

Mauryan Empire

[UPSC Notes]

History of the Mauryan Empire

The Maurya Empire was established in the Magadha region under the leadership of Chandragupta Maurya and Chanakya. The first pan-Indian dynasty that ruled across the majority of the Indian subcontinent was the Mauryan Empire, which began in 321 BCE and ended in 185 BCE. Chandragupta Maurya began land consolidation as Alexander the Great's influence started to decline.

Chandragupta took advantage of the vast power vacuum left by Alexander's death in 323 BCE by gathering an army, overthrowing the Nanda monarchy in Magadha, eastern India, and founding the Mauryan Empire. The Nanda Empire was a large, militaristic, and economically powerful empire. Thus, the Maurya Empire came into the picture after overthrowing the Nanda Dynasty.

During its heyday under Emperor Ashoka, the empire was regarded as the biggest on the Indian subcontinent, spanning more than five million square kilometers. It was surrounded on three sides by mountains: the Himalayas, the Ganges river to the north, the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Indus river, and the Arabian Sea to the west.

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, served as Chandragupta's chief minister and made a significant contribution to the history of the empire.

Rulers of the Mauryan Empire

The Mauryan dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya (324/321- 297 BCE) who conquered almost the whole of the north, the north-west and a large region of Peninsular India. The famous rulers of the Mauryan Empire were:

Chandragupta Maurya

Chandragupta, born in c. 321 – c. 297 BCE, founded the Mauryan empire. He was supported by Chanakya. Chandragupta Maurya was a great warrior, empire builder and a skilled administrator.

Chandragupta Maurya was an ambitious king. He was the chief architect of the Mauryan empire who first established himself in Punjab and then moved eastwards to gain control over the Magadhan region. Through the invasion of southern and western part of India, Chandragupta significantly grew the size of his kingdom.

Chandragupta, at a young age, involved himself in completing his ambitions, which led to forming a powerful kingdom. The late fourth-century fall of the Nanda Empire during Dhana Nanda by a group led by Chandragupta Maurya. Chandragupta embraced Jainism towards the end of his life and stepped down from the throne in the favour of his son. Chandragupta Mauryan turned to Jainism and put out the Santhara rite in old days. According to Jain texts, Chandragupta Maurya adopted Jainism and went to the hills of Shravanabelagola (near Mysore) and committed Sallekhana (death by slow starvation).

Bindusara

Bindusara was the second king of the Mauryan Dynasty, and was the son of Chandragupta Maurya. He was also known as Amitraghata, which means killer of enemies. He explicitly ruled over much of the whole Indian land by uniting 16 nations under the Mauryan Empire. Bindusara conquered the land between the Arabian sea and the Bay of Bengal. Under his rule, almost the entire subcontinent was under the Mauryan empire.

Bindusara maintained friendly diplomatic relations with the Greeks. Deimachus was the ambassador of Seleucid emperor Antiochus I at Bindusara's court.

Ashoka

Ashoka (r. 272-232 BCE) was a magnificent commander. His biggest military victory, known as "Digvijaya," the conquest of other monarchs, is deemed to be the historical reality of him. As king, he was forceful and ambitious, reinforcing the Empire's dominance in southern and western India. However, his victory over Kalinga (262-261 BCE) was set out to be a defining moment in his life. By constructing a citadel there and claiming it as his own, Ashoka studied Kalinga to exert control over a vast area. He was one of the greatest rulers of the Mauryan dynasty.

Ashoka carried the Dhamma for a collection of decrees that served as the policy of the emperor who gained the throne in about 269 B.C. Ashoka put the tenets of Ahimsa into practice by repealing sports like hunting and putting an end to forced labor and indentured slavery. The Dhamma Vijay policy also placed a strong emphasis on non-violence, which was to be observed by denying war and conquests as well as by refusing from the death of animals.

