UNIT 4: THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- trace the foundation of the Mauryan empire,
- discuss Ashoka and his Dhamma,
- discuss the Mauryan Administrative system,
- know about the disintegration of the Maurya Empire.

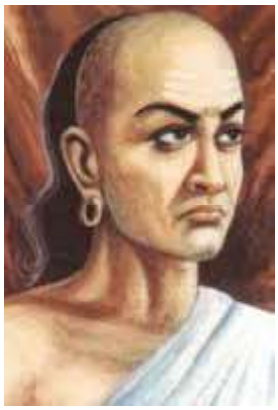
4.2 INTRODUCTION

In unit we have already discussed the sixteen *mahajanapadas.* In the 6th century B.C.E the entire northern territory was divided into 16 *mahajanapadas*. Among the sixteen *mahajanapadas*, there was Magadha, which became the most powerful *mahajanapada* between the 6th and the 4th century B.C.E. The growth of Magadha culminated in the emergence of the Mauryan Empire. In this unit we will discuss the rise and fall of the Mauryan Empire.

4.3 RISE OF THE MAURYA

The rise of the Maurya and the foundation of the Mauryan Empire are considered a landmark event in Indian history. This Empire was founded by Chandragupta Maurya by defeating the Nandas in 321 B.C. It is said that he was guided by a Brahmana named Kautilya or Chanakya, who was traditionally believed to be the Prime Minister of Chandragupta.

Figure 4.1: Kautilya or Chanakya



Source: *Google Images*

Historians have used a variety of sources to learn about the rise of Chandragupta Maurya and his Empire. We have different opinions about the origin of the Mauryas. According to Buddhist traditions, they were a branch of the Kshatriya *Moria* class associated with the ***Sakyas***. But according to the Puranic tradition, Chandragupta Maurya was the son of the last Nanda king from his Sudra concubine, Mura. The name Maurya is believed to be derived from his mother's name Mura.

Chandragupta Maurya took advantage of the growing weakness and unpopularity of the Nandas in the last days of their rule. Though Chandragupta's military strength was inferior to that of the Nandas, his superior strategy helped him. Once he established his control over the Ganga plain, he moved to the North-West. He liberated North-Western India from the Greek General Seleukos Nikatar, the successor of Alexander the Great.

A treaty was signed in 303 B.C.E and some Seleucid territories were ceded to the Mauryan kingdom. There was also a possible marriage alliance between the two royal families. Thus, the territorial foundation of the Mauryan Empire was laid and Chandragupta established his control over the Gangetic plains and the Indus Valley.

The Mauryan contact with the Greeks was important for territorial expansion, as well as for the development of friendly relations between the two. It led to the creation of a new cultural development. Besides, exchange of envoys between the Mauryan and the Seleucids, there was also the exchange of envoys with the Greek states of the West. Seleukos sent an envoy, Megasthenes to the Mauryan court. The latter spent considerable time at the capital Pataliputra and in his treatise *Indika* he had left a valuable account of the city and also of Indian society.

According to Jaina tradition, Chandragupta became an ardent Jaina towards the end of his life. He made his son Bindusara, the king of Magadha, become an ascetic. He went to South India and there he ended his life by regulated slow starvation in the orthodox Jaina manner.

Bindusara ascended the throne in about 297 B.C.E According to Buddhist tradition he was associated with the ***Ajivika*** sect. A Tibetan history of the Buddha suggests that Bindusara campaigned in the Deccan. However it is not sure whether this land was occupied by Bindusara or his son Asoka. He too continued to exchange embassies with Greece and showed interest in Greek philosophy. Bindusara died in 272 B.C.E By then a large part of India had come under Mauryan sovereignty.



LET US KNOW

The account of Megasthenes does not exist in full. But quotations occur in the works of several subsequent Greek writers. These fragments have been collected and published in the form of a book called *Indika* or An Account of India.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 1: Who founded the Mauryan Empire?

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Q 2: Who was Kautilya?

.....

Q 3: Who was the Greek envoy to the Mauryan court?

.....

Q 4: When was Mauryan Empire established?

.....

Q 5: Who ascended the throne after Chandragupta Maurya?

