

# Chapter-8

## The Mauryan Empire

# Introduction

Between the years 322 BCE and 185 BCE, India saw the growth of large and powerful **empires**. Empires are large kingdoms that grew because of ambitious rulers and the rich natural and economic resources that these regions had.

# Chandragupta Maurya

Chandragupta Maurya was the founder of the Mauryan Empire. His rise to power came with the help of the most trusted minister and chief advisor, Chanakya, also known as Kautilya in 321 BCE. His conquest of Pataliputra established a strong base for the Mauryan empire. We know about the reign of Chandragupta in great detail from the Greek Ambassador, Megasthenese in his book, Indika.

# Chanakya

Chanakya was earlier a minister to the last of the Nanda rulers. He is regarded as a great political thinker and an economist. His political theories have been compiled in his book, the Arthashastra.

## Bindusara

Bindusara, Chandragupta's son, succeeded him to the throne. He has been attributed with conquering almost the entire Indian peninsula. Like his father, Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara maintained friendly relations with the Greeks. He was tolerant to all religions and many saints visited his empire during this time.

# Ashoka

Ashoka was one of India's greatest rulers. Emperor Ashoka ruled almost the entire Indian subcontinent. He had been called 'Ashoka the Great'. During his father's reign, Ashoka served as the governor of Taxila and Ujjain and went on to become the emperor in 268 BCE. Ashoka was a very ambitious ruler and used military strength in order to expand the empire. He launched brutal wars, which lasted for around eight years till the Kalinga war, which changed his life.

# The Kalinga War

Kalinga was a kingdom in coastal Orissa( present –day Odisha). The war of kalinga turned out to be an infamous battle. Over 1,00,000 people of Kalinga and more than 10,000 soldiers of Ashoka died in the war. This war was a turning point in Ashoka's life. He felt responsible for the loss of so many lives and decided to renounce war. He devoted the rest of his life to ahimsa ( non-violence) and converted to Buddhism. Ashoka ruled for forty years and after the battle of Kalinga in peace, harmony and prosperity.

# Ashoka's Dhamma

Dhamma is the prakrit form of the word dharma which means duty. The principles of dhamma were based on a code of conduct that would help people live virtuous lives. Ashoka's dhamma consisted of non-violence, tolerance towards all sects and religions, obedience towards parents, respect for Brahmins and all religious teachers, humane treatment of servants and generosity towards all.

Ashoka's dhamma was written in prakrit, which was the language of the common people. He inscribed his dhamma on pillar's caves and rocks so that people could read and follow the message on the inscriptions. He called the children "my children" in all his inscriptions. He believed that dhamma could resolve conflicts for the people. He appointed officials called dhammamahamatta who travelled to distant places and spread his message. These officials were even sent to Syria, Egypt, Greece and Sri Lanka to spread his dhamma.

# Ashoka's dhamma

Ashoka sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka and other countries of South-East Asia as ambassadors of Buddhism. He communicated directly to his subjects through rock edicts. Usually, the top of the column or pillars on which Ashoka's messages were inscribed was decorated with figures of lions and bulls. One such pillar at Sarnath has four lions carved at the top. This pillar has come to be known as one of the most famous Ashoka's pillars. This structure is now the national emblem of India.



# Ashoka's administrative measures

Ashoka was a sincere king, who believed that a king's duty was to serve the society and not to live a relaxed life.

- He introduced many reforms, some of which included an efficient civil service and land taxation reforms.
- During Ashoka's reign, cities and villages were protected by walls. Ashoka's messengers used specially built tunnels to move safely and quickly.
- Ashoka did a lot for the welfare of the people. He built roads, rest houses and universities for his people. He made hospitals for both animals and people, offered loans to poor farmers.
- Ashoka promoted vegetarianism and himself quit meat to reduce unnecessary slaughter of animals.
- He encouraged and controlled international trade.
- He boosted agriculture with revolutionary ideas and improved the system of drainage and irrigation.

# Mauryan Administration

We come to know about the Mauryan administration from Chanakya's Arthashastra. It gives us information about the Mauryan Empire and other rules of governance. From it, we learn that the empire was divided into four provinces, each under a prince. The provinces were divided into districts and these districts were further divided into villages. At the provincial level, the prince was assisted by ministers. Some of the functions undertaken at the district level were the review of the land, maintenance of law and order and collection of taxes. Here the district head was assisted by junior officials. At the village level, the headmen looked after land records and assisted the district officials pertaining to the matters of the village. The Mauryan economy was driven by agriculture. The state-owned farms were large and rice, full grain, sesame (til), barley (jao), wheat, mustard, grapes, sugarcane, pumpkin and medicinal roots were grown. Internal trade improved due to the new found peace and stability in the empire. Chandra Gupta even introduced a single currency to be used throughout the empire. The Mauryan maintained a strong army which was well equipped with infantry, cavalry, elephants, chariots and a navy. Spies were kept throughout the kingdom and they informed the rulers to remain updated on matters regarding the welfare of the people as well as matters involving other kingdoms.

# Art and Architecture

Some of the best contribution to art and architecture were made during this period . Some examples are the stupas, the pillars, edicts of Ashoka and the viharas. Stupas are a semi spherical dome-like structure, built in various sizes. The upper portion was decorated by a wooden umbrella, signifying the importance of dharma. Polished monolithic pillars containing the Ashokan edicts were built all over the kingdom. The Ashokan pillar at Sarnath has the lion capital and the four lions positioned back to back, supporting the dharma known as the Ashok Chakra. Many impressive viharas have also been found. Examples of such viharas are in Nagararjuna hills near Gaya in Bihar.

# Decline of the Mauryan Empire

The successors of Ashoka were very weak and the empire was too vast. It was not easy for the king to maintain control over the provinces that were located far-off from the centre. After the death of Ashoka, many distant provinces broke away and there were constant foreign invasions. The final blow came when an internal revolt led by the chief of the Mauryan army, Senapati Pushyamita Sunga bringing an end to the Mauryan empire.

End of the Chapter