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The Emergence of Empire: Mauryan India

C. 321-185 BC

The Mauryas and their World

The concept of an empire becomes familiar to Indian historiography in the colonial period. There was an attempt to identify a few empires from the past and see the current one as part of an ongoing legacy. Empires were defined by extensive territory and their glory was said to lie in monumental architecture, grandiose public works and imperial proclamations. In these descriptions empires outside Europe were generally characterized by autocracy and backwardness, explicitly stated in concepts such as Oriental Despotism. The source of revenue was solely agrarian, as this was a system where land was entirely owned by the state. This was a historical justification for the claim to ownership of resources by nineteenth-century imperial systems.

When the term came to be used for large states in early times the focus of the definition had to shift. In relation to the early past an empire is recognized as a more evolved and complex form of state, and therefore embedded in the nature of the formation of states that preceded it. The change from non-state to state becomes central to understanding the context in which empires arise. A qualitative change is also significant. Empires, for instance, control a differentiated economy, unlike kingdoms, where the economic base tends to be relatively more uniform. A crucial question relates to whether the state attempts to restructure the economies – and if so, which economies – or is it content merely to cream off revenue from the resources. There was also an assumption of cultural uniformity, based largely on the symbols of imperial power. But there has been less investigation of the extent to which imperial cultural forms penetrated into distant areas. These investigations are necessary to the definition of an empire. Thus, monumental architecture was seen as important, but largely as a statement of power and presence. Another aspect of such a presence would have been uniformity in laws, perhaps mentioned indirectly in one of the edicts of the Emperor Ashoka, although the laws in question are not spelt out.

With the coming of the Mauryas in the latter part of the fourth century BC, the historical scene is illuminated by a relative abundance of evidence from a variety of sources. Not only do these provide information, but they also encourage tangential thoughts on the history of those times. The political picture is relatively clear, with the empire of the Mauryas covering a large part of the subcontinent, the focus being control by a single power. Attempts were made to give the political system a degree of uniformity, and historical generalization can be made with more confidence for this period than in earlier centuries. Inevitably, in an imperial system, there were attempts to draw together the ends of the empire, to encourage the movement of peoples and goods and to explore the possibilities of communication at various levels. These included the use of a script, of punch-marked coins in exchange transactions and the projection of a new ideology, intended to pursue new precepts.

In the typologies of states, kingdoms differ from empires. Kingdoms tend to draw the maximum profit from existing resources and therefore do not make too great an attempt at restructuring access to resources. The pressures on an empire and its requirements are of a different order, so meeting the financial needs of administering an empire requires considerable restructuring wherever there is a potential for obtaining revenue. An imperial system is not static and has continually to adjust to demands and resources. Although they rarely succeed, imperial systems attempt to erase variation in favour of homogeneity. The variations are cultural and economic. Cultural homogeneity is often sought by propagating a new ideology, in this case the *dhamma* of Ashoka. Not every part of the empire has the same resources, nor is their utilization identical, therefore some degree of economic restructuring also becomes necessary. The restructuring tends to be limited to those resources thought to have the maximum potential. The restructuring in the Mauryan Empire was attempted through both the extension of agriculture, together with mobility of labour in some instances, and the introduction of more wide-reaching commercial exchange. But imperial systems also exploit economic differences and restructure economies in order to suit new alignments. The differentiation is based on the manner in which resources are garnered through administration.

The empire was founded by Chandragupta Maurya, who succeeded to the Nanda throne in *c.* 321 BC. He was then a young man and is thought to have been the protegfe of the brahman Kautilya, who was his guide and mentor both in acquiring a throne and in keeping it. This is suggested by a range of stories that relate his rise to power, particularly from Buddhist and Jaina texts, as well as by the play *Mudrarakshasa* by Vishakhadatta, which, although written many centuries later, still supports this tradition. The origins and caste status of the Maurya family vary from text to text. Thus Buddhist texts speak of them as a branch of the *kshatriya* Moriya clan associated with the Shakyas, presumably to give the family a higher status; but brahmanical sources imply that they were *shudras* and heretics, presumably because each king was patron to a heterodox sect. Predictably, the family has also been associated with the Nandas. The *Puranas* had described the Nandas as *shudras,* with the ambiguous statement that in contrast to the *kshatriya* heroes of the solar and lunar lineages the successor dynasties would be of *shudra* origin. This shift in the status of the ruling family is an aspect of the coming of the state, where political power was to be increasingly open – virtually accommodating any *varna.*

The young Maurya and his supporters were inferior in armed strength to the Nandas, and it was here that strategy came in useful. The acquisition of the throne of Magadha was, according to some accounts, the first step: Other stories suggest that Chandragupta began by harassing the outlying areas of the Nanda kingdom, gradually moving towards the centre: this strategy was based, we are told, on the moral drawn from the fact that the young Emperor-to-be saw a woman scolding her child for eating from the centre of a dish, since the centre was bound to be much hotter than the sides. Once the Ganges Plain was under his control, Chandragupta moved to the north-west to exploit the power vacuum created by Alexander's departure. These areas fell to him rapidly, until he reached the Indus. Here he paused, as the Greek Seleucus Nicator – the successor to Alexander – had fortified his hold on the area. Chandragupta moved to central India for a while and occupied the region north of the River Narmada. But 305 BC saw him back in the north-west, involved in a campaign against Seleucus, in which Chandragupta seems to have been successful, judging by the terms of the treaty of 303 BC.

Some Seleucid territories that today would cover eastern Afghanistan, Baluchistan and Makran were ceded to the Maurya. With this, the routes and nodal points of the north-west region shifted from Persian-Hellenistic to Mauryan control, a shift from one to the other of the major states of Iran and

northern India becoming a pattern in the history of the region. Given this historical reality, the notion of some dynasties being 'foreign' would possibly have been unfamiliar to the people of the north-west, who were themselves of varying cultures. In return for the territory ceded, Seleucus obtained 500 elephants, a belief in their effectiveness in campaigns being axiomatic in Hellenistic military strategy. There was also an *epigammia* – a marriage agreement – which has been interpreted as a possible marriage alliance between the two royal families. But it could also have referred to the legalizing of marriages between Hellenistic Greeks and Indians living in the cities or as part of the garrison settlements in eastern Afghanistan. The territorial foundation of the Mauryan Empire had been laid, with Chandragupta controlling the Indus and Ganges Plains and the borderlands – a formidable empire by any standards.

Campaigns in the ancient world were not merely a mechanism for acquiring more territory. They were frequently enterprises motivated by considerable diplomatic play, as well as a search for economic advantage. Diplomacy took the form of relationships with neighbours, and was later to provide the basis of the theory of *mandala* – the circle of diplomacy involving allies and enemies. Economic advantage was more visible, not only in the nature and location of the territory to be conquered and its resources, but also in the nature of the campaign. Large-scale campaigns against wealthy neighbours were a source of booty, as well as the taking of prisoners-of-war who could be used as labour. Campaigns have therefore been more than matters of military concern. The campaign against the Seleucids was to wrest Gandhara from them, as it had yielded impressive revenues since the time it was part of the Achaemenid Empire. It was also linked to the land routes to west Asia. The acquisition of central India meant access to the peninsula, another area with resources as yet untapped by northern powers.

Despite the campaign, there was considerable contact of a friendly and inquisitive nature between the Mauryas and the Seleucids. Chandragupta is referred to as Sandrocottos in later accounts and is said to have met Alexander as a young man. In the eighteenth century William Jones identified Sandrocottos with Chandragupta, which provided a clue to Mauryan chronology. It is possible that as a result of the marriage alliance one of the daughters of Seleucus came to the Mauryan court at Pataliputra, in which case a number of Greek women would have accompanied her. An exchange of envoys between the Mauryas and the Seleucids, and with the Hellenistic states further west, was initiated, accompanied by an exchange of gifts (which included potent aphrodisiacs!). Pataliputra welcomed visitors and the city administration had a special committee to look after their welfare.

Seleucus's envoy, Megasthenes, is said to have spent time in India and left an account entitled *Indica*. Much of this account could have been gathered from conversations and travellers' tales, rather than from personal knowledge, and some of his contemporaries doubted that he spent time at Pataliputra. Unfortunately, the original account has been lost and what survive are paraphrases in the writings of later authors such as Diodorus, Strabo and Arrian. That these later authors were reformulating the original text is possible as there are some points of disagreement among the three. The Hellenistic states were all seeking historians to give them legitimacy and to describe their governance. Megasthenes was the choice of the Seleucids. His account of Mauryan India can be better appreciated if seen in the context of the discussion on Hellenistic states by other writers.

The Jaina tradition claims that towards the end of his life Chandragupta, by now an ardent Jaina, abdicated in favour of his son Bindusara and became an ascetic. Together with one of the better-known Jaina elders, Bhadrabahu, and other monks he went to south India, and there he ended his life by regulated slow starvation in the orthodox Jaina manner. A site close to the Jaina centre of Shravana Belgola in Karnataka is associated by local tradition with this story.