.....

Q 6: Write a note on the foundation of the Mauryan Empire (within 60 words).

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4.4 ASOKA AND HIS DHAMMA

Asoka who ascended the Mauryan throne after his father's death was well known for his *Dhamma*. He was a great ruler. But it was his *Dhamma* which made him a popular ruler and which won the hearts of his subjects. In this section we are going to discuss about the religious policy of Asoka which centred round the *Dhamma*. Before going into it we will discuss in brief the early life of Asoka.

- **Early Life of Asoka**

Bindusara was succeeded by his son Asoka, who is considered the greatest of the Mauryan rulers. We can know about Asoka through his edicts distributed over a large part of India. They give us a detailed account about his life and various activities. The edicts of the earlier half of Asoka's reign were inscribed on rock surfaces and are therefore called the Minor and Major Rock edicts. In the later part of his reign, his edicts were inscribed on well polished sandstone monolithic pillars which are called Pillar Edicts.

Figure 4.2: Asoka



Source: *Google Images*



LET US KNOW

In 1834 James Prinscep deciphered the Brahmi script in which the edicts of Asoka were inscribed. Though most of the Asokan edicts were written in Prakrit, some edicts found in North-West of India were in Aramaic and Greek languages. Most Prakrit edicts were written in Brahmi script. However some edicts of North-West were written in Kharosti. Greek and Aramaic scripts were used for edicts in Afghanistan.

However, for the early life of Asoka we have to depend upon the Buddhist account. According to Buddhist tradition he was appointed governor of Taxila and Ujjain during the reign of Bindusara.There is a controversy regarding his accession to the throne. Whether he ascended the throne immediately after his father's death or whether there was a four year ***interregnum*** involving a struggle for the throne with his brothers is not very clear.

Figure 4.3: Asoka's Empire



Source: *Google map*

The most important event in the early life of Asoka was the famous campaign in Kalinga in about 260 B.C.E. It was possible that the main motive behind this campaign was to obtain resources from Kalinga, to safeguard the trade routes with the peninsula or to give Kalingans a lesson for overthrowing Magadhan control. But the large scale deaths in the war moved the king. After this incident he became attracted to Buddhism. But the conversion did not take place immediately. It took almost two and a half years for him to embrace Buddhism.

During Asoka's reign the Third Buddhist Council met at Pataliputra in 250 B.C.E. This council decided to send missionaries to various regions. Accordingly Asoka sent his people outside India to spread Buddhism.

- **Asoka's Religious Policy**

The Kalinga war opened a new chapter in the life of Asoka. He developed a philosophy based on his interpretation of *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* is the ***Prakrit*** form of the Sanskrit word Dharma, which means the universal law or righteousness. However, Asoka gave it a wider meaning.

The *Dhamma* which Asoka preached was not simple piety but the specific code of moral duties laid down for the common people. Asoka wanted to transform Buddhism into a popular religion. His edicts are, therefore, of two kinds: (a) The smaller group of edicts was addressed to the Buddhist *Sangha*. These edicts describe his adherence to Buddhism and his relationship with the Buddhist *Sangha* or community of monks. (b)The larger group of edicts on the rock surfaces is more important. The Minor Rock Edicts and Major Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts define Asoka's concept of *Dhamma*.

Some historians thought that there was no difference between Asoka's *Dhamma* and Buddhism. But from his edicts it appears that Asoka wanted to use his *Dhamma* to reduce social conflict and intolerance. He especially emphasized tolerance towards all people and towards their beliefs and ideas. Therefore, the principle of *Dhamma* was defined in such a way that it should be acceptable to people belonging to any religious sect. However, his *Dhamma* was influenced to a great extent by the teachings of Buddha, especially the emphasis on non-violence and proper behaviour towards all.

One important principle of Asoka's *Dhamma* was harmonious living. Therefore, he discouraged assemblies and gatherings which created differences of opinions. Another principle of *Dhamma* was non-violence. He discouraged war conquest by violence and prohibited killing of animals on certain specified occasions. However, Asoka recognized the occasions where violence was unavoidable.

