



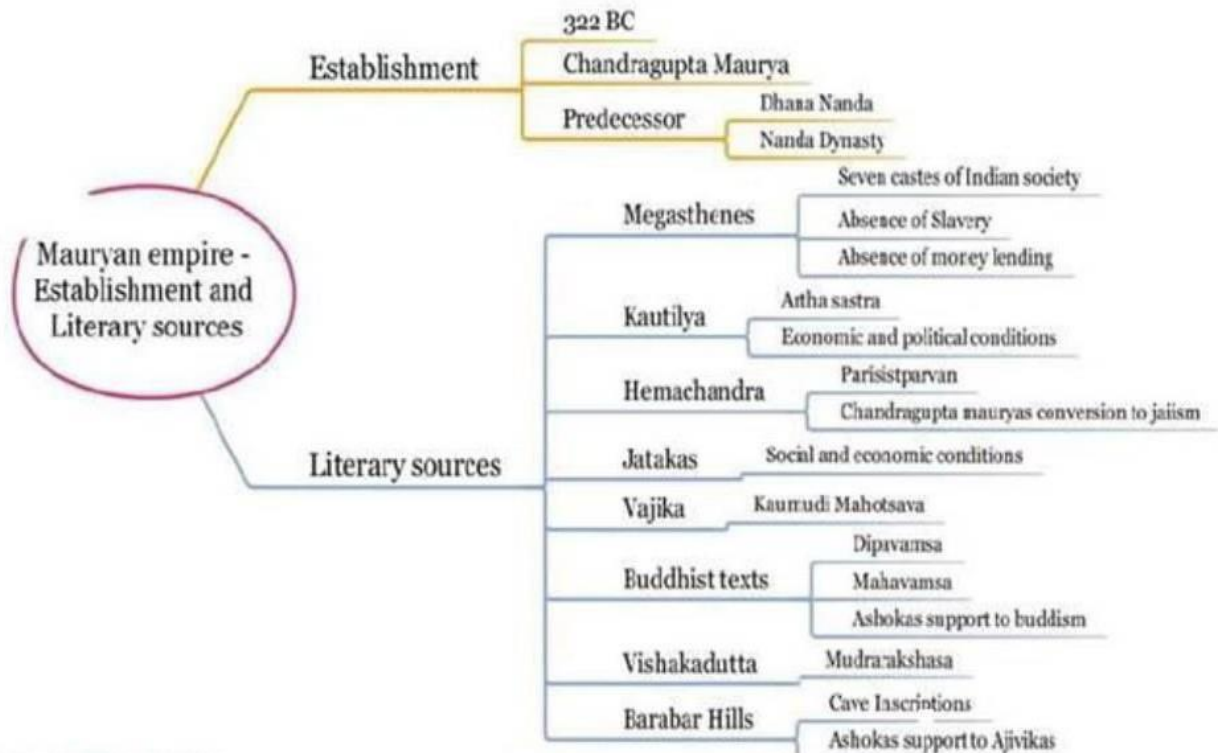
Ancient Indian History UPSC CSE

(Prelims + Mains)
Supplementary Study Material

Module 7: Mauryan Empire

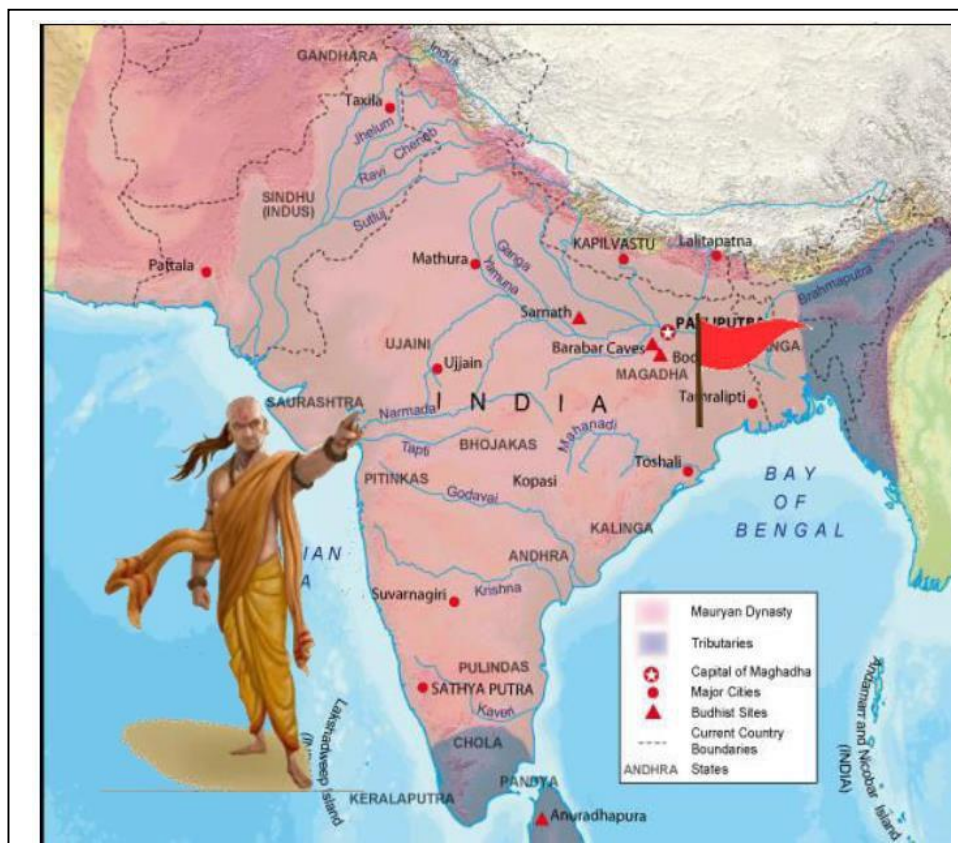
-Arti Chhawari

- The Maurya dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya.
- According to the brahmanical tradition, he was born of Mura, a shudra woman in the court of the Nandas.
- An earlier Buddhist tradition speaks of the Mauryas as the ruling clan of the little republic of Pipphalivana in the region of Gorakhpur near the Nepalese terai.
- With the help of Chanakya, who is known as Kautilya, he overthrew the Nandas and established the rule of the Maurya dynasty. The machinations of Chanakya against Chandragupta's enemies are described in detail in the *Mudrarakshasa*, a play written by Vishakhadatta in the ninth century.
- Chandragupta liberated north-western India from the thralldom of Seleucus, who ruled over the area west of the Indus. In the war with the Greek viceroy, Chandragupta seems to have emerged victorious.
- Chandragupta thus built up a vast empire which included not only Bihar and substantial parts of Orissa and Bengal but also western and north-western India, and the Deccan. Aside from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and parts of north-eastern India, the Mauryas ruled over virtually the entire subcontinent.
- The Mauryas also conquered the republics or *samghes* which Kautilya considered obstacles to the growth of the empire.
- Megasthenes was a Greek ambassador sent by Seleucus to the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He lived in the Maurya capital of Pataliputra and wrote an account not only of the administration of the city of Pataliputra but also of the Maurya Empire as a whole.
- These fragments have been collected and published in the form of a book entitled *Indika*, which throws valuable light on the administration, society, and economy of Maurya times.
- Megasthenes's account can be supplemented by the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. Chandragupta Maurya was evidently an autocrat who concentrated all power in his hands.
- The empire was divided into a number of provinces, and each of these was placed under a prince who was a scion of the royal dynasty. The provinces were divided into still smaller units, and arrangements were made for both rural and urban administration.