Bindusara succeeded in about 297 BC. To the Greeks, Bindusara was known as Amitrochates – perhaps a Greek transcription of the Sanskrit *amitraghata,* the destroyer of foes. Apparently he was a man of wide interests and tastes, and it is said that he asked the Greek King Antiochus I to send him some sweet wine, dried figs and a sophist. Buddhist tradition associates him with an interest in the Ajivika sect. A Tibetan history of Buddhism, written many centuries later, attributes to him the conquest of 'the land between the two seas' – presumably the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. This would suggest that Bindusara campaigned in the Deccan, extending Mauryan control as far south as Karnataka. The recent discovery of Ashokan edicts at Sannathi in Karnataka, similar to those found at Kalinga in Orissa and issued after the Kalinga campaign, raises the question of whether this region was conquered later by Ashoka, rather than by his father Bindusara; or were these edicts located at this site by mistake? Early Tamil poets of south India speak of Mauryan chariots thundering across the land, their white pennants brilliant in the sunshine. Yet there appeared to have been friendly relations with the chiefdoms of the far south. At the time of Bindusara's death in *c.* 272 BC, a large part of the subcontinent had come under Mauryan suzerainty. One area that was hostile, possibly interfering with Mauryan commerce to the peninsula and south India, was Kalinga on the east coast (Orissa). Its conquest was left to Bindusara's son Ashoka, whose campaign in Kalinga was more than just an event of military significance.

Until about a hundred years ago in India, Ashoka was merely one of the many kings mentioned in the Mauryan dynastic list included in the *Puranas*. Elsewhere in the Buddhist tradition he was referred to as a *chakravartin/cakkavatti,* a universal monarch, but this tradition had become extinct in India after the decline of Buddhism. However, in 1837, James Prinsep deciphered an inscription written in the earliest Indian script since the Harappan, *brahmi*. There were many inscriptions in which the King referred to himself as Devanampiya Piyadassi (the beloved of the gods, Piyadassi). The name did not tally with any mentioned in the dynastic lists, although it was mentioned in the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka. Slowly the clues were put together but the final confirmation came in 1915, with the discovery of yet another version of the edicts in which the King calls himself Devanampiya Ashoka.

The edicts of Ashoka, located as inscriptions in various parts of his empire, acquaint us not only with the personality of the King but also with the events of his reign and above all his policies as a ruler. As statements of his personal concerns they are remarkable documents, vividly capturing the ambience of his time. This allows glimpses of something other than the conventional limitations of official documents. The edicts do in fact 'speak' of his concerns, both as a human being and a statesman. Their almost conversational style brings to life the personality of the King.

The edicts of the earlier half of his reign were inscribed on rock surfaces wherever these were conveniently located, and are therefore referred to as the Minor and Major Rock Edicts. These were distributed widely throughout the empire especially in areas of permanent settlement and concentrations of people. In the latter part of his reign his edicts were inscribed on well-polished sandstone monolithic pillars, each surmounted with a finely sculpted animal capital, and these have come to be known as the Pillar Edicts. The stone was quarried from sites at Chunar near Varanasi and would have involved much technological expertise in cutting and engraving. The Pillar Edicts are confined to the Ganges Plain, probably because they were transponed by river. The area coincides with the heartland of the empire.

Ashokan inscriptions continue to be found and there is always anticipation regarding information that a new edict may bring. Even where the text is the same as that of earlier ones, the significance of the location adds to our information on Mauryan history. Translations or versions in Greek or

Aramaic of the Ashokan edicts, intended for the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking people on the north-western borders, have been helpful in clarifying the meaning of those Prakrit terms that are ambiguous or controversial. Thus *dhamma* was rendered by some scholars as the teaching of the Buddha and by others as a more general concern for ethical behaviour. Its translation into Greek as *eusebeia* would tend to support the second meaning. There is interestingly no reference to the teachings of the Buddha in the Greek and Aramaic versions. This might have been expected if their intention was to propagate Buddhism. What is equally fascinating is that some concepts in these edicts are drawn from the philosophical discourse in that language. Thus the edicts in Aramaic are better understood if read in the context of some Zoroastrian concepts. At a more mundane level, the Greek version of the Minor Rock Edict clarifies the date as being in expired regnal years, which is helpful to chronological reconstruction.

Ashoka's experience as an administrator began with his being the governor at Taxila and at Ujjain, both cities handling commercial activities. His sojourn in Taxila is described in texts associated with the later northern Buddhist tradition. These write of his bid for the throne on the death-bed of his father, a bid encouraged by some of the more powerful ministers. His stay at Ujjain is described in the Sri Lankan chronicles of the southern Buddhist tradition. They refer to his love for the beautiful daughter of a merchant, a devout Buddhist and the mother of his son Mahinda who is said to have introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

There continues to be a controversy as to whether Ashoka succeeded his father immediately on the latter's death or whether there was a four-year interregnum involving a struggle for the throne among the brothers. Of the events of Ashoka's reign, the most frequently referred to by modern historians has been his conversion to Buddhism. This was linked to the famous campaign in Kalinga. In about 260 BC Ashoka campaigned against the Kalingans and routed them. Presumably the campaign was to obtain resources from Kalinga; to safeguard the routes of the profitable Mauryan trade with the peninsula that went past the eastern coast; or to chastize the Kalingans for having broken away from Magadhan control, if the canal built by the Nandas was a symbol of control. The destruction caused by the war filled the King with remorse. His earlier perfunctory interest in Buddhist teaching was rekindled and this time it became a central pursuit. It has been stated in the past that he was dramatically converted to Buddhism immediately after the battle, with its attendant horrors. But his was not an overnight conversion; he states in one of his inscriptions that only after a period of two and a half years did he become a zealous devotee of Buddhism. It eventually led him to endorse non-violence and consequently to forswear war as a means of conquest. Yet, curiously, he refrained from engraving his confession of remorse at any location in Kalinga. This was replaced by the Separate Edicts (as they have come to be called), which are instructions to his officers, emphasizing the need for good administration.

Nevertheless his statement on the campaign is indeed extraordinary, coming from a conqueror, setting him apart as a rare human being. He states:

When he had been consecrated eight years the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, conquered Kalinga. A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished. Afterwards, now that Kalinga was annexed, the Beloved of the Gods very earnestly practised *Dhamma,* desired *Dhamma* and taught *Dhamma.* On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods and

weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods, is that those who dwell there, whether brahmans, shramans, or those of other sects, or householders who show obedience to their superiors, obedience to mother and father, obedience to their teachers and behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves and servants – all suffer violence, murder and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to have escaped and whose love is undiminished suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues and relatives. This participation of all men in suffering weighs heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods.

Major Rock Edict XIII, tr. R. Thapar,

Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas, pp. 255-6

It was during Ashoka's reign that the Buddhist Sangha underwent further reorganization, with the meeting of the Third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra in *c.* 250 BC. The Theravada sect claimed that it represented the true teaching of the Buddha, a claim that enabled it to become a dominant sect in the southern tradition and allowed it to exclude those regarded as dissidents. Theravada Buddhist sources have naturally tried to associate Ashoka with this important event in order to give it greater legitimacy. Ashoka does not mention it directly in any of his inscriptions, but there is a possibly oblique reference in an inscription addressed to the Buddhist Sangha, stating that dissident monks and nuns are to be expelled. The exclusion of dissidents is a recognized pattern in sectarian contestations.

The decision to send missionaries to various parts of the subcontinent and even further, and to make Buddhism an actively proselytizing religion, appears to have been taken at this Council, leading eventually to the propagation of Buddhism all over Asia by the turn of the Christian era. This heightened sense of mission was in some ways more characteristic of Buddhism than of the other religions that evolved in India. Conversion as a religious act was partially determined by links between caste and religion.Buddhism did not make caste a barrier to those who wished to be either Buddhist monks or lay followers. This was a contrast to Vedic Brahmanism where caste was crucial to participation in, and sometimes even defined, various forms of worship. Buddhism was unable to negate caste as a form of stratification, which in later times other non-caste religions such as Christianity and Islam also failed to do.

Communications with the world beyond the subcontinent were once again being developed. Most of the contacts were with countries to the west. The east was comparatively unexplored. Ashoka's missions to the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the enhancement of trade with these, familiarized the Hellenistic world with Indian life and provoked an interest in things Indian. Exchanges of envoys are on record. The closest of these kingdoms was that of the Seleucids whose border was contiguous with the Mauryan. The north-western provinces, having once been part of the Achaemenid empire, retained many Persian features. It is not surprising that the capitals of the Ashokan pillars bear a remarkable similarity to those at Persepolis, and the idea of engraving inscriptions on appropriately located rocks may have come to Ashoka after hearing about those of Darius. However, the content of the inscriptions and their locations are very different from those of the Achaemenids.

Ashoka mentions various contemporaries in the world to the west with whom he exchanged missions, diplomatic and other. A passage in one of his inscriptions reads, 'where reigns the Greek King named Amtiyoga and beyond the realm of that Amtiyoga in the lands of the four kings Tulamaya, Antekina, Maka, and Alikyashudala'. These have been identified as Antiochus II Theos of Syria (260-

246 BC), the grandson of Seleucus Nicator; Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (285-247 BC); Antigonus Gonatus of Macedonia (276-239 BC); Magas of Cyrene; and Alexander of Epirus. This passage is the bedrock of the chronology of Indian history, interlocking the date of the Mauryas with Hellenistic kings. The choice of these kings was not arbitrary since each had some kinship connection with his neighbour.

