

First Empires

Some years after Mahapadma Nanda a young man called Chandragupta Maurya became the king of Magadha. He started the Maurya dynasty (a family whose members become the rulers one after the other is called a dynasty). Chandragupta's son Bindusara and grandson Ashoka ruled over the Magadha kingdom and extended it to include most of the Indian subcontinent. Look at the map 1 of India to see the extent of the kingdom – it extends from the modern Afghanistan to Karnataka in the South and Bengal in the East.

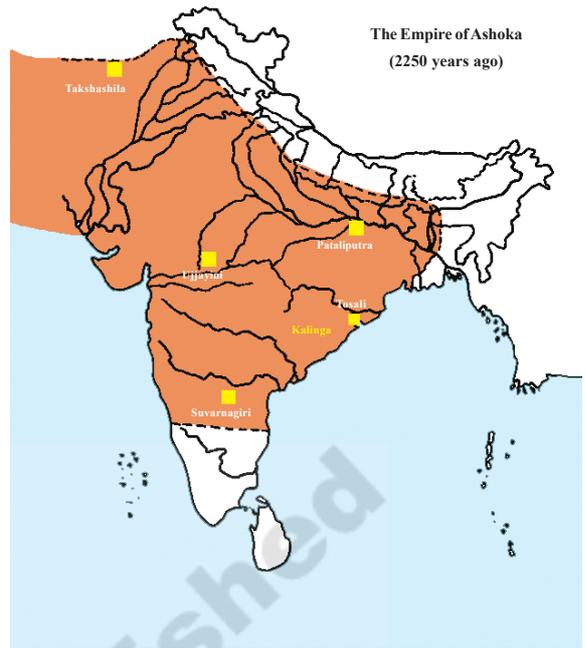
Mauryan Empire

The large kingdoms are called empires and their kings are called Emperors. We can even say that Chandragupta Maurya was among the earliest Emperors of Indian subcontinent. In the beginning the Magadha kingdom was confined to Magadha and nearby areas. But later it included all the mahajanapadas of those times. It had the Hindukush Mountains in the North West, the Great Indian Desert, Gujarat, the Indus and Ganges valley, the plateau of Malwa, the vast forests of central India, the Krishna-Tungabhadra valley and also the Godavari valley. Can you imagine the vastness of the empire and the different kinds of people who would have lived in it! Some of these areas like the Ganges Valley, the Krishna river Valley, Malwa, Gujarat and Punjab were very fertile and had densely settled villages and towns. Some other areas were important for the trade and crafts: through them passed important routes which connected

large cities, sea ports and other countries. Some regions were important for the mining of precious metals like gold and gem stones.

- ♦ From what sources do we learn about Mauryan Empire?
- ♦ Identify the trade routes of Mauryan Empire. In what ways do you think the trade routes were important for the emperors?
- ♦ What is the difference between the mahajanapadas and the empire?

The Mauryan emperors were able to get resources and taxes from all these different kinds of places and people. How did the emperors rule such a vast empire? Suppose some villages on the Krishna River refused to pay taxes, how would the Emperor sitting in Patna get to know of it, how would he give orders to his army to punish them and how would the army go all the way to Krishna valley and find out those villages



Map 1: Map of India showing important cities and sites of Mauryan Empire

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and punish them? How long would all this take?

The Mauryans ruled different parts of the empire differently. The area around Pataliputra was under the direct control of the emperor. He appointed officials to collect taxes from the people and punished those who disobeyed royal orders. There were also spies who collected information on what was going on and how the officers were working and reported to the emperor. The emperor issued orders which were carried by messengers to the officials. The emperor supervised them with the help of ministers and members of the royal family.

- ♦ What methods were used by the Emperor to control the area under his direct control?
- ♦ Why do you think the emperor needed spies within the empire?

There were other areas or provinces which were ruled from provincial capitals like Takshashila, Ujjain or Suvarnagiri. These were ruled by royal princes who

were sent as governors. They could take decisions about their provinces and probably had their own officials and army to help them. The emperor would also send instructions to them through messengers. The governors may also take the help of important families of the region who knew the customs and rules followed in the province.

Between these provinces there were vast areas which were forested or did not have many villages or cities. But these were important as they had the roads on which traders, armies and messengers had to travel. The Mauryans probably made special arrangements to control them. Through these roads the Mauryans reached areas like Suvarnagiri in which were situated gold mines, or Takshashila from where they could get goods from other countries. They collected taxes and tributes from these areas also probably in the form of hides, wild animals, precious stones, gold etc. Probably, the forest tribes were allowed to live without much interference.