- Pataliputra, Kaushambi, Ujjain, and Taxila were the most important cities. Megasthenes states that numerous cities existed in India, but he considered Pataliputra to be the most important. He calls it Palibothra. This Greek term means a city with gates. According to him, Pataliputra was bounded by a deep ditch and a wooden wall crowned with 570 towers, and had 64 gates.
- The ditch, timber palisades, and also wooden houses have been found in excavations. According to Megasthenes, Pataliputra was 9.33 miles long and 1.75 miles broad.
- The Greek ambassador also refers to the administration of Pataliputra, the capital of the Mauryas. The city was administered by six committees, each of which consisted of five members. These committees were entrusted with sanitation, care of foreigners, registration of birth and death, regulation of weights and measures, and similar other functions.
- According to Kautilya, the central government maintained about two dozen departments of state, which controlled social and economic activities at least in the areas that were in proximity to the capital.
- The most striking feature of Chandragupta's administration was its maintenance of a huge army. A Roman writer called Pliny states that Chandragupta maintained 600,000 foot soldiers, 30,000 cavalrymen, and 9000 elephants.
- Another source tells us that the Mauryas maintained 8000 chariots. In addition to these, it appears that the Mauryas also maintained a navy.
- The administration of the armed forces, according to Megasthenes, was carried on by a board of thirty officers divided into six committees, each committee consisting of five members. It seems that each of the six wings of the armed forces, the army, the cavalry, the elephants, the chariots, the navy, and the transport, was assigned to the care of a separate committee.
- It appears that taxes collected from the peasants varied from one-fourth to one-sixth of the produce. Those who were provided with irrigation facilities by the state had to pay for it.
- In addition, in times of emergency, peasants were compelled to raise more crops. Tolls were also levied on commodities brought to town for sale, and they were collected at the gate. Moreover, the state enjoyed a monopoly in mining, sale of liquor, manufacture of arms, etc.

