

Mauryan Empire [Ancient History Notes for UPSC & Govt. Exams]

The Mauryan period is considered a remarkable period in the early history of the Indian subcontinent. The Mauryas ruled over the whole of the subcontinent except Kerala, Tamil Nadu and some parts of northeastern India.

Mauryan Empire [c. 324 - 187 BCE]

The literary sources like Arthashastra of Kautilya, Indica of Megasthenes and edicts issued by Ashoka throw a clearer light on the history of this period. There are other literary sources also which depict the different facets of the Mauryan empire. They are:

1. Banabhatta's Kadambari.
2. The trinity of Buddhist texts - Mahavamsa, Milindapanho and Mahabhashya give us an account of Chandragupta's life.
3. The Buddhist Dipavamsa, Ashokavadana, Divyavadana and Mahavamsa give an account of Ashoka.
4. Hema Chandra's Parishishta Parvan establishes Chandragupta's connection with Jainism.
5. Vishakhadatta's Mudrarakshasa (from the 5th century CE) is a historical drama that describes the clever machinations of Chanakya against Chandragupta's enemies.

All these texts help in understanding in detail the life and administration of the Mauryas. Among these literary sources, Arthashastra and Indica are of utmost importance.

Kautilya's Arthashastra

The title, Arthashastra, is a Sanskrit word that literally means "the science of material well being" though it is also accepted as "the science of statecraft".

- According to Arthashastra, artha (material well-being) is superior to both dharma (spiritual well-being) and Kama (sensual pleasure).
- The Arthashastra, consisting of 15 books (Adhikaranas), summarizes the political thoughts of Chandragupta Maurya's chief minister, Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta.
- Kautilya is often compared to the Italian Renaissance writer Nicolo Machiavelli, the author of 'The Prince'.
- Kautilya's Arthashastra contains detailed information for rulers who aspire to run an effective government.
- Topics like diplomacy and war are dealt with in detail and the work also contains recommendations on prisons, law, taxation, agriculture, mining, fortification, administration, trade and spies.
- Kautilya also deals with controversial topics like assassinations, how to manage secret agents, when to kill family members, when it is useful to violate treaties and when to spy on ministers.
- He also writes about the moral duty of the king and lays stress on paternal despotism as he summarizes the duty of a ruler saying, 'the happiness of the subjects is the happiness of the king: their welfare is his; his own pleasure is not his good but the pleasure of his subjects is his good'.

Megasthenes' Indica

Megasthenes was a Greek ambassador sent by Seleucus Nikator to the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He lived in the Maurya capital of Pataliputra and wrote an account not only of the administration of the city of Pataliputra but also of the Mauryan empire as a whole.

- The account of Megasthenes does not survive in full, but quotations occur in the works of subsequent Greek writers.
- These fragments have been collected and published in the form of a book that throws valuable light on the administration, society and economy of the Mauryan empire.
- Indica describes the subcontinent in terms of its size and shape (India is a quadrilateral-shaped country, bound by the ocean on the southern and the eastern side), soil, climate, rivers, plants, animals, administration, society, legends and folklore.
- The big flaw of Megasthenes' work was the division of the society into seven classes based on the profession instead of the four-fold division of the caste system prevalent at that time.
- However, Megasthenes identified the two most important aspects of the Indian caste system - endogamy and hereditary occupations.

Both Kautilya's Arthashastra along with Megasthenes' Indica provide insights on one of the most powerful and prominent dynasties of that time, the Mauryan dynasty.

Mauryan Dynasty

The Mauryan dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya (324/321 - 297 BCE) who conquered almost the whole of the north, the north-west and a large region of Peninsular India. The Buddhist text speaks of the existence of a Kshatriya clan called Mauryas living in the region of Gorakhpur adjoining Nepalese terrain. But Brahmanical sources consider Mauryas as Shudras. The family has also been believed to be associated with the Nandas, according to Vishnu Purana, Chandragupta Maurya was the eldest son of Maurya, son of the Nanda king Sarvarthasiddhi, by Mura - daughter of a hunter.

