
UNIT 16 THE MAURYAN ‘EMPIRE’*

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the beginnings of the first pan-India polity, the Mauryas, and how they administered their vast realm;
- understand how different types of resources were required for sustaining an empire;
- understand the nature of urban economy;
- learn about the society, economy and political set up of the Mauryas.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

At the time of Alexander’s invasion of India, Magadha under the Nanda rule had emerged as the most formidable power. The ascendancy of Magadha reached its peak under the successors of Nandas, i.e., the Mauryas. The Mauryan empire marks a watershed juncture in Indian history. For the first time in the history of India, a large portion of the subcontinent, extending up to the far north-west, was under a single paramount power.

This Unit will introduce you to the Mauryan empire and its importance in history. The main focus in this Unit will be on the political, economic, and administrative

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16.2 SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF MAURYAN PERIOD

This period has a greater number and more diverse type of primary sources as compared to the earlier periods; more importantly many of these sources are contemporary with the period under review. Let us look at a few of them in greater detail.

The most important literary source is Megasthenes' *Indica*. Megasthenes was a Seleukidian envoy who visited the Mauryan capital Pataliputra during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. His account, *Indica*, encapsulates his impressions of India, particularly northern India, under Chandragupta Maurya. However, the original work is lost. What is available instead are quotations, excerpts, summaries and quotes by later writers.

The other equally popular source is Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Traditionally *Arthashastra* is ascribed to Kautilya, also known as Vishnugupta or Chanakya, who is believed to have been Chandragupta's chief minister. He helped him overthrow the Nandas. *Arthashastra* is a theoretical treatise, prescribing modes of statecraft, and not describing an actual state. A statistical study of *Arthashastra* reveals that some chapters could be dated to the first two centuries of the Common Era. However, many scholars consider it to be contemporaneous with the Mauryas. It reflects a complex administrative structure which was not achieved any time before the Mauryas.

The texts like the *Divyavadana* and the *Ashokavadana* as well as Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles such as the *Mahavamsa* and the *Dipavamsa* and the king-lists in *Puranas*, again of a later period, refer to Mauryas.

The most significant source for the Mauryan period is undoubtedly the inscriptions of Ashoka. Ashoka's inscriptions mark the beginning of Indian epigraphy. What sets Ashoka's edicts apart is that they are issued in first person, thereby revealing the voice and ideas of the king himself. The edicts are written in the Prakrit language and Brahmi script, and occasionally in the Kharoshti script (in the north-western parts of the subcontinent). There are a few inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic as well. A bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription was found at Shar-i-Kuna near Kandahar in south-east Afghanistan and one in Taxila. Ashoka himself had designated these edicts as *Dhammalipi* (Edicts of Piety) and they are of the following types (Map 16.1):

- 1) Fourteen Rock Edicts or Major Rock Edicts (REs)
- 2) Two 'Separate' Rock Edicts or 'Kalinga' Rock Edicts
- 3) Two Minor Rock Edicts (MREs)
- 4) Seven Pillar Edicts or Major Pillar Edicts (PEs)
- 5) Minor Pillar Edict (MPE)

- 6) Rock Edict from Bairat (Rajasthan)
- 7) Two Minor Pillar Inscriptions
- 8) Inscriptions engraved on the Barabar hills close to Gaya, Bihar.

The Major Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts occur at different places, with minor variations. The Minor Rock Edicts are considered among the earliest inscriptions, followed by the Major Rock Edicts. The Pillar Edicts are still later.



Fig.16.1: Hoard of Mauryan Punch Marked Coins. Credit: CNG Coins.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punch-marked_coins#/media/File:Hoard_of_mostly_Mauryan_coins.jpg)

Other material sources for the study of the Maurya period include coins (Figure 16.1) and archaeological remains. Coins of this period are without legends. Punch-marked coins, mostly of silver, were issued during the Mauryan period. The punch marked coins of the Mauryas contain uniform symbols. Most probably, they were issued by the central authority. Known as *karshapana* coins, they do not specify the issuing authority; they do carry certain symbols that have been associated with Mauryan kings. These symbols include crescent-on-arches, tree-in-railing, and peacock-on-arches.

Archaeological remains from Bulandibagh (Figure 16.2) and Kumrahar (Figure 16.3) are associated with the Mauryan capital Pataliputra. Other important sites are Taxila, Mathura, and Bhita. What is a common feature of the finds is the great diversity of artefacts, and heightened urban elements. Thus, a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of the Mauryas rests on a combined analysis of the various sources.



Fig.16.2: Mauryan Remains of Wooden Palisade at Bulandibagh Site of Pataliputra. Archaeological photo at Pataliputra by ASIEC 1912-13. Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan_remains_of_wooden_palissade_at_Bulandi_Bagh_site_of_Pataliputra_ASIEC_1912-13.jpg)



Fig.16.3: Mauryan Ruins of Pillared Hall at Kumrahar of Pataliputra. Credit: 1912-13 Archaeological Excavation by ASIEC at Pataliputra. Source: Wikimedia Commons. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauryan_ruins_of_pillared_hall_at_Kumrahar_site_of_Pataliputra_ASIEC_1912-13.jpg)

16.3 THE MAURYAN DYNASTY: ORIGINS AND EXPANSION

The foundation of the Mauryan empire was laid by Chandragupta Maurya, who overthrew the Nanda dynasty in 321/324 BCE. According to *Puranas*, the Mauryan rule lasted for 137 years, i.e., the Mauryas probably ruled till 187/185 BCE. Even if one takes these dates as approximate, one can conclude that the Mauryan period lasted from around the late fourth century BCE to the first quarter of the second century BCE.

