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 (1). 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 nuanced disparity geographically nor does it highlight the non-uniformity of administration. 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. As is known, 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: Udi¯cya, Madhyade¯s´i¯ya, Pra¯cya and by the end of 500 B.C there is the addition of the fourth, Da¯ks?in?a¯tya. However, in the Asokan period the three dialects that we see are: a) Prakrit or Aryan speech of North-west which was a derivative of the Udi¯cya tract dialect and 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 Pra¯cya. Pra¯cya was a highly deviated form of the Aryan speech and was illegible to the speakers in Udi¯cya. 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 Pa¯taliputra. 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 Udi¯cya, Pra¯cya and Da¯ks?in?a¯tya 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 Pa¯taliputra, it was “for the first and the last time we have an Eastern speech established as the official language in the Midland”, even though Midland speech would have been a better choice to reach out to a vaster audience. This prevalence of Eastern Prakrit clearly elucidates the centralization of power or the political importance of the capital in terms of linguistics. The Eastern speech was as we saw earlier, 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 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. However, the edicts for them were published in Eastern prakrit only while the former two regions had crude translations of the edicts into their local dialects. This linguistically, points towards the relative importance of the NW people over citizens of Kalinga and this goes against the claims of uniformity that popular perception makes .

It is in popular legends that “Although Ashoka’s army succeeded in overwhelming Kalinga forces of royal soldiers and civilian units, an estimated 100,000 soldiers and civilians were killed in the furious warfare, including over 10,000 of Ashoka’s own men. Hundreds of thousands of people were adversely affected by the destruction and fallout of war. When he personally witnessed the devastation, Ashoka began feeling remorse. Although the annexation of Kalinga was completed, Ashoka embraced the teachings of Buddhism, and renounced war and violence”. Historical debates have tried to prove that this is not the case. The Shahbazgarhi Rock edict no 13 (pg 42) elucidates in length how remorseful As´oka 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. The edict also says “After now that the country of Kalinga has been conquered,the beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of dhamma”. Though this event did provocate him to take up an intense practice of dhamma, there isn’t any proof which explicitly states that this particular event was the one that converted him into a Buddhist all of a sudden. This story of sudden transition from a cruel man to a saintly king, however, serves as an excellent plot for the transition of Chanda As´oka to As´oka the Great. Also, in 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 “. Hence the claim that he turned totally renounce violence is false. Also, in the pillar inscription of Topra(pg 59), when Asoka reflects on the dhamma, he states “ The thought occurred to me: I will cause proclamations of Dharma to proclaimed and instruction in Dharma to be imparted. Hearing these the people will conform to them, will be elevated and will progress considerably through the promotion of dharma ”. He continues about how the act of proclaimation of dharma was driven by a sense of ensuring welfare of his citizens. He doesn’t say anywhere that his remorse was the reason for his treading on the path of Dharma. The page also states that after the war Ashoka was responsible for “ending indentured and forced labor (many thousands of people in warravaged Kalinga had been forced into hard labour and servitude).” However, Prisoners-of-war are listed as a regular source for the supply of slaves.Some were undoubtedly used as labour to cultivate the sita lands.(p9). If this was the case and if sita lands were important to the economy of Mauryan Empire, then abolishment of slavery would have had a major impact on the economy of the state and would have had some source to corroborate with it.

The popular perceptions of the Mauryan empire also include 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 discussed in great 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 authors, we need to consider the ideological positions of these authors as well as that of Megasthenes to derive historical facts out of the account. After a detailed study, she concludes that when Megasthenes visited and noted that Megasthenes must have been drawing a parallel between the chora basilike of the Seleucids(p47) and the sita lands of the Maurya empire. However there still isn’t any clarity as to a) If there was any restriction on private ownership of lands. b) the importance of these sita lands to the Mauryan economy i.e. to what degree is the revenue generated from these lands important to the Mauryan economy c) If there was a rental system or a taxation system or if there was a system where wages were paid to the cultivators. D) If Kautilya’s advice about the state providing assistance for the cultivation of the sita lands was actually taken into consideration.

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 As´oka 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, As´oka’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 As´oka 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 almost all of his edicts. However, her claim that “The attempt then was to appeal to a broader spectrum of belief and behaviour emphasised by most of the religious teachers of that time without necessarily associating this idea with any single one of them” is question, for in B-Rock Edicts no1 (p.32) he states that “Here no living being should be slaughtered for sacrifice and no festive gathering should be held”. By imposing such conditions against animal sacrifice, which was a very popular practice amongst the followers of Hinduism, Asoka was going against Thapar’s claims unifying religions.

While there have been a lot of rumours surrounding the figures of Asoka and the Mauryan empire, it is important to note that the Mauryan empire

Works Cited

1. Thapar, Romila. Towards the definition of an empire. The Mauryas Revisited.