

CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE

IX. EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF MAURYAN EMPIRE: STATE ADMINISTRATION, ECONOMY, ASHOKA'S DHAMMA, ART AND ARCHITECTURE.

The period from sixth century BC to late fourth century BC witnessed significant changes in greater parts of North India. These changes are visible in the emergence of territorial, the growing power of one of the mahajanapadas (namely Magadha), the ion of urban centres and the attending socio-economic changes, and the increasing appeal of several heterodox religious groups (especially, Buddhism and Jainism) that challenged the infallibility of Vedas and the claim for the social supremacy of the brahmana. The most apparent change was in the arena of politics; a substantial part of North India - the Ganga valley - came under the authority of Magadha. At the time of Alexander's invasion of India, the most formidable power in North India was indeed Magadha under the Nanda rulers, though any political and military showdown between the Macedonian and the Magadhan forces did not take place. The rise of Magadha that began in the sixth century BC reached its peak during the succeeding century and a quarter. In about 325-324 BC, Chandragupta Maurya established the Maurya empire that lasted for nearly 140 years. Greater parts of the subcontinent came under the domination of a single paramount power, for the first time in the history of India. The making and consolidation of the nearly pan-Indian empire of the Mauryas was made possible by the first three rulers of the dynasty, namely Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara and Asoka.

One major factor enabling historians to probe into the history of this period is the availability of greater number and more diverse type of primary sources than those from the previous ages. Enlisting these sources, one may begin with the Greek accounts of Megasthenes, the Seleucidan envoy to the Maurya capital.

Among the indigenous texts, the famous Kautilya Arthashastra must be mentioned. It is ascribed to Kautilya or Vishnugupta or Chanakya, considered to have been the chief minister of Chandragupta Maurya. This manual on statecraft is famous for its pragmatic approach to polity and its thrust on financial/material matters (*arthaiva pradhiinam*) for the successful management of the realm.

Archaeological materials are more securely datable than the literary ones and therefore often treated with greater reliance by historians. There are various archaeological sources belonging to the Maurya period. Among these, the most significant are undoubtedly inscriptions of Asoka. Asoka's inscriptions mark the beginning of Indian epigraphy. Asoka's edicts brought in for the first time, elements of literacy in the history of the subcontinent.

Chandragupta Maurya founded the Maurya dynasty by overthrowing the erstwhile king house of Magadha, namely the Nanda dynasty. The last Nanda king, Dhanananda, was possibly the ruler of Pataliputra when Alexander fought against Puru (Porus) on the banks of the river Jhelum in the Punjab. Alexander's return from India probably took place about 327 BC; it is therefore likely that the end of the Nanda rule and the foundation of the Maurya dynasty can be placed in 325 BC. Some scholars however, prefer to date the beginning of the Maurya dynasty in 324 or 321 BC.

Little is known about Chandragupta's ancestry and his life prior to ascending the throne of Magadha. The *Mudrarakshasa* describes him as a scion of the Nanda house, his mother being a slave woman named Mura. It is suggested that being

the son of Mura he became known as a Maurya, which eventually turned out to be dynastic epithet.

Chandragupta Maurya uprooted the last known Nanda King Dhanananda and laid the foundation of the Maurya empire in Magadha in 325-324 BCE. Soon after establishing the Maurya rule in Magadha Chandragupta became the master of the extensive territories formerly under the Nandas. His first major political success being his victory over the last Nanda king in 325/324 BCE. His second success against the Greek Governors probably came after seven or eight years, during which time Chandragupta must have consolidated his hold over greater parts of the Ganga valley. His victory over the Greek governors of the Punjab and the North-Western Frontiers of the subcontinent resulted in the steady expansion of the Maurya rule beyond the Ganga valley and into the north western parts of India.

The immediate successor to Chandragupta was his son Bindusara, who possibly ruled for about 27 years (300-273 Be). In the absence of any contemporary source referring to this Mauryan ruler, very little is known about his reign.

The history of the Mauryas enters its most significant stage during the reign of the third ruler of the dynasty, Asoka, son of Bindusara. Asoka's reign spans for nearly four decades (273-232 BC), which is considered a landmark and of profound importance in Indian history. The most important evidence of his reign comes in the form of his own lithic records, encountered for the first time in Indian history. Significantly enough, his edicts record the events and administrative measures of his times in terms of the years since his coronation.