The Ashokan inscriptions were generally in the local script. Other than the ones composed in Greek and Aramaic, they were in the Prakrit language. Thus, those found in the north-west, in the region near Peshawar, are in the *kharoshthi* script which was derived from Aramaic used in Iran. At the extreme north-west of the empire, near modern Kandahar, the inscriptions are in Greek and Aramaic. Elsewhere in India they are in the *brahmi* script. Whereas in the north-west a concession was made to both the local language and script, in the southern part of the peninsula where people did not yet speak Prakrit – the more widely used language being Tamil – such a concession was not made. Perhaps this was because Tamil did not have a script at that time, the earliest script being an adaptation of *brahmi;* or perhaps also because these were regions which were still chiefdoms and therefore were not given the same status as the kingdoms of the north-west. The extensive use of Prakrit would suggest that the edicts encouraged an element of cultural uniformity in the empire quite apart from the geographically limited use of other languages, but regional linguistic variants are common in the Prakrit of the inscriptions. The origin of the *brahmi* script remains a source of controversy. Some point to its similarities with the southern Semitic script and argue that trade connections led to its evolution; others maintain that it is indigenous and was invented to assist in the administration of a state. The close link between *kharoshthi* and *brahmi* could suggest that the former influenced the latter, since engravers with knowledge of *kharoshthi* were sometimes used to engrave the inscriptions in *brahmi* as far south as in Karnataka.

Tibetan sources maintain that the kingdom of Khotan in central Asia was jointly founded by Indian and Chinese political exiles, and that Ashoka actually visited Khotan. This sounds improbable in view of the hazardous terrain encountered in making such a journey. Contacts with China are difficult to determine with any precision at this date. The central Asian route may have been known but not used regularly. The mountains of the north-east were on the borders of areas that came to be part of the Chinese domain, but the alignment of these mountains in a north-south direction may have created an effective barrier to frequent communication. One of Ashoka's daughters is said to have married a nobleman from Nepal, thus setting up a connection. The eastern Ganges region was included in the location of Vanga (Bengal). Urban centres and ports in the delta such as Chandraketugarh and Tamralipti/Tamluk became centres of trade, and ships heading for the eastern coast and south India began their voyage from the ports of the delta. On the western coast the major ports were Bhrigukaccha (the Barygaza of Greek texts) and Sopara near Mumbai.

The Mauryan capital, Pataliputra, was linked to the northern route – the *uttarapatha* – of earlier times, which ran along the foothills of the Himalaya and then probably along the Gandak. The capital was also at a nodal point, facilitating control over the Ganges system. The Ganges Plain, apart from river routes, was connected with the main commercial centres. Pliny, writing in the post-Mauryan period, mentions a royal highway which followed the route from Taxila to Pataliputra, with a possible extension to Tamralipti. Routes through the peninsula are indicated by the location of the edicts at strategic points – Sahasram, Panguraria (near Hoshangabad), Sannathi. The sites of the inscriptions in southern Karnataka could also have been reached by sea along the eastern coast to the delta of the Krishna River and then inland.

The extent and influence of Mauryan power in the peninsula can be gauged from the location of

Ashoka's inscriptions, which are not found beyond southern Karnataka. Ashoka mentions the people of the south with whom he was on friendly terms – the Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras and Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni (Sri Lanka), and there is no indication that he attempted to conquer them. The resources of the far south seem not to have been so visible as they were to become later. The chiefdoms, in turn, having had or heard of the experience of Mauryan arms from earlier campaigns, probably preferred to give pledges of friendship and remain at peace.

Mauryan relations with Sri Lanka are described as particularly close in the chronicles of the island – the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*. Not only was the first Buddhist missionary to the island said to be Ashoka's son Mahinda, but the then King, Tissa, appears to have modelled himself on Ashoka. There were frequent exchanges of gifts and envoys. The Indian Emperor gifted a branch of the original *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha had gained enlightenment and which, it is claimed, survived in Sri Lanka, although the parent tree in India was cut down in later centuries by an anti-Buddhist fanatic.

The reigns of the first three Mauryas – the first ninety years or so of the dynasty – were the most impressive. Their significance lay not merely in the administration of the rulers over a vast territory, but also in the fact that they were able to draw together the largely diverse elements of the subcontinent. They gave expression to a political vision that coloured subsequent centuries of Indian political life, even if few rulers succeeded in repeating the Mauryan pattern. How and why this imperial vision was possible in the third century BC was determined by a variety of factors.

The Political Economy of Empire

Among the sources used extensively to reconstruct the polity of the Mauryas is the *Arthashastra,* which provides a detailed blueprint of how a kingdom should be governed. The precise date of the text remains uncertain, this being the case with many major texts of the n past. Its authorship is attributed to Kautilya, also identified by some with Chanakya and thought to be the chief minister of Chandragupta. The present form of the text is the work of Vishnugupta in about the third century AD. The main chronological controversy hinges on which parts of the texts are datable to the Mauryan period, or if at all, and which are later. Even if some sections are likely to be dated to the Mauryan period, such as Book II, they should not be taken as descriptive since, as a theoretical treatise, it is only a pointer to what were regarded as essential matters pertaining to governance and to a particular political economy. These ideas did derive from some existing features, but the precision of detailed functioning on the part of a centralized government was doubtless an ideal. It is more important to recognize that such an ideal was seen as a possibility. The text therefore is essentially an encouragement to a particular pattern of governance.

The revenue-producing economy of northern India was now predominantly agrarian, with large areas being brought under cultivation. Land revenue had become the accepted source of income for the government, and it was realized that regular assessments assured increased revenues. The predictability of revenue from these taxes would have created a sense of fiscal security. The administrative system was largely concerned with the efficient collection of taxes. Regarded by many as the theorist of such a system of administration, Kautilya refers at length to methods of tax collection and related problems and a control over potential sources of revenue. Thus forests could not be privately cleared, and clearance was supervised by the state, doubtless to collect the forest products

as well as to prevent any arbitrary extension of agriculture. It is a moot point whether such a degree of control was actually exercised. Economic activities other than agrarian were neither unknown nor discouraged. Villages still maintained herds of animals and these were listed under items that were assessed and taxed. In theory, commercial enterprises, particularly in the coastal regions, came under government supervision, and taxes, tolls and customs dues were collected wherever and whenever possible, the techniques of taxation having evolved from the earlier tax on agricultural produce.

Apart from the activities of the state in agriculture, private owners, as farmers or landowners, cultivated the land or had it cultivated and paid the state a variety of taxes. The large landowners collected a rent from their tenants. The recognition of private property in land was gradually conceded, shown by the statement that priority over the sale of landed property would go to kinsmen and creditors before others. Kinship links in relation to land had not been entirely terminated. Extensive areas of wasteland and of *sita* or crown lands were cultivated under the supervision of the state. The latter could be directly cultivated by those appointed to do so, or could be cultivated by sharecroppers or tenant cultivators who paid the state a tax, or by wage labourers employed directly by the state. Greek writers, referring to the account by Megasthenes, unfortunately make contradictory statements about the relationship between the cultivator and the state, although they all agree that cultivators were the largest in number and maintain that the ownership of land was claimed by the ruling dynasty. The variations in tenancy mentioned in the *Arthashastra* are missing in these accounts. The text advocates that the state should organize the clearing of new areas or deserted lands and should settle on such lands large numbers of *shudra* cultivators, either deported from over-populated or sub-standard areas, or enticed from neighbouring kingdoms. Doubtless, the 150,000 people deported from Kalinga after the campaign of Ashoka were sent to clear wasteland and establish new settlements.

Shudras settling in new land were initially exempt from tax, but, once they were working the land, tax was imposed. They have in the past been described as helots, owned and employed by the state. But they were neither owned by the state nor by the ruling community, as in helotage. Other categories that were not necessarily peasants, but provided labour, are referred to in the compound phrase *dasa-karmakara* – slaves and hired labourers. The status of both allowed little freedom and permitted much oppression. Buddhist texts seem to be more sensitive to the condition of such people.

Megasthenes has commented on the absence of slavery in India, but this is contradicted by Indian sources. Perhaps he had the pattern of Athenian slavery in mind and the Indian pattern differed. He suggests a parallel with the Spartan system in Greece, which may have occurred to him because of the centrality of status through birth in both instances. Domestic slaves were a regular feature in prosperous households, where the slaves were of low-caste status, but were not untouchables or they would not have had entry into the homes of the upper castes. Slave labour was also used in the mines and by some craft associations. The conditions leading to slavery are listed in more than one text, and among them are: that a man could be a slave either by birth; by voluntarily selling himself; by being captured in war; or as a result of a judicial punishment. Slavery was a recognized institution and the legal relationship between master and slave was clearly defined. For example, if a female slave bore her master a son, not only was she legally free but the child was entitled to the legal status of a son of the master. Megasthenes may have confused caste status with stratification defined by degrees of freedom. Although Greek society in practice acknowledged degrees of unfreedom, in theory it made a distinction between the freeman and the slave, a distinction which was not so apparent in Indian society. A slave in India could buy back his freedom or be voluntarily released by his master; and, if previously he had the status of an *arya,* he could return to this status on the completion of his term as a

slave, according to the *Arthashastra*. Possibly the function of arya and dasa had again undergone some change. What was immutable in Indian society was not freedom or slavery, but caste. In effect, however, the condition of freedom or slavery was implicit in caste, where, in the overall scheme, the lower castes were less free than the higher, and untouchability could coincide with slavery.

