

Mauryan Empire, Origin, Rulers, Map, Economy, Decline

Description

For every serious UPSC aspirant, the Mauryan Empire is not just a chapter in history; it is the first well-documented, pan-Indian imperial state that sets the template for understanding ancient Indian polity, administration, and culture. The period from Chandragupta Maurya to Brihadratha represents a zenith of political unity, bureaucratic sophistication, and artistic achievement. This blog delves deep into the Mauryan era, providing a structured and detailed analysis crucial for mastering the Ancient History segment of the Civil Services Examination.

I. Reconstructing History: The Source Materials

A distinctive feature of the Mauryan period is the richness and variety of its source materials, which allow historians to construct a relatively reliable account.

1. Literary Sources:

- **Arthashastra:** Attributed to Chanakya (also known as Kautilya and Vishnugupta), the prime minister of Chandragupta Maurya, this is a monumental treatise on statecraft, economics, and military strategy. Its detailed descriptions of administration, revenue, law, and foreign policy provide an invaluable framework for understanding the Mauryan machinery.
 - It is divided into 15 *Adhikaranas* (books) and 180 *Prakaranas* (sections).
 - The manuscript was discovered by R. Shamasastri in 1904.
- **Indica:** Written by Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador of Seleucus Nicator to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, this work offers an external perspective. Though the original is lost, fragments quoted by later Greek writers describe the capital Pataliputra, the administration, and social life of the time.
- **Other Significant Texts:**
 - **Mudrarakshasa:** A historical play by Vishakhadatta (c. 5th century CE) that dramatizes the ascent of Chandragupta Maurya with the aid of Chanakya.

- **Buddhist and Jain Traditions:** Texts like the *Mahavamsa* (Buddhist) and Jain *Parisistaparvan* provide narratives on the lives of Chandragupta, Bindusara, and especially Ashoka, though they often contain legendary elements.
- **Puranas:** Provide the genealogical lists of the Mauryan kings.

2. Archaeological Sources:

- **Ashokan Edicts:** The most important and direct sources for the reign of Ashoka. These inscriptions, carved on rocks and pillars across the subcontinent, are the emperor's own voice, outlining his policies, his Dhamma, and his vision for governance.
- **Material Remains:** The archaeological excavations at sites like Kumrahar (Patna) have revealed the massive 80-pillared hall of the Mauryan palace. The polished sandstone pillars, rock-cut caves (e.g., Barabar and Nagarjuni hills), and early stupas (e.g., at Sanchi) are testament to the advanced art and architecture of the period.

II. The Founders and Consolidators

A. Chandragupta Maurya (c. 321 – 293 BCE)

Chandragupta Maurya laid the foundation of the empire by overthrowing the last of the Nandas. With the strategic guidance of Chanakya, he not only consolidated power in Magadha but also expanded his territory dramatically.

- **Geographical Extent:** His empire stretched from Bengal and Assam in the east to Afghanistan and Balochistan in the west, and as far south as the Deccan plateau, excluding only the extreme southern tips of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.
- **The Seleucid Treaty:** A significant diplomatic achievement was his treaty with Seleucus Nicator, the Greek general, around 305 BCE. Chandragupta secured territories in Gedrosia (Balochistan), Arachosia (Kandahar), and Paropamisadae (Kabul), in return for which he gifted 500 war elephants. This treaty also led to the establishment of a Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, at the Mauryan court.
- **Later Life:** According to Jain traditions, Chandragupta, in his later years, embraced Jainism, abdicated the throne in favour of his son, Bindusara, and migrated to Shravanabelagola (Karnataka) with the Jain ascetic Bhadrabahu, where he ended his life by sallekhana (fasting unto

death).

B. Bindusara (c. 293 – 273 BCE)

Bindusara, known as Amitraghata (Slayer of Foes) in Indian sources, successfully maintained the vast empire inherited from his father.

- **Diplomatic Relations:** He continued friendly relations with the Hellenistic world. He is said to have corresponded with Antiochus I Soter of Syria, requesting sweet wine, figs, and a sophist philosopher (the latter was politely declined). Diplomatic exchanges with Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt are also recorded.

C. Ashoka the Great (c. 268 – 232 BCE)

Ashoka's reign represents the climax of Mauryan power and its most enduring legacy. His transformation after the bloody Kalinga War (c. 261 BCE) is a pivotal moment in world history.

- **Early Reign and Kalinga War:** The early part of Ashoka's reign was marked by the policy of *Digvijay* (military conquest). The annexation of Kalinga (modern Odisha) was a brutal campaign, resulting in immense death and suffering, as described in his own Rock Edict XIII.
- **The Turning Point:** The carnage of Kalinga led to a profound personal and political transformation. Ashoka renounced aggressive warfare and adopted the policy of *Dharmavijay* (conquest through righteousness).
- **Titles:** He adopted titles like *Devanampiya* (Beloved of the Gods) and *Piyadassi* (He who looks with affection).

III. The Mauryan Administration: A Blueprint for Governance

The Mauryan state was a highly centralized, bureaucratic empire. The King was the supreme head, but his power was exercised through a sophisticated administrative structure, as detailed in the *Arthashastra*.