How do we know?

We come to know about this empire from several books written around this time. One important book is Arthashastra written by a minister of Chandragupta called Kautilya. Another was written by Megasthenes, an ambassador of a Greek King in the court of Chandragupta. We also learn a lot about these times from inscriptions engraved on the orders of Ashoka in various parts of his empire.

Arthashastra

It is said that Chanakya or Kautilya who was the minister of Chandragupta wrote this very important book on how to conquer and rule kingdoms. This book advises kings on how to protect themselves from conspiracies, how to tax different kinds of professions, and what kinds of resources were available in different parts of Indian subcontinent, etc.

- ♦ Why do you think the Mauryan emperors need such diverse resources from various regions?
- ♦ What do you think the farmers, craftsmen, traders, forest dwellers and herders got in return for the taxes they paid?
- ♦ In what way do you think cities like Takshashila, Suvarnagiri were important for the Mauryans?
- ♦ What do you think is the reason for the Emperors ruling the region around Pataliputra, the provinces and the forests differently? Could they have made common rules or laws for all the three regions?

Ashoka - A unique ruler

The most famous Mauryan ruler was Ashoka. He was the first ruler who tried to take his message to the people through inscriptions. Most of Ashoka's inscriptions were in Prakrit and were written in the Brahmi script.



Fig: 11. 1 King Ashoka

Ashoka's war in Kalinga

Kalinga is the ancient name of coastal Odisha (see Map 11.1). Ashoka fought a war to conquer Kalinga. However, he was so horrified when he saw the violence and bloodshed that he decided not to fight any more wars. He is the only king in the history of the world who gave up conquest after winning a war.

Ashoka's inscription describing the Kalinga war

This is what Ashoka declared in one of his inscriptions:

"Eight years after becoming king I conquered Kalinga. About a lakh and a half people were captured. And more than a lakh of people were killed.

This filled me with sorrow. Why?

Whenever an independent land is conquered, lakhs of people die, and many are taken prisoners. Brahmins and monks also die. People who are kind to their relatives and friends, to their slaves and servants die, or lose their loved ones.

That is why I am sad, and have decided to observe dhamma, and to teach others about it as well. I believe that winning people over through dhamma is much better than conquering them through force.

I am inscribing this message for the future, so that my son and grandson after me should not think about war. Instead, they should try to think about how to spread dhamma."

('Dhamma' is the Prakrit word for the Sanskrit term 'Dharma').

- How did the Kalinga war bring about a change in Ashoka's attitude towards war?
- Why do you think he inscribed on rocks his feelings on Kalinga war?
- What would have been the impact of stopping all wars on the people living in the subcontinent?

What was Ashoka's dhamma?

Ashoka's dhamma did not involve worship of a god, or performance of sacrifice. He felt that just as a father tries to teach his children, he had a duty to instruct his subjects. He was also inspired by the teachings of the Buddha.

There were a number of problems that troubled him. People in the empire followed different religions, and this sometimes led to conflict. Animals were sacrificed. Slaves and servants were ill treated. Besides, there were quarrels in families and amongst neighbours. Ashoka felt it was his duty to solve these problems. So, he appointed officials, known as the dhamma mahamatras who went from place to place teaching people about dhamma. Besides, Ashoka got his messages inscribed on rocks and pillars, instructing his officials to read them to those who were illiterate.

Ashoka also sent messengers to spread ideas about dhamma to other lands, such as Syria, Egypt, Greece and Sri Lanka.

He built roads, dug wells, and built rest houses. Besides, he arranged for medical treatment for both human beings and animals.

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Ashoka's messages to his subjects:

"People perform a variety of rituals when they fall ill, when their children get married, when children are born, or when they go on a journey. These rituals are not useful. If instead, people observe other practices, this would be more fruitful. What are these other practices?"

"These are: being gentle with slaves and servants; respecting one's elders; treating all creatures with compassion; giving gifts to brahmins and monks.

"It is both wrong to praise one's own religion or criticising other's religion. Each one should respect the other's religion.

"If one praises one's own religion while criticising others, one is actually doing greater harm to one's own religion.

"Therefore, one should try to understand the main ideas of other's religion, and respect it."

- What were the problems that Ashoka wanted to solve by introducing Dhamma?
- Why do you think slaves and servants were being ill treated? Do you think the edict of the emperor would have improved their condition? Give reasons for your answer.
- What did Ashoka do to spread the dhamma among the common people?
- What did Ashoka promote in the place of rituals?