The four-decade long reign of Asoka witnessed only one military campaign and quest, that of Kalinga. The conquest took place in his thirteenth regnal year, i.e., 261 BC. Asoka himself admits that the Kalinga conquest was associated with terrible bloodbath violence: hundreds of thousands of people were carried away

forcefully, probably prisoners of war; many more were killed in the battlefield and even greater number these died because of the war. The massacre perpetrated during the Kalinga war deep impressions on him and though victorious, he was full of remorse. Asoka is justifiably celebrated for his feat of having eschewed war for ever, not in defeat but after a victory. Perturbed the horrors of war, he is said to have embraced Buddhism soon after the Kalinga and this was followed by his promulgation of the Law of Piety (Dhamma).

Right from the days of Bimbisara in the late sixth century BC till Kalinga conquest in 261 BC Magadha's rise to political paramountcy in the subcontinent was largely the outcome of pursuing the policy of military conquest and annexation of vanquished areas. The Kalinga conquest by Asoka saw the culmination is protracted process. Though Asoka's stated remorse for having unleashed terrible violence against Kalinga appears genuine, that did not deter him from annexing the territory of Kalinga to the Maurya empire.

The victory over Kalinga and its annexation to the Maurya realm resulted in the maximum expansion of the empire. Asoka's edicts are the most reliable evidence for determining the extent of the Maurya empire at its peak.

STATE ADMINISTRATION

The Maurya rulers are famous for carving out a vast empire by military conquests and the annexation of conquered areas. No less significant was the achievement that this realm embracing almost the entire subcontinent was kept under the political control of a paramount power for at least a century. This speaks of an efficient administrative system, which helped the political integration of the Maurya empire.

The two important sources for studying the Maurya administration was Kautiliya's Arthashastra and Megasthenes' Indika. The Mauryas established a highly centralized and unitary state system in which every policy and decision emanated from the apex political centre at Pataliputra and was uniformly applied to disparate regions of the empire.

The Maurya emperor was of course the pivotal figure in the statecraft. The metropolitan and the core areas of the Maurya realm appear to have been brought under the direct control of the ruler. The administration revolved around a number of very high-ranking functionaries. Kautilya considers that the ruler, however powerful, could not run the administration single-handedly; kingship is possible only with assistance, a single wheel does not move a vehicle. The Arthashastra recommends the appointment of amatyas or high-ranking officers for this purpose.

The highest officers under Asoka are however, not designated as amatyas or adhyakshas (heads of departments), but as mahamatras.

The enormous importance of a powerful armed force in making the far-flung Mauryan empire cannot be overlooked. Closely associated with the organization of the army was that of the secret service, encountered for the first time in the sources of the Maurya period. The Classical texts speaks of the overseers, inspectors and spies who are praised as the most reliable people in the realm.

The Arthashastra repeatedly stresses on the significance of a strong treasury. According to this the collection of revenue is entrusted with a high-ranking officer, the Samahartta (collector of revenue). The most important source of tax must have come agriculture.

ECONOMY

Like other periods of early Indian history, the root of the material life of the Maurya period was agriculture. Greek writers were struck by the immensity of agrarian production. They unanimously speak of the profusion and diversity of crops which they attribute to the excellent fertility of the soil, presence of many rivers and profuse rainfall because of two rainy seasons. The Mauryas were the first political power in India to have established a firm control over the areas watered by both the Ganga and the Indus river systems. The bulk of the population was certainly engaged in agriculture.

Agriculture was intimately associated with irrigation. The Greek accounts may suggest that armour-making and ship-building activities were under the Maurya state control. Much more pronounced is Kautliyan emphasis on the control and working of mines and minerals. Mines are clearly seen by Kautilya as the very root of the treasury, which in its turn greatly influences the army.

The Arthasastra recommends the setting up of state textile manufactories under the supervision of the director of yarn/textile production. The sutradhyaksha clearly figures as an employer of labourers, including women worker in the textile manufacturing unit. The Mauryas tried to supervise trade and commerce, at least in and around the, metropolitan area of Magadha.

ASHOKA'S DHAMMA

The Maurya realm was created by a strong army and maintained by an efficient administrative machinery. Besides these two factors, the integration of the empire probably required an ideology that would provide an overarching framework, accommodating many diversities at local and regional levels. While the expansion and consolidation of Magadhan power were achieved by powerful rulers like Bimbisara, Ajatasatru, Mahapadma Nanda and Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka was possibly the first ruler to have realized the

need of an ideology for ensuring coalescence in the empire. The Prakrit term Dhamma is the same as Sanskrit 'Dharma' which is popularly, but not accurately, translated as religion. This is often taken in the sense of the religious leaning of an individual or a group of persons. Thus, Asoka's Dhamma is commonly viewed as his personal religious leaning.

The much-cherished notion is that Asoka, out of his deep and genuine remorse of the violence perpetrated during the Kalinga war, became a Buddhist. As a devout Buddhist, he steadfastly practised non-violence (ahimsa), eschewed war for good since the victory over Kalinga and followed a pacifist policy. In other words, Asoka after the Kalinga war governed his empire as a devout Buddhist.

