

The Mauryan Empire: Legacy of Ashoka and the Art of Epigraphy

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Abstract

One of India's greatest dynasties was the Mauryan empire, which had a lengthy line of emperors and produced important historical achievements. With the astute advice of Chanakya, Chandragupta Maurya/Chandragupta Maurya established the Mauryan dynasty. The contributions made during this era to edicts, stupas, and education are widely recognised. Even Takshashila, an ancient university, was said to have been established in the Mauryan era. The Arthashastra/Arthashastra, an ancient Indian treatise on politics, royalty, and related subjects, first emerged at this time. The main sources for history, or how we find out about previous dynasties, are the architectural designs, inscriptions, coins, and other excavation finds. These resources are essential because they enable us to recreate the social mores, economic conditions, and way of life that prevailed throughout the period. The focus of this research will be the information that the Mauryan inscriptions left behind.

Keywords: Indian subcontinent, Buddhism, stone inscriptions, Ashokan edicts, and HYDE

1. Introduction

Asoka's name suggests that he was exceptional within the context of prehistoric Indian history. The existence of someone by the name of Asoka in the early Indian historical lineage was entirely unknown to the outside world. James Prinsep wasn't sure which monarch Asoka was referring to when he finally understood the Brahmi proclamation. This is because most of them use variants of the two titles, Devanampiya and Piyadasi, to make references to Asoka. One of the most reliable archaeological sources for rewriting Mauryan history is the Ashokan inscriptions[1]. The most reliable source for recreating the greatest ruler of the Mauryan dynasty seems to be the Ashokan inscriptions. The edicts of the Mauryan emperor Asoka represent a unique body of Indian epigraphic literature for many reasons. In several forms of Prakrit speech, they offer the earliest records in the Brahmi and Kharoshthi alphabets. They also throw much-needed light on the scant and questionable information that tradition has to offer about the life, administration, politics, and religion of a powerful emperor who is regarded as one of India's and the world's greatest sons. Asoka was the first monarch to engrave messages for his officials and subjects on polished pillars and naturally occurring rocks. He declared what he believed to be the Dhamma using the inscriptions[2]. Because of this, many people consider Asoka's Dhamma to be his own spiritual instruction.

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In the eleventh regnal year, Asoka travelled to Bodhyagaya and saw the location of Buddha's enlightenment. Asoka got to know the Buddhist Samgha and committed himself entirely to religious conquest—also known as Dharma Vijaya—rather than military conquest. Edicts etched on exquisitely constructed stone pillars erected across his kingdom served as a record of this Buddhist Mauryan monarch's rule. These edicts are some of the first unique texts in India to be deciphered. After his conversion, he appointed about the greatest masterworks of ancient Indian art and sent countless Buddhist diplomats around Asia as part of his vision of conquest. After Ashoka's death, attacks, southern prince betrayals, and succession issues caused the empire to shrink. The Shunga dynasty, which ruled central India for more than a century, is acknowledged for having slain its last king, Brihadratha, in 185 BCE at the hands of his Brahman commander in chief, Pushyamitra [2]. The Nandas gave the Mauryan dynasty's founder, Chandragupta Maurya (324/321–297 BCE), a powerful army that he used to conquer almost all of north India, the north-west, and a sizable portion of the peninsular India[3]. The caste and origins of the Maurya family remain a mystery. The founder of the Mauryan dynasty, Chandragupta (also known as Chandragupta Maurya), took control of the Punjab region from Alexander's former kingdom's southeast boundaries. With freedom, Chandragupta focused his military might towards the east and south. By the end of his reign, he had to expand his sphere of influence throughout northern India. The dominion continued to expand under his son Bindusara, reaching what is now known as Karnataka in the Deccan[4].

1.1 Notable Mauryan dynasty monuments

1.1.1 Pillars

The most striking examples of Ashoka's court art are the white-grey sandstone columns he built all across his empire to commemorate significant events or to mark a hallowed spot connected to the life of the Buddha. The well-known proclamations of Ashoka preaching the Dhamma ([Dharma or rules of the Buddha]) or his regal homilies to his people are carved on several of these pillars. When pillars reach their most advanced form, they are tall, narrowing megaliths with modelled capitals that include an extended series of grooved petals that fall together to form a bell—also known as the Persepolis Bell—that are overcome by a circular abacus that is adorned with floral and animal motifs in relief. The tallest animal sculpture, which is usually a bull, elephant, or lion and is shown alone on the main assets and grouped on the advanced singles, is located ahead of the circle. The highest point of the lions on the pillar was once capped with a huge stone wheel. The capital has earned a reputation as one of ancient India's greatest creative achievements due to its angular shape, impeccable polish, and superb degree of workmanship.[5]