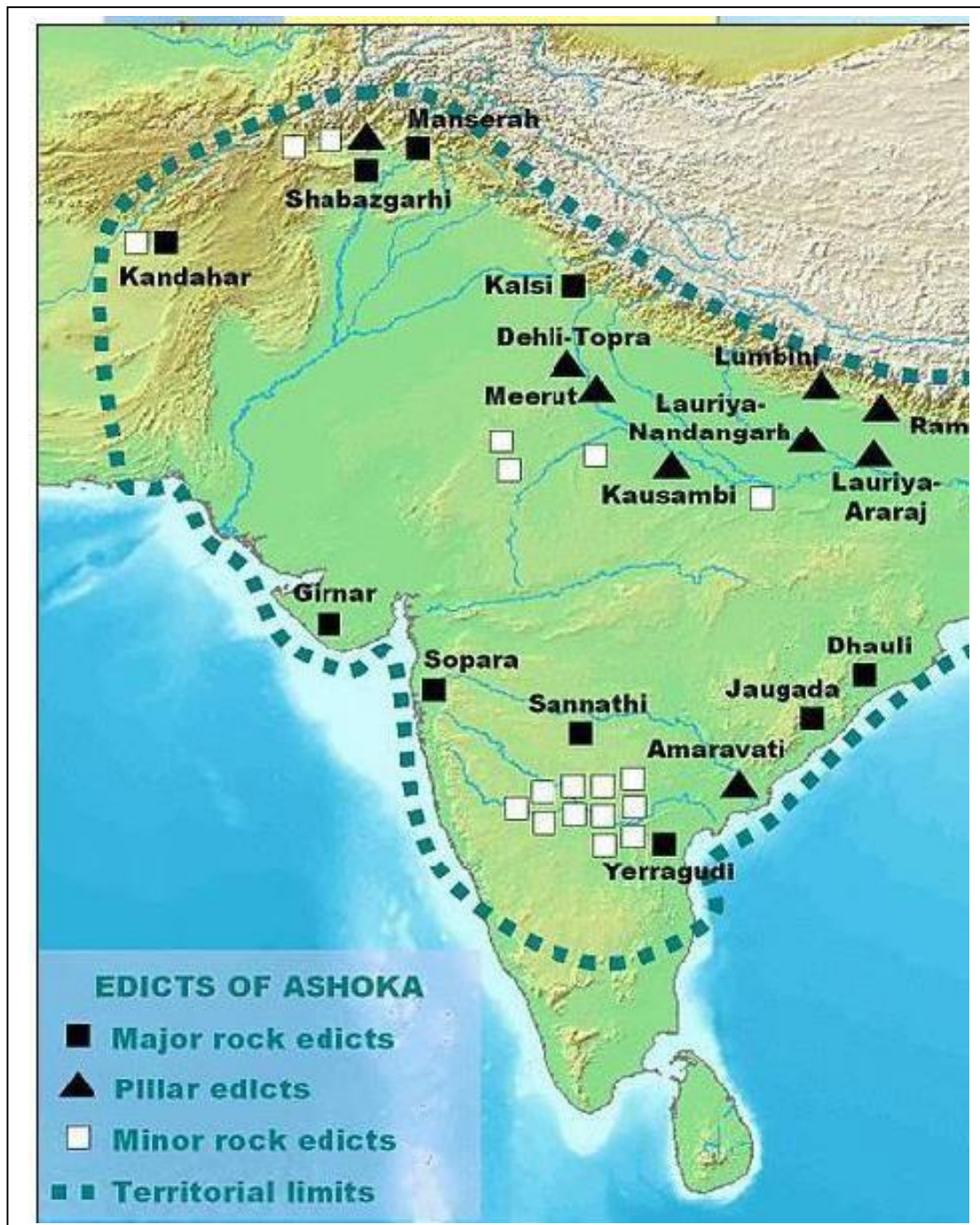


Ashoka (273-32 BC)

- Chandragupta Maurya was succeeded by Bindusara, whose reign is important for its continuing links with the Greek princes. His son, Ashoka, is the greatest of the Maurya rulers.
- According to Buddhist tradition, he was so cruel in his early life that he killed his ninety-nine brothers to win the throne.



- The history of Ashoka is reconstructed on the basis of his inscriptions, thirty-nine, in number, that are classified into Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, Separate Rock Edicts, Major Pillar Edicts, and Minor Pillar Edicts.



- The name Ashoka occurs in copies of Minor Rock Edict | found at three places in Karnataka and at one in MP. Thus, altogether, the name Ashoka occurs four times. It is significant that Ashoka's name does not occur in any of his inscriptions from north or north-west India.

- The inscriptions which do not carry his name mention only *devanampiya piyodasi*, dear to the gods, and leave out the name Ashoka. The title *devanampiya* or 'dear to gods' adopted by Ashoka.
- Ashokan inscriptions have been found in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Altogether, they appear at forty-seven places, and the total number of versions is 182 including two edicts which are considered spurious.
- It is significant that Ashokan inscriptions which were generally located on ancient highways, have been found at six places in Afghanistan. Composed in Prakrit, they were written in Brahmi script in the greater part of the subcontinent. However, in the north-western part of the subcontinent they appeared in Aramaic language and Kharoshthi script, and in Afghanistan they were written in both Aramaic and Greek scripts and languages.
- He was the first Indian king to speak directly to the people through his inscriptions which carry royal orders. The inscriptions throw light on Ashoka's career, his external and domestic policies, and the extent of his empire.