Land revenue was of at least two kinds. One was a tax on the area of land cultivated and the other on the assessment of the produce. Ashoka's inscription at Lumbini, commemorating the birthplace of the Buddha, speaks of *bali* and *bhaga* which may have been these two taxes. Interestingly, he exempts the people of Lumbini from the first, but continues to impose a tax on produce. The assessment varied from region to region and the sources mention a range from one-sixth to a quarter of the produce of the land. It was generally based on the land worked by each individual cultivator, and also on the quality of the land. A reference to *pindakara* – a heap of taxes – could suggest a tax collected jointly from a village. The treasury was entitled to tax the shepherds and livestock breeders on the number and the produce of the animals. Taxes on other activities, referred to by the general term *kara,* were also levied. A tax of a different kind, *vishti,* was paid in labour for the state and is therefore sometimes translated as corvee. It could be forced labour, although some historians regard it as a labour tax that provided labour in lieu of a tax. *Vishti* pertains more to the individual than the other taxes. At this period it is mentioned often in the context of craft production, where craftsmen provide a stipulated amount of free labour to the state.

Taxes for the provision of water for irrigation were regularly collected wherever the state was responsible for providing irrigation. One of Chandragupta's governors had a dam built across a river near Girnar in western India, thus constructing the Sudarshana lake to supply water for the region. An inscription in the neighbourhood mentions the continuous maintenance of this dam for 800 years, stating that it was built through local but official initiative. But where irrigation was privately managed – through wells, channels off rivers and pools, and systems for lifting water – there was either a reduction on the water levy or an exemption. The *Arthashastra* had a preference for the private management of irrigation. Thus, although the construction and maintenance of reservoirs, tanks and canals were regarded as part of the functions of governing, there is no ground for holding that the control of irrigation was the key to the control of the economy and therefore the prevalence of despotism.

According to Megasthenes, the fertility of the land was such that two crops a year were normal. However, other sources mentioned famines. The Jatna tradition referred to a famine towards the end of the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. An inscription from Mahasthan in eastern India dated to the Mauryan or the immediately post-Mauryan period listed the measures to be taken by the local administration during times of famine. Twelve-year famines were referred to in the epics and texts associated with the Vedic corpus, but such references were more likely a rhetoric for disaster.

If the agrarian economy helped to build an empire, the latter in turn furthered another form of economic activity. The attempted political unification of the subcontinent, and the security provided by a stable government, encouraged the expansion of various craft associations, and consequently in trade. The state employed some artisans, such as armourers and shipbuilders, and they were exempt from tax. Others who worked in state workshops, for example the spinning and weaving shops and the state mines, were liable to pay taxes. The rest worked either individually or, as was most often the case, as members of an association. These associations – *shreni* or *puga* – were to become increasingly large and complex in structure, and artisans found it advantageous to join them since this eliminated the expense of working alone and having to compete with the larger organization. From the perspective of the state, such associations facilitated the collection of taxes. They were in turn

strengthened by the localization of occupation and the preference for hereditary occupations, and gradually acquired features suggesting the functions of a guild.

The sale of merchandise was, in theory, strictly supervised. Goods were required to be stamped so that consumers could distinguish between the old and the new. Before assessing the goods the superintendent of commerce was expected to inquire into their current price, supply and demand, and the expenses involved in production. A toll was fixed at one-fifth of the value of the commodity and, in addition, there was a trade tax of one-fifth of the toll. Tax evasion is on record and Megasthenes tells us that it was heavily punished. Prices were controlled to prevent too great a profit on the part of the merchant. The degree to which the Mauryan administration could collect revenue from commercial sources would have varied according to Mauryan control over an area or a route. There was no banking system but usury was customary. The recognized rate of interest on borrowed money was 15 per cent per annum. However, in less secure transactions that involved long sea voyages the rate could be as high as 60 per cent. How much of all this was actually in practice remains uncertain.

Mauryan levels from excavations of urban centres show an improvement in the standard of living compared to the previous period. Domestic housing was of brick, although what are thought to be the palace and the audience-hall at Pataliputra were of stone. The massive wooden palisade with its towers and gateways circumscribing the city, as described by Megasthenes, has been corroborated from excavations. A timber palisade was safer in the soft alluvial soil of the river bank. However, he does mention that many of the buildings were of timber and therefore fire was a major hazard. Pataliputra is the only Mauryan city of that period with monumental architecture. Such architecture is often seen as a statement of imperial power and presence. In the Mauryan case it is limited to the capital. Elsewhere, the imperial presence is encapsulated in the inscribing of the king's edicts. Unfortunately, the site of Pataliputra is now built over by the city of Patna, making extensive excavation virtually impossible. Characteristics associated with urban centres are met with at Mauryan levels, for example a frequency of ring wells and soakage pits. There is a quantitative increase in the use of iron, as well as a greater variety of iron artefacts. The distribution of Northern Black Polished Ware as far as south India is an indication of the reach of trade.

Major towns tend to be distantly located in relation to each other, barring those in the Ganges Plain. Mahasthan (Bogra Dt. of Bangla Desh), Shishupalgarh (Orissa), Amaravati (in the Krishna delta), Sopara (near Mumbai) and Kandahar (in Afghanistan) are unlikely to have been in close contact. Some of these were larger than the cities of the earlier period but none could compare in size to Pataliputra. Shishupalgarh is identified by some with Tosali, an important administrative centre mentioned in an edict of Ashoka, not far from the location of the edict at Dhauli. The conquest of Kalinga and the location of Amaravati would have occasioned some activity along the east coast. In the post-Mauryan period this takes the form of a series of Buddhist sites along the coast.

Punch-marked coins and some uninscribed cast copper coins continue to be associated with these levels. The more commonly found punch-marked coins carry familiar symbols such as the crescent-on-arches or hills, the tree-in-railing, the sun symbol and the circle with six arrow-like extensions. An attempt was made to arrange all the coins from a hoard by weight and then relate them to the symbols in order to ascertain a chronological sequence, arguing that the older coins would have less weight because of greater wear and tear. But it did not provide conclusive results.

Terracotta figures, both human and animal, appear to have been popular and can be contrasted stylistically with the far more sophisticated pillar capitals of stone. Whereas the terracottas were made for use by ordinary people, the stone pillars and capitals were artistic statements of the royal court that drew attention to the message engraved on the pillars. Terracotta moulds have been found in

large numbers and the repertoire included forms that are linked to fertility cults. Stone-cutting and carving acquired significant dimensions, both in the assertion of a distinct aesthetic and in the techniques of polishing the stone after it had been carved. What has come to be called the Mauryan polish or gloss is easily recognized and gives a special quality to the stone. Stone was the medium for the large figures of *yakshas* and *yakshis,* demi-gods and spirits (such as the now famous one from Didarganj), possibly Mauryan and displaying the same perfection in polish as the pillar capitals. The stone elephant emerging out of the rock at Dhauli is of rougher workmanship. Stone sculpture was evidently the preferred medium of the wealthy and powerful, and is a contrast to the more humble terracotta images.

Welding a Subcontinental Society

Megasthenes speaks of Mauryan society as having seven divisions – philosophers, farmers, soldiers, herdsman, artisans, magistrates and councillors. These have been interpreted as castes because he states that no one is allowed to marry outside his own division or change one profession for another. Only the philosopher is permitted this privilege. All the seven divisions did not follow identical rules. It is thought that he was confusing caste with occupation and by the seven divisions he meant *varnas*. But these were only four, and seven was a fairly common number for classifications of various kinds. It is more likely that he was describing the principle of *jati,* where the social group one was born into was perhaps a closer determinant of marriage rules and occupation than *varna.* Curiously, he makes no mention of the notion of social pollution or of the category of untouchables. Was this too complicated a system for a visitor to understand or was its practice not as widespread as it was to become later? His description is of interest, not because it is accurate but because it is based on the observations of a visitor and reflects hearsay as well as current notions.

The category of philosophers consisted of the dual division of the Brachmanes and the Sarmanes – brahmans and *shramanas* – referring to what we would call the religious identities of Vedic Brahmanism and Shramanism. These were blanket terms which were also used in later times. The *shramanas* included a variety of ascetics, as well as the monks and lay followers of various sects – Buddhist, Jaina, Ajivika and others. They were large and influential enough to constitute a separate category. The philosophers were exempt from taxation, as corroborated by Indian sources when referring to brahmans and to monks.