1.1.2 Rock-cut Architecture

One of South Asia's most significant and unique aesthetic traditions—rock-cut architecture—was firmly established during Ashoka's reign. There are inscriptions in a number of rock-cut sanctuaries in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills in Bihar that suggest they were intended to be the home of certain

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Ajivika ascetics, maybe Jain adherents. They are the first examples of the rock-cut method in India, which gives them architectural importance.[5]

1.1.3 The Stupa

Prior to Ashoka's rule, stupas were widespread throughout India. The Vedic Aryans constructed a simple clay and brick burial mound at first. There is no evidence of devotion for relic mounds during the pre-Mauryan era. The outside face of the stupa was covered in a thick layer of plaster, while the inside was composed of unburned masonry. A wooden gate that surrounded a path for Pradakshina existed atop the stupa.[5]

1.1.4 Human Figures

There are still a number of human-shaped stone sculptures that have been found that show Mauryan characteristics. One of them is a strikingly new-looking statue of a female chowrie (fly whisk) carrier that was found in Didar Ganj by locals and is now housed in the Patna Museum. High polish, surface refinement, and technique are all ideas from the Mauryan period. Most of the Indian subcontinent was under Mauryan empire dominion from the end of the 4th century until the start of the 5th century. The Nanda dynasty, which had ruled Magadha (present-day Bihar) and established their capital at Pataliputra (present-day Patna), was overthrown by the dynasty's founder, Chandragupta Maurya/Cantirakupta Maurya. Many historical narratives state that Chandragupta Maurya/Cantirakupta Maurya became emperor under the advice and guidance of Kautilya/Kealy or Chanakya/Caky, a Brahmin advisor who penned the famous ancient Indian treatise on politics, the military, and the economics known as the Arthashastra/Arthashastra. Records pertaining to Megasthenes, a Seleucid ambassador to the Maurya/Mavuriy, have survived.[5]

Maurya Chandragupta/Cantirakupta

As the founder of the Mauryan dynasty, he was among the first emperors to be recognised as the architect of the Pan-Indian empire. He received assistance from his advisor, minister Chanakya/Caky/Kealy/Kealy. He reportedly engaged in combat with Alexander the Great in order to stop the Macedonian king from seizing the Ganges' far bank during the Indian empire's invasion in 326 BCE. He established an unbroken empire throughout the Indian subcontinent from 322 to 298 BCE. Under his direct successor, the Mauryan dynasty prospered, especially under notable emperors like Emperor Ashoka and his grandson, Bindusara, who was the son of Chandragupta. In an effort to forge closer relations and trade with nations outside, Alexander wed Seleucus' daughter. He ended up receiving a sizable chunk of Seleucus' territory, indicating that their collaboration was successful. The next king was Bindusara, son of Chandragupta Maurya. We don't know a great much about his rule because of the dearth of evidence. He may have governed from 300 to 273 BC, or for around 27 years[6]. Greek ambassador Deimachos paid him a visit at his court. The next monarch was Bindusara, the son of Chandragupta Maurya. Because there is not much evidence to support his authority, we know almost little about it. He might have ruled from 300 to 273 BC, or around 27

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years. Greek ambassador Deimachos showed up to his court. The son and heir of Seleucus, Antiochus, was friendly with Bindusara. According to some historians, he subjugated the southern provinces of the Satyaputras, Cholas, and Cheras to the Mauryan Empire. Taranatha tells the story of Bindusara expanding his dominion from sea to sea or capturing sixteen kingdoms. Early Buddhist sources don't address Bindusara in great detail. The king's disinterest in Buddhism might be the reason behind this. It seems that Bindusara is more drawn to the Ajivikas. The Mauritian Empire was divided into five official regions under his rule. He was in charge of Magadha and a few other mahajanapadas. The Arthashastra and Megasthenes's Indica reports describe a central government that is relatively centralised. Four provinces were under Asoka's rule: the capital city of Taxila, the wet province of Ujjain, the eastern province of Kalinga, and the southern province of Kurnool. Mahamatras was the ruler of these regions[7].