Impact of the Kalinga War

- After his accession to the throne, Ashoka fought only one major war called the Kalinga war. According to him, 100,000 people were killed in the course of it, several lakhs died, and 150,000 were taken prisoners.
- The war caused great suffering to the brahmana priests and Buddhist monks, and this in turn brought upon Ashoka much grief and remorse.
- He therefore abandoned the policy of physical occupation in favour of one of cultural conquest. In other words, *bherighosha* was replaced with *dhammaghosha*.
- The officials appointed by Ashoka were instructed to propagate this idea among all sections of his subjects. The tribal peoples were similarly asked to follow the principles of dhamma (dharma).
- He no longer treated foreign dominions as legitimate areas for military conquest. He took steps for the welfare of men and animals in foreign lands, which was a new thing considering the conditions in those times.
- He sent ambassadors of peace to the Greek sections of his subjects. The tribal peoples were similarly asked to follow the principles of dhamma (dharma). He sent ambassadors of peace to the Greek kingdoms in West Asia and Greece. All this is based on Ashoka's inscriptions.
- If we rely on the Buddhist tradition, it would appear that he sent missionaries for the propagation of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and Central Asia, and there is inscriptional evidence to support Ashoka's initiatives to propagate Buddhism in Sri Lanka.
- Within the empire he appointed a class of officers known as the *rajukas*, who were vested with the authority not only to reward people but also to punish them when necessary. Ashoka's policy to consolidate the empire in this way bore fruit.
- The Kandahar inscription speaks of the success of his policy with the hunters and fishermen, who gave up killing animals and possibly took to a settled agricultural life.