- Locate the countries mentioned above on a map and describe the route from Patna to these countries.

Kingdoms and Empires in the Deccan

Around the time the Mauryans conquered the Deccan (from the Godavari River to the Krishna-Tungabhadra River valleys) large parts of the region had developed village settlements and also small towns in which iron tools and other items were being made and sold. In some areas they also mined gold and made ornaments. However most of the other areas must have been under forest with hunter - gatherers and herders living in small settlements.

Probably each of these areas was inhabited mainly by a group of people closely related to each other through birth and marriage. Such interrelated groups are also called clans. Some important persons among these clans may have emerged as powerful headmen who led them and settled their internal disputes. They gradually grew wealthy and powerful and ruled the clan area.

- A large number of these early towns had strong fortifications. What threat would they have faced? Why do you think they needed this?
- What are the similarities between Indo-gangetic Valley and the Krishna-Tungabhadra Valley that led to the settlement of villages and towns there?

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Soon after the Mauryan empire ended, many headmen of such clans emerged as small kings. Among them were the **Satavahanas** or the Andhras who managed to build a large kingdom which extended from the banks of the Narmada River to the Krishna-Godavari delta. The most important Satavahana kings were Gautamiputra Satakarni, Vashishtiputra Pulumavi and Yajnashri Satakarni. They ruled about 2000 years ago for about 200 years. Some of them also used Dhanyakataka near Amaravati on the banks of river Krishna as their capital. The Satavahanas tried to bring the various clan headmen and small kings under their control, but allowed them to function within their clan areas without any interference.

Many of these headmen, women of their families, traders etc. contributed to the Buddhist Monasteries and Stupas built in Amaravati, Bhattiprolu, Vadlamanu etc. During this time trade with distant places like Bengal and even Rome became very important. We find a large number of coins including Roman coins and also pots made in Roman style. Merchandise was probably transported in boats along the sea coast and over the Krishna River to the interior towns like Amaravati.



Fig: 11. 2 Gautamiputara Satakarni portrayed on coins

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How did the headmen of some clans become small kings?

Inscription from Myakadoni village in Bellary district

- Read this short inscription found on a rock near this village probably dating back to the Satavahana kings:

In the 8th year of the reign of the King of Satavahanas Sri Pulumavi, in his mahasenapati Skandanaga's janapada located in Satavahana district, in the village Vepura headed by Kumaradatta, a gahapati named Samva, who was a resident of this village and from the Kaunta clan got this tank excavated.

1. Which clan lived in Vepura village?
2. Who was its headman?
3. Who was in charge of the janapada in which the village was situated?
4. Why do you think Gahapati Samva built the tank?



Fig: 11. 3 Vashishtiputra Sri Pulumavi portrayed on coins

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Sometime after the end of the Satavahana kingdom a family who called themselves *Ikshvakas* assumed royal titles and established a kingdom with its capital in Vijayapuri which was probably located near Nagarjunakonda on the bank of the Krishna River. The important kings of this dynasty are Chantamula and Virapurushadatta. These kings tried to bring together the various headmen and small chiefs by intermarrying with their families. At the same time they sought to show themselves as distinct from them by performing very expensive yagnas like Ashvamedha, Vajapeya etc and made large donations to Brahmins. They also claimed to be the descendents of Rama of Ramayana. Very interestingly the women of the Ikshvaka family were devoted to Buddhist saints and made large donations to the famous Stupa and monasteries of Nagarjunakonda. A very large monastery and Stupa was built at this place.

Key words

Empire
Arthasastra
Dharmamahatras
Dhamma
Spice
Yagnas
Monastery
subcontinent

Improve your learning

1. In what way do you think donations to Buddhist monasteries helped the Satavahana and Ikshvaka kings?
2. Do you think performance of expensive yagnas and claiming to be the descendents of Rama would have helped the Ikshvakas to establish their claim to rule among all the clans?
3. What did the Ikshvaka rulers do to get acceptance from the various clan headmen?
4. Why do you think Ashoka was a unique ruler?
5. What enabled the establishment of kingdoms in the Deccan 2000 years ago?
6. Identify the three rivers and two territorial capitals in map 1?

Project:

- Collect more inscriptions of Ashoka with the help of your teacher, and display them in a local public place.
- If you find any old inscription in your neighborhood find out more about it.

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