Chandragupta Maurya (324/321 - 297 BCE)

- The Mauryan dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya with the assistance of Chanakya/Kautilya.
- Justin, a Greek writer, says that Chandragupta Maurya overran the whole of India with an army of 600,000. He liberated northwestern India from the thralldom of Seleucus, who ruled over the area west of the Indus. In the war with the Greek viceroy, Chandragupta seems to have come out victorious. Eventually, there was peace between the two and in return for 500 elephants, Seleucus gave him eastern Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the area west of Indus.
- He was the chief architect of the Mauryan empire who first established himself in Punjab and then moved eastwards to gain control over the Magadhan region. Chandragupta built a vast empire that included Bihar, good portions of Orissa and Bengal, western and northwestern India and the Deccan. Leaving Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of northeastern India, the Mauryans ruled over the whole subcontinent.
- According to Jain texts, Chandragupta Maurya adopted [Jainism](#) and went to the hills of Shravanabelagola (near Mysore) and committed Sallekhana (death by slow starvation).

Read more on [Chandragupta Maurya](#) in the linked article.

Bindusara (297 - 273 BCE)

- Also known as Amitrochates (destroyer of foes) by the Greek scholars while the Mahabhasya refers to him as Amitraghata (killer of enemies). The Ajivika sect mentions a fortune-teller who prophesied to Bindusara about his son Ashoka's future greatness.
- Bindusara conquered the land between the Arabian sea and the Bay of Bengal. The Tibetan monk who wrote a 17th-century history of Buddhism, Taranatha, states that one of Bindusara's lords, Chanakya, destroyed the nobles and kings of 16 towns and made him master of all the territory between the eastern and western seas.
- As per the Greek source, he had diplomatic ties with western kings. According to Strabo, Antiochus (Syrian king) sent Deimachus as an ambassador to Bindusara's court.
- It is believed that Bindusara joined the Ajivika sect.
- Under his rule, almost the entire subcontinent (as far as Karnataka) was under the Mauryan empire.

Ashoka (268 - 232 BCE)

- There was a four-year succession conflict after the death of Bindusara in 273 BCE. Bindusara wanted his son Susima to succeed him. With the help of a minister named Radhagupta and after killing 99 brothers, Ashoka (son of Bindusara) acquired the throne. Ashoka had been the Viceroy of Taxila and Ujjain (cities that mainly handled commercial activities) during the reign of Bindusara.
- Ashoka was one of the greatest kings of all times, and is regarded as the first ruler to maintain direct contact with his people through his inscriptions. The other names of the emperor include Buddhashakya (in the Maski edict), Dharmasoka (Sarnath inscription), Devanampiya (meaning beloved of the gods) and Piyadassi (meaning of pleasing appearance) given in the Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa.
- The Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa give a detailed account of his queens. He was married to Mahadevi (daughter of a merchant of Vidisha) who was the mother of Mahendra and Sanghamitra, the celebrated children of Ashoka who helped in the propagation of Buddhism. The Buddhist texts also mention queens Asandhimitta, Padmavati, Tissarakhita (who tried to cut the Bodhi tree) and Karuvaki (the only queen to be mentioned in the queen's edict, where she is described as the mother of prince Tivara, the only son of Ashoka to be mentioned by name in inscriptions).
- During Ashoka's reign, the Mauryan empire covered the whole territory from Hindukush to Bengal, and extended over Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the whole of India including Kashmir and the valleys of Nepal, except a small portion in the far south, which was occupied by Cholas and Pandyas according to the rock edict 13 and by Keralaputras and Satyaputras as per the rock edict 2.
- He developed diplomatic relations with his contemporaries in Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Cyrenaica (Libya) and Alexander of Epirus, all these are mentioned in the Edicts of Ashoka.
- Ashoka was a great proponent of [Buddhism](#). He converted to Buddhism and during his reign, Buddhism went outside India. His children Mahendra (son) and Sanghamitra (daughter) were sent to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) to propagate Buddhism.
- Ashoka appointed Dharma Mahamattas to propagate dharma among various social groups including women (in the 14th year of his reign).
- During his second Dharmayatra tour (in the 21st year of his reign), he visited Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha.
- He banned animal sacrifice, regulated the slaughter of animals for food and established dharmashalas, hospitals and sarais throughout his kingdom.

