

Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-6 The Mauryan Dynasty

Book Title: World Civilizations

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## 4-6 The Mauryan Dynasty

For a century and a half after the Buddha's death, the philosophy he founded steadily gained adherents but remained a distinctly minority view in a land of Hindu believers. In the 330s B.C.E., however, the invasion of India by Alexander the Great (see [Chapter 8](#)) not only brought the first direct contact with Western ideas and art forms but also enabled a brief period of political unity under the [Mauryan \(MOH-ree-yahn\) Dynasty \(\(MOH-ree-yahn\) The first great dynasty of rulers of India that reigned from 322 to 185 B.C.E.\)](#), which moved into the vacuum left by Alexander's retreat. The founder of this first historical dynasty in India was Chandragupta Maurya (chan-drah-GUHP-tah MOH-ree-yah), who succeeded in seizing supreme power in northwestern India upon the withdrawal of the Greeks. The rule of the dynasty was brief but important for India's future. The third and greatest of the Mauryan rulers, [Ashoka \(\(ah-SHOH-kah\) Greatest of the kings of ancient India. He greatly expanded the Mauryan kingdom through conquest. Later converted to Buddhism and encouraged its spread.\)](#) (ah-SHOH-kah; 269–232 B.C.E.), was the outstanding Indian emperor of premodern times, admired by all Indians as the founding spirit of Indian unity and nationhood.

Ashoka's significance stems in large part from his role in spreading the Buddhist faith in India, thereby initiating the tradition of mutual tolerance between religions that is (or used to be) one of the subcontinent's cultural boasts. After a series of successful wars against the Mauryans' neighbors and rivals, Ashoka was shocked by the bloodshed at the battle of *Kalinga* at the midpoint of his reign. Influenced by Buddhist monks, the king became a devout Buddhist and pacifist. The last twenty years of his reign were marked by unprecedented internal prosperity and external peace, thanks mostly to the support he and his Buddhist advisors gave to trade. The inscriptions enunciating his decrees were placed on stone pillars scattered far and wide over his realm, and some of them survive today as the first examples of written Indian language. They and the accounts of a few foreign travelers are the means by which we know anything of Indian government in this early epoch.

After Ashoka's death, his weak successors soon gave up what he had gained, both in defense against invasion and in internal stability. New waves of nomadic horsemen entered India through the gateway to Central Asia, the Khyber Pass (see [Map 4.1](#)). Most of them quickly acquired sedentary habits, adopted Indian civilization, and embraced the Buddhist faith. But the political unity established by the Mauryan rulers disintegrated. Four centuries passed before the Gupta Dynasty could reestablish it in the 300s C.E.

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