Internal Policy and Buddhism

- Ashoka was converted to Buddhism as a result of the Kalinga war. According to tradition, he became a monk, made huge gifts to the Buddhists, and undertook pilgrimages to the Buddhist shrines.
- His visit to Buddhist shrines is also suggested by the dhamma yatras mentioned in his inscriptions.
- According to tradition, Ashoka held the third Buddhist council (*sangiti*) and missionaries were sent not only to south India but also to Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), and other countries to convert the people there.
- Brahmi inscriptions of the second and first centuries BC have been found in Sri Lanka.
- Ashoka appointed *dhammamahamatras* to propagate dharma among various social groups, including women, and appointed *rajukas* for the administration of justice in his empire.

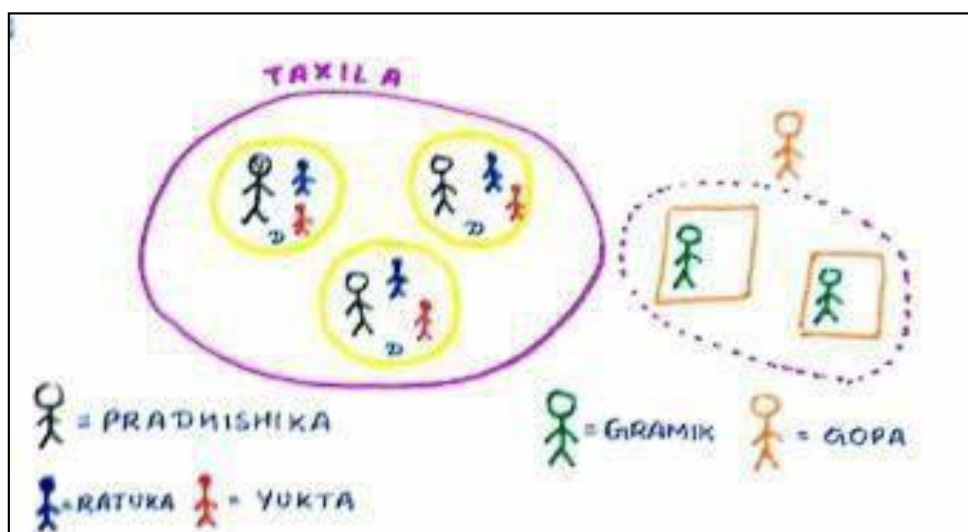
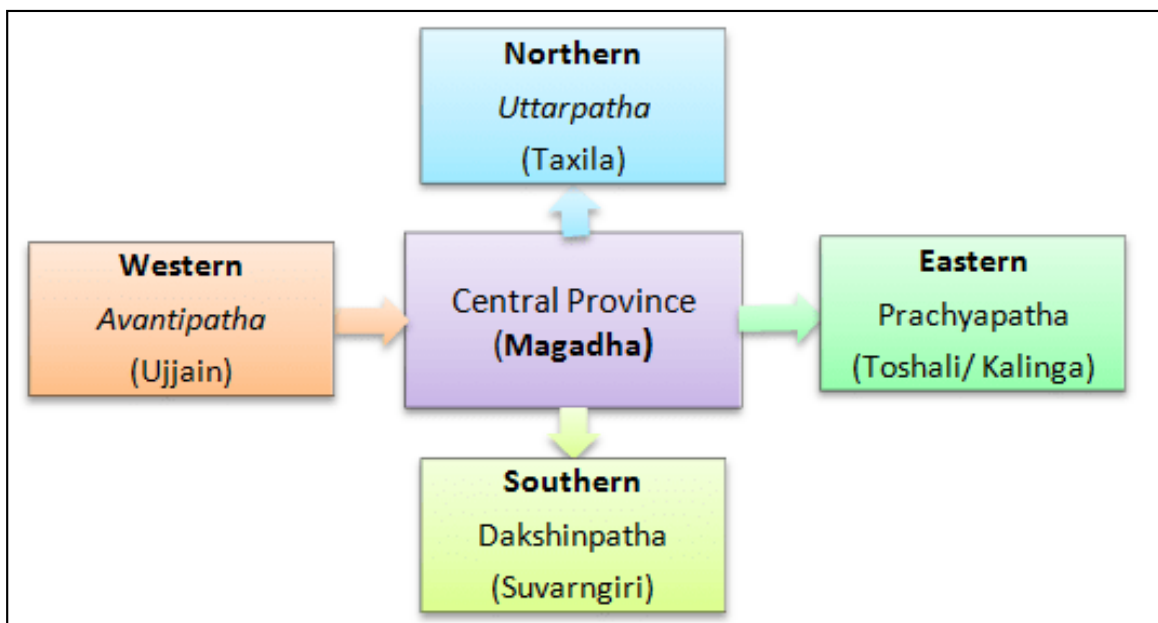
- His Kandahar Greek inscription preaches amity between the sects. Ashoka's inscriptions are called *dhammaiipi*, which cover not only religion and morality but also embrace social and administrative matters.
- They can be compared to the Dharmashastras or law-books written in Sanskrit under brahmanical influence. Though the *dhammelipis* were written in Prakrit under Buddhist influence, they try to regulate the social order like the Dharmashastras.
- The Ashokan edicts can be also compared to the *shasanas* or royal edicts issued in Sanskrit by the brahmanized kings. The broad objective was to preserve the social order.
- He ordained that people should obey their parents, pay respect to the brahmanas and Buddhist monks, and show mercy to slaves and servants
- Above all, the *dhammalipi* asks the people to show firm devotion (*dridha bhakti*) or loyalty to king. These instructions are found in both the Buddhist and brahmanical faiths.
- Ashoka taught people to live and let live.

