Topic: Mauryan Empire: Reasons For Decline [Ancient Indian History for UPSC]

After the death of Emperor Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire collapsed within five decades. There are many reasons given by historians for this disintegration of a once mighty empire. At its zenith, the Mauryan Empire stretched from Afghanistan in the west to Bangladesh in the east. It covered almost the whole Indian subcontinent except present Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and modern-day Sri Lanka. A few years after Ashoka’s death, the weakening of the empire started.

The various reasons for the fall of the Mauryan Empire:

The partition of the Empire

- After the death of Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire split into two halves – western and eastern parts. This weakened the empire.
- Kalhana, author of the work Rajatarangini which is an account of Kashmir’s history says that after Ashoka’s death, his son Jalauka ruled over Kashmir as an independent ruler.
- This partition resulted in invasions from the northwest.

Highly centralised administration

- Historian Romila Thapar is of the view that the highly centralised administration under the Mauryas became a problem with the later Mauryan kings who were not as efficient administrators as their predecessors.
- Powerful kings like Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka could control the administration well. But weak rulers led to a weakening of the administration and ultimately led to the empire’s disintegration.
- Also, the sheer vastness of the Mauryan Empire meant that there had to be a very effective ruler at the centre who could keep coherent all the regions.
- A weakening of the central administration coupled with a large distance to communicate also led to the rise of independent kingdoms.

Weak monarchs after Ashoka

- The successors of Ashoka were weak kings who could not carry the burden of the huge empire that was bequeathed to them.
After Ashoka, only six kings could rule over the kingdom for a mere 52 years.

The last Maurya king, Brihadratha was overthrown by his own army commander, Pushyasmita.

Only the first three kings of the Mauryan Empire were men of exceptional abilities and character. The later kings were no match in quality to their illustrious ancestors.

Independence of the provinces

After Ashoka, under the later kings, the centre’s hold over the vast empire began to disintegrate. This led to the emergence of various kingdoms.

It is already mentioned that Jalauka ruled over Kashmir independently.

Kalinga became independent.

According to Tibetan sources, Virasena ruled over Gandhara independently.

Vidarbha broke away from Magadha. As per Greek sources, a king named Subhagasena (Sophagasanus) began to rule over the north-western provinces independently.

Internal revolt

During the rule of Brihadratha, there was an internal revolt led by his army chief Pushyasmitra Shunga in about 185 or 186 BC.

Bana describes in Harshacharita how Shunga killed Brihadratha during an army parade.

This ended the rule of the Mauryas over Magadha and thence started the Shunga dynasty’s rule.

Foreign invasions

During the reign of the first three Mauryan kings, no foreign power tried to attack India from the north-west as there was a fear of the mighty Mauryan army.

But after Ashoka’s death, the kingdom split up into two. This led to the Greek king Antiochus to attack India unsuccessfully.

But in time, foreign tribes attacked and established their kingdoms on Indian soil. The notable ones were the Indo-Greeks, the Sakas and the Kushanas.

Ashoka’s policies

Some scholars suggest that Ashoka’s policies of non-violence and pacifism led to the weakening of the empire.

Since he stopped waging wars, foreign powers were once again tempted to attack the kingdom.

Also, he gave a lot of importance and efforts to the propagation of Buddhism.
Brahminical reaction

- According to some historians, the Brahmins were unhappy with Ashoka’s unabashed patronage of Buddhism.
- He had banned animal slaughter which was a sacrifice conducted by the Brahmins.
- But this theory is refuted because many of Ashoka’s inscriptions talk of respecting Brahmins.
- Also, Pushyamitra Shunga, a general in the Mauryan army was a Brahmin which proves that they had powerful posts under the Mauryas.