16.3.1 Chandragupta Maurya

Details about Chandragupta's ancestry and caste status differ from text to text. The *Mudrarakshasa* describes him as being of low social origin. Dhundiraja, a commentator on the *Vishnu Purana*, states that Chandragupta was a Nanda scion, son of the Nanda king Sarvarthasiddhi with Mura, the daughter of a hunter. It is suggested that as the son of Mura, Chandragupta became known as Maurya, which went on to become the dynastic epithet. The 12th century text *Parishishta-parvan* written by Jaina author, Hemachandra, identifies Chandragupta as the grandson of the chief of peacock-tamers' clan (*mayura-poshakas*). Similarly, Greek accounts of Justin and Plutarch categorically state that Sandrocottus (i.e., Chandragupta) did not enjoy any royal descent. On the other hand, the Buddhist texts such as the *Digha Nikaya*, *Mahavamsa*, and *Divyavadana* trace the Mauryan ancestry to a *khattiya* (Pali for kshatriya) clan called the Moriyas, who ruled at Pipphalivana. This stress on his noble birth was to legitimize his ascension to the throne.



Fig.16.4: Bhadrabahu Cave, where Chandragupta Maurya is said to have died at Sravanabelgola, Karnataka. Credit: Amol Thikane. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhadrabahu_Gopha_on_Chandragiri.JPG

What we do know from Greek accounts is that soon after Alexander's dispersal from India, Sandrocottus established a new dynasty and conquered a vast area. Greek sources also mention a treaty signed between Seleucus Nikator and

Chandragupta Maurya. According to the terms of this treaty, Seleucus ceded to Chandragupta the territories of Arachosia (the Kandahar area of south-east Afghanistan), Gedrosia (south Baluchistan), and Paropomisadai (area between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent). Chandragupta is said to have reciprocated by gifting 500 war elephants to Seleucus. Alongside the treaty, the general rights of intermarriage between the Greeks and the Indians was also acknowledged. Chandragupta not only established control over the north-west but also the Ganga plains, western India and the Deccan. Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of north-east India were out of this ambit.

Graeco-Roman sources also speak highly of the trans-Vidhyan military exploits of Sandracottus. Plutarch mentions that Sandracottus over-ran and subdued the whole of 'India' with an army of 600,000 men. However, it remains unclear what these writers exactly mean by 'India'.

Chandragupta's reign is supposed to have lasted nearly 24 years.

16.3.2 Bindusara

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara, who ruled between 297 and 273 BCE. The *Mahabhashya* refers to Chandragupta's successor as Amitraghata, which literary means 'a slayer of enemies'. On the other hand, Greek accounts such as those of Athenaios and Strabo knew him as Amitrokhates or Alitrokhates. These names were probably royal epithets, which further indicate his military prowess. To Bindusara's credit, he succeeded in keeping the vast empire he had inherited, intact. The *Divyavadana* speaks of a revolt in Taxila during Bindusara's reign. According to *Divyavadana* the subjects of Taxila were dissatisfied with rogue administrators (*dushtamatyas*; *amatyas* meaning ministers).



Silver Coin (Karsapana) of the period of Bindusara. Credit: Jean-Michel Moullec.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:142_1karshapana_Maurya_Bindusara_MACW4165_1ar_\(8486583162\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:142_1karshapana_Maurya_Bindusara_MACW4165_1ar_(8486583162).jpg))

Under Bindusara's reign, diplomatic relations with Greek rulers of West Asia continued. Bindusara is described as having requested the Syrian king, Antiochus I, to send him fine wine, figs and a sophist (philosopher). To this, Antiochus replied that while he would definitely send across the wine and figs, Greek laws do not permit the sale and purchase of sophists.

16.3.3 Ashoka

For a long time till 1837, not much was known about Ashoka. In that year James Prinsep deciphered a Brahmi inscription referring to a king called *Devanampiya*

Piyadasi (Beloved of the Gods). Further, study of *Mahavamsa* made it clear that this epithet referred to Ashoka Maurya.

Ashoka succeeded his father Bindusara upon his death in 273 BCE. The *Asokavadana* says that when he was born, his mother Subhadrangi exclaimed 'I am now without sorrow' and that is how he came to be named Ashoka (the one who is without sorrow). During his father's reign, he was appointed as the Viceroy of Taxila and also Ujjain. It is believed that he was not the crown prince (*yuvaraja*). He was engaged in a struggle with his brothers for the throne.

Ashoka, like Bindusara before him, inherited a large part of the subcontinent as empire. The only significant area not under his suzerainty was Kalinga (modern day Odisha). It was in 260 BCE that Kalinga was finally brought under Mauryan control as a result of a fierce campaign led by Ashoka. Strategically Kalinga was important. It was rich in forest resources and also lay on the Mauryan trade route with the peninsula through the east coast. However, the campaign itself was very destructive, with thousands killed, and many more captured as prisoners. The large-scale destruction is said to have filled king Ashoka with remorse. In Rock Edict XIII, Ashoka, however, states that such death and destruction is inevitable when an unconquered area is conquered. He wished that his successors would avoid any more bloodshed. Despite being remorseful, Ashoka issued a warning to the troublesome forest people, reminding them that even in his repentance, he still had the power to punish. It is also noteworthy that Ashoka refrained from engraving his remorse at any location in Kalinga, where the Rock Edict XIII was in fact replaced by the Separate Edicts. The Separate Edicts contain instructions to his officers and emphasize the value of good administration.



Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, Bihar. Credit: Bpilgrim. Source: Wikimedia Commons. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashoka_pillar_at_Vaishali,_Bihar,_India.jpg)

The victory in Kalinga war marked the official replacement of the war-drum (*bherighosha*) with the sound of *Dhamma* (*dhammaghosha*). The remorse over the Kalinga war sparked his interest in Buddhism and started his journey of

conversion. It was not however an overnight conversion, as Ashoka's sympathy towards Buddhism had been brewing. He himself states in Minor Rock Edict I that he has been a lay devotee for two and a half years, indicating that he turned towards the Buddha's teaching only gradually and not suddenly.