A. Central Administration

The King was assisted by a council of ministers (*Mantriparishad*). The bureaucracy was organized into specialized departments, each headed by an *Adhyaksha* (Superintendent).

Key Central Functionaries (Tirthas):

Designation (Sanskrit)	Role and Responsibility
Mantrin	Chief Minister and primary advisor to the King.
Purohita	Chief Priest, responsible for religious ceremonies and counsel.
Senapati	Commander-in-Chief of the Army.
Yuvaraj	Crown Prince, often groomed for future rule.
Samaharta	Chief Collector of Revenue, in charge of the treasury.
Sannidhata	Head of the Royal Treasury and storage of precious goods.
Pradeshika	Head of District Administration.
Rajjukas	Officers for land survey, measurement, and settlement of revenue.
Nayaka	Head of City Security.
Vyabharika	Chief Judge of the realm.

A Selection of Superintendents (Adhyakshas):

Superintendent (Adhyaksha)	Department / Responsibility
Sitadhyaksha	Agriculture and Crown Lands
Panyadhyaksha	Trade, Commerce, and Market Control
Suradhyaksha	Excise and Liquor
Koshadhyaksha	Treasury
Ayudhadhyaksha	Armaments and Weapons Manufacturing
Lakshanadhyaksha	Coinage and Mint
Sutradhyaksha	Textile and Weaving Industry
Pautavadhyaksha	Weights and Measures
Navadhyaksha	Shipping and Navigation
Ganikadhyaksha	Superintendence of Courtesans

B. Provincial and Local Administration

The empire was divided into provinces for efficient governance.

Major Provinces and their Capitals:

Province	Capital	Approximate Jurisdiction
Uttarapatha (Northern)	Taxila	North-West (Gandhara, etc.)
Avantipatha (Western)	Ujjain	Western India (Malwa, Saurashtra)
Dakshinapatha (Southern)	Suvarnagiri	Deccan Region
Prachyapatha (Eastern)	Toshali	Kalinga and Eastern Territories
Central Province	Pataliputra	Magadha and the Core Region

- **District Level:** Provinces were subdivided into districts (*Aharas* or *Vishayas*) administered by *Pradeshikas*, *Rajjukas*, and *Yuktas*.
- **Village Level:** The village was the basic unit, headed by a *Gramika* (village headman).
- **City Administration:** Megasthenes provides a detailed account of the administration of Pataliputra by a board of 30 officials, divided into six committees of five members each, looking after industries, foreigners, birth/death registration, trade, market inspection, and tax collection.

C. Army, Espionage, and Justice

- **Military:** The Mauryas maintained a massive standing army. Pliny records Chandragupta's force as 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, and 9,000 war elephants. The army was managed by a war office of six boards.
- **Espionage:** A well-organized secret service (*Gudhapurushas*) was the "eyes and ears" of the king. Spies were of two types: *Sanstha* (stationary) and *Sanchara* (roaming). They gathered intelligence internally and externally, and even included women.
- **Judicial System:** Justice was administered by the king and his officials. There were two broad types of courts:
 - **Dharmasthiya:** Civil courts for disputes related to marriage, inheritance, contracts, etc.
 - **Kantakashodhana:** Criminal courts for dealing with theft, robbery, and other offenses.

D. Revenue Administration

The state's revenue was drawn from a wide array of sources, meticulously managed.

Major Sources of Revenue:

Source Type	Examples	Administration
Land Revenue	<i>Bhaga</i> (1/4th or 1/6th of produce), <i>Bali</i> , <i>Pindakara</i>	Collected by <i>Samaharta</i> and <i>Rajjukas</i>
Urban Taxes	Sales tax, house tax, license fees	Collected by <i>Nayaka</i> and city boards
Tolls & Customs	<i>Shulka</i> (import/export duties), road tolls	<i>Shulkadhyaksha</i> , <i>Pattanadhyaksha</i> (port officer)

Source Type	Examples	Administration
State Monopolies	Mines, forests, salt production, liquor, arms manufacturing	Respective <i>Adhyakshas</i> (e.g., <i>Akaradhyaksha</i> for mines)
Miscellaneous	Fines from courts, taxes on professions, temples	Various departments

IV. Ashoka's Dhamma: A Philosophy of Ethical Governance

Ashoka's Dhamma was not a sectarian religion but a code of social ethics and personal conduct intended to foster harmony within a vast and diverse empire.

- **Core Principles:** The main tenets, as derived from his edicts, include:
 - Respect for elders, parents, and teachers.
 - Compassion towards all living beings (*Ahimsa*).
 - Religious tolerance and respect for all sects (*Samavaya*).
 - Liberality towards Brahmins and ascetics.
 - Humane treatment of servants and slaves.
 - Truthfulness and moral purity.
- **Institutionalization:** To propagate and implement Dhamma, Ashoka created a new class of officials called the *Dhamma Mahamattas* in the 14th year of his reign. Their role was to educate the people in Dhamma and ensure its practice, even among the royal family and in frontier regions.