Ashoka's Place in History

- He was certainly a great missionary ruler in the history of the ancient world. He enthusiastically worked with great devotion for his mission and achieved a great deal at home and abroad.
- Ashoka brought about the political unification of the country. He bound it further by one dharma, one language, and virtually one script called Brahmi which was used in most of his inscriptions.
- In unifying the country he respected such non-Indian scripts as Kharoshthi, Aramaic, and Greek.
- Ashoka followed a tolerant religious policy, not attempting to foist his Buddhist faith on his subjects; on the contrary, he made gifts to non-Buddhist and even anti-Buddhist sects.
- Ashoka was fired with a zeal for missionary activity, He deputed officials in the far-flung parts of the empire. He helped administration and promoted cultural interaction between the developed Gangetic basin and distant backward provinces.
- The material culture, characteristic of the heart of the empire, spread to Kalinga, the lower Deccan, and northern Bengal.
- Ashoka is important in history for his policy of peace, nonaggression, and cultural conquest. He had no model in early Indian history for the pursuit of such a policy.
- Ashoka's policy did not have any lasting impact on his viceroys and vassals, who declared themselves independent in their respective areas after the king retired in 232 BC.

State Control

- Kautilya advises the king to promulgate dharma when the social order based on the varnas and ashramas (stages in life) collapses. He calls the king *dharmapravartaka* or promulgator of the social order. Ashoka promulgated dharma and appointed officials to inculcate and enforce its essentials throughout India.
- The administrative mechanism was backed by an elaborate system of espionage. Various types of spies collected intelligence about foreign enemies and kept an eye on numerous officers.
- Important functionaries were called *tirthas*. It appears that most functionaries were paid in cash, the highest among whom, the minister (*mantrin*), high priest (*purohita*), commander-in-chief (*senapati*) and crown prince (*yuvaraja*), were paid generously.
- They received as much as 48,000 *panas* (*pana* was a silver coin equal to three-fourths of a *tola*). In sharp contrast to them, the lowest officers were given 60 *panas* in consolidated pay although some employees were paid as little as 10 or 20 *panas*.