Brihadratha

- The Mauryan empire declined after Ashoka's reign and later kings ruled for only short periods.

- The empire weakened and came to an end when the last Mauryan king, Brihadratha was assassinated by his military commander, Pushyamitra Sunga (in 187 BCE).

Ashokan Inscriptions and Ashoka's Dharma

The history of [Ashoka](#) is reconstructed on the basis of his inscriptions. He was the first Indian king to speak directly to the people through his inscriptions. These inscriptions throw light on the career of Ashoka, his external and domestic policies and the extent of his empire. They also give a picture of his views about dhamma.

Read in detail about [Ashokan inscriptions and edicts](#) in the linked article.

Kalinga War Impact

After his accession to the throne, Ashoka fought only one major war called the Kalinga war. In this war, 100,000 people were killed and 1,50,000 were taken as prisoners. The war brought to the Brahmana priests and the Buddhist monks great suffering, which caused Ashoka much grief and remorse. So, he abandoned the policy of physical occupation in favour of a policy of cultural conquest, meaning bherighosha was replaced by dhammagosha (mentioned in the 13th Major Rock Edict). After the Kalinga war, he tried to conquer the foreign dominions ideologically rather than by military conquest.

Ashoka retained Kalinga after its conquest and incorporated it into his empire. The Kalinga war did not make Ashoka an extreme pacifist, he rather adopted a practical policy of consolidating his empire. He repeatedly asked the tribal people to follow the policy of dharma and threatened them not to violate the established rules of social order and righteousness (dharma). He appointed a class of officers - rajukas who were entrusted with the power of administering justice.

Ashoka converted to Buddhism as a result of the Kalinga war. He became a monk and made huge gifts to the Buddhists and undertook dharma yatras (pilgrimages) to the Buddhist shrines. The [Buddhist council](#) was held under the chairmanship of his brother and missionaries were sent to south India, Sri Lanka, Burma and other countries to convert the people to Buddhism. Ashoka appointed dharma mahamatras for propagating dharma among various social orders including women.

Ashoka's Legacy

Ashoka is considered a great missionary ruler in the history of ancient India, and also of the world. Some of his path-breaking achievements are given below:

1. Political unification of the country - He bound the whole country together by one dhamma, one language, and practically one script of Brahmi - which is used in most of his inscriptions.
2. Spread of tolerance and respect - He adopted and preached tolerance in religious sphere as well as in case of scripts and languages. He did not try to force his religious faith on his subjects, instead he gave donations to non-Buddhist sects as well (such as donating Barabar caves to the Ajivika sect). He respected scripts other than Brahmi, like Kharoshti, Aramaic and Greek.
3. Promotion of cultural contacts - Apart from bringing in the innovative changes in his administration, he also promoted cultural contacts between Indian states and between India and the outer world too. It would not be an exaggeration if Ashoka is considered the first global cultural ambassador of India.

4. Policy of peace and non-aggression - Ashoka is known for his policy of peace, non-conquest and non-aggression.

Mauryan Administration

The Mauryan period was marked by innovative administrative policies. The King was the fountainhead of all powers; though it is said that Mauryan kings, especially Ashoka, claimed paternal despotism rather than divine rule. In Arthashastra, the concept of **Saptanga Rajya** has been mentioned which means that a state comprises seven interrelated and interlocked angas or prakritis (elements).