The category of fanners, apart from the owners of land, would have included the *shudra* cultivators and the labourers working on the land. The cultivators, listed as the largest category, underline the centrality of agriculture and its requirement to maintain the Mauryan infrastructure, both civil and military. Cultivators were kept unarmed, thus reducing the likelihood of peasant revolts. When Buddhist sources speak of peasants being oppressed by a king they very occasionally refer to the exiling of the king. More often such peasants are said to migrate to neighbouring kingdoms. Migration was doubtless an easier solution than revolt, and although revolts occur in a much later period even then they were infrequent.

For Megasthenes to mention soldiers as one of the seven divisions emphasizes the importance of the army. The Mauryan standing army was larger than that of the Nandas, according to Roman sources. Pliny, writing in post-Mauryan times, quotes the figures at 700 elephants, 1,000 horses and 80,000 infantry, which figures are inflated by Plutarch to 600,000 for the foot soldiers. These

enormous figures are obviously exaggerated, as were those quoted earlier for the armed opposition met with by Alexander. In peacetime such a vast army would have been an economic liability. Megasthenes writes, 'when they are not in service they spend their time in idleness and drinking bouts, being maintained at the expense of the royal treasury.' In the circumstances it is not surprising that the treasury had to be kept replenished at any cost, whether it meant taxing every possible taxable commodity or deporting whole communities to establish new settlements. The curtailing of military campaigns might have been encouraged by financial constraints as well. Membership of the armed forces was not restricted to *kshatriyas,* for foot soldiers, charioteers and attendants would have been of the lower castes. Kautilya requires that soldiers should return their weapons to the armoury.

Of the other categories a different term is used for the herdsmen, who are listed as tribes, presumably pastoralists still adhering to clan identities. Pastoralists were sufficiently visible to constitute a distinct social group. They may well have included some hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivators, apart from horticulturalists who had come within the purview of the administration. These could be the people of the forest referred to as *atavikas* in Indian texts, since pastoralists frequently grazed their animals in forests and doubtless were familiar with the people who lived there.

The status of the artisan would depend on his particular craft. Metalworkers, for instance, making armour and other expensive items, were accorded a higher status than weavers and potters; itinerant smiths, catering to the needs of households, had a low status despite the importance of their work. Wealthy artisans were counted among the *gahapatis,* householders, in Buddhist texts. Those with small incomes would have been among the *shudras*. Curiously, there is no mention of merchants, except that one of the Greek terms used for artisans suggests townsmen who could have been petty traders. Magistrates and councillors were obviously part of the administrative system and would tend to be either brahmans or *kshatriyas,* although exceptions are on record.

The picture of Indian society presented by Megasthenes would suggest a more flexible society than has been assumed by modern scholars, and the differentiation between the upper and lower castes was derived from both economic and social status. A useful aspect of the description given by Megasthenes is that it depicts the range of societies that the Mauryan system was attempting to integrate. The distinctive characteristics of these probably changed only in areas where agriculture and commerce enveloped more simple and localized economies.

Caste society need not have worked in the smooth manner envisaged by the brahman theoreticians. It assumed the validity of the principle of social inequality. The first three castes, the *dvija* or twice-born, were theoretically more privileged than the *shudras* and the outcastes. But *vaishyas,* though technically *dvijas* or twice-born, did not benefit recognizably from their privileged position, since they had an ambiguous relationship with the first two. Yet traders and merchants were by now economically powerful, because of the opening up of commerce. Confrontations between them and the socially superior castes would have been inevitable. Guild leaders in urban centres had a significant role in urban institutions, yet the social code denied them a position of prestige. However, narratives of urban life in Buddhist texts are not too troubled by brahmanical norms, although if taken literally the norms of the *Dharmasutras* would have been resented by the less privileged groups. A partial expression of such resentment would have been their support for the heterodox sects, Buddhism in particular. Buddhist texts, unlike the brahmanical, are respectful towards the *setthis* - the financiers and the merchants – who were often their patrons, as they also were of the other sects. This may well have caused friction between the brahmans and the heterodox sects. Ashoka's emphatic plea for social harmony and repeated calls for equal respect towards brahmans and *shramanas* would suggest that there were social tensions.

Activity related to women takes a variety of forms. There is a curious reference to the king's bodyguard consisting of women archers who also accompanied him on hunts. This statement echoes some from other societies with similar royal bodyguards, presumably regarded as impeccably reliable. In addition, women were liable to be employed by the state as spies and performers. Women of the upper castes who had become impoverished or widowed, wives who had been deserted, or ageing prostitutes could get work from the state, such as spinning yarn, but their movements had to be circumspect. Should a peasant fall into debt his wife was required to continue farming his land if he still held it, so that the debt could be cleared. This was not required of women of the upper class. Yet, if a slave woman gave birth to her master's child, both she and the child were immediately manumitted. Female ascetics were known, but were few and far between, and more frequently were found moving around as part of the palace scene in literary works. Kautilya has no qualms about insisting that prostitutes also be taxed on their takings. This would suggest that they were of a sufficient number to bring in a worthwhile amount in tax. That the state should be concerned about their welfare is evident from the punishments to be imposed on those who harmed them. Women camp-followers probably came from the same profession. As in many texts the discussion on women assumes that, other than these few groups, the majority of women followed the wishes of the men in their family.

Surprisingly, there is no mention of either *varna* or *jati* in the Ashokan edicts, which may suggest that they were not yet so prominent as social categories. Social distinctions were, however, evident, and among the markers are the ways in which sculptural representations are used. The capitals surmounting the stone pillars that carried the edicts of Ashoka had animal motifs, and their representation seems to combine both a Buddhist and an imperial ideology. As a contrast to these, the small but extensive terracotta figures of animals and humans were more suggestive of a popular form drawing on religious ideas and decorative functions.

Administration and Empire

The economic conditions of the time and the requirements of the Mauryan period have tended to give the form of a centralized bureaucracy to the Mauryan administration, which has been imprinted with the structure envisaged in the *Arthashastra*. If this text can be presumed to reflect the changes of this period, then it can be argued that it was projecting the potentialities of a centralized administration. But the degree to which it was actually so, and the manner in which this administration was practised, may require a closer look at other texts claiming to be descriptive. The earlier assumption of a uniform and centralized administration needs modification. Nevertheless, some degree of centralization is suggested from other sources and this would have provided leads to the system as constructed in the *Arthashastra*. It might be more useful, therefore, to look at the variations within the system.

The nucleus of the Mauryan system was the king, whose powers had by now increased tremendously. Ashoka interpreted these as paternal kingship, whose rallying call was 'All men are my children'. He travelled extensively throughout the empire to be in touch with his subjects. Legislation was largely a matter of confirming social usage and in this the king had a fairly free hand, but was expected to consult with his ministers. The ministerial council had no well-defined political status, its power depending on the personality of the king. Ashoka's edicts mention frequent

consultations between him and his ministers, the latter being free to advise him on his regulations. However, the final decision lay with the monarch.

If the *Arthashastra* can be taken as a guide to the kind of administration adopted by the Mauryas, then the two key offices controlled by the central administration were those of the treasurer and the chief collector. The treasurer was responsible for keeping an account of the income in cash and for storing the income in kind. The chief collector, assisted by a body of clerks, kept records of the taxes that came in from various parts of the empire. The accounts of every administrative department, properly kept, were to be presented jointly by all the ministers to the king, perhaps to avoid fraud and embezzlement. Each department had a large staff of superintendents and subordinate officers, linked to local administration and the central government. Those specifically listed in the *Arthashastra* are the superintendents of gold and goldsmiths, and of the storehouse, commerce, forest produce, the armoury, weights and measures, tolls, weaving, agriculture, liquor, slaughterhouses, prostitutes, ships, cows, horses, elephants, chariots, infantry, passports and the city.

Salaries of officials and expenditure on public works constituted a sizeable portion of public expenses, one-quarter of the total revenue being reserved for these. The figures given for the salaries of those running the administration come from a section of the text that is believed to be post-Mauryan. The hierarchy that emerges is of some interest in explaining where the emphasis lay in administration. The higher officials were extremely well paid according to this scheme and such salaries could have been a drain on the treasury. The chief minister, the *purohita,* and the army commander received 48,000 *panas,* the treasurer and the chief collector 24,000; the accountants, clerks and soldiers received 500 *panas,* whereas the ministers were paid 12,000; and artisans received 120 *panas*. The value of the *pana* is not indicated, nor the interval at which salaries were paid, assuming that they were paid in money. Some comparison can be made with other sources, mentioning that a pair of oxen cost 24 *panas* and a slave could be bought for 100 *panas*. These may not have been the actual salaries but the implicit ratios in these amounts are of interest. Thus, the ratio of the clerk's salary to that of the chief minister or of the soldier to that of the commander of the army works out at i: 96.

The upper levels of the bureaucracy would have been extraordinarily well paid if these ratios are even reasonably correct. Public works covered a wide range of activity: building and maintaining roads, wells and rest-houses, and planting orchards, as stated by Ashoka in his edicts; irrigation projects such as the Sudarshana lake; maintaining the army; running the mines; financing certain kinds of items in which the state had a monopoly, such as armour; the grants of the royal family to religious institutions and individuals, for example where Ashoka refers to the gifts made by his queen; and the maintenance of the royal family itself.

