

The Mauryan Empire (c. 322 – 185 BCE)

The Mauryan Empire was the first pan-Indian empire, covering most of the Indian subcontinent (except the far south). It marked a transition from isolated kingdoms to a unified imperial structure, characterized by a sophisticated administration and the spread of Buddhism.

Historians reconstruct Mauryan history through several key literary and archaeological sources:

The Arthashastra: It is an ancient Indian Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, economic policy, and military strategy. Written by **Kautilya** (also known as **Chanakya** or Vishnugupta), the Prime Minister to the first Mauryan Emperor, Chandragupta Maurya, around the 4th century BCE. The name is derived from the Sanskrit words *Artha* ("prosperity" or "material well-being") and *Shastra* ("treatise" or "science"). Unlike many ancient texts that focus on spirituality, the Arthashastra is a work which is focused on the practicalities of running a powerful and prosperous empire.

Inscriptions: The **Edicts of Ashoka** are a collection of more than 30 inscriptions carved onto pillars, boulders, and cave walls during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (c. 268–232 BCE). These edicts are historically significant as they represent the first concrete evidence of Buddhism and are the earliest written documents in the Indian subcontinent.

Religious Literature: Buddhist (Jatakas, Mahavamsa) and Jain (Parishishta Parvan) texts provide ancestral and cultural details.

2. Major Rulers

Chandragupta Maurya (322–298 BCE)

The founder of the dynasty, he overthrew the Nanda King Dhana Nanda with Chanakya's help.

- **Expansion:** He defeated the Greek general **Seleucus I Nicator** (c. 305 BCE), gaining territories in modern-day Afghanistan and Baluchistan.
- **Legacy:** He unified North India and, according to Jain tradition, abdicated the throne to become a Jain monk, eventually dying of starvation (*Sallekhana*) in Shravanabelagola.

Bindusara (298–273 BCE)

Chandragupta Maurya passed down his throne to Bindusara. He was known as *Amitrochates* (Destroyer of Enemies).

- **Expansion:** He expanded the empire into the Deccan, reaching as far south as Karnataka.
- **Diplomacy:** He maintained friendly relations with Greek rulers in Syria and Egypt.

Ashoka the Great (273–232 BCE)

The most famous Mauryan emperor, known for his transformation after the **Kalinga War (261 BCE)**.

- **Conversion:** Horrified by the bloodshed at Kalinga, he renounced war and embraced **Buddhism**.
- **Dhamma:** He promoted a code of conduct based on non-violence (*Ahimsa*), tolerance, and social responsibility.
- **Propagating Buddhism:** He sent missions to Sri Lanka (led by his children Mahinda and Sanghamitta), Southeast Asia, and Greece.

3. Administration

The Mauryan state was a highly centralized monarchy. The *Arthashastra* mentions the **Saptanga Theory** (Seven limbs of the state): the King, Minister, Territory, Fort, Treasury, Army, and Ally.

Central Administration

- **The King:** The fountainhead of justice and executive power.
- **Mantriparishad:** A council of ministers (like the *Purohita*, *Senapati*, and *Yuvaraja*) who advised the king.
- **Bureaucracy:** Officers called *Adhyakshas* (superintendents) managed specific departments like trade, agriculture, and mining.

Provincial and Local Governance

- The empire was divided into five main provinces: **Prachya** (Capital: Pataliputra), **Uttarapatha** (Taxila), **Avantipatha** (Ujjain), **Dakshinapatha** (Suvarnagiri), and **Kalinga** (Tosali).
- Provinces were ruled by **Kumaras** (royal princes).
- The smallest unit of administration was the **Village**, headed by a *Gramika*.

4. Economy and Society

- **Agriculture:** The backbone of the economy. The state provided irrigation (e.g., the Sudarshana Lake) and collected 1/6th to 1/4th of the produce as tax.
- **Trade:** Internal and external trade flourished. The **Royal Highway** (precursor to the Grand Trunk Road) connected Pataliputra to Taxila.
- **Currency:** The silver *Pana* (punch-marked coins) was the standard currency.
- **Social Class:** Megasthenes noted seven classes: Philosophers, Farmers, Soldiers, Herdsmen, Artisans, Magistrates, and Councilors.

5. Art and Architecture

Mauryan art is distinguished by its use of stone and "Mauryan Polish" (a mirror-like finish).

- **Ashokan Pillars:** Monolithic sandstone pillars topped with animal capitals (e.g., the **Lion Capital at Sarnath**, India's national emblem).
- **Stupas:** Large hemispherical mounds built to house Buddhist relics. The **Sanchi Stupa** is the most famous example.
- **Caves:** Rock-cut caves like the Barabar Caves provided housing for Ajivika monks.

6. Decline of the Empire

After Ashoka's death in 232 BCE, the empire began to disintegrate due to:

1. **Weak Successors:** Inability to control such a vast territory.
2. **Financial Crisis:** The heavy cost of maintaining a massive army and bureaucracy.
3. **Provincial Revolts:** Oppressive rule by provincial governors led to rebellions in distant regions.
4. **Final Blow:** In 185 BCE, the last Mauryan king, **Brihadratha**, was assassinated by his general, **Pushyamitra Shunga**, who founded the Shunga Dynasty.