The extent of Ashoka's empire can be traced through the spread of his inscriptions. From their distribution we know that the Mauryan Empire extended up to Kandahar in Afghanistan in the north-west. In the eastern frontier it extended to Odisha. According to Rock Edict XIII, the rest of the subcontinent was under Mauryan rule barring the extreme south, which was ruled by Cholas and Pandyas; and according to Rock Edict II by the Keralaputas and Satiyaputras. People of diverse origins and diverse cultures lived in his empire. For example, in the northwest are mentioned the Kambojas and Yavanas. They are mentioned along with other people like the Bhojas, Pitinikas, Andhras and Pulindas who can be located in parts of western India and the Deccan.

The Mauryan empire declined rapidly after Ashoka. The *Puranas* mention the names of later Mauryan rulers and make it clear that the duration of their reigns was relatively very short. The empire soon became weak and fragmented and is said to have suffered an invasion by the Bactrian Greeks. The Mauryan dynasty came to an end with the last king Brihadratha being killed by his own military commander Pushyamitra, who then established the Shunga dynasty in c. 187 BCE.

16.4 THE MAKING OF AN 'EMPIRE'

Traditional viewpoints saw the Mauryan empire as a centralized bureaucratic empire. Such empires are characterized by powerful kings who through military exploits bring peace and cohesiveness to the kingdom. They are marked by the presence of allies, enemies, matrimonial relations, diplomatic alliances. Centralized bureaucratic empires are exploitative in nature with corresponding element of inequality among social classes. Romila Thapar's earlier contention that the Mauryan empire was a uniform and centralized administered entity was modified by her in a later study. According to her, at the hub was the metropolitan state of Magadha, broadly an area of the distribution of the pillar edicts. This was the area of maximum centralized administration. Then there were the core areas, which were of strategic importance and agrarian and commercial potential. This second category was less under central control and was under the control of governors and senior officials. Gandhara, Raichur Doab, Southern Karnataka, Kalinga and Saurashtra were such core areas. The third category was those areas which were located at the peripheries. The economy of such regions was not restructured by the Mauryan State. Only the resources were tapped.

The Mauryan realm covered diverse ethnic groups, including the non-indigenous *yavanas*, as well as different linguist groups. This is corroborated from the fact that Ashoka's edicts are found in at least three languages, Prakrit, Greek and Aramaic. Ashoka's edicts also corroborate the presence of multiple religious beliefs and practices, including Buddhism, Jainism, Vedic and Brahmanical practices, Ajikivism and smaller cults.

The key difference between a kingdom and an empire is present in the fact that a kingdom draws maximum profit from existing resources. An empire on the other hand, makes considerable effort in restructuring resources to get maximum revenue. The financial needs of administering an empire are considerable. In the

Mauryan empire, this restructuring took place through the extension of agriculture, and introduction of wide-reaching commercial exchange (Thapar, 2002). Moreover, the governance of such a vast realm was aided through multiple foci of administration. Thus, regional variations and diversities were accommodated by the Mauryan rulers into their polity. While an empire accommodates and integrates these diversities on the one hand, at the same time, it also favours homogeneity as a binding force. Thus, imperial systems make attempts to draw together the ends of empire, to encourage foremost the movement of peoples and goods (Thapar, 2002). This includes the use of script, punch-marked coins in exchange transactions and the projection of a new ideology that sets new precepts. In the case of Mauryan empire, the State attempted cultural homogeneity through the introduction of the policy of *Dhamma*.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) What are the main sources for the reconstruction of the history of Mauryas?
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- 2) Comment briefly on the notion of Mauryan ‘Empire’.
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16.5 ECONOMY

Since the time of sixth century BCE, there had been a continuous expansion of agriculture along with the rise in urban centers. The Greek writer Arrian talks about the immense number of towns. Technologically the Mauryan economy and state were on a sound footing. The *Arthashastra* mentions use of different kinds of iron. Iron was a crucially important metal for agriculture. Similarly, the social dimensions of production also had a strong basis. *Arthashastra* mentions that new lands should be brought under the plough and for this purpose the shudras were to be settled on these areas. The needs of labour for labour intensive tasks such as paddy cultivation were to be met with prisoners of war. It is believed that the 1,50,000 people who were deported after the Kalinga war were used in this fashion. The shudra settlers were given fiscal concessions along with seed and cattle to settle new lands. Such lands formed part of the *sita* lands or crown lands. Thus, two factors — control over iron and manpower — laid the foundations of a strong economy during the Mauryan period.

16.5.1 Trade and Commerce

The Magadha State was concerned about two things:

- a) Expansion of trade and commerce
- b) Establishment of new towns and markets.

The expansion of commerce and trade enabled the Mauryas to augment their resources and revenue. The *Jatakas* refer to caravan traders carrying large volumes of goods to distant places. The Mauryan State was able to provide security and peace and hence trade routes and trade became more secure. Major trade routes to West Asia and Central Asia passed through the north-west India. Major centers like Rajagriha in Magadha and Kaushambi near present-day Prayagaraj were located on main trade routes that were along the river Ganges and the Himalayan foothills. Pataliputra was located in a strategic location through which trade routes and river routes in all the four directions could be accessed. The northern route linked cities like Kapilavastu, Shravasthi, Vaishali with Kalsi, Hazara and eventually Peshawar. Megasthenes talks of a land route that connected the north-west with Pataliputra. The same land route in the south linked central India and in the south east, Kalinga. Then there was an eastern route. It turned southwards to finally reach Andhra and Karnataka. The other part of the eastern route continued down to the Ganges delta to Tamralipti which acted as an exit point to the south and south-east. From Kaushambi, moving westwards, was another route which led to Ujjain. This continued either further west to the coast of Gujarat or west south across the Narmada and was regarded as *Daksinapatha* (southern route). The overland route to regions of the west went via Taxila near Islamabad.