In the practice of Dhamma, Asoka actually emphasizes on the observance of certain conducts. One of the pillars of these principled conducts is the observance of non-violence. Asoka eschewed war and replaced the sound of the war drum with the reverberation of the drum of Dhamma following this principle. This also prompted him to emphasize on the non-injury to living beings and non-slaughter and to put an end to royal hunting.

Asoka prescribes the inculcation of certain virtues for the practice of Dhamma. These are- little sin, many meritorious deeds, kindness, charity, truthfulness, and purity. To these are added the recommendation for avoiding some vices: violence, cruelty, anger, pride and jealousy. Daily life and chores were also within the purview of Dhamma. Inseparably associated with the practice of Asoka's Dhamma are respectful behaviour to parents teachers and elders, seemly behaviour to brahmana-sramana, kind attitude to the weak, miserly, slaves and servants.

An important aspect of his Dhamma programme was his sending Dhamma propagation mission in areas beyond his realm. Here lies the relevance of his appointment of the Dhammamahatras class of high-ranking functionaries. The

Dham missions reached the lands of the Chola, Pandyas, Satiyaputra and Keralaputra South India. The propagation of Dhamma was conducted in Sri Lanka, as both Asoka edicts and later Buddhist traditions would bear it out. No less significant is the fact that his Dhamma propagators also went to the far-flung kingdoms of five Greek rule in West Asia and Ptolemaic Egypt.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

An outstanding political power often attempts to record and glorify its might and magnificence through visual culture. This may manifest in the creation of monumental architecture and visual representation of rulers. Little traces of monumental architecture associated with the Mauryas have been found, save the excavated remain of what is identified as the Maurya palace at Kumrahar near Patna. Megasthenes however, left behind an eloquent description of the Maurya royal palace at Palibothra. Excavations at Kumrahar revealed the floor of a large pillared hall marked by eight rows of ten columns each. The columns were systematically placed at 35 feet apart from one another. The columns are monolithic shafts made of Chunar sandstone and they stand free on the wooden floor of the hall without any pedestals or sockets or holes.

Buddhist traditions of later centuries credit Asoka with the construction of 84,000 stupas . In the Seventh century AD, the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang is said to have seen and visited some of the stupas originally built by Asoka. Asoka and one of his later successors, Dasaratha donated cave Shelters for wandering monks in the Barabar hills near Gaya, as their respective inscriptions record these donations. These cave shelters were artificially created. These mark the beginning of the rock-cut architecture that would take the well-known chaityas in post-Mauryan times, especially the in western Deccan.

It is true that the earliest stone sculptures in the subcontinent go back to the days of the Harappan civilization, after which stone sculpting disappeared as a

creative activity. It is in the Maurya period that stone sculpting re-emerged and continued since. The outstanding examples of Maurya sculptural art are the Asokan pillars and the capitals atop them (consisting of animal figures). The Mauryan columns are free-standing pillars, made of Chunar sandstone and noted for their mosaic-like polish on their outer surface. Some of the pillars were inscribed, like those at Sarnath and Allahabad, while several were left with plain columns, like those at Lauria Nandangarh, Lauriya Araraj and Basar Bakhira (all in Bihar).

In the visual art of the Maurya period is conspicuously absent a human figure, especially that of the ruler. One salient exception to this general pattern is the enchanting female figure, celebrated as the Didarganj yakshi, which was found from Patna. A free-standing sculpture in the round, this is a wonderful instance of modelling the female figure with all the charms and grace of youth. She holds a chowrie in her right hand that apparently rests on her right shoulder.

DECLINE

The first nearly pan-Indian power of the Mauryas was not however a long-lasting one. The Satavahanas of the post-Mauryan times, the Guptas and the Palas lasted much longer than the Mauryas as a dynasty. The Maurya empire collapsed when Puranas indicate that around 187 BC, the last ruler of the dynasty, Brihadratha, was overthrown and assassinated by his military commander (senapati), Pushyamitra Sunga, the founder of the succeeding Sunga dynasty.

The Maurya empire is a landmark in the Indian history as a pioneer in establishing a nearly pan Indian paramountcy, an efficient administrative system with a centripetal orientation. The ideal of Chakravarti (universal) rulership was realized during this period. It will be remembered for the formulation of the policy of Dhamma to underline and accommodate plurality in the socio-

economic and cultural situation in the subcontinent. Two other legacies that the Maurya period left behind were the tradition of inscribing royal orders and documents, and the use of stone as a major medium of sculptural art in India.

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