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Literary Resources

1. Kautilya's Arthashastra, also known as Arttacāstiram.

Kautilya/Keaily served as Chandragupta Maurya's prime minister. Chandragupta used his support to construct the Mauryan Empire. He is the author of Arthashastra/Arttacstiram. It is the most important source for writing the Mauryan history and is split into 15 Adhikarnas (parts) and 180 Prakaranas (subdivisions). It contains almost 6,000 slokas. Shamasastri discovered the book in 1909 and successfully translated it. It is a treatise about statecraft and public administration. Regardless of its date or authorship, its importance arises from the fact that it presents a clear and logical analysis of the Mauryan period's economic and political situations[8].

2. Mudra Rakshasa.

Vishakhadatta's (4th century CE) Sanskrit historical play "Signet Ring of the Rakshasa, the chief minister of the last Nanda monarch" portrays King Chandragupta Maurya's rise to power in Northern India with the help of Chanakya, his Guru and chief minister[8].

3. Indica

Megasthenes was Seleucus' envoy to Chandragupta Maurya's court at Pataliputra for many years, beginning in 300 BCE. His book, Indica, which he wrote as a keen observer, has only survived in fragments, as reported by Diodorus, Strabo, and, most significantly, Arrian. Megasthenes' detailed portrayal of Indian society's seven "divisions" is especially intriguing. They provide an intriguing and, in fact, the first comprehensive description of Indian society as seen by a European visitor to India's capital and environs[8].

4. Buddhist Literature

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Buddhist literature, such as the Jatakas, offer information on the socioeconomic circumstances of the Mauryan period, and Buddhist histories, Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa, throw light on Ashoka's role in bringing Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Divyavadam, a Tibetan Buddhist text, describes Ashoka's endeavours to spread Buddhism[8].

2.2 King Ashoka and His Contributions

Bindusara died in 272 BCE, and his son, Ashoka the Excessive (304–232 BCE), succeeded him. He was an ambitious and strong dictator. His defeat of Kalinga (262-261 BCE) proved to be the defining moment in his life. The violence and its aftermath damaged hundreds of thousands of people. When he seen the devastation firsthand, he adopted Buddhist teachings and rejected war and violence. He despatched campaigners across Asia to propagate Buddhism to new nations. One of Ashoka's most notable accomplishments was the creation of his edicts, which were completed between 269 and 232 BCE. The Ashoka Edicts are etched in stone and may be seen across the subcontinent. Ashoka's Chandragupta was both a great commander and a brilliant fighter[9]. Chandragupta's brilliance and aggressive attitude, together with Chanakya's adept tactics, were enough to efficiently combat any opposition. During his reign, Chandragupta was engaged in a number of disputes. He captured Magadha and fought both the Greeks and the eastern Nanda empire. By the age of twenty, his dominion had spread from the Bay of Bengal in the east to the Indus River in the west, and the Arabian Sea in the south. Many nations were rescued from barbaric tyranny as well as foreign captivity under Chandragupta Maurya's reign. His administrative and military achievements were extraordinary. In 320BC, he accepted Jainism and abdicated the realm to his son. Bindusara edicts explain his policies and accomplishments from Afghanistan to Andhra (Nellore District). Ashoka's edicts stressed his empire's social and cultural values, encouraging Buddhism but not criticising other faiths. From the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra, he successfully maintained a centralised administration. Taxation was collected by a massive bureaucracy. The inspectors returned to the emperor with their findings. Irrigation improved agricultural productivity. Excellent roads connecting key economic and political centres were built, as was common in ancient empires; Ashoka-commanded pathways had wells, inns, and shade trees[3].

2.2.1 Importance of Ashoka's Inscription

So far, ancient history has been produced mostly using literary texts from either indigenous or foreign languages. Coins and inscriptions had a part, but literature have attracted more attention. The records are clearly more reliable than the mythological followers. Religious persons are said to have had an important influence in the transmission of Ayurveda to other countries. Ayurveda was widely diffused, particularly in East Asian nations, Thailand, Singapore, Malasia, Myanmar, Japan, Tibet, and Korea. Most of them are Buddhist religious folks. The Buddhist values of peace and love affected him. He toured significant Buddhist sites and built memorial pillars with inscriptions explaining their significance.[9]

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2.2.2 Chandragupta Maurya

Chandragupta Maurya founded the Mauryan empire. After securing his position on Magadha's throne, Chandragupta set out to expand his country. He conquered all of northern India, including the Indus River. Chandragupta had enormous wealth, which enabled him to maintain a vast army. In 305BC, he conquered Seleucus Nikator and freed northwestern India from Greek dominion. Seleucus handed up Afghanistan and Baluchistan, as well as Helen, his daughter, to Chandragupta. In response, Chandragupta handed Seleucus 500 war elephants. Seleucus sent Megasthenes as an ambassador to Chandragupta's court. According to Jain tradition, he starved himself to death to reach nirvana. Bindusara, his son, extended the dominion into central and southern India. At his death, only the kingdom of Kalinga remained unconquered. In 273BC, His son, Asoka, replaced him. [4].