River transport had improved once the forests around the valleys had been cleared under state initiative. Other factors like the establishment of friendly relations with the Greeks under the Mauryan kings like Bindusara and Ashoka improved trade relations.

The artisans during the Mauryan period were organized along guild lines. The well-known guilds were those of metallurgists, carpenters, potters, leatherworkers, painters, textile workers etc. The Mauryan State also was very careful in making the organization of trade efficient. Though it did not directly interfere with guilds, it did take control of production and distribution in some cases. The State did this by directly employing some of the artisans like armourers, shipbuilders, stone builders etc. They were exempt from payment of taxes because they rendered compulsory labour services to the State. Other artisans like spinners, weavers, miners etc. who worked for the State were taxed.

Urbanism spread to other areas of western and central India, the Deccan and south India. *Gahapatis* became prosperous and rural settlements proliferated. Towns came to be inhabited by merchants, traders and officials. According to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the State founded towns through the process of *durganivesa* or *durgavidhana*. These towns were peopled by priests, nobles, soldiers, merchants, artisans and others. Another important aspect of the urban economy during this period was the widespread use of metallic money for transactions in cash. Use of coinage had become prevalent in the 6th century BCE, but now due to development of commerce, coins became a common occurrence. The salaries of the officials were paid in cash.

16.6 ARTHASHASTRA AND THE SAPTANGA THEORY

The *Arthashastra* is the first South Asian text which offers a theory of the State as being composed of seven constituent elements. Kautilya puts forward the concept of *saptanga rajya* to understand the State – a system of seven inter-related and interlacing constituent limbs or elements (*angas* or *prakritis*). This concept of the *saptanga-rajya* was accepted and found in much later texts including the *Dharmashastras*, the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*, with a few modifications.

These seven elements were, in the order below:

- 1) *svami* (the king)
- 2) *amatya* (ministers)
- 3) *janapada* (the territory and its people, i.e., subjects)
- 4) *durga* (a fortified capital)
- 5) *kosha* (the treasury)
- 6) *danda* (justice or force)
- 7) *mitra* (ally)

Dividing the State into seven basic constituents allowed one to assess the individual strength or weakness of each constituent. Each of the seven constituent elements is defined by a group of ideal qualities. The elements are not equal.

Svami

Monarchy is considered the norm by the *Arthashastra* and all its teaching is addressed to the king. For Kautilya, the fate of the king was closely tied to that of his subject population. If the king was energetic, then his subjects too would be energetic. Conversely if he was lazy, his subjects too would be lazy and eat into the kingdom's wealth. Thus, Kautilya advocated for a constantly alert, diligent and sensible king.

Ashoka's inscriptions give us a sense of kingship that was quite close to what Kautilya prescribed. We know from his Minor Rock Edicts that Ashoka adopted a very unassuming title, the *raja* of Magadha, as opposed the very grand titles of later times like *maharaja*, or *maharajadhiraja*. However, the preferred epithet in the inscriptions is '*Devanamapiya*' or the 'beloved of the gods', suggesting attempts to proclaim a divine connection. Ashoka also laid the foundations of a new kind of 'paternalistic kingship' by stating 'All men are my children' in Rock Edicts I and II. He elaborated further on his ideals of kingship by committing to ensure the welfare of all beings and his subjects in this world and the next.

Amatya

The term '*amatya*' was an umbrella term that included all the high-ranking officials, counsellors and executive heads of department. The *Arthashastra* mentions two kinds of consultative bodies. The first was a small consultative body of *mantrins* (ministers) called the *mantra-parishad*. The other was a larger body of all the executive heads of the department, called the *mantri-parishad*.

An important functionary in Kautilya's administration was the *purohita* (royal priest). The *Arthashastra* states that the *purohita* should belong to a reputed family and should be thoroughly trained in the *Vedas*, the interpretation of divine signs and omens, as well as the science of politics. We can also assess the *purohita's* importance by looking at the figures of salaries given by Kautilya. According to Kautilya, the highest officials were paid extremely well, with the chief minister, the *purhoita*, and the army commander receiving 48,000 *panas* and the treasurer and the chief collector 24,000 *panas*. Even if Kautilya's estimates are only approximate, we can assume that the higher officials in the administration were extraordinarily well-paid, and their salaries would have constituted a large chunk of the total revenue collected.

Janapada

This referred to a recognized territory as the realm of the empire. The *Janapada* was a major source of income for the king and the text demonstrates the various investments, rewards, and punitive strategies used by the State to maximize its tax income based on agricultural production. Additionally, attention to trade routes, port cities, demonstrates the extent that economic interests dominated the king's sense of his own greater territory.

Durga

Crucial to the defense of the realm, fortified cities protect important border regions, serve as sanctuaries during times of attack, and house the major economic and administrative centers of the state. The ideal state of the *Arthashastra* possesses a number of fortresses, differing in geographical setting and purpose. The largest of the fortresses is the capital city, which operates as an administrative, economic, and military hub for the kingdom. Kautilya says that it should be constructed with mud ramparts and parapets built of brick and stone, the fort would be well-stocked with supplies of grain and necessities in case of a siege. Interestingly, the Greek accounts describe Pataliputra, the Magadhan capital, on a similar grand scale.

Kautilya also suggested stationing troops along the approaches to the fort. He refers to a standing army with four main divisions – infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. From Ashoka's edicts we know that after the Kalinga war, Ashoka made efforts at pacifism and committed himself to *dhamma-vijaya* (victory through *dharma*), rather than war. Yet, significantly, he did not disband the army.

Danda

Danda can be understood as a reference to force or justice. The *Arthashastra* lays out the judicial system in detail with references to *dharmasthas* (judges) and *pradeshtris* (officers responsible for suppression of criminals). Punishments for offences and crimes ranged from fines to mutilation of limbs, or even capital punishment. For Kautilya, the nature of punishment depended not only upon the nature and gravity of the crime, but also on the *varna* of the offender. For the same crime, Kautilya set aside lighter punishments for higher *varnas*. For example, if a kshatriya had sexual relations with a brahmin woman, he was to pay the highest fine. For the same offence, a vaishya could have his entire property confiscated. The worst punishment was reserved for a shudra.