Administration doubtless attempted to follow some of the prevailing precepts, but also had to adjust to the political and economic reality. The *Arthashastra* endorsed a highly centralized system where the king's control over the entire exercise remained taut. This would have been difficult for an area as vast as that of the Mauryan Empire, economically and culturally so diverse, although it could have been possible in a smaller area such as Magadha, the governance of which seems closer to what Kautilya envisaged. It may be more realistic to suggest that the administration was adjusted to the socio-economic patterns and differentiations. Seen from this perspective, three variants in the administrative pattern can be suggested which would be appropriate for distinctly different conditions, but which would all the same underlie the emphasis on revenue collection and redistribution.

At the hub was the metropolitan state of Magadha, an area with long experience of functioning as a

state. The Ganges Plain was doubtless part of the same system. This is broadly the area of the distribution of the Pillar Edicts of Ashoka, many of which are his retrospective on his reign. Although the location of the pillars doubtless had to do with access to transportation by river, it would have been an interesting coincidence if this was the area of maximum centralized administration which probably functioned more closely to the Kautilyan system than elsewhere. The metropolitan state was the pivot of the empire, controlling the income and its redistribution. It extended its hegemony by conquering areas of strategic importance and of agrarian and commercial potential, the revenue from which would enrich it. Such areas could be regarded as core areas, scattered throughout the subcontinent and constituting a second category that was distinct from the metropolitan state.

The core areas were less directly under central control and more effectively under the control of governors and senior officials. As areas brought into the ambit of the Mauryan system they experienced state formation at second remove. The state was foisted on them through conquest and they subsequently accommodated themselves to the new situation, being incorporated into the state system. The imperial administration would have attempted to restructure the economy of these areas to bring them into some conformity with the metropolitan state. Core areas seem to coincide with closer clusters of Ashokan edicts and the Major Rock Edicts, such as those in Gandhara, in the Raichur *doab* and southern Karnataka, in Kalinga and in Saurashtra. The importance of Gandhara was that it controlled access to the Hellenistic kingdoms of west Asia and was an obvious area for commercial exchange. In Karnataka the locations of the inscriptions seem to have been determined by the potential for mining gold and the activities of chalcolithic and megalithic people. Urban centres were probably initially limited to Mauryan administrative centres, such as Suvarnagiri, perhaps so named because of its proximity to gold-mining areas. Mining was an important source of wealth and, apart from the availability of gold in Karnataka, there was copper in Rajasthan and iron in south Bihar. Some of the core areas would have included the peoples mentioned in the edicts, such as the Kambojas, Yonas, Bhojas, Pitinikas and Andhras, all of which were located in the imperial domain.

The third form was that of the peripheral areas, which have been called areas of relative isolation rather than attraction, and where extensive settlements were more limited. The imperial administration did not attempt to restructure the economy of these areas but limited its activities to tapping the existing resources. Peripheral areas were probably controlled more by fiat than by conquest and direct administration. Such territories were often viewed as buffer zones. These were generally forested areas providing a wealth of resources in timber, elephants and semi-precious stones. It would not be surprising if the people living in the forests tapped these resources more effectively than the Mauryan administration, and the administration would have had working relations with them in order to obtain the resources. Some who were brought within the ambit of the Mauryan administration, the *atavikas* or forest-dwellers, were referred to in the Ashokan edicts.

These references to the forest-people are in a tone that is both cajoling and threatening. The threat may have resulted from a resistance by forest-dwellers to encroachments. These were not always related to a control over the area by the army or the administration, but could also arise from hermitages or settlements of graziers and cultivators that often acted as the vanguard of a more determined intrusion. To the forest-dwellers they were alien and invasive, since the norms of the forest-dwellers were different from those of the settlers. For the latter, the former were without norms and unpredictable, and therefore often mythologized into the demons of the forest.

In the peninsula the societies of the megalithic settlements, cultivating rice, using iron artefacts and with elaborate burials, were more complex compared to the forest-dwellers who coexisted with them. A Mauryan presence is not registered in any striking way among the artefacts in the megalithic

remains, although Ashokan inscriptions are located in these areas and refer to Mauryan administration. Possibly, resources were tapped by the administration through local channels without any extensive restructuring of the economy in these areas. There is a cluster of Ashokan inscriptions in the gold-bearing region of Karnataka and it is likely that the ore was mined. It is otherwise difficult to explain why there should have been so much administrative activity in the area, even though gold objects from Mauryan levels are rare.

The suggestion that Mauryan administration and economy be viewed in terms of the metropolitan state, together with core and peripheral areas, should not be confused with what has been described as the segmentary state. Terms such as centre, core and periphery have been used in historical models other than the segmentary state, for example in the analyses of commerce relating to the function of markets and production. The Mauryan system suggested here had little to do with ritual status, ritual hierarchies or the separation of the political from the ritual. Mauryan control over administration and revenue collection did not vary, but rather there were variant mechanisms and forms in this control. Thus, it is possible that the chiefs among the forest-dwellers collected the forest produce demanded by the Mauryan administration and were the channels by which the administration obtained this tax in kind. Ashoka's admonition to the people of the forests does not suggest a dilution of Mauryan control.

The edicts make it evident that the empire was not viewed as consisting of uniform units of administration and they acknowledge the presence of diverse peoples. The variants suggested here accommodated these diversities without detracting from the general, overall control exercised by the imperial administration, or from the recognition that the metropolitan state was at the heart of the Mauryan system however uniform it was. This is made clear by the King's statement to the forest-dwellers which was conciliatory but accompanied by the threat that the state could be severe. The *Arthashastra* also warns that the forest-dwellers, although at some levels marginal, can be a danger when kings are campaigning in the area and should therefore be treated with suspicion and, if possible, appeased. They are a political reality and have to be treated tactfully. Mention is also made of the presence of pastoralists, in addition to cultivators, and the archaeology of this period points to a variety of settlements. The coexistence of such diversity required a focus, but also required diverse ways of administrative handling. Acknowledging diversity requires more than a single pattern of administration, and these patterns have to be flexible since the diversities were to be found in various parts of the empire.

Apart from the metropolitan area, which was directly governed, the empire was divided into provinces, each one apparently under a prince or member of the royal family. Centres of provincial administration were located at Taxila, Ujjain, Dhauli, Suvarnagiri and possibly Girnar. Governors administering smaller units were selected from among the local people, such as the Iranian Tushaspa associated with Saurashtra, or Romo-dote at Taxila. Senior officers – *pradesbikas* – toured every five years for an additional audit and check on provincial administration. There were specially appointed judicial officers – *rajukas* – both in the cities and rural areas, and they combined their judicial functions with assessment work. Among the duties of the *yukta* was the recording of information from varied sources. Fines served as punishments in most cases. But certain crimes were considered too serious to be punished by fines alone and Ashoka, despite his propagation of non-violence, retained capital punishment.

According to the blueprint of the *Arthashastra,* provinces should be subdivided into districts, each of these into groups of villages, the final unit of administration being the village: a system which has been implemented from time to time and has remained approximately unchanged. The group of villages was to be staffed with an accountant, who maintained boundaries, registered land and deeds,

kept a census of the population and a record of the livestock; and the tax collector, who was concerned with the various types of revenue. The most frequently mentioned person in the village, the headman, functioned in some official capacity and was responsible to the accountant and the tax collector. Administrative divisions are referred to in the edicts, one of which was called *ahara* – a term with an intrinsic interest since it is derived from collecting and eating.

Urban administration had its own hierarchy of officers. The city superintendent maintained law and order and the general cleanliness of the city. He was assisted by an accountant and a tax collector, with functions similar to those of their village counterparts. Megasthenes' description of the administration of Pataliputra states that the city was administered by thirty officials, divided into six committees of five members. Each committee supervised one of the following functions: questions relating to industrial arts; the welfare of visitors coming from distant places; the registering of births and deaths; matters relating to trade and commerce; supervision of the public sale of manufactured goods; and, finally, collection of the tax on articles sold (this being one-tenth of the purchase price). A similar administration is proposed by the *Arthashastra,* supporting supervision of production and exchange in urban centres, presumably to control revenues. If it was literally so, could it have acted as an inhibiting factor in exchange activities?

Whether the administration was quite as effective as suggested by these statements remains uncertain. There is for instance much emphasis on the keeping of records, but unfortunately such records have not survived, nor for that matter have records from later times. The communication between the province and the centre, which would be crucial to the kind of administration suggested, might have been difficult given the distances and the time taken for orders to be carried from Pataliputra to the other cities. Decisions on lesser activities were doubtless taken at the local level.

For the Mauryan administration espionage was a recognized official activity, one which was common to many other imperial systems. The *Arthashastra* advocates the frequent use of spies, and recommends that they should work in the guise of recluses, householders, merchants, ascetics, students, mendicant women and prostitutes. Ashoka also refers to agents who bring him news and generally keep him informed about public opinion. This was one of the means through which contact was maintained with even the more remote parts of the empire.