Economic Regulations

- The state appointed twenty-seven superintendents (*adhyakshas*), principally to regulate its economic activities.
- They controlled and regulated agriculture, trade and commerce, weights and measures, crafts such as weaving and spinning, mining, and the like. The state also provided irrigation facilities and regulated water supply for the benefit of agriculturists.
- According to the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, a striking social development of the Maurya period was the employment of slaves in agricultural operations. royal control was exercised over a very large area, at least in the core of the empire.
- This was because of the strategic position of Pataliputra, from where royal agents could sail up and down the Ganges, Son, Punpun, and Gandak rivers. Besides this, the royal road ran from Pataliputra to Nepal through Vaishali and Champaran.
- A road at the foothills of the Himalayas which passed from Vaishali through Champaran to Kapilavastu, Kalsi (in Dehra Dun district), Hazra, and eventually to Peshawar. Roads also linked Patna with Sasaram, and from there they ran to Mirzapur and central India.
- The capital was also connected with Kalinga via a route through eastern MP, and Kalinga in turn was linked with Andhra and Karnataka. All this facilitated transport in which horses may have played an important part.
- The Ashokan inscriptions appear on important highways. The stone pillars were made in Chunar near Varanasi from where they were transported to north and south India.
- Pataliputra was the chief centre of royal power, but Tosali, Suvarnagiri, Ujjain, and Taxila were seats of provincial power. Each of them was governed by a governor called *kumara* or prince, and thus every governor hailed from the royal family.
- The princely governor of Tosali administered Kalinga and also parts of Andhra, and that of Suvarnagiri ruled the Deccan area. Similarly, the princely governor of Ujjain ruled the Avanti area while that of Taxila the frontier area.
- Ashokan inscriptions show that royal writ ran throughout the country except the extreme east and south. Nineteen Ashokan inscriptions have been found in AP and Karnataka.
- The Maurya period constitutes a landmark in the system of taxation in ancient India. Kautilya names many taxes which were collected from peasants, artisans, and traders. This required a strong and efficient machinery for assessment, collection, and storage.
- The Mauryas attached greater importance to assessment than to storage and deposit. The *samaharta* was the highest officer in charge of assessment and collection, and the *sannidhata* was the chief custodian of the state treasury and storehouse. The assessor-cum-collector was far more important than the chief treasurer.
- It seems that the punch-marked silver coins, which carry the symbols of the peacock and crescented hill, formed the imperial currency of the Mauryas.

Art and Architecture

- Fragments of stone pillars and stumps, indicating the existence of an 84-pillared hall, have been discovered at Kumrahar on the outskirts of modern Patna.
- Each pillar is made of a single piece of buff-coloured sandstone. Only their capitals, which are beautiful pieces of sculpture in the form of lions or bulls, are joined to the pillars on the top.
- The erection of the polished pillars throughout India shows the spread of the technical knowledge involved in the art of polishing them. The earliest examples are

the Barabar caves at a distance of 30 km from Gaya.

- In the central phase of the Northern Black Polished Ware around 300 BC, the central Gangetic plains became the centre of terracotta art.
- The stone statue of Yakshini in the form of a beautiful woman found in Didarganj (Patna) is noted for its Maurya polish.

Spread of Material Culture and the State System

- The Maurya period witnessed a rapid development of material culture in the Gangetic plains. Given the access to the rich iron ores of south Bihar, people used more and more of this metal.
- This period evidences socketed axes, hoes, spades, sickles, and ploughshares. Besides these iron implements, the spoked wheel also began to be used.
- In the end of the Maurya period burnt bricks were used for the first time in north-eastern India. Maurya constructions made of burnt bricks have been found in Bihar and UP.
- Ring wells, which were first constructed under the Mauryas in the Gangetic plains spread beyond the heart of the empire. In Bangladesh, the Mahasthana inscription in Bogra district is in Maurya Brahmi.
- NBPW has been found at Bangarh in Dinajpur district and sherds of it at Chandrakhetgarh in the 24 Parganas in West Bengal. Gangetic associations can be attributed to settlements at Sisupalgarh in Orissa.
- The settlement of Sisupalgarh is ascribed to Maurya times in the third century BC, and it contains NBPW, iron implements, and punch-marked coins.
- As Sisupalgarh is situated near Dhauli and Jaugada, where Ashokan inscriptions have been found on the ancient highway passing along the eastern coast of India, the material culture may have reached this area as a result of contact with Magadha.
- This contact may have started in the fourth century BC when the Nandas are said to have conquered Kalinga, but it deepened after the conquest of Kalinga in the third century BC.
- Ashokan inscriptions have been found at Amaravati and three other sites in Andhra and at nine places in Karnataka. It therefore appears that, from the eastern coast, ingredients of the material culture percolated through Maurya contacts into the lower Deccan plateau.
- The art of making steel may have spread through Maurya contacts across some other parts of India. Steel objects relating to about 200 BC or an earlier date have been found in the mid- Gangetic plains.
- The spread of steel may have led to jungle clearance and the use of better methods of cultivation in Kalinga, and could have created the conditions for the rise of the Cheti kingdom in that region.
- Although the Satavahanas rose to power in the Deccan in the first century BC. Stimulus to state formation in peninsular India came from the Mauryas not only in the case of the Chetis and the Satavahanas but also that of the Cheras (Keralaputras), the Cholas, and the Pandyas.
- According to Ashokan inscriptions, all the three last-mentioned people came together with the Satyaputras, and the people of Tamraparni or Sri Lanka lived on the borders of the Maurya empire, and were, therefore, familiar with the Maurya state.
- The Pandyas were known to Megasthenes who visited the Maurya capital. The existence of inscriptions, occasional NBPW sherds, and punch-marked coins in parts of Bangladesh, Orissa, Andhra, and Karnataka from about the third century BC shows that during the Maurya period attempts were made to spread elements of the mid-Gangetic basin culture in distant areas.
- The process seems to be in accord with the instructions of Kautilya.