Brihadratha

Over the course of 50 years, a series of less powerful rulers served Ashoka. Dasharatha Maurya, the grandson of Ashoka, succeeded him. His first child, Mahinda, was intent on making Buddhism popular everywhere. Due to his eye defect, Kunala Maurya was not good at taking the throne, and Tivala, the descendant of Kaurwaki, passed away even before the death of Ashoka came. Jalauka, another son, has a relatively uneventful backstory of life.

Under Dasharatha, the Empire lost a great deal of land, which Kunala's son Samprati eventually took to recover. Brihadratha Maurya was killed by his commander Pushyamitra Shunga in 180 BCE. Thus, the enormous Mauryan empire began to decline, giving way to the Shunga Empire rulers.

Mauryan Architecture

The former palace at Pataliputra, now known as Kumhrar in Patna, was built during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya and is considered the grandest monument of the Maurya period.

Megasthenes' work Indica contains important details on the Mauryan Dynasty. Similar accounts of Fa-Hien and the monk 'Hiuen Tsang' depicting about the empire.

The palace's ruins have been found through excavations; it is assumed to have been a collection of various structures, the most significant of which was a huge pillared hall built on a high wood substratum. In addition to stupas and viharas, other structures carved during the Mauryan period included stone pillars, rock-cut caverns, and colossal figure carvings.

In the Ashokan period, a wide variety of masonry was built, including lion sightings, stupa railings, huge free-standing pillars, and other gigantic monuments. Artists polished even small pieces of stone art to a high lustrous sheen resembling exquisite enamel at this time because the use of stone had advanced to such a high level of perfection.

Sanchi Stupa was built on the premise laid by Ashoka. Unburned brick was used to construct the stupa's inner structure, and roasted brick was used to construct its exterior wall thickness. Examples: Of all the Ashokan stupas, Sanchi Stupa in MP is the most well-known. Several stupas, which are enormous domes decorated with images of Buddha, were built by Ashoka.

Other important architecture includes at Nagarjunakonda, Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, Bodhgaya, and Bharhut, and Ashoka's pillars at Nandangarh and Sanchi Stupa.

Ashokan Pillar and Edicts

The edicts are drafted in an unusual and ancient form of Prakrit. Prakrit scripts were created in the simple-to-learn Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts. Some were inferred at Kaushambi, Champaran, Topra (Delhi), Rampurva, Meerut, and Mehrauli. The Ashokan Pillar has four parts, namely:

- Ashoka's first pillar is the idea of protecting individuals.
- The second pillar defines Dhamma as having few sins, many virtues, and the qualities of generosity, compassion, sincerity, and pureness.
- Third type eliminates errors such as harshness, cruelty, rage, and pride.
- Fourth pillar part covers Rajukas' responsibilities.

Ashoka's seven pillar edicts are:

- Ashoka's ideal of protecting individuals is outlined in Pillar Edict I.
- Pillar Edict II defines Dhamma as having no major sins, numerous virtues, and the qualities of generosity, compassion, sincerity, and purity.
- In Pillar Edict III, it eliminates the sins of cruelty, cruelty, rage, envy, etc.
- Pillar Edict IV regards the rights of Rajukas, .
- Lists of birds and pets that one should not slay on specific days and another list of species that we should not harm are contained in Pillar Edict.
- Sixth pillar decree outlines Dhamma policy
- Seventh Pillar Edict highlights Ashoka's contributions to Dhamma policy.

Contrasting Achaemenian pillars with Mauryan pillars we can say the Mauryan pillars were cut out of rock, exhibiting the abilities of the cutter, while the Achaemenian pillars were built one by one by a mason.

Minor Inscriptions on Pillars

Ashoka's voyage to Lumbini and the city's tax exemption are there in an inscription on the Rummindei Pillar. Inscription on the Nigalisagar Pillar, Nepal states that Ashoka doubled the size of the stupa of Buddha Konakamana's height.