1. King (Svamin)

1. According to Kautilya, the king was the Dharma Pravakta or promulgator of the social order, as he issued Rajasasana i.e, royal rescripts and maintained Porana Pakiti i.e, ancient rules and customs.
2. He was assisted by a council of ministers but he took final decisions by himself regarding law and order, revenue, war, etc.
3. In one of his rock edicts, Ashoka had declared that even common people could meet him anytime.
4. The king had to exercise great vigilance to safeguard his life and position. Various types of spies collected intelligence and reported the same to the king. For example, there were Sanstha or stationary spies who were posted permanently at a particular region and Sanchara, who wandered from place to place collecting secret information.
5. The special reporters of the king Pativedakas and Pulisani kept him informed of public opinion.

2. Amatya (all high officials, counsellors and executive heads of departments/ministers)

1. Mantriparishad, a council of ministers, was appointed by the king to assist him in day to day administration (Mantriparishad is comparatively a larger body than Mantra-Parishad). They exercised a great influence in the appointment of governors, viceroys, deputy governors, treasurers, judges and other high officials. The Maha-Mantrins or the high ministers also attended the meeting of the Mantriparishad. The Maha-Mantrins received 48,000 panas (pana being a silver coin, equal to three-fourths of a tola) per annum while the members of Mantriparishad received only 12,000 panas per annum.
2. There were also bodies of Nikayas (trained officials) who looked after the ordinary affairs of the region. Important functionaries were called Tirthas. The highest functionaries were Minister (Mantrin), high priest (Purohit), commander-in-chief (Senapati) and crown prince (Yuvaraja).
3. The officials who were in-charge of other important portfolios were known as Amatyas (who filled the administrative and judicial appointments), Mahamattas, and Adhyakshas. The state appointed 27 Adyakshas (Superintendents) mostly to regulate the economic activities of the state. They controlled and regulated agriculture, trade and commerce, weights and measures, crafts such as weaving and spinning, mining, etc.
4. The Maurya period constitutes a landmark in the system of taxation in ancient India. Kautilya names many taxes to be collected from peasants, artisans and traders. This required a strong and efficient machinery for assessment, collection and storage. The Samaharta was the highest officer in charge of assessment and Samadhata was the chief custodian of the state treasury and store house.

3. Janapada (Territory and Population)

1. The Mauryan empire was divided into four provinces, apart from Magadha with its capital at Pataliputra. During the reign of Ashoka, a fifth province of Kalinga was incorporated.
 - Uttarapatha (northwestern India) - capital at Taxila
 - Dakshinapatha (southern India) - capital at Suvarnagiri
 - Eastern India - capital at Tosali

- Avantiratha - capital at Ujjain
 - Kalinga - capital at Tasali/Dhauri
2. The head of the provincial administration was the Viceroy, who was in charge of law and order and collection of taxes from the centre. He was generally a prince from the royal family (Kumara or Aryaputra) and was assisted by Mahamattas and a council of ministers. The provinces were further divided into divisions headed by Pradeshikas (with no advisory council). Divisions were divided into districts headed by Rajukas (rajju means rope and refers to the measurement of land using ropes). He was assisted by Yuktas.
 3. Districts were divided into groups of 5 or 10 villages headed by Sthanikas (who collected taxes), who were assisted by Gopas (maintained proper records and accounts). The lowest unit of administration was the village, headed by Gramini/Gramika on the consultation of Grama Vriddhas (elders of the village). The administration was thus, in the nature of a pyramid with the Gramini at the bottom and the King at the top.
 4. At Pataliputra, the capital city of the Mauryas, the municipal administration was of a unique kind. As per the sources- Megasthenes and Arthashastra, the city administration was conducted by six committees of five members each. Each committee was given different subjects like industry, foreigners, trade and market, etc.
 - **Industry** - This committee looked after the production of commodities, kept watch on the quality of the raw material used, decided the fair value of the articles manufactured and stamped the finished goods.
 - **Foreigners** - The duty of this committee was to take special care of foreigners, and send physicians to the foreigners who were not feeling well.
 - **Birth and death registration (vital statistics)** - This committee was entrusted with the job of registering every birth and death with the purpose of not only levying tax, but also to ensure that the birth and death among both high and low don't escape the cognizance of the government.
 - **Trade, commerce and market regulations** - This committee kept a watch over the weights and measures and made sure that the commodities were sold well on time. It also ensured that seasonal products were sold by public notice and no one was allowed to deal with more than one commodity, however, one could do so by paying double or thrice the tax. Kautilya suggested that the dues realised in the form of grains should be kept as a buffer stock to be used in the time of food shortage.
 - **Manufactured articles** - This board kept a vigil on the newly manufactured articles and ensured that the new ones were not mixed or piled with the old stock.
 - **Tax collection** - This board collected one-tenth of the prices of the articles or produce sold as tax. Any fraud in the payment of this tax was punishable with the death penalty.
4. **Durga (Fortified Capital)**
 1. The Mauryans maintained a huge army. Anta-Mahamattas (higher officials) were responsible for the security of frontier forts. The detailed directions for the construction of the main fort in the capital city were given by Kautilya. He recommended troops to be positioned along the approaches to the fort and fort walls to be surrounded by three moats filled with lotuses and crocodiles. He also suggests that the fort should have several secret exit routes and be provided with plenty of supplies to tide over sieges. Kautilya strongly approves an adequately trained standing army, which was supposed to be recruited from all four varnas and maintained by the state.
 2. Megasthenes reports that the administration of different branches of the army was carried through a war office comprising 30 members. It was divided into six boards of five members each:
 - i. The board of Admiralty - In charge of the navy (though Kautilya does not mention the navy).