In Ashoka's inscriptions the judicial responsibilities lay with the city *mahamatas*. The edicts urge the *mahamatas* to be impartial and ensure that people are not

imprisoned or punished without sufficient evidence. Pillar Edict IV contains Ashoka's claim that he had introduced *samata* in judicial procedure. According to some interpretations this meant that he had established a uniform rule of law, abolishing *varna* distinctions in punishments.

Mitra

This element refers to 'friends' of the realm, or political allies. At the centre of Kautilya's polity is the *vijigishu* – the would-be conqueror. The inter-state policy is about the several players around the *vijigishu* – the *ari* (enemy), *madhyama* (the middle king), and the *udasina* (the indifferent or neutral king). Kautilya further listed various policies and strategies that the king could adopt according to the circumstances, ranging from peace treaty (*sandhi*) if the enemy was stronger, to *vigraha* (hostility) if the enemy was weaker. Other options included military expeditions or teaming up with the enemy's enemy and attacking together.

Ashoka sent missions to the Hellenistic kingdoms in the north-west, with the purpose of enhancing trade with them. Of these the most prominent was the Mauryan relationship with the Seleucids, right from the treaty signed under Chandragupta. Diplomatic exchanges continued with subsequent rulers. Ashoka also mentions other contemporaries with whom he exchanged missions. His inscriptions mention the Greek king Antiyoga, as well as the lands of the kings Tulamaya, Anetika, Make and Alikyashudala. These have been identified by historians, respectively, as Antiochus II of Syria (260-246 BCE), Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (285-247 BCE), Antigonus Gonatus of Macedonia (276-239 BCE), Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander of Epirus. Ashoka also dispatched special ministers on *dhamma* missions to frontier regions and neighbouring realms, to spread the word of *Dhamma* and the teachings of the Buddha.

16.7 ADMINISTRATION

Mauryan empire was a vast territorial entity. Various levels of administration were required to govern it well. The *Arthashastra*, Greek accounts and Ashokan inscriptions give us a good idea about the administrative system. The administrative structure involved a division of the empire into provinces, each under the direct governance of a prince (*kumara*) or a member of the royal family. The inscriptions suggest four such provinces – a southern one with its centre at Survarnagiri, a northern province with capital at Taxila, a western one with its capital at Ujjayini, and an eastern one with its capital at Tosali. Ashokan inscriptions also referred to these governors as *kumara*, suggesting a continuation of the tradition of appointing royal princes to these important posts.

Senior officers called *pradeshikas* were tasked with touring the empire every five years and perform an audit as well as keep a check on the provincial administration. In addition, there were judicial officers, *rajukas*, in both urban and rural areas, whose judicial functions often combined with assessment of revenue. A well-organized administration was needed for a variety of tasks such as surplus production, extraction of surplus, its distribution or expenditure, strong army to conquer areas, tax collection from traders and agriculturalists etc.

Let us look at the details of Mauryan administration below.

16.7.1 Central Administration

The central administration can be classified under the following categories:

- a) The king
- b) The council of ministers
- c) City administration
- d) Army
- e) Espionage network
- f) Law and justice
- g) Public welfare

Let's discuss each of these categories separately.

- a) **The King:** The king has been given primacy even in the normative texts. The *Arthashastra* considers the king as the central focus of administration. He had the power to appoint or remove the ministers (*amatyas*); defend the treasury and the people; look after the welfare of the people; punish criminals; influence the people (*praja*) through his morality. According to the *Arthashastra*, the king's decision could override *shastric* injunctions if found to be differing from the latter.

The texts prescribe certain qualities that a king should possess. These are: birth in a high family; capability to control kings and officials; sharp intellect; truthfulness; and upholder of *Dharma*. He should be a skillful warrior, should perfect all domains of economic life, and writing (*lipi*). Besides this, the texts specify certain preconditions that the king should fulfill. For example, he should pay equal attention to all matters; remain vigilant and active for taking action or corrective measures; he should always discharge his duties; be accessible to his advisors and officials. Both from Megasthenes and Ashokan edicts it becomes evident that these injunctions were followed by the Magadhan kings.

Ashoka's role as an ideal king was augmented by his paternalistic attitude towards his subjects. He was deeply concerned about the welfare of his people but at the same time he was an absolute monarch. He adopted the title of *Devanampiya* (beloved of the Gods) which according to Romila Thapar underlined his close connection with the Divine power even to the degree of excluding the intermediaries, the priests. This indicates that the king was exercising his authority in religious matters as well.

- b) **Council of Ministers:** The *Arthashastra* and even Ashokan edicts mention a *mantri parishad* (council of ministers). It is mentioned in the *Arthashastra* that the state cannot function without the assistance of ministers. Rock Edict III says that the *Parishad* was expected to ensure that the new administrative measures were being carried out well by the different categories of the council. Similarly, Rock Edict VI mentions that the ministers can discuss the king's policy during his absence; suggest amendments; decide upon any important matter which the king had left to them. Yet the Council had to report its opinion to the king immediately. The primary role of the Council was advisory in nature. The king's decision was final in all respects.

There was an emphasis on majority opinion in the Council (*Bhuvyist*). In cases where the majority verdict was not agreeable, then the king's decision prevailed. The qualifications which the prospective ministers should fulfill have been clearly specified; these were: they should not be lured by wealth; should not succumb to pressure; he should be a *sarvopadashudha* (purest of all). There was also an inner council of ministers (*mantrins*) who were consulted on issues which needed immediate attention.

- c) **City Administration:** There are a number of references to city administration with regard to Palibothra (Pataliputra) by Megasthenes. In this account, the city council was divided into six sub-councils or committees and each committee had five members. These were:

First Committee: It looked after industry and crafts. It inspected such centers and looked after fixing of wages etc.