V. Society, Economy, and Religion

- **Society:** The Varna (caste) system was well-established. Slavery existed. While women from elite families enjoyed a certain status, the institution of prostitution was also state-regulated. The general populace led a simple life, and social harmony was a key goal of Ashoka's Dhamma.

- **Economy:** The economy was a mix of state control and private enterprise.
 - **Agriculture:** The primary occupation, with the state maintaining its own farms (*Sita*).
 - **Trade and Industry:** There was a significant growth in internal and external trade. Key industries included textile manufacturing, metallurgy (iron and steel), mining, and shipbuilding. The state owned and operated several industries, particularly those related to arms and mining.
 - **Currency:** The primary coin was the punch-marked silver coin.
- **Religious Landscape:** The period was marked by religious pluralism.
 - **Brahmanism:** Continued to be a major force.
 - **Jainism:** Chandragupta Maurya's association gave it a significant boost.
 - **Buddhism:** Under Ashoka, it transformed from a minor sect into a major world religion. Ashoka's patronage, the Third Buddhist Council, and missionary activities were instrumental.
 - **Ajivikas:** This ascetic sect, founded by Makkhali Gosala, also received patronage, as evidenced by Ashoka's donations of caves to them.

VI. Mauryan Art and Architecture

The Mauryan period marks the beginning of monumental stone art and architecture in India. Art historian A.K. Coomaraswamy classified it into two streams:

1. Court Art:

- **Pillars:** The most iconic examples. Made of Chunar sandstone, they are renowned for their exquisite polish and exquisite capitals. The Sarnath pillar with its four-lion capital (now the National Emblem of India) is the finest specimen.
- **Stupas:** Though later enlarged, the core of several stupas, like those at Sanchi and Sarnath, date back to Ashoka's time.

- **Rock-cut Caves:** The caves on the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills (e.g., Lomas Rishi cave) were excavated for Ajivika ascetics. Their interiors have a mirror-like polish.

2. Popular / Folk Art:

- **Sculpture:** This includes the numerous terracotta figurines and stone sculptures of Yakshas and Yakshinis (nature spirits), such as the famous Didarganj Yakshi and the Parkham Yaksha, which show a robust and earthy indigenous tradition.

VII. The Ashokan Inscriptions: A Decipherment

The edicts are the primary source for Ashoka's reign and are categorized as follows:

Category	Key Locations	Significance
Major Rock Edicts (14 Edicts)	Girnar (Guj), Shahbazgarhi (Pak), Kalsi (UK), etc.	Outline the principles and administration of Dhamma.
Minor Rock Edicts	Maski (Kar), Brahmagiri (Kar), Gujarra (MP), etc.	Include the Bairat edict expressing his faith in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.
Major Pillar Edicts (7 Edicts)	Topra (now in Delhi), Lauriya-Nandangarh (Bih), etc.	Later edicts providing more details on Dhamma and social norms.
Minor Pillar Edicts	Sarnath (UP), Sanchi (MP), Kausambi (UP)	Include the Schism Edict (warning against division in Sangha) and commemorative edicts like the Rummindei Pillar (marking Buddha's birthplace).

- **Languages and Scripts:** The edicts were customized for local populations.
 - **Prakrit:** Written in the **Brahmi** script across most of the subcontinent.
 - **Prakrit:** Written in the **Kharoshthi** script in the northwest.
 - **Greek and Aramaic:** Used in the bilingual Kandahar inscription (Afghanistan) to communicate with the Hellenistic and Iranian populations.

VIII. The Decline of the Mauryan Empire

The empire began to disintegrate soon after Ashoka's death in 232 BCE and finally ended with the assassination of Brihadratha by his general, Pushyamitra Sunga, in 185 BCE.

The causes for the decline are multifaceted and often debated:

- **Weak Successors:** The later Mauryas were unable to control the vast empire or maintain the administrative rigor of their predecessors.
- **Financial Crisis:** The enormous cost of maintaining a huge standing army and a vast bureaucracy may have drained the treasury.
- **Administrative Over-centralization:** The highly centralized system, effective under a strong ruler, became a liability under weak ones, leading to provincial revolts.
- **Brahmanical Reaction:** Some historians suggest that the pro-Buddhist policies of Ashoka and the pro-Jaina leanings of some successors may have alienated the Brahmanical priesthood, who then supported Pushyamitra Sunga's revolt.
- **Pacific Policy of Ashoka:** It is argued that Ashoka's abandonment of aggressive warfare (*Digvijaya*) and emphasis on *Dharmavijaya* weakened the military preparedness of the empire, making it vulnerable to internal rebellions and external pressures.

Conclusion: The Mauryan Legacy for UPSC Aspirants

The Mauryan Empire is indispensable for the UPSC preparation. It provides the first clear picture of a centralized state in ancient India. Key takeaways include the sophisticated administrative structure detailed in the *Arthashastra*, the unique model of ethical governance under Ashoka's Dhamma, the evolution of art and architecture, and the rich corpus of epigraphic sources. Understanding the causes of its rise and decline also offers timeless lessons in statecraft and political history. A thorough grasp of this era will not only help answer direct questions in Prelims and Mains but also provide a strong foundation for understanding the subsequent historical periods.