2.2.3 Early Years of Chandragupta Maurya

Though little is known about Chandragupta's early life, inscriptions show that he was born about 345BC to a Kshatriya family that lived between present-day Gorakhpur and the Terai in Nepal. Many Indian historians say that Chandragupta was the illegitimate son of a prince from the Nanda dynasty of Magadha and a maid called 'Mura.' The dynasty was titled

Chandragupta's Mother: Chanakya, a lecturer at Takshasila University, spotted him playing pretend king with his friends. The boy's impassioned knowledge thrilled Chanakya, who was so struck by his leadership talents that he appointed him as a student. Chanakya taught Chandragupta about battle and statecraft. They conquered Magadha and established a new dynasty in Gandhara. [4]

2.3 Bindusara (297 – 272 BC)

Chandragupta ruled for around 25 years before passing the kingdom to his son Bindusara. The Greeks called to Bindusara as "Amitraghata," which means "Slayer of Enemies." Some scholars believe Bindusara conquered the Deccan all the way to Mysore. Taranatha, a Tibetan monk, confirmed that Bindusara conquered 16 kingdoms spanning "the region between the two oceans." According to Sangam Literature, Maurya conquered all the way to the south. As a consequence, during Bindusara's rule, the

The Mauryan dynasty spread as far as Mysore, covering almost all of India except for a small area of unknown terrain and forested areas surrounding Kalinga (Odisha) and the kingdoms of the far south. Bindusara also communicated with the Seleucid Syrian emperor Antiochus I, who sent Deimachus as an envoy to his (Bindusara) court. Bindusara requested exquisite wine, dried figs, and a sophist from Antiochus I, who sent everyone but the sophist since it was against Greek law to send a sophist. Bindusara was captivated by the Ajivikas, a religious community. Bindusara appointed his son Ashoka as governor of Ujjain and then suppressed a rebellion at Taxila.[9]

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2.4 Maurya Dynasty

Nanda kings ruled over the Magadha dynasty in the fourth century B.C., which was the most powerful state in the north. A Brahman minister called Chanakya, also known as Kautilya/Vishnupgupta, educated Chandragupta, a youthful member of the Mauryan family. In 322 B.C., Chandragupta raised his own army and deposed the Nanda ruler. As a consequence, Chandragupta Maurya is considered the first monarch and founder of the Mauryan dynasty. His mother's name was Mur, thus he was called Maurya in Sanskrit, which means "son of Mur," and his dynasty was known as the Maurya dynasty. Scholars think he was just 25 years old when he seized Patliputra from the monarch of the Nanda Dynasty, Dhana Nanda. First, he established his control in the Indo-Gangetic plains before advancing northwest. Chandragupta rapidly established power over all of Punjab. Alexander's Greek commander, Seleucus Nicator, commanded parts of the kingdom in the far north. As a consequence, Chandragupta fought him for a long time until conquering him about 305 B.C., and an agreement was struck with Central India to annex the land north of the Narmada River.[8]

2.5 Kalinga War: Two Perspectives

The Kalinga dispute took place during King Ashoka's 12th year in rule. Kalinga became independent after seceding from Magadha. It was both a wealthy and a seaside region. There are references to Kalinga in the Mahabharata. Kalinga, as stated in the Mahabharata, most likely housed more than one small kingdom. The kingdom is said to have originated with Monarch Vali, who may have been the ruler of Magadha, as well as the originally non-Vedic lineages of Anga, Pundra, Suhma, and Vanga. The main reason why King Ashoka attacked Kalinga was to complete India's political unification. Because the Kalinga area functioned as a land bridge between the north and south, its conquest may provide safe passage for the Magadha army to begin an invasion in the far south. The existence of a strong independent kingdom on Magadha soil constituted a direct threat to the Mauryan empire.