Second Committee: It looked after the foreigners. Its functions included arranging for their food, stay, comfort, and security.

Third committee: Registration of births and deaths

Fourth Committee: Looked after trade and commerce. It inspected weights and measures, markets etc.

Fifth Committee: Inspected manufactured goods, made provisions for their sale and steps taken to distinguish between new and second-hand goods

Sixth Committee: It collected taxes on the goods sold, the rate being 1/10th.

Though the *Arthashastra* does not mention any such committees, the functions specified above have been mentioned. For example, the functions of the fourth committee were performed by the *Panyadhyaksha*; the collection of taxes (sixth committee) was the responsibility of *Sulkahyaksha* and the registration of births and deaths was the work of *Gopa*. The head of the urban administration was called *Nagarika*. He was assisted by two subordinate officials-*Gopa* and *Sthanika*. Other officials are also mentioned such as *Bandhanagaradhyaksha* (looked after the jail); *Rakshi* (i.e. the police; looked after the security of the people); *Lohadhyaksha*, *Sauvarnika* (officials who looked after goods that were manufactured in the centers).

The city administration was elaborate and well planned. Penalties and punishments were prescribed for various offences. No one was above the law. Even law enforcers like the police were to be penalized for any wrong doings. Similarly, the citizens were punished if found guilty of transgressing rules.

- d) **The Army:** The Kalinga war, retreat of Seleucus, descriptive accounts of the army in *Arthashastra* all indicate that the Mauryas had a large army. It included infantry, cavalry, elephants, chariots, transport and admiral of fleet. Both the Greek and Indian literary sources refer to the fact that Chandragupta's army that was raised against the Nanda kings also included mercenary soldiers. According to Pliny's account, Chandragupta's army consisted of 9000 elephants, 3000 cavalry and 6000 infantry. Plutarch's account refers to 6000 elephants, 80000 horses, 20000 foot soldiers, and 8000 war chariots.

Kautilya too refers to a standing army with four main divisions – infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants. Each of these divisions was placed under commanding officers respectively known as *patyadhyaksha*, *ashvadhyaksha*, *rathadhyaksha*, and *hastyadhakshya*. Megasthenes describes a similar arrangement of six committees of five members each, in charge of navy, supervision of equipment and transport, infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants. Besides, there was a provision for medical service to the army.

There were also officials like the *Ayudhagaradhyaksha* who looked after the production and maintenance of a variety of armaments. The *Arthashastra* also refers to the recruitment policy, war plans and fortifications. The officers and soldiers were paid in cash. The salaries of army officers ranged between 4000 *panas*-48000 *panas*.

- e) **Espionage:** *Arthashastra* mentions a well-knit system of espionage. The spies were supposed to keep an eye on the ministers, government officials, collect impressions regarding the feelings of the citizens and know the secrets of foreign kings. They reported directly to the kings on urgent matters. They not only went under disguise but also contacted barbers, cooks etc. to collect information. The *Arthashastra* described a very elaborate setup with regard to these spies, enlisting two types: stationary (*samstha*) and roving (*sanchara*), which then were further sub-divided into nine types. The head of the secret service in the *Arthashastra* was the *samahartta*, who was primarily tasked with the collection of revenue. Yet another task was the protection of the king. In fact, the king's bodyguard was known to consist of women archers who also accompanied him on hunts. Additionally, women too were employed by the State as spies.
- f) **Justice and Punishment:** An orderly legal system was in place to ensure social order, smooth functioning of the administrative system and flow of revenue to the State. The *Arthashastra* lists a number of punishments for various offences. These ranged from violation of marriage laws, divorce, murder, theft, adulteration, wrong weights etc. There were various kinds of courts to settle disputes and read out punishments to the offenders.

The *Arthashastra* lays out the judicial system in detail with references to *dharmasthas* (judges) and *pradeshtris* (officers responsible for suppression of criminals). Punishments for offences and crimes ranged from fines to mutilation of limbs, or even capital punishment.

The king was the supreme arbiter of justice and upholder of dharma. Though the crimes were few, cases were decided by a 'body of arbitrators' with a system of appeal to the king. In Ashoka's inscriptions the judicial responsibilities lay with the city *mahamatas*. The edicts urge the *mahamatas* to be impartial and ensure that people are not imprisoned or punished without sufficient evidence. Rock Edict I in particular states that every five years, the king would dispatch a gentle officer, neither fierce nor harsh, on a tour of inspection to ensure that this was being done.

- g) **Public Welfare:** Ashoka as evident from his many edicts was devoted to the welfare of his subjects. A number of public welfare works were undertaken during the reign of the Mauryas. For instance, irrigation was considered of paramount importance by the State. Megasthenes has

mentioned officials who supervised irrigation. The modes of irrigation and types of water resources were afforded protection, and anyone found causing damage was punished. The State encouraged people to repair dams at their own initiative and in return were granted revenue remissions. According to the Junagadh Rudradaman's inscription (2nd century CE), Sudarshana lake was constructed during the time of Chandragupta. The State also laid down and repaired roads. Medical treatment and medicines were made available to the needy. We have references to medicine men of various kinds and ordinary physicians (*Chikitsakah*), midwives (*garbhavyadhi*) etc. Ashoka exhorted that the orphans, old women should be looked after. The citizens were given protection against natural calamities like famines, floods etc. Thus, the State invested a certain portion of its revenue in the general welfare of its subjects.

16.7.2 District and Village Level Administration

According to the *Arthashastra*, the smallest unit of administration was the village. A few villages were grouped as one district, and a collection of districts formed a province. Each district was to have an accountant to maintain records of boundaries, registered land and deeds as well as kept a census of population and a record of the livestock. There was also a tax collector for every district, responsible for various types of revenue. At the village level, the most important functionary was the village headman, who was accountable to the district accountant and tax collector.