Asoka opposed the practice of many orthodox ceremonies and maintained that the practice of morality was more important than the observance of rituals. Rock Edict XI is concerned with the practice of morality, such as giving respect to the elders, being charitable towards friends, slaves and servants, etc.

Asoka appointed *Dhammamahamatras* for propagating *Dhamma*. The activities of the *Dhammamahamatras* were not restricted to any particular community. They were expected to work impartially among all sects.

Thus, for Asoka *Dhamma* was a way of life based on harmonious blending of social ethics, moral virtues and civic responsibility. However, his policy of *Dhamma* did not succeed. It may be because he was too much occupied with his efforts to spread Buddhism and he did succeed in transforming this local creed in the Gangetic Valley into a world religion.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 7: Who succeeded Bindusara?

.....

Q 8: Where did the Third Buddhist Council meet?

.....

Q 9: Asoka was appointed as governor of .....and ..... during the reign of Bindusara.

Q 10: Into how many types Asoka's edicts can be divided?

.....

Q 11: Whom did Asoka appoint for propagating Dhamma?

.....

4.5 MAURYAN ADMINISTRATION

The Mauryan dynasty organized a very elaborate system of administration. We can collect information about the Mauryan administration from the accounts left by Megasthenes, Kautilya's *Arthasastra* and the inscriptions or edicts of Asoka.

4.5.1 Central Administration

The king was the pivot of the administrative structure in the Mauryan Empire. He had absolute power in the administration.

However, the king was expected to consult with his ministers, but the final decision lay with him.

The king was assisted by a Council of Ministers, the *Mantri Parishad*. According to *Arthasastra,* two important officers in the central administration were *Sannidhata* (the treasurer) and *Samaharta* (the chief collector). The treasurer was the custodian of the realized revenue. The chief collector supervised the collection of revenue from the whole kingdom.

Another important officer of the Mauryan administration was the *Adhyakshas* or superintendents. We find mention of about 32 superintendents in charge of different departments. They were linked to local administration and the central government. The different departments were treasury, mines, metals, mint, salts, gold, trade, forest produce, weights and measures, tolls, agriculture, infantry, horses, chariots, elephants, shipping, cattle, gambling, jail, ports, etc.

One-quarter of the total revenue was reserved for salaries of the officials and for public works. The salaries of the higher officials were very high. Public works covered a wide range of activity - building and maintaining roads; wells and rest houses; planting trees; irrigation projects; maintaining the army; running the mines; the grants of the royal family to the religious institutions and individuals and the maintenance of the royal family.



LET US KNOW

Some changes in the Mauryan administration were brought about by Asoka. Traditional Mauryan concept of kingship was softened by Asoka's paternalistic concept. In a separate Kalinga edict, Asoka declared- 'All men are my children'. Asoka appointed a new class of officials known as *Dhammamahamatras* to promote the material and spiritual well-being of the people.

The administration of the capital Pataliputra was well planned. It was looked after by a Municipal Commission consisting of thirty members. The commission was divided into six boards or committees of five members each. These committees looked after industrial arts, foreigners, registration of births and deaths, trade and commerce, manufactured articles and collection of tax and sold goods.

Espionage was recognized as an official activity in the Mauryan Empire. A large number of spies were appointed who transmitted secret and confidential reports to the king. Spies helped to maintain contact with even the remote parts of the Empire.

4.5.2 Provincial Administration

There were five major political centres in the Mauryan Empire, as mentioned in the Asokan inscription. We have already discussed about that the capital Pataliputra had well planned administered. The other four centres were: Taxila, Ujjain, Tosali and Suvarnagiri. They were each placed under a governor who usually belonged to the imperial family. Governors of smaller units were selected from local people. Senior officers called *Pradeshikas* visited the provinces every five years to check the administration. Another group of officers called *Rajukas* were appointed both in cities and villages to look after the judicial matter. *Yukta* was appointed for recording information coming from various sources.

According to Arthasastra, provinces were further sub-divided into *Vishayas* or districts and district into villages. In each village, there was an accountant and a tax collector. The *gramas* or village headman was responsible to them.