2.6 Kalinga War: An Alternative Perspective

According to Daya Dissanayake, a Sri Lankan writer who wrote the book "Who is Ashoka?" the Kalinga war may not have happened. He said that the rock edict at Daya River in Odisha has no mention of the Kalinga War. Instead, the incident was recorded in a rock edict far from Odisha. According to BJP leader Biswa Bhusan Harichandan, the Kalinga conflict might have been a hoax. "If one lakh troops were killed in the fight, one lakh were injured, and more than 1.5 lakh were imprisoned, the Kalinga army must have had a strength of more than eight lakh," the historian said. Taking this into consideration, the army's strength would have been equal to one-third of Kalinga's population. It seems odd. Furthermore, there must have been a fearsome ruler. Some historians argue that Kalinga was a form of federation during the time, with no one king governing. If this is the case, who was the federation's prime minister or leader? These questions should be addressed." [10]

2.7 Sources for History

- **Literary:** Literary sources comprise all written works, including texts, articles, and descriptions, as well as manuscripts and epics.
- **Epigraphic:** Epigraphy is the study of identifying graphemes, explaining their meanings, categorising their use based on dates and cultural contexts, and drawing conclusions about the writing and its authors. As a consequence, these are the evidences found on inscriptions, clay tablets, and so on.
- **Archaeological sources:** Archaeological materials, including historical buildings, coins, inscriptions, and relics, give valuable information about a certain time period.[11]

3. Discussion

The population alone is insufficient to predict the location of social spectacles, for which decision, planning, or technological skill were combined with the distinctive qualities of local ecosystems. For example, in the case of the Ashokan living-rock proclamations, the exceedingly discerning placement of texts would have been handled by particular individuals (skilled engravers or stonemasons) who used exact criteria of scenic evaluation for assignment. These guidelines have included environmental markers such as the availability of adequate pebbles, as well as social features such as the presence of roads and tunnels utilised by passengers, and the positioning of population hubs represented by towns, Buddhist temples, and cities. Such 'citizen-science' interfaces already exist in botany and biology (for example, India's Shared Bird Initiative (Mutual Bird Intensive Care of India, n.d.). Images labelled with geo-positions—taken, for example, with mobile phones—may allow researchers to thoroughly admit 'citizen' sightings, which were previously completed through track calls by archaeologists and epigraphers; over time, the quantity of images can also provide a means of monitoring condition and preservation. The rebirth of interest in the Indian subcontinent as the origin of Buddhism has significantly increased both local and international participation in legacy activities.[12]

4. Conclusion

Chandragupta Maurya, the exiled Mauryan ruler, successfully overthrew the Nanda dynasty, backed by Chanakya/political Caky's cunning. The Mauryans ruled almost the whole Indian subcontinent. The Mauryan era is considered as the best since the kingdom grew to be strong while also excelling at administrative reforms. Chanakya/Caky, Chandragupta Maurya's political counsellor, printed 'Arthashastra'. Arthashastra is a Sanskrit text that discusses economic policy, military strategy, statecraft, and politics. The 'Indica,' published by Greek explorer and historian Megasthenes, provides a complete account of the Mauryan empire's social, economic, and administrative growth. Bindusara, Chandragupta Maurya's/Cantirakupta Maurya's successor, improved commercial relations with bordering nations, forged marital alliances with other kingdoms, and conquered them. His son,

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Ashoka, succeeded him and became a notable advocate for peace and nonviolence. During Ashoka's reign, monasteries and other religious constructions were created alongside edicts and stupas. The South Asian Ashokan inscriptions are among the most remarkable examples of writing as a transformative ancient political weapon. The inscriptions are especially relevant for the study of Buddhism, which was formerly a tiny and rather unknown faith before Ashoka's royal support. The HYDE-derived map of Ashokan edicts identifies places needing systematic examination as the Himalayan foothills around the Narmada River, the upper Indus Valley, and the Godavari River. The Maurya Empire is a watershed point in Indian history because it was the first to construct a practically pan-Indian paramountcy, and an effective Administrative system having a centripetal orientation. During this period, the objective of chakravarti (universal) rulership was achieved. It will be remembered for the development of Dhamma policy to stress and accommodate variation in the subcontinent's socioeconomic and social settings. The Maurya dynasty also left two more legacies: the practice of etching royal instructions and papers and the use of pebble as a key standard of sculptural sculpting in India.

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