At the district level, the officials listed were *Pradeshika*, *Rajuka* and *Yukta*. *Pradeshika* was the overall in-charge of the district. The *Yukta* was a junior officer giving secretarial kind of assistance to the other two. The officials fulfilled the following duties: survey and assessment of land; tours and inspections; revenue collection; and maintaining law and order.

At times the king was in direct touch with these officers. The 4th pillar Edict mentions that Ashoka granted 'independent authority' to the *Rajukas* to carry out certain responsibilities related to public welfare. Besides this, there were checks and balances on the powers of each category of officials.

The local people appointed as officials in the village were called as *gramika*. Then, there was *Gopa* and *Sthanika* — two types of officers, acting as intermediaries between the district and village level administrative units. They were entrusted with the following duties: demarcating village boundaries; maintaining records of land; recording income and expenditure of people; recording taxes, revenues and fines. Despite the presence of such officials, the villages enjoyed certain degree of autonomy in administering their affairs.

The administrative system largely revolved around the efficient collection of taxes. We know from Ashoka's inscription at Lumbini that land revenue was of two kinds — *bali* and *bhaga*. The assessment of the tax varied from region to region, from being on 1/6th to a quarter of the produce of the land. 1/4th of the produce was paid in tax by the peasants. They also paid a tribute. Land tax (*bhaga*) was the main source of revenue. It was levied at 1/6th of the produce. It could have been higher in the Mauryan times. The Lumbini edict of Ashoka says that during his visit to the birthplace of the Buddha, he exempted the village from the payment of *bali* and reduced the payment of *bhaga* to 1/8th. Sharecropping was

another way by which the State collected agricultural resources. Sharecroppers were provided with seeds, oxen etc. and received arable land for cultivation. Such peasants gave half of the produce to the State. Other kinds of taxes were also prevalent. The peasants paid a tax called *pindakara*. It was paid by husbandmen, which was assessed on a group of villages. This was customary in nature. The villages also provided provisions to the army passing through their respective territories. Then, there was a tax called *hiranya*. Its nature is not clear. It was paid in cash. Some taxes could have been voluntary. For example, *pranaya* was a tax which literally means gift of affection. Panini mentions it first but Kautilya elaborates upon it. It amounted to 1/3rd or 1/4th of the produce according to the nature of soil. Over time it may have become obligatory.

Megasthenes also assumed that all land belonged to the king, and the cultivators tilled the land on the condition that they paid in kind one fourth of the produce as tax. Yet other Greek accounts seem to suggest that the cultivator *received* one fourth of the produce for tilling the land of the king. We have references to crown land called *sita* which was held by the ruler and designated as his own land (*svabhumi*). These crown lands were cultivated under the supervision of State, by sharecroppers or tenant cultivators who paid a tax, or even by wage labour. In the *Arthashastra*, a *Sitadhyaksa* or superintendent of agriculture is mentioned who probably supervised the cultivation of *sita* lands.

The rest of the land in the Mauryan state, known as *Janapada* territories was most probably under private cultivators. The Jatakas mention *gahapatis* and *grambhojakas* who are said to have employed hired labourers, indicating that they were the land-owning gentry. The State's role in the provision of irrigation was crucial for a strong agricultural set up. The *Arthashastra* mentions a water cess which amounted to a fifth, a fourth or a third of the produce. In such areas cess was levied only on irrigated lands indicating that the state regulated irrigation facilities wherever rainfall was scarce. As said before, collection of land revenue through taxes was an important affair of the state. The highest officer in charge of this was the *samaharta*. The *sannidhata* was the chief custodian of the State treasury. Since the revenue was collected in kind also, providing storage facilities for grains was the responsibility of the State.

Labour was provided by the *dasa-karmakaras* – slaves and hired labour. According to *Arthashastra* the various categories of labour included wage labour, bonded labour, and slave labour.

16.8 SOCIETY

Megasthenes and later Greek authors describe Indian society at the time of Mauryas as being divided into seven distinct groups – philosophers, cultivators, hunters and herdsmen, artisans and traders, overseers (spies) and the king's counselors. The Greek authors describe these groups as the seven '*genos*'. Megasthenes notes that these occupations were hereditary in nature and inter-marriage between groups was not allowed – two features crucial to the functioning of the caste system. Let us look and compare Megasthenes' categories with other primary sources.

Megasthenes describes the '*philosophoi*' (sophists and philosophers) as being held in very high esteem in India. Strabo divided them further into two groups, the *brachmanes* (Brahmanas) and *garmanes* (shramanas). They were considered

as public benefactors, making prophecies and were exempted from paying taxes. We know from other texts that brahmanas and *sramanas* were used as general descriptive terms in later periods. The *sramanas* for example referred to a range of ascetic groups and sects – Buddhist, Jaina, Ajivika, etc.

About the second category, Megasthenes writes that cultivators were the most numerous of all groups. Clearly, the bulk of the population was engaged in agriculture. In fact, the Greek writers were struck by the large scale of agrarian operations. All accounts speak of the profusion and diversity of crops, achieved due to the profitable combination of highly fertile soil, presence of rivers and plentiful rainfall.

The third category mentioned by Megasthenes is that of hunters and herdsmen. According to Megasthenes these people lived outside agrarian settlements. Hunters and gatherers cleared the country of unwanted beasts and birds. According to *Arthashastra*, forests could not be privately cleared, and clearance was supervised by the State. The State was involved in collecting and taxing forest produce. Non-agrarian activities such as herding of animals were practiced even within villages. Kautilya even listed animals amongst items that were assessed and taxed.

Megasthenes' fourth group also relates to non-agrarian activities – artisans and traders. Some Greek authors suggest that all artisans (*technitai*) were employed by State and exempted from paying taxes. According to Strabo, apart from independent artisans, the armourers and shipbuilders were employed by State and paid a wage. Most of the artisans either worked individually or as members of associations. These associations – *shreni* or *puga* – gradually became powerful and were extremely influential as patrons of religious sects and visual arts. Megasthenes was wrong in stating that Indians did not borrow or lend money on interest, since money-lending was known and practiced from early times.

