History is often subject to lot of misunderstandings and inculcation of a lot of popular perceptions. These perception either enter the realms of historical facts and figures to legitimize political or socio-cultural power or at times, the perceptions creep in through slight yet constant changes that creep in during the, these perceptions are rather a form of misreading the evidence at our disposal. This paper, on the basis of Romila Thapar’s collection of essays *The Mauryas Revisited*, “India During the Nanda and Maurya Periods-the Linguistic Situation” by Suniti Kumar Chatterji and D.C Sircar’s Inscriptions of the Asoka, tries to explore the ways in which recent historical figures have refined the idea of the Mauryan empire and also tries to banish some of the popular misconceptions or myths surrounding this ancient empire.

The Wikipedia page on the Maurya Empire talks of a great degree of uniformity at political and administrative level. The page doesn’t attempt to break down what do they mean when they use the word ‘Empire’. However, they introduce the Mauryan Empire as “The Maurya Empire, also known as the Mauryan Empire, was a geographically extensive Iron Age historical power in ancient India, ruled by the Maurya dynasty from 322–185 BCE”. This definition of the Mauryan empire hints towards the popular perception of associating an Empire with vast territorial control and extensively centralized political power. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an empire as: An extensive territory under the control of a supreme ruler (typically an emperor) or an oligarchy, often consisting of an aggregate of many separate states or territories. These definitions however, are oversimplifications and gross-generalizations of the complex mechanisms of the Empire as an entity. Though these definitions have worked well for all early empires, Achaemenid, Han, Roman, they do not perform that well for the Maurya empire. Though the page does identify the existence of provincial capital and border lands in the Mauryan Empire as slightly disparate entities, it doesn’t shine any light on the disparity that existed geographically nor does it highlight the non-uniformity of administration structure in the Mauryan Empire. It also maintains that “For the first time in South Asia, political unity and military security allowed for a common economic system and enhanced trade and commerce, with increased agricultural productivity.” However, the structure of the Mauryan Empire isn’t as uniform as the article suggests which has been elaborated upon in detail in the coming paragraphs.

### The linguistic situation of Mauryan empire, Ashokan era in particular, hints towards a certain degree of centralization of power as well as the relative importance of one community over the other. To argue for this centralization of power, it is imperative to briefly acquaint ourselves with the three distinctive local dialects of the Aryan language in Mauryan India. Before, the Mauryan period, we could speak of the Aryan-speaking world of c.700 B.C., as being divided into three groups on the basis of dialectal differences: *Udīcya,* *Madhyadēśīya,* *Prācya* and by the end of 500 B.C there is the addition of the fourth, *Dāks̩in̩ātya.* However, in the Asokan period the three dialects that we see are:a) Prakrit or Aryan speech of North-west: This dialect which can be seen on the edicts of Mansehra or Shahbazgarhi, is based on the *Udīcya* tract. The dialect spoken in these parts was, in popular perception, the best and the purest form, for it is very likely that in these tracts there was the largest settlement of Aryan population and thereby a better preservation of the language. b) The Prakrit of the east which was a derivative of *Prācya. Prācya* was a highly deviated form of the Aryan speech and was illegible to the speakers in *Udīcya.* However, the *Prakrit* of the East was the dialect that was official language of the court of the Mauryan empire, i.e., this was the dialect that was spoken in and around *Pātaliputra. c*) The dialect of peninsular Gujarat (Saurastra): This was the dialect that drew its roots from the Midland speech. The Midland speech was the prevalent dialect and was the real heart of Aryavarta, for this form could be understood by people of *Udīcya,* *Prācya* and *Dāks̩in̩ātya* as well*.* So much so was its prevalence that, it is likely that Mahendra studied his Buddhist texts not in Eastern Prakrit but in Mid-land dialect(Pali) . However, due to the presence of the Empire capital in *Pātaliputra,* it was “for the first and the last time we have an Eastern speech established as the official language in the Midland” even though it was illegible to the rest of Mauryan Empire (Midland and North-west and South-west). While Midland speakers might have found understanding Eastern Prakrit difficult, the edicts of Asoka were still written in this dialect and sent to the Midland regions. In regions like NW (Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi) and in SW (Girnar) where they were totally illegible, they were crudely translated into the local dialect. This also serves an illustration of the importance of the people of NW held in the Mauryan period. For apart from people in NW and SW, people in the Kalinga country (Dhauli and Jaugada) too couldn’t understand Eastern Prakrit and were speakers of Dravidian and Kol language the edicts were published in Eastern Prakrit only. This shows the relative importance of the NW people over citizens of Kalinga. The prevalence of Eastern Prakrit clearly elucidates the centralization in terms of linguistics.