Ashoka's Dhamma

It was against this background that Ashoka expounded an idea which was new to Indian political and social theory, which has also received much attention in recent years, enhancing the curiosity about Ashoka. It is based on his interpretation of the 'philosophy' or idea of *Dhamma,* a term he used frequently. *Dhamma* is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word *Dharma,* meaning, according to the context, the universal law or righteousness or, by extension, the social and religious order found in a society where Brahmanism was the norm. In the Buddhist Canon it was used for the teaching of the Buddha. However, the word had a much more general connotation at the time and, judging by the way in which he used it in his edicts, Ashoka gave it a wider meaning.

Early studies of Ashoka drew on the evidence from the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka in conjunction with the King's own edicts, and this naturally emphasized a Buddhist reading of the edicts. His supposedly sudden conversion to Buddhism after the battle of Kalinga was dramatized and he was depicted as a paragon of Buddhist piety following his conversion – one historian suggesting

that he may have been both a monk and a monarch at the same time. Ashoka was certainly attracted to Buddhism and became a practising Buddhist. But the Buddhism of his age was not merely a religious belief; it was in addition a social and intellectual movement at many levels, influencing many aspects of social life. Obviously, any responsible and sensitive statesman would have had to locate himself in the context of the Buddha's teaching, among others, and be aware of its impact on the society of that time. Ashoka's edicts reflect this sensitivity, as also do his concerns for the ethics of those whom he was governing.

Ashoka, it would seem, made a distinction between his personal belief in and support for Buddhism and his obligation as a king and a statesman to insist that all religions must be respected. His inscriptions are therefore of two kinds. The smaller group consists of declarations of the King as a lay Buddhist, addressed to the Buddhist Sangha. These edicts describe his adherence to Buddhism and his relationship with the Sangha. Here the voice is that of a confirmed believer with some degree of intolerance of differing opinion, as for instance in a passage where he proclaims in no uncertain terms that dissident monks and nuns should be expelled from the Sangha. Another inscription mentions the various teachings of the Buddha with which Buddhists, and in particular Buddhist monks, should be familiar.

Far more important, however, is the larger group of inscriptions on rock surfaces known as the Major and Minor Rock Edicts, and the Pillar Edicts inscribed on specially erected pillars, all of which were located in places where people were likely to gather. Given that literacy would not have been widespread, these were presumably locations where the edicts would be read out to the gathered people. This was part of the propagation of ideas through the oral tradition. These may be described as exhortations to his subjects.

The versions of the Minor Rock Edicts reiterate the fact of his being a Buddhist and these, together with the Major Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts, define what he understands by *Dhamma*. The achievement of Ashoka lay in his exposition of this idea in the context of Mauryan India. He did not see *Dhamma* as piety, resulting from good deeds that were inspired by formal religious beliefs, but as conformity to a social ethic. Some historians have interpreted Ashoka's *Dhamma* as a synonym for Buddhism, arguing that Ashoka's intention was the propagation of Buddhism to make it virtually the religion of the Mauryan state. The edicts would belie such an intention. He appears to have been concerned with using a broader ethic to explore ways of governance and to reduce social conflict and intolerance. *Dhamma* was aimed at creating an attitude of mind in which the ethical behaviour of one person towards another was primary, and was based on a recognition of the dignity of human beings. It was couched in a language that was familiar to the discourse of that time. The ideas on which he focused, which do have some parallels in Buddhist teaching, were nevertheless central to contemporary debates on matters beyond the concerns of religious organizations.

This concept of *Dhamma* can perhaps be better understood by analysing it as a response to contemporary conditions. It was in part a policy that was nurtured in the mind of Ashoka, but, since he also saw it in relation to existing problems, it is in the light of these that its nature can be assessed. As a family, the Mauryas tended to be eclectic and favoured the heterodox sects – the Jainas, the Ajivikas and the Buddhists – although they were not hostile to Brahmanism. These dissident sects questioned brahmanical ideas and suggested alternative ways of life and thought. The strength of, and the support for, ideologies alternative to Vedic Brahmanism was apparent, and this would have made them all the more competitive. That the competition was sometimes expressed in contestation was unavoidable. There were other tensions, involving the status of newly emerging communities, such as the mercantile community, the assertion of craft associations in urban centres, the strain of an

administrative system more complex than before and the sheer size of the empire.

It would seem that with such divergent forces a focus or common perspective was required. The empire included multiple cultural and social systems. In the north-west, Hellenistic society was characterized by two divisions, the master and the slave; in the Ganges Plain and the core areas four *varnas* were more common, as well as innumerable *jatis;* among the *atavikas* or forest-people, scattered in many parts of the empire, there were no *varnas*. Such plurality could be juxtaposed or even minimally welded either by force or by persuasion. Ashoka chose the latter. Given the structure of Mauryan society and politics, in order to be successful such a focus had to derive from a central authority. He sought a group of unifying principles, influenced by the intellectual and religious currents of the time. Ashoka mutated *Dhamma* to his needs and explained it through a personal definition.

The principles of *Dhamma* were such that they would have been acceptable to people belonging to any religious sect. *Dhamma* was not defined in terms of caste duties and regulations and was left vague in details, referring itself to the requirements of social ethics. Of the basic principles, Ashoka emphasized tolerance. This, according to him, extended to tolerance towards people and towards their beliefs and ideas. He defined it repeatedly as consideration towards slaves and servants, respect for teachers, obedience to mother and father, generosity towards friends, acquaintances and relatives, regard for and donations to brahmans and *shramanas,* a concern for all living beings and an abstention from taking life. He went on to say:

But the Beloved of the Gods does not consider gifts of honour to be as important as the essential advancement of all sects. Its basis is the control of one's speech, so as not to extol one's own sect or disparage that of another on unsuitable occasions… On each occasion one should honour the sect of another, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other, while, by doing otherwise, one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms the other… therefore concord is to be commended so that men may hear one another's principles.

Major Rock Edict XII, tr. R. Thapar,*Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas,* p. 155

Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas, p. 155

This was a plea to accommodate differences in the interests of harmonious living. Differences can be openly expressed and admitted, while at the same time being tolerated. There was a concern that differences should not lead to disharmony. Occasions that might encourage disharmony or become the starting point for opposition, such as assemblies and gatherings, were discouraged.

Refraining from violence was another principle of *Dhamma,* which included the renunciation of war and conquest by violence, as well as a restraint on the killing of animals. But Ashoka was not adamant in his insistence on non-violence. He recognized that there were occasions when violence might be unavoidable, for instance when the forest-dwellers were troublesome. In a moving passage on the suffering caused by war, he declares that by adhering to *Dhamma* he will refrain from using force in the future. He also states that he would prefer his descendants not to conquer by force, but should it be necessary he hopes they will conduct this conquest with a maximum of mercy and clemency. He pared down the cooking of meat in the royal kitchen, allowing for only a little venison

and peacock meat -evidently his personal preferences. He also lists a number of birds, animals and fish of a curiously mixed kind that he declares inviolable. The inviolability of some is linked to particular days of the calendar. This is frequently quoted today as an early example of the conservation of wildlife, but a more likely explanation of their preservation points to a ritual or medicinal connection. In another edict he refers to the planting of medicinal herbs to help both men and animals.

The policy of *Dhamma* included the state's concern for the welfare of its people. The Emperor claims that:

On the roads I have had banyan trees planted, which will give shade to beasts and men. I have had mango groves planted and I have had wells dug and rest houses built every nine miles… And I have had many watering places made everywhere for the use of beasts and men. But this benefit is important, and indeed the world has enjoyed attention in many ways from former kings as well as from me. But I have done these things in order that my people might conform to *Dhamma.*

Pillar Edict VII, tr. R. Thapar, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas,* p. 265

He criticized in no uncertain terms what he described as 'useless ceremonies and sacrifices', held as a result of superstitious beliefs, for example those meant to ensure a safe journey or a quick recovery from an illness. These were the stock-in-trade of the lower order of priests, who depended on such ceremonies for their livelihood. Yet he has no objection to spectacles and displays conjuring up divine forms as a means of attracting an audience to create an interest in *Dhamma.* This was propaganda of an obvious kind.

To implement the policy of *Dhamma* and publicize it, Ashoka instituted a special category of officers – the *dhamma-mahatnattas.* Their concern was with the well-being of his subjects. As can often happen with such categories of officers, although the intention was worthy they may have interfered more than was necessary in the lives of people, thus to some extent nullifying their very purpose. Had his interest been only to propagate Buddhism, then his support to the Sangha would have sufficed; but the appointing of the *dhamma-mahatnattas* points to wider concerns.

Yet the policy of *Dhamma* did not succeed. It may have been due to Ashoka's over-anxiety for its acceptance, or to his own weakness when he became obsessed with *Dhamma* in the latter part of his reign. The social tensions and sectarian conflicts continued, or else were adjusted but remained. Nevertheless, Ashoka deserves admiration, not only for recognizing the need for a social ethic, but for attempting to both define and implement such an ethic in his capacity as emperor. Buddhist tradition depicts him as the *chakkavatti* – the universal monarch who ensures that the turning of the wheel of law is the essence of his rule. Universal monarchy was a concept rather than a reference to reality. Ashoka does not describe himself as a *chakkavatti,* possibly because this was not his intention.