Causes of the Fall of the Maurya Empire

Several causes seem to have brought about the decline and fall of the Maurya empire.

1. Brahmanical Reaction

- The brahmanical reaction began as a result of Ashoka's policy. The anti-sacrifice attitude of Buddhism adopted by Ashoka adversely affected the incomes of brahmanas.
- Further, Ashoka appointed *rajukas* to govern the countryside and introduce *vyavaharasamata* and *dandasamata*. This meant the same civil and criminal law for all varnas.
- The Shungas and the Kanvas, who ruled in MP and further east on the remnants of the Maurya empire, were brahmanas. Similarly, the Satavahanas, who founded kingdom in the western Deccan and Andhra, claimed to be brahmanas.
- These brahmana dynasties performed Vedic sacrifices that were discarded by Ashoka.

2. Financial Crisis

- The enormous expenditure on the army and payment to the bureaucracy created a financial crisis for the Maurya empire.
- It seems that Ashoka made large donations to the Buddhist monks which left the royal treasury empty.

3. Oppressive Rule

- Oppressive rule in the provinces was an important cause of the break-up of the empire. In the reign of Bindusara, the citizens of Taxila bitterly complained against the misrule of wicked bureaucrats (*dushtamatyas*).
- The Kalinga edicts show that Ashoka was much concerned about oppression in the provinces and, therefore, asked the *mahamatras* not to tyrannize the townsmen without due cause.
- For this purpose he introduced rotation of officers in Tosali (in Kalinga), Ujjain and Taxila. He himself spent 256 nights on a pilgrimage which may have helped administrative supervision.

4. New Knowledge in the Outlying Areas

- Once the knowledge of the use of these elements of culture spread to central India, the Deccan, and Kalinga as a result of the expansion of the Magadhan empire, the Gangetic basin, which formed the heart of the empire, lost its special advantage.
- The regular use of iron tools and weapons in the peripheral provinces coincided with the decline and fall of the Maurya empire.

5. Neglect of the North-West Frontier and the Great Wall of China

- The Scythians were in a state of constant flux. A nomadic people principally reliant on the use of the horse, they posed a serious danger to the settled empires in China and India.
- The Chinese ruler Shih Huang Ti (247–10 BC) constructed the Great Wall of China in about 220 BC to shield his empire against the attacks of the Scythians, but Ashoka took no such measures.
- Naturally, when the Scythians made a push towards India, they forced the Parthians, the Shakas, and the Greeks to move towards this subcontinent. The Greeks had set up a kingdom -in north Afghanistan which was known as Bactria, and they were the first to invade India in 206 BC.

The Maurya empire was finally destroyed by Pushyamitra Shunga in 185 BC. Although a brahmana, he was a general of the last Maurya ruler called Brihadratha. He is said to have killed Brihadratha in public and forcibly usurped the throne of Pataliputra. The Shungas ruled in Pataliputra and central India.