4.5.3 The Army

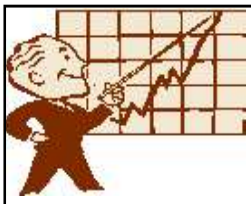
The Mauryan Empire maintained a huge army. According to the account of a Roman writer called Pliny, Chandragupta maintained

600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry and 9000 elephants. Another source tells us that Mauryas also had 8000 chariots. Megasthenes mentions that a committee with six sub-committees was responsible for coordinating military activity. Of these, one looked after the navy, the second managed transport and provisions, the third was responsible for infantry, the fourth for horses, the fifth for chariots and the sixth for elephants. According to Megasthenes, the soldiers received regular pay from the state. Kautilya mentions a *Navadhyaks* or superintendent of ships. Therefore it is possible that the Mauryans possessed a navy.



LET US KNOW

The Mauryans had chosen their provincial centres very carefully. Both Taxila and Ujjain were situated on important long-distance trade routes. Suvarnagiri was possibly located in one such way that facilitated the collection of gold from the mines of Karnataka.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 12: Who was the head of the administration in the Mauryan Empire?

.....

Q 13: Who looked after the collection of revenue in the Mauryan Empire?

.....

Q 14: How many political centres were there in the Mauryan Empire?

.....

Q 15: Who was Samaharta ?

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Q 16: Who was Adhyaksha?

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Q 17: Who was Pradeshika?

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Q 18: Who was Navadhyak?

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Q 19: Prepare a note on the central administration of the Mauryas? (Answer in about 60 words)

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4.8 DECLINE OF THE MAURYAN STATE

Asoka died in about 232 B.C.E With his death, the Mauryan Empire began to disintegrate. The last Mauryan ruler, Brihadratha, was assassinated by his Brahmana commander Pushyamitra Sunga. Following this Pushyamitra established the rule of the Sunga dynasty.

Earlier, it was accepted that Asoka's policy was mainly responsible for the decline of the Mauryas. It was believed that his inclination towards Buddhism offended the Brahmanas, who revolted against him. But if we consider his policy we see that Asoka repeatedly emphasized on showing respect to Brahmanas and Shramanas.

It is also said that Asoka's policy of non-violence weakened the Mauryan army. As a result, the foreign invaders got an opportunity to attack the Empire. But this cannot be accepted as we have already discussed in the previous section that though Asoka accepted the policy of non-violence, yet he mentioned the use of violence where necessary.

Therefore, the causes for the decline of the Mauryas must lie elsewhere. The pressure on the Mauryan economy can be considered as a cause for the downfall. The vast expenses of the Empire to maintain an army, to pay the ministers and to meet the cost of establishing settlements in newly cleared land could have drained the treasury.

Although Mauryan economy was based on agriculture, yet it might be possible that the revenue collected from agriculture was not sufficient to maintain the whole Empire. Probably the Mauryas did not restructure the economy sufficiently to provide long-term support to the Empire.

Mauryan administration was also in a way responsible for the decline of the Empire. In the Mauryan Empire the Emperor was the central figure around whom the administration revolved. When a ruler changed, the new ruler was required to possess the capability to attract the loyalty of the people by being an efficient administrator. But the successor of Asoka lacked this essential quality.

In the Mauryan administration the process of recruitment was arbitrary. Local governors had the power to change their officers. So many a time they chose a person of their choice ignoring the capability.

Another problem was the absence of representative institutions in the Empire. For a vast Empire like that of the Mauryas, representative institutions were required to stabilize public opinion.

It is very essential for the survival of the state to get loyalty of the people. But in the Mauryan system, loyalty was directed to the social order. Because of the interdependence of caste and politics, gradually caste was given higher status than politics. According to Arthasastra, a state should have seven limbs - the king, the territory, the administration, the treasury, the capital, coercive powers, and allies. Gradually, Brahmanical text emphasized on two factors for the existence of a state- one was ***Danda*** and the other was ***Varnasramadharma***. Gradually the *varna-ashrama-dharma* became more important than the state.

The successors of Asoka could not maintain the mighty fabric of the Empire. Immediately after his death, one of his sons Jalauka set up an independent principality in Kashmir. Another prince, Virasena made himself independent in Gandhara. Vidarbha or Berar also separated from the Mauryan Empire. The Greek evidence further confirms the loss of the Northern provinces to the Bactrian Greeks.