The popular perception of the Mauryan Empire also includes this notion of a highly centralized, well- organized system of agriculture. The article claims “Farmers were freed of tax and crop collection burdens from regional kings, paying instead to a nationally administered and strict-but fair system of taxation as advised by the principles in the *Arthashastra*”. This is the system that has been fairly discussed in depth by Romila Thapar in her dissection of Megasthenes account of his visit to the Mauryan empire. She argues that while looking at sources like that of Megasthenes, which didn’t survive the cruel clutches of time and rather survives through quotations by later author, we need to consider the ideological positions of these authors to derive historical facts out of the account. After a detailed study, she concludes that when Megasthenes visited and noted these

Recent historical debates have also revolved around the nature of *dhamma* and the agendas Ashoka had behind them. Historians like Romila Thapar argue that *dhamma* was as “an attempt at uniformity at the ideational level”. She sees the *dhamma* as this abstract message that just propounds goodwill, righteousness and morality. “His definition of *dhamma* as an ethical principle was an attempt to provide a common factor even if only of an abstract kind. That it is not meant as an imposition of Buddhism seems evident” she claims. While she says “The universalising of *dhamma* by Aśoka went further than merely patronage to a particular sect. Interestingly none of his inscriptions are direct votive inscriptions to the Buddhist sangha”. However, in D.C sircar’s translation of the Rupnath Rock edict, Aśoka’s directives to his officers to propagate the teachings of *dhamma* by putting it in stone wherever possible is preface by his declaration of his allegiance to the Buddhist religion. D.C Sircar clearly translates the text as “ A little more than two years and half have passed since I have avowedly a lay follower of the Buddha.” Such a preface on an official decree clearly lays how Aśoka and his *dhamma* are directly linked to Buddhism. While Romila’s argument about the content of the *dhamma* being this message that propagated this general sense of righteousness and just living as can be seen from “” .

It is in popular legends that In about 260 BCE, Ashoka waged a bitterly destructive war against the state of Kalinga (moder day Odisha). He conquered Kalinga, which none of his ancestors had done. He embraced Buddhism after witnessing the mass deaths of the Kalinga War, which he himself had waged out of a desire for conquest.”. Historical debates have proved with utmost confidence that this was not the case. The Shahbazgarhi Rock edict no 13 (pg 42) elucidates in length how remorseful Aśoka is about the slaughter and enslavement the Kalinga war caused. He also expresses remorse as to how righteous people like the Brahmanas, the Sramanas and other pious people too are deported or slaughtered. All this serves as an excellent plot for the transition of Chanda Aśoka to Aśoka the Great. However, the very next paragraph of the same edict, he says “It is hereby explained to them (offenders and forest-dwellers of the borderlands)that inspite of his repentance, the Beloved of Gods possesses power enough to punish them for their crimes, so that they should turn from evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes ”.

Corroboration between historical sources is imperial to the art of historical reasoning and deduction. This act of finding corroboration between sources is missing in the process of creation of a popular image of Aśoka which has been a fairly biased process with different communities having invested motives in the popularity of Aśoka in good light. People just pick up one source and take everything said in it or through it to be true if it is working in their favour i.e if it is working towards creating a majestic image of Aśoka . This can be seen in the Wikipedia page of Aśoka as well. Sources like Aśokavadana and Buddhist chronicles , whose exaggerated facts and figures have been quoted again and again throughout the page, don’t have any sort of corroboration with any other historical source of evidence. So much strong is the attempt towards glorifying Aśoka is that the authors of the pages quoted claim that the story of Aśoka ordering a massacre of all Ajivikas is called “a clear fabrication arising out of sectarian propaganda”. This sort of lack of corroboration is the reason for many myths that surround the figure of Aśoka.