

NCERT Notes: Mauryan Empire: Reasons for Decline [Ancient Indian History For UPSC]

Late Stages of the Mauryan Empire

After the death of [Emperor Ashoka](#), the Mauryan Empire collapsed within five decades. There are many reasons given by historians for this disintegration of a once-mighty empire. At its zenith, the Mauryan Empire stretched from Afghanistan in the west to Bangladesh in the east. It covered almost the whole Indian subcontinent except modern-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka. A few years after Ashoka's death, the weakening of the empire started.

For a detailed account of the [Mauryan Empire](#), click on the link.

The various reasons for the fall of the Mauryan Empire are highlighted below:

Brahmanical Reaction

- The anti-sacrifice attitude of Buddhism and Ashoka brought much loss to the Brahmanas, who lived on the gifts made to them in various kinds of sacrifices.
- In spite of the tolerant policy of Ashoka, the Brahmanas developed some kind of antipathy towards him. They wanted a policy that would favour them and uphold existing interests and privileges.
- Some of the kingdoms which arose on the ruins of the Maurya empire were ruled by Brahmanas. The Sungas and the Kanvas, who ruled in Madhya Pradesh and further east on the remnants of the Mauryan empire were Brahmanas.
- Similarly, the Satavahanas who founded a lasting kingdom in the western Deccan and Andhra claimed to be Brahmanas.
- These Brahmana dynasties performed the Vedic sacrifices, which were abandoned by Ashoka.

Financial Crisis

- The enormous expenditure on the maintenance of the huge army and payment to bureaucrats, the largest regiment of officers, created a financial crisis for the Mauryan empire.
- Despite the taxes imposed on the people, it became difficult for the Mauryas to sustain this huge superstructure.
- It appears that the large grants to the Buddhist monks by Ashoka made the royal treasury empty and in order to meet the expenses they had to melt the images made of gold.
- The cost of establishing settlements on the newly cleared land also must have strained the treasury, as the people settling on these lands initially were exempted from tax.

Oppressive Rule

- The oppressive rule in the provinces was another factor that led to the breaking-up of the empire.
- In the reign of Bindusara, the citizens of Taxila complained against the misrule of wicked bureaucrats (Dushtamatyas).
- Their grievances were redressed by the appointment of Ashoka as the viceroy of Taxila. But, when Ashoka became the emperor, a similar complaint was lodged by the same city.
- The Kalinga edicts show that Ashoka felt very much concerned about the oppression in the province and therefore, asked the Mahamatras not to torture townsmen without due cause.

- For this purpose, he introduced rotation of officers in Torali (in Kalinga), Ujjain and Taxila.
- All the measures taken did not help to stop oppression in the outlying provinces and after the retirement of Ashoka, Taxila took the earliest opportunity to throw off the imperial yoke.

The partition of the Empire

- After the death of Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire split into two halves – western and eastern parts. This weakened the empire.
- Kalhana, the author of the work Rajatarangini which is an account of Kashmir's history, says that after Ashoka's death, his son Jalauka ruled over Kashmir as an independent ruler.
- This partition resulted in invasions from the northwest.

Highly centralised administration

- Historian Romila Thapar is of the view that the highly centralised administration under the Mauryas became a problem with the later Mauryan kings who were not as efficient administrators as their predecessors.
- Powerful kings like Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka could control the administration well. But weak rulers led to a weakening of the administration and ultimately led to the empire's disintegration.
- Also, the sheer vastness of the Mauryan Empire meant that there had to be a very effective ruler at the centre who could keep coherent all the regions.
- A weakening of the central administration coupled with a large distance to communicate also led to the rise of independent kingdoms.

Weak monarchs after Ashoka

- The successors of Ashoka were weak kings who could not carry the burden of the huge empire that was bequeathed to them.
- After Ashoka, only six kings could rule over the kingdom for a mere 52 years.
- The last Maurya king, Brihadratha was overthrown by his own army commander, Pushyamitra.
- Only the first three kings of the Mauryan Empire were men of exceptional abilities and character. The later kings were no match in quality to their illustrious ancestors.

Independence of the provinces

- After Ashoka, under the later kings, the centre's hold over the vast empire began to disintegrate. This led to the emergence of various kingdoms.
- It is already mentioned that Jalauka ruled over Kashmir independently.
- Kalinga became independent.
- According to Tibetan sources, Virasena ruled over Gandhara independently.
- Vidarbha broke away from Magadha. As per Greek sources, a king named Subhagashena (Sophagasanus) began to rule over the north-western provinces independently.

Spread of the new material knowledge in the outlying areas

- Once the new knowledge of iron tools and weapons spread in the peripheral areas, Magadha lost its special advantage.
- On the basis of material culture acquired from Magadha, new kingdoms such as the Shungas and Kanvas in central India, the Chetis in Kalinga and the Satavahans in the Deccan were founded and developed.

Internal revolt

- During the rule of Brihadratha, there was an internal revolt led by his army chief Pushyamitra Shunga in about 185 or 186 BCE.
- Bana describes in Harshacharita how Shunga killed Brihadratha during an army parade.
- This ended the rule of the Mauryas over Magadha and thence started the Shunga dynasty's rule.

Foreign invasions

- During the reign of the first three Mauryan kings, no foreign power tried to attack India from the north-west as there was a fear of the mighty Mauryan army.
- But after Ashoka's death, the kingdom split up into two. This led the Greek king Antiochus to attack India unsuccessfully though.
- But in time, foreign tribes attacked and established their kingdoms on Indian soil. The notable ones were the Indo-Greeks, the Sakas and the Kushanas.

Ashoka's policies

- Some scholars suggest that Ashoka's policies of non-violence and pacifism led to the weakening of the empire.
- Since he stopped waging wars, foreign powers were once again tempted to attack the kingdom.
- Also, he gave a lot of importance and effort to the propagation of Buddhism.

Neglect of the north-west frontier and absence of the boundary structure such as the Great Wall of China

- The Chinese ruler Shih Huang Ti (247-210 BCE) constructed the Great Wall of China in about 220 BCE, to protect his empire against the attacks of the Scythians, a central Asian nomadic tribe who were in a state of constant flux.
- No such measures were taken by the emperor Ashoka on the northwestern frontier of India.
- In order to escape the Scythians, the Parthians, the Shakas and the Greeks were forced to move towards India.
- The Greeks were the first to invade India in 206 BCE and they set up their kingdom in north Afghanistan called Bactria.
- This was followed by a series of invasions till the beginning of the Christian era.