LET US KNOW

Kautilya occupies a unique place in the history of India. He aroused a national spirit among the Indians to throw out the Greeks from the soil of India. For this purpose he advised Chandragupta to unite the warring tribes and republics. As the Chief Advisor and Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya, he rendered a valuable service in running the state. He wrote Arthasastra, a book on the art of government and state craft. He described in detail the various duties of the ruler, the role of the king's advisors, welfare duties of the government, spy system and administration of justice. It also contains rules to regulate different social relations.



ACTIVITY 4.1

Make a list of the successors of Asoka.

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4.9 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that,

- Chandragupta Maurya had established the first Indian Empire with the help of his Prime Minister Kautilya or Chanakya. After establishing himself in the Gangetic plains, he moved towards North-West India and liberated that part from the Greek General Seleucus Nikatar. By a treaty in 303 B.C.E. Chandragupta secured some Seleucid territories. He established political as well as cultural contact with the Greeks. His son Bindusara succeeded him in 297 B.C.E, who too exchanged administration centered round the Emperor and the successors of

Asoka were weak and inefficient. They failed to attract the loyalty of the people which affected the Mauryan administration. The recruitment policy of the Mauryans was too arbitrary. There was also no representative institution in the Mauryan Empire. All these collectively led to the downfall of the Mauryan Empire. The Sunga dynasty succeeded the Mauryan dynasty.



4.10 FURTHER READING

1) Majumdar, R.C., Raychaudhuri, H.C., Datta, K. (1986). *An Advanced History of India*. New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd.

2) Sharma, L.P. (1981). *Ancient History of India (pre-historic Age to 1200 A.D.)*. New Delhi, Vikas Publication House Pvt. Ltd.

3) Thapar, Romila. (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India from The Origins to A D 1300.* New Delhi, The Penguin Group.

4) Tripathi, Ramashankar. (1999). *History of Ancient India*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.



4.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Chandragupta Maurya

Ans to Q No 2: Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya

Ans to Q No 3: Megasthenes

Ans to Q No 4: 321 B.C.E.

Ans to Q No 5: Bindusara

Ans to Q No 6: Chandragupta Maurya by overthrowing the Nandas in 321 B.C. founded the Mauryan Empire. He was guided in his efforts by Chanakya who was traditionally believed as his Prime Minister. After establishing his control over the Gangetic Plain, he liberated North-Western

India from the Greek General Seleukos Nikatar and secured some Seleucid territories by a treaty in 303 B.C.

Ans to Q No 7: Asoka

Ans to Q No 8: Pataliputra

Ans to Q No 9: Taxila, Ujjain

Ans to Q No 10: Two

Ans to Q No 11: Dhammamahamatras

Ans to Q No 12: The King

Ans to Q No 13: *Samaharta*

Ans to Q No 14: Five

Ans to Q No 15: Chief Collector

Ans to Q No 16: Superintendent

Ans to Q No 17: Senior Officer

Ans to Q No 18: Superintendent of Ships

Ans to Q No 19: The central administration of the Mauryas centred round the king who enjoyed absolute power in the administration. He was assisted by a Council of Ministers or Mantri Parishad. There were also superintendents in charge of different departments which were linked up to both the local administration and central government. The king had a good espionage system.



4.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question in about 50 words)

Q 1: When did Bindusara ascend the throne?

Q 2: Asoka was well known for his……. (Fill up the blank)

Q 3: What was the function of a *Yukta*?

Q 4: Who authored *Arthasastra*?

B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q 1: Narrate the contact of the Mauryans with the Greeks. What was the impact of the Indo-Greek contact?

Q 2: Write a note on the early life of Asoka?

Q 3: How did Kalinga campaign influence the life of Asoka?

Q 4: How does Arthasastra help us to know about the Mauryas?

C) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the foundation of the Mauryan Empire.

Q 2: How did Asoka promote Buddhism? Discuss his concept of Dhamma.

Q 3: Describe the administrative system of the Mauryan Empire.

Q.4: Assess the causes behind the downfall of the Mauryan Empire.

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