Significant Pillar Inscriptions

Other than the major inscriptions found on the pillars from the time of Ashoka, other significant pillar inscriptions include:

- Sarnath Lion Capital nearby Varanasi to honor Dharmachakrapravartana or the Buddha's first sermon.
- Single lion on the Vaishali Pillar in Bihar with no inscription.
- Pillar in Uttar Pradesh's Allahabad.
- Bihar's Lauriya-Araraj, Champaran.
- Uttar Pradesh's Sankisa Pillar.
- Bihar's Lauriya-Nandangarh is in Champaran.

Economy

The Mauryan Empire placed a high value on interregional trade. Trade grew in India as a result of the cohesion and internal tranquilly of the Maurya Empire. The economy under the Mauryan empire can be studied as under

- **Revenue System and Taxation:** The two main sources of income were: a portion of land output; and other land-related dues, such as water rates. The cost of water vary depending on the type of land, the crop, and the rent on homes in localities.
- **Agriculture:** The Mauryas' economy was based primarily on agriculture, although trade was becoming more and more important. Taxes on agriculture were the vital link of income.
- **Industries:** Textile, mining and construction, jewellery making, metal works, pot production, etc. were the key industries at this time. Different guilds were used to organise the industry.
- **Transportation and trade ports:** The Uttarapath and Dakshinapath roads served as a vibrant thread that linked many regions of the peninsula together. The throbbing veins that kept the body politic alive, lively, and capable of internal operations were these economic routes. The most notable ports in India at the period were Tamluk (Tamralipti) and Broach, Sopara on the west side coast.
- **Coinage:** Money used by the Mauryas appears to be punch inside silver pieces known as pana, containing peacock, hill, and circle symbols. These common coinage provided the economy an identical status to run.

Folk Art and Pottery

The stone figures of Yaksha and Yakshi are two of the most well-known works from the Mauryan era. They acted as religious shrines for the three major world religions—Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Northern Black Polished Ware is the generic term for pottery from the Maurya empire era (NBPW). Black paint and a super glossy luster were hallmarks of Mauryan pottery, which was having mild as a luxury good.

Administration

According to historical theories, artists built the Empire according to the enormous system that Kautilya detailed in the Arthashastra: a highly developed civil people who oversaw everything from local sanitation to international trade.

The administrative council was led by "*mantriparishad-adhyakshya*," a figure similar to King Ashoka who made numerous changes to the Mauryan Empire's judicial system. The government servants known as *amatyas* were chosen to handle daily administration. To control the state's economic activity in farm, market, trade, arts, customs, and territories, *adhyakshas* (supervisors) were chosen. The official in charge of the king's revenues was named *Yukta*. *Rajjukas* served as the officers responsible for setting up limits and measuring the land. When it comes to Dhamma, *kumar mahamatras* were chosen by Emperor Ashoka to propagate and uphold the tenets.

Administrations in Villages

The village's head was *Gramika*. The "village elders" aided him in running the village. The communities had a great deal of autonomy at this time. *Sthanikas* and *gopas* were in charge of running the general government and collecting taxes in the districts.

The Mauryas' Espionage

Spies provided the Emperor with information on the government and markets. Spies could be classified as either *Sansthana* or *Sanchari* (wanderer). Secret spies or officers were called *Gudhapurushas*.

Provinces

The imperial capital was located in Pataliputra, and the Empire was split into four parts. The four of the various provincial seats were

1. Taxila (according to Ashokan edicts in the north)
2. Suvarnagiri (south side)
3. Tosali (east side)
4. Ujjain (to the west side)

The Kumara (royal defendant), who served as the king's representative and oversaw the provincial government, was in charge of each province. The Mahamatyas and the council of ministers helped the Kumara. This hierarchical system during the regal period during the rule of Maurya Dynasty Kings and his Mantriparishad (Council of Ministers).

The Mauryans devised a sophisticated mechanism for minting coins. Copper and silver made up the majority of coin composition. People also put some gold coins in use. The use of the coins in trade and business was widespread.