Imperial Decline

Ashoka ruled for thirty-seven years and died in about 232 BC. Subsequently, a political decline set in and the empire began to break up. The last of the Mauryas, Brihadratha, was assassinated during an inspection of the troops by the brahman Pushyamitra, the commander of the army. Pushyamitra founded the successor Shunga dynasty. However, military coups were rare in the early history of India. This incident is frequently quoted as a case of the ineptitude of the ruler allowing himself to be removed.

The pattern of the break-up of the empire has its own interest in terms of the continuance of the metropolitan area and the evolving of the core regions into independent states. The Ganges Plain remained under the Mauryas, becoming the nucleus of the kingdom of their successors. The north-western areas were lost to the rising ambitions of the Bactrian Greeks, and remained vulnerable to the politics from across the borderlands. Interestingly, some of the *gana-sanghas* of the Punjab and Rajasthan seem to have survived and were able to reassert themselves. However, the *gana-sanghas* of the middle Ganges Plain had succumbed to monarchical rule. This is to some degree a commentary on the nature of the imperial administration. Other parts of the empire, erstwhile core areas, such as Gandhara, Kalinga and parts of the western Deccan, broke away into smaller states, some with occasional evidence of dynasties and others with more continuous dynastic control. The forest-dwellers continued to inhabit various parts of the subcontinent. It was not the ambition of the Mauryas to uproot local societies, nor did these become part of a single, uniform culture.

It has been asserted in the past that the decline of the Mauryan Empire can be attributed largely to the policies of Ashoka. He has been accused of causing a revolt of the brahmans because of his pro-Buddhist policy. But his general policy was not an active proselytizing in favour of Buddhism at the expense of Brahmanism. It was open to acceptance or rejection by all or any. He repeatedly states that respect is to be shown to both brahmans and *shramanas*. There is little evidence to suggest that Vedic Brahmanism was the prevalent religion in the Indian subcontinent at that time. It was still the religion of a small minority, although gradually becoming powerful. To the extent that Ashoka patronized Buddhism it came to be established in some parts of the empire. But the more extensive spread and enhancement of Buddhism came from its new patrons in the mercantile community in the post-Mauryan period. It has also been said that his obsession with non-violence led to the emasculation of the army, thus laying the country open to invasion. Yet his propagation of non-violence did not override other considerations, as is evident from his advice to his sons and grandsons on the use of violence; nor do the edicts imply that he deliberately weakened the military strength of the state by pursuing a policy of non-violence.

More probable reasons are to be found elsewhere. The suggestion that the Mauryan economy was under considerable pressure seems a more likely cause, although this requires further investigation. The need for vast revenues to maintain the army, and to finance the salaries of the upper levels of the bureaucracy, not to mention the cost of establishing settlements on newly cleared land, could have strained the treasury. Although excavation of the Mauryan urban sites points to an expanding economy in the early stages, the view that there was a debasement of silver coins in the later Mauryan period would suggest a different picture. This has been interpreted as a severe pressure on the economy where the normal channels of revenue were not sufficient for the Mauryan state. However, the chronology of the coins remains uncertain and debased coins alone are not conclusive proof of a fiscal crisis. Kautilya suggested that double-cropping should be undertaken during times of financial need, but this was practised in some areas even before the Mauryan period.

Other economic factors had a more direct bearing on the question. Kautilya's advice that virtually every human activity should be taxed has also led to the suggestion that there was a fiscal crisis.

Although an agrarian economy prevailed in the Ganges Plain, there was still a great variation in economic patterns throughout the empire. Significantly, despite increasing the land under cultivation, there is a record of famine in eastern India, which suggests that the lines of supply were not adequate. This variation may well have prevented an economic equilibrium in the state, with the revenue from agrarian areas not being sufficient to maintain the entire empire. Possibly the Mauryan administration was content to cream off the revenue as and when it could, and did not restructure the economy sufficiently to provide longer-term support for an imperial system. The economic development of the core areas of the empire, such as Gandhara and Kalinga, led to the emergence of new states that coincided with the decline of the empire. It has therefore been argued that, although Mauryan control may have declined, this was nevertheless a period of local economic development.

As an imperial system it was short-lived when compared to those of other parts of the world, and perhaps features at the root of the system were not conducive to long-lasting empires. An imperial structure requires a well-organized administration with built-in factors to ensure its continuity. The Mauryan bureaucracy was centralized, with the ruler – or king – as the key figure towards whom loyalty was directed. A change of king meant a re-alignment of loyalty or, worse, even a change of officials. The system of recruitment was arbitrary, with local governors choosing their officers, and the same pattern is likely to have been repeated throughout the hierarchy of office. This might have been avoided if some form of recruitment had been adopted to eliminate the possibility of particular social groups and local cliques monopolizing administrative control. The building of institutions requires some distancing from personal concerns and choices, with the replacement of these by social and civic concerns.

The lack of any representative institutions to stabilize public opinion would have added to the problem. The system used by the Mauryas, as also by other ancient imperial systems, was espionage. This must have created manifold tensions in both political and administrative activity. The mood of the *Arthashastra* is hostile to notions of representation – however limited – and the participation of larger numbers in decision-making. This can be seen in the section where various methods are suggested for sowing dissension and terminating the existence of the *gana-sanghas*. They are not merely to be conquered and incorporated into the kingdom, but are to be rooted out as a system. Even if the *gana-sangha* system was not exactly one of representation, nevertheless it did endorse a wider distribution of authority than in kingship.

Among its essentials, the factor of political loyalty implies loyalty to the state, the state being a concept that is over and above that of the king and the government. The monarchical system, which increasingly leaned on religious orthodoxy, tended to blur the concept of the state, and instead loyalty was directed to the social order. The interdependence of caste and politics had gradually led to caste being accorded higher status than political institutions. This is partly seen in the changing attitude towards kingship and the functions of the king. To begin with, the divinity of the king had been emphasized in brahmanical sources, but the Buddhists and Jainas had introduced a contractual concept for the origin of the state. In order to lay stress on the necessity for a controlling authority, brahmanical sources also introduced the idea of a contract. Not only was the king invested with divinity, but his status and power resulted from a contract between the people and the gods. The earlier theory of *matsyanyaya* had reflected a fear of anarchy, which was believed to be inevitable in a society without kingship.

The essential constituents of a state are discussed in the *Arthashastra* in its reference to the *saptanga,* the seven limbs of the state. These were the king, the territory, the administration, the treasury, the capital, coercive powers (as invested in the army and in punishments) and allies. Two

factors were gradually being emphasized in brahmanical texts as essential to the existence of the state. One was *danda* (coercion), which gave the state the power to coerce and to enforce laws even if this involved punishment, the other, which became more important, was *varna-ashrama-dharma* (social and ritual obligations in accordance with vama). Gradually the latter took precedence over the state. This was rooted in the idea that the king was required to protect his subjects and to ensure the preservation of the *vama-ashrama-dharma,* which encapsulates the acceptance of social duties and obligations set out in the *Dharma-shastras*. The Buddhist requirement had a different emphasis in that the universal monarch or *cbakravartin/chakkavatti* should rule righteously, which also meant ensuring the welfare of all his subjects irrespective of upholding *varna*. If he did so the wheel of law would roll through his kingdom. An unrighteous act would stop the wheel and lead to its sinking into the ground. In political theory from brahmanical sources, the highest authority on the empirical plane was accorded to the king and, on the abstract plane, *dharma.* The latter changed by slow degrees and the change was consequently hardly noticed, which ensured continued and unabated loyalty. *Dharma* obtained its sanction from divine sources, which made it imperative to defend it as a sacred duty.

There are multiple aspects of the Mauryan period that make it a time of great historical interest. The state controlled many activities and was sustained by systems of revenue collection. The focus therefore was on the state as an agency of control, largely through administrative functionaries concerned with assessing sources of revenue and collecting taxes. The relationship between the state and the peasant or the artisan was without effective intermediaries, other than the bureaucracy. The peasant was largely free, except where he worked on land under the control of the state, and even in the latter case a variety of tenures could apply. The state, however, appears to have taken the initiative in extending agriculture. Peasant discontent was articulated largely in the form of migration, but nevertheless the state was being advised to open up new areas to settlement. Systems of exchange were varied, but coined money played a visible role and the potentialities of commerce were beginning to be tapped. The absence of reference to *varna* in the edicts of Ashoka suggests that other social categories were more significant, such as family, clan and sect. *Varna* categories would have been observed, for instance, in the reference to brahmans, but possibly *jatis* were more prominent in the social landscape. This could have been closely related to the prevalence of, and patronage to, the heterodox sects. These aspects gradually changed in the post-Mauryan period and by the mid-first millennium AD were superseded by other forms that gave a new direction to historical activity.

By the early second century BC the first experiment in imperial government in India had ended. Other experiments were to be made in later centuries but the conditions were never quite the same. The degree of central control attempted in the Mauryan polity, particularly in the metropolitan area, became increasingly difficult in later periods when officials and landowners, to whom the king delegated much of his power, became the intermediaries between king and subject. The desire for empire did not disappear, but there was no longer the same compulsion and intensity which accompanied the first of the empires. And beyond that there remains the solitary figure of Ashoka as a ruler with a commitment to a social ethic. This was unique in Indian history and rare in the histories of other societies.