- ii. The board of Infantry - Headed by Padadhyaksha.
- iii. The board of Cavalry - Headed by Asvadhyaksha.
- iv. The board of War Chariots - Headed by Rathadhyaksha.
- v. The board of War Elephants - Headed by Hastyadhyaksha.
- vi. The board of Transport and Supervision of Equipment

- 3. In addition to these, there is mention of periodic levies of troops like Maula (hereditary warriors), Bhartiakas (mercenaries), and forest tribe soldiers, and allies (furnished by friends).

5. Kosha (Treasury)

- 1. The state taxes were not sufficient to meet all the needs of the state like maintaining a huge standing army, employment of a huge number of state officials, the building of roads, etc. Therefore, the Mauryan empire had to undertake and regulate numerous economic activities to generate more and more resources. Taxes were levied in both cash and kind. Land revenue was the major source of income. Peasants had to pay one-sixth of the produce as bhaga and the extra tax bali as tribute. Peasants had to pay many other taxes like Pindakara (assessed on a group of villages), Hiranya (paid only in cash), Kara (levied on fruits and flower gardens), etc. The class of officials who collected land tax was called Agranomoi (Megasthenes). In addition, the Arthashastra states that the amount of tax would also depend on the nature of irrigation facilities and would range from one-fifth to one-third of the produce. However, there is no reference in any text of taking away the land of the farmers in case of non-payment of taxes. Kautilya also mentions certain emergency taxes (Pranaya) or the additional taxes that the state could impose if the treasury got depleted.
- 2. One of the important results of the political unification of India under the Mauryas and the control of a strong centralized government was the impetus given to various crafts. Craft activities were also an important source of revenue to the state. Artisans living in the town had to pay taxes either in cash or kind or work free for the king (visthi- forced labour). There is mention of karamakara who were regarded as free labourers working for a regular wage and the dasas who were slaves. Traders and artisans were organised into corporate associations called shrenis or guilds or puga to protect their rights and these guilds were headed by Jesthaka. Guilds of textile merchants must have been prominent at that time as the Arthashastra mentions several places in the country which specialized in textiles. The main centres of textile manufacturing were Varanasi, Mathura, Bengal, Gandhara and Ujjain. The state-run textile workshops were placed under Sutradhyaksha and chariot workshops under a Rathadhyaksha. Mining and metallurgy were other important economic activities and the mine officer was called Akaradhyaksha. The Mauryans maintained a monopoly over the production of iron, which was in great demand by the army, industry and agriculture. The officer-in-charge was named Loha-adhyaksha.
- 3. There was a brisk internal trade among different regions in various types of goods. Pataliputra was connected through various trade routes with all parts of the subcontinent. Taxila was the main centre of trade in the north-west which was further connected with Central Asian markets. Trade routes in the Mauryan period followed either the main highways or the navigable rivers. Urban taxes included Shulka (duties on imported and exported goods) and excise duties on local manufacturers.
- 4. The use of currency became a fairly common feature of the Mauryan period. The punch-marked silver coins, carrying the symbols of the peacock, hill and the crescent (called pana) formed the imperial currency. Kautilya refers to the state officer-in-charge of coinage as Rupadarshaka. About the practice of usury, Megasthenes states that Indians neither put out money at usury (lending of money at high-interest rates) nor knew how to borrow.
- 5. Thus during the Mauryan reign, there was extensive participation of the state in the economy and the state exercised great regulation and control over the economy.