Religion During Mauryan Empire

The Mauryan Empire had a strong religious presence even before Ashoka converted. The spiritual adviser of Chandragupta foresaw a famine in the realm. The pillars Ashoka built, which bore edicts (proclamations) and stupas—places of meditation and significance in the life of the Buddha—were possibly his most notable efforts. Brahmanism played a significant role in the early years of the empire. Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism were all preferred religions by the Mauryans.

Jainism

After retiring, Chandragupta Maurya converted to Jainism by giving up his crown and worldly riches to join a traveling community of Jain monks. Chandragupta was a student of Acharya Bhadrabahu, a Jain monk. Chandragupta is reported to have perished in Bhadrabahu Cave in Shravanabelagola.

Ashoka's grandson Samprati supported Jainism as well. Samprati is claimed to have constructed 125,000 derasars throughout India and was motivated by the ideas of Jain monks like Suhastin. In the regions of Ahmedabad, Viramgam, Ujjain, and Palitana, some of them can still be spotted.

Buddhism

Buddhism was created in Magadha, the heart of the empire. Following the Kalinga War, Ashoka abandoned expansionism and aggression as well as the stricter prohibitions of the Arthashastra on using power, strenuous policing, and ruthless measures for collecting taxes against rebels.

Ashoka had originally started practicing Brahmanism but later adopted Buddhism. Ashoka dispatched a mission to Sri Lanka, where monarch Tissa was so enamored with Buddhist principles that he embraced them himself and declared Buddhism the official religion, under the leadership of his child Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta.

In addition to ordering the building of monasteries and schools and distributing Buddhist literature throughout the empire, Ashoka also dispatched several Buddhist missionaries to Asia, Athens, and South Asia.

As many as 84,000 stupas, including those at Sanchi and the Mahabodhi Temple, are thought to have been constructed by him throughout India. Near his capital, Ashoka assisted in bringing together the Third Buddhist Council of the Buddhist orders of India and South Asia. This council worked hard to reform and advance the Buddhist faith. Indian traders embraced Buddhism and contributed significantly to its expansion throughout the Mauryan Empire.

The 3rd Buddhist council

The Theravadin writings and histories state that Ashoka, the Mauryan ruler, hosted the 3rd Buddhist Council in Pataliputra. Mogaliputta Tissa presided over the council. The primary goal was to rid Buddhism of shady organisations and Sangha corruption. Here, the Dharma Pitaka was written, bringing the contemporary Pali Tipitaka virtually to completion. Foreign nations got Buddhist missionaries in progress of the council.

The Mauryan Empire's decline

Ashoka's rule came to an end in 232 BCE, marking the start of the Mauryan empire's collapse. A number of events caused the huge empire's collapse and demise, namely:

- **Buddhist Reaction:** Despite adopting a policy of religious tolerance, Ashoka opposed the killing of animals and pets. The Brahmanical society, which depended on the offerings made in the name of sacrifices, suffered due to Ashoka's anti-sacrifice attitude. As a result, the Brahmanas formed some sort of animosity toward Ashoka.
- **Economic crisis:** The Mauryan empire maintained the greatest army, resulting in significant expenditures for paying the soldiers and officials, which burdened the economy.
- **Negative rule:** Ashoka instructed the mahamatras to refrain from torturing the populace without justification under Bindusara's rule. To solve this problem, he instituted officer rotation in Ujjain, Taxila, and Tosali. However, the peripheral regions were still under persecution.
- **Dissemination of new knowledge:** This material knowledge acquired from the Magadha served as the foundation for the founding and expansion of other kingdoms like the Shungas, Kanvas, and Chetis.
- **North-West Frontier Ignorance:** Ashoka was involved with both domestic and international missionary endeavors. In starting, the Greeks were reaching India and attacking north Afghanistan, led by several invasions. Pushyamitra Shunga, the ruler of the Shunga people, finally brought an end to the Mauryan empire. He overthrew the last member of the dynasty to grab the throne at Pataliputra (Brihadratha). The Shungas retain the Brahmanical way of life's practices and laws. The Kanvas brought up the Shungas.