The fifth group noted by the Greeks was the soldiers, the second largest group in terms of numbers. The Mauryas had a standing army; the size and estimates vary across sources. According to Pliny, the army comprised 700 elephants, 1,000 horses and 80,000 infantry. Further one can conclude from the vast size that recruitment to the army was not limited to the *kshatriyas*, the traditional warrior group. Maintaining such a large army would have been a burden on resources and may have encouraged frequent and high taxation.

Closely associated with the army was the sixth group, the overseers (spies or inspectors). According to Greek accounts they were the most trusted persons in the realm and never lied. However, Kautilya recommended a spy's report should be corroborated by three other sources to be deemed acceptable.

The last group that Megasthenes mentions is the king's counsellors. This group was the smallest in number. They included the highest administrative functionaries of the realm, including army generals, revenue heads, etc. The nearest equivalent of this group in the Indian sources is the *amatyas* or *mantris*.

Megasthenes however seems to think that there was no concept of slavery in India. On the other hand, we know from other sources of situations that led to enslavement – a person could be a slave either by birth, by voluntary selling themselves, by being captured in war, or as a result of judicial punishment. We

also know of a tax termed *vishti* that was paid in labour to the State. Kautilya also described different kinds of slaves.

Megasthenes' Indica: A Case Study

Megasthenes was originally a representative of Seleucus Nikator at the court of Sibyrtios, the governor of Arachosia (present day Kandahar region in Afghanistan). After the treaty between Chandragupta and Seleucus was settled, Megasthenes was sent as Seleucus' envoy to Chandragupta's court. Based on his travels and experiences in India, he wrote a book called the *Indica*. This work is lost. What survives of it is in the form of 'quotations' from later writers (Diodorous, Strabo, Arrian and Pliny) concerned with the Hellenistic world. Megasthenes' *Indica* described the country, whatever little he saw of it, its size and shape, rivers, soil, climate, plants, animals, agricultural produce, administration, society, and folktales. The animals in the subcontinent particularly captivated the Greek writers and their audiences, and they describe in detail the exotic animals such as elephants, monkeys and activities such as horse training and elephant training. They also noted the similarities with their own lands, especially in terms of legends and mythologies.

Whether Megasthenes is a reliable historian is a debatable question? There are a number of absurd statements that we find attributed to Megasthenes. For example, there was no slavery in India, or that Indians never lied, and theft was rare, or that farmers were never touched in war, or that Indians did not borrow or lend money. When juxtaposed with other indigenous sources of the subcontinent, we know for a fact that these statements bear no truth.

Thus, information on the Mauryas from Greek sources comes to us through a double filter – the first was Megasthenes interpretation of what he saw or heard, and the second was of the later Graeco-Roman writers and their interpretations of Megasthenes. As a historian reading these texts, one needs to be aware of the perceptions of the authors and of those who later on paraphrased the original. The study of texts from the ancient period remains a complicated process and requires the removal of such filters. Thapar believes that Megasthenes' account was influenced by the fact that he was familiar with the Seleucid *satrapy* and hence *Indica* may have carried both Hellenistic and Seleucid imprint.

Source: Romila Thapar, 1993.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Write a note on the *Saptanga* theory of State as mentioned in the *Arthashastra*.
- 2) Describe in 100 words the administrative structure under the Mauryas
- 3) Mark which of the following statements are right (✓) or Wrong (×)
 - a) Shudras were employed for large scale agricultural operations. ()
 - b) All villages in Mauryan India were under direct state control. ()
 - c) According to *Arthashastra* the Council of Ministers' verdict was final before the king. ()
 - d) The adoption of a paternal attitude towards his subjects was a new development in relation to king's attitude in Indian polity. ()

- e) There is no description of city administration in the account of Megasthenes. ()
- f) The king was central to the seven components of the State in Kautilya's scheme. ()
- g) The Mauryan State spent a huge amount on the maintenance of the army. ()
- h) The Mauryas had no system of espionage. ()
- i) During this period there were certain rules and regulations for the functioning of courts. ()
- j) The king had no right to grant revenue remissions. ()

16.9 SUMMARY

The Maurya period saw the establishment of the first empire in the history of Indian subcontinent. Such a large empire required new strategies of governance. The complex system of administration set up under the Mauryas became the foundational basis of succeeding polities. Ashoka is known equally, if not more, for renouncing all military ambition and turning to his spiritual side. He decided to promote the cause of *dhamma*, inspired from his personal faith in the Buddha's teaching for the laity.

The social and economic processes of agrarian expansion and urbanization of the preceding centuries continued under Maurya rule, and there was a further growth in cities, trade, and the money economy. However, after Ashoka, the empire saw a swift and rapid decline. The next Unit will take a closer look at this 'zenith' and the subsequent decline.

16.10 KEY WORDS

<i>Ajivika</i>	: A heterodox sect of the time of the Buddha
Cess	: Tax
<i>Chakravartin/ chakravartigal/chakkavatti</i>	: Universal monarch
Classical Sources	: Refers to the Greek sources for example the <i>Indica</i> of Megasthenes
Diffusion	: Spread from the center of origin
Eclectic	: Borrowing freely from diverse ideas and philosophies
Espionage	: Spy system
Fiscal	: Economic and financial measures
<i>Kahapana/karshapana/ pana</i>	: Widely used coin series, often silver
<i>Sita Lands</i>	: Lands owned/controlled directly by the King

16.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 16.2
- 2) See Section 16.4

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 16.6.
- 2) See Section 16.7 and its Sub-sections
- 3) a) ✓, b) x, c) x, d) ✓, e) x, f) ✓, g) ✓, h) x, i) ✓, j) x

16.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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