6. Danda/Bala (Justice/Force)

1. The king was the head of justice - the fountainhead of law and all matters of grave consequences were decided by him. Kautilya refers to the existence of two types of courts - Dharmasthithas (dealing with civil matters) and Kantakasodhanas (dealing with criminal cases). Judges were called Dharmasthas, though Ashokan inscriptions mention city Mahamattas who were also given judicial functions. The Pradeshtis were the officers responsible for the suppression of criminals. The jail proper Bhandhanagara was different from the police lock-up called Charka. Punishments to the persons found guilty by the court were very severe like amputation of limbs, decapitation, fines, etc. The nature of the punishment depended on the severity of the crime as well as the varna of the offender and the plaintiff. Kautilya mentions about four sources of law:

1. Dharma (sacred law)
2. Charitam (customs and precedents)
3. Vyavahara (usage)
4. Rajasasana (royal proclamations)

7. Mitra (Ally)

1. From the point of the Vijigishu (the would-be conqueror), Kautilya discusses the inter-state policy and takes into account all possible circumstances. He lists six policies (Shad-gunya) to be followed by the king under these circumstances:
 - Policy of Sandhi (peace treaty) - If one is weaker than the enemy.
 - Policy of Vighraha (hostility) - If one is stronger than the other.
 - Policy of Asana (keeping quiet) - If one's power is equal to that of the enemy.
 - Policy of Yana (marching on a military expedition) - If one is much stronger than the enemy.
 - Policy of Samshraya (seeking shelter with another king or in a fort) - If one is very weak.
 - Double policy of Dvaidhibhava (sandhi with one king and vighraha with another) - If one can fight the enemy with the help of an ally.
2. The Mauryas had great diplomatic relations with various Hellenistic kingdoms and even South Asian countries. It seems that they had a department of foreign affairs. In Arthashastra, there is a mention of certain diplomatic posts of Nisriharthaduta, Parimitarthaduta, Sasanharaduta.

Mauryan Art and Sculpture

The Mauryans made a remarkable contribution to art and architecture and introduced stone masonry on a wide scale. During the Mauryan empire, two types of art and architecture emerged - Court art and Popular art. Mauryan court art implies architectural works (in the form of pillars, stupas and palaces) commissioned by Mauryan rulers for political and religious purposes. Popular art was initiated by commoners which includes sculpture, cave arts, pottery, etc. Megasthenes describes the palaces of the Mauryan empire as one of the greatest creations of mankind and the Chinese traveller Fa Hien called Mauryan palaces as god-gifted monuments.

- Ashokan pillars (usually made up of Chunar sandstone) assumed a great significance in the entire Mauryan empire. The main objective of these pillars was to disseminate the Buddhist ideology and court orders in the entire Mauryan empire. All the pillars are circular and monolithic. **Our national emblem is adopted from the four-lion capital of the Ashokan pillar at Sarnath in Benaras.** Mauryan art is believed to have Persian (Achaemenian) influence since the pillar inscriptions of Ashoka are similar in form and style to the Persian king Darius' inscriptions.

