the Maurya Empire

The Magadha empire, which had been reared by successive wars culminating in the conquest of Kalinga, began to disintegrate after the exit of Ashoka in 232 BC. Several causes seem to have brought about the decline and fall of the Maurya empire.

Brahmanical Reaction

The brahmanical reaction began as a result of Ashoka's policy. There is no doubt that Ashoka adopted a tolerant policy and asked the people to respect even the brahmanas, but he issued his edicts in Prakrit and not in Sanskrit. He prohibited the killing of birds and animals, and derided superfluous rituals performed by women. The anti-sacrifice attitude of Buddhism adopted by Ashoka adversely affected the incomes of brahmanas. Further, Ashoka appointed *rajukas* to govern the countryside and introduce *vyavaharasamata* and *dandasamata*. This meant the same civil and criminal law for all varnas. But the Dharmashastra compiled by the brahmanas prescribed varna discrimination. Naturally this policy infuriated the brahmanas.

Some new kingdoms that arose on the ruins of the Maurya empire were ruled by the brahmanas. The Shungas and the Kanvas, who ruled in MP and further east on the remnants of the Maurya empire, were brahmanas. Similarly, the Satavahanas, who founded kingdom in the western Deccan and Andhra, claimed to be brahmanas. These brahmana dynasties performed Vedic sacrifices that were discarded by Ashoka.

Financial Crisis

The enormous expenditure on the army and payment to the bureaucracy created a financial crisis for the Maurya empire. As far as we know, in ancient times the Mauryas maintained the largest army and the largest regiment of officers. Despite the range of taxes imposed on the people, it was difficult to maintain this huge superstructure. It seems that Ashoka made large donations to the Buddhist monks which left the royal treasury empty. Towards the end, in order to meet expenses, they were obliged to melt gold images.

Oppressive Rule

Oppressive rule in the provinces was an important cause of the break-up of the empire. In the reign of Bindusara, the citizens of Taxila bitterly complained against the misrule of wicked bureaucrats (*dushtamatyas*). Their grievance was redressed by the appointment of Ashoka, but when Ashoka became emperor, a similar complaint was made by the same city. The Kalinga edicts show that Ashoka was much concerned about oppression in the provinces and, therefore, asked the *mahamatras* not to tyrannize the townsmen without due cause. For this purpose he introduced rotation of officers in Tosali (in Kalinga), Ujjain and Taxila. He himself spent 256 nights on a pilgrimage which may have helped administrative supervision. All this however failed to stop oppression in the outlying provinces, and after his retirement Taxila took the earliest opportunity to throw off the imperial yoke.

New Knowledge in the Outlying Areas

We may recall that Magadha owed its expansion to certain basic material advantages. Once the knowledge of the use of these elements of culture spread to central India, the Deccan, and Kalinga as a result of the expansion of the Magadhan empire, the Gangetic basin, which formed the heart of the empire, lost its special advantage. The regular use of iron tools and weapons in the peripheral provinces coincided with the decline and fall of the Maurya empire. On the basis of the material culture acquired from Magadha, new kingdoms could be founded and developed. This explains the rise of the Shungas and Kanvas in central India, of the Chetis in Kalinga, and of the Satavahanas in the Deccan.

Neglect of the North-West Frontier

and the Great Wall of China

Since Ashoka was primarily preoccupied with missionary activities at home and abroad, he was unable to pay attention to safeguarding the passes through the north-western frontier. This had become necessary in view of the movement of tribes in Central Asia in the third century BC. The Scythians were in a state of constant flux. A nomadic people principally reliant on the use of the horse, they posed a serious danger to the settled empires in China and India. The Chinese ruler Shih Huang Ti (247–10 BC) constructed the Great Wall of China in about 220 BC to shield his empire against the attacks of the Scythians, but Ashoka took no such measures. Naturally, when the Scythians made a push towards India, they forced the Parthians, the Shakas, and the Greeks to move towards this subcontinent. The Greeks had set up a kingdom in north Afghanistan which was known as Bactria, and they were the first to invade India in 206 BC. This was followed by a series of invasions that continued till the beginning of the Christian era.

The Maurya empire was finally destroyed by Pushyamitra Shunga in 185 BC. Although a brahmana, he was a general of the last Maurya ruler called Brihadratha. He is said to have killed Brihadratha in public and forcibly usurped the throne of Pataliputra. The Shungas ruled in Pataliputra and central India. They performed several Vedic sacrifices to mark the revival of the brahmanical way of life, and are said to have persecuted the Buddhists. They were succeeded by the Kanvas who were also brahmanas.

Chronology

(BC)

4 C	The elements of the mid-Gangetic material culture started to spread to northern Bengal, Kalinga, Andhra, and Karnataka. The Nandas of Magadha are said to have conquered Kalinga.
3 C	Conquest of Kalinga by Ashoka. Rise of Sisupalgarh settlement.
232	The Magadhan empire began to disintegrate.
247–10	Date of Shih Huang Ti, the ruler of China.
220	The Great Wall of China was constructed by the Chinese ruler Shih Huang Ti to shield his empire

against attacks.

206

The Greeks invaded India.

200

Steel objects of around this time found in the mid-Gangetic plains.

185

The Maurya empire finally destroyed by Pushyamitra Shunga.