Some of the similarities with Persian pillars -

- Both Mauryan and Achaemenian pillars used polished stones and have certain common sculpture motifs such as lotuses.
- The Mauryan idea of inscribing proclamations on pillars has its origin in Persian pillars.
- Inscriptions of both empires begin in the third person and then move to the first person.

However, there are also differences between Mauryan and Persian pillars. These are:

- The shape and ornamentation of the Mauryan lotus (typical bulge) is different from the Persian one (non-bulge).
- Most of the Persian pillars have fluted/ridged surfaces while the Mauryan pillars have smooth surfaces.
- Unlike Mauryan shafts which are built of monoliths, Persian shafts were built of separate segments of stones (aggregated one above the other).
- Persian pillars stand on bases while Mauryan pillars have no base.
- The art of stupa reached its zenith during the Ashokan period. They were actually burial mounds in which relics and ashes of the dead were kept. It is believed that there were about 84,000 stupas built during the time of Ashoka. The core of the stupa was made of unburnt brick while the outer surface was made by using burnt bricks, which were then covered with plaster and medhi and the toran were decorated with wooden sculptures e.g, [Sanchi Stupa](#) (Madhya Pradesh), Piprahwa Stupa (Uttar Pradesh, oldest one).
- **Cave architecture** - Caves were generally used as Viharas i.e, living quarters by the Jain and Buddhist monks. The caves during the Mauryan period were marked by a highly polished finish of the interior walls and decorative gateways. For example:
 - The seven caves - Satgharwa (Jehanabad district, Bihar) were created by the emperor Ashoka for the Ajivika sect.
 - Barabara caves near Gaya - Four caves - Karna Chaupar, Sudama cave, Lomash Rishi cave, Vishva Zopri cave.
 - Nagaragunja caves - Three caves in Bihar.
 - Majestic Dhauri caves near Bhubaneswar, Odisha which contain rock sculpture of the front part of an elephant.
- **Sculptures** - Among several stone and terracotta sculptures of this period, the polished stone sculpture of a female known as the **Didarganj Yakshini** (demi-gods and spirits; Yakshinis are generally regarded as fertility deities, and the female counterpart of Yakshas, who were the deities connected with water, trees, forest, wilderness and fertility) is the famous one. Another important polished Chunar sandstone sculpture is the torso of a nude male figure found at Lohanipur in Patna. The stone portrait of Ashoka found at Kanaganahalli (near Sannati, Karnataka) is also spectacular. A large number of carved ring stones and disc stones which probably have religious and ritualistic significance have been found at various sites in northern India such as Delhi, Taxila, Mathura, Vaishali and Kaushambi. They have different carvings arranged in two or more concentric circles and have different designs and geometric patterns.
- **Pottery** - Pottery of the Mauryan period is generally referred to as Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). Mauryan pottery was characterized by black paint and highly lustrous finish and was used as luxury items. Kosambi and Pataliputra were the centres of NBPW pottery.

The Mauryan period also witnessed the rapid development of material culture in the Gangetic plains. The new material culture of the Gangetic basin was based on the intensive use of iron and iron implements (such as socketed axes, ploughshare, and spoked wheel), the prevalence of writing, use of punch-marked coins, NBPW pottery artifacts, the introduction of burnt bricks and timber in construction and ring wells. The existence of inscriptions, occasional NBPW potsherds and punch-marked coins in

parts of Bangladesh (Bogra district), Odisha (Sisupalgarh), Andhra (Amravati) and Karnataka points towards the spread of material culture to these peripheral areas too.

Decline of the Mauryas

The Mauryan empire began to decline after the death of Ashoka around 232 BCE. One of the reasons for its decline was the succession of weak kings. The last Mauryan king, Brihadratha was assassinated by his general Pushyamitra Shunga who was a Brahmin.

To know more about the reasons for the [Mauryan Empire's decline](#), click on the linked article.

