

The Mauryan Empire

In thinking about the Mauryan Empire and, later the Gupta Empire we need to consider what kinds of states they were, avoiding imposing political notions from modern, Western experience on material from the past. A comprehensive definition of an empire which covers all cases is not possible. Then it comes to the Mauryan Empire we are fortunate that Romila Thapar, has devoted much attention to thinking about the structure of that state

When we consider the history of empires in ancient South Asia, it is useful to keep in mind that they were relatively short in time, compared to the Han Empire in China or the Achaemenid Empire in Iran. This means, among other things, that they did not have a strong restructuring effect on local institutions. The social structure of the Gangetic valley, the varna and, especially, the caste model for social organization, spread throughout South Asia. Administrative procedures for penetrating local societies and bending local political and social structures to the will of the state did not spread. Curiously, the Mauryan Empire was probably administratively more centralized than those that followed. Still, as we shall see, the arm of the state did not reach deeply. To the extent that it was centralized, the Mauryans could succeed because state formation in general in India had been so slow. The Mauryan hinterland was not studded with aggressive chiefs and princes looking for a fight from an imperial challenger. This situation would characterize the medieval period. Ironically, in trying to make contact and to establish some control over the frontier regions, the Mauryans initiated state formation in those areas. This we see when the empire disintegrates.

First, however, we shall consider the emergence of Magadha as an empire. There has been much speculation about this emergence, which from one point of view seems to have sprung into existence at the periphery of the Gangetic civilization after just two generations of leaders. One theory was that imperial state administration had diffused from Western Asia. An Achaemenid emperor established a province on the banks of the Indus in the 6th century BC and many have considered that the Mauryans took their cue here. Evidence for this point of view comes from the most famous symbol of the Mauryans—the stone pillars of Ashoka. From the point of view of art historians, there is evidence for strong influence in Mauryan statecraft from Iran.

A second theory about the emergence of the Mauryans comes from Indian Marxists who emphasize materialist causes as the motive force in historical change. These historians have speculated that iron made a major impact in agriculture in the Ganges Valley from about 750 b.c., leading to a greater agricultural surplus which could support more complex state formations, the mahajanapadas which emerged. The historian Kulke points out that there is little evidence for widespread use of iron in agriculture.

Rather than look for a single cause, we do well to consider the entire long process of political change which was basically internal to Indian society. The process of change accelerated markedly around the 7th century with the Aryans' shift to the ecological zone of the middle Gangetic plain. The Iranian province of the 6th century and the invasion of Alexander the Great in the 4th century could not have made a noteworthy impact on political development in north India if there had not already been the long—term political and economic changes which we noted for the late Vedic age. When we examine the ideological changes of this period and

examine their long-term impact we will see that Iranian influence on Indian statecraft was quite superficial.

The Mauryan Empire consisted of a great variety of political formations and ecological zones: it contained forest peoples and nomads, chieftaincies and oligarchies like the *gana*—*sangha* confederacies of chiefs. It contained smaller kingdoms with a range of administrative structures not necessarily similar to that in Magadha.

Thapar argues that the Mauryan Empire was made up of a metropolitan state, core areas, and peripheral areas. The metropolitan state, Magadha was the state that initiated conquest and control over other entities. It was the administrative center of the empire. The core areas included existing states like Gandhara, whose capital was Taxila. It also included regions of incipient state formation like Kalinga and Saurashtra. included existing centers of exchange--connecting points of active trade--like Ujjain and Amaravati. One can think of core areas as sub-metropolitan areas which could develop into metropolitan areas themselves when the empire disintegrates.

The peripheral areas included a variety of social forms, ranging from hunters and gathers to agriculturally settled communities. They had in common that they had not yet developed into state systems. The peripheral areas were often borders between rich agricultural belts.

Magadha's initial expansion may have been justified as a defence of the Ganges Valley against the successors of Alexander the Great. The northwest areas was desirable, in any case, because it gave access to trade routes through the Hellenistic kingdoms and on to markets of the eastern Mediterranean. In trying to decide the motivation for further expansion on the part of the leadership of Magadha, Thapar takes her cue from the ancient treatise on politics, the *Arthashastra* (which translates loosely as knowledge of wealth). This appears to describe the political processes which led up to the establishment of the Mauryan Empire. Here the writer or writers of the text advises the king to look first to the collection and revenue and the protection of revenue-generating activities. The Dutch Sanskritist Heesterman suggests, however, that the *Arthashastra* was written (by Brahmins) as a theoretical guide for kings, not a manual for practice.

Looking at the expansion of Magadha from the point of the desire for wealth, we can note that the lower Indus Valley had fine horses which could have acted as a stimulus to attempted political control. It appears, as well, that the Mauryans wanted to control the *daksinapatha*, the way south. In the south were the gold reserves of Karnataka. This southern area could also be approached from the west coast or along the Krishna valley to the east. So these routes were marked out for protection. Kalinga may have been desirable partly because it was territory which Magadha had controlled earlier and then lost--so the desire to uphold dynastic honor may have made this area a priority but also the area was rich in agriculture, trade and elephants. Holding Kalinga would secure the defense of Magadha from the southeast and would protect the coastal route down the east coast.

The policy toward the peripheral areas was slightly different. Rather than try to collect revenues from these areas, the Mauryans were interested in containing tribal groups on its

borders, using them as buffer zones which could separate well-developed areas from each other. The policy of segregation would help to keep the core areas under control without excessive use of the imperial army and imperial administration.

When we consider the core and peripheral areas outlined above, it is clear that they were highly varied politically, socially and economically. Some of the core areas were still tribal republics--gana-sanghas, for example. The Middle Gangetic Valley shared the cultural synthesis which developed out of the meeting of Aryan elites with the native populations, but there were still wide cultural differences between the northwest and the east. Even in the core areas, as well, there was, thus, a wide variety of land tenures and systems of taxation and tribute. Economically the areas ranged from barter to more complex commercial transactions involving markets, guilds (sreni) and major traders (setthis) . However, even though the Arthashastra shows an interest in the state recovering revenue from all kinds of activities, Magadha itself did not attempt to enter deeply into local polities and economies with the aim of maximizing revenue by active attempts at restructuring.

One of the indications of a policy of relative noninterference is the lack of major irrigation works which can be said to have been sponsored by the state. There is only one single large-scale irrigation work attributed to Mauryan enterprise. The Mauryan Empire, like other states in Indian history, did not control irrigation works. Irrigation was considerably decentralized, frequently in small-scale systems drawing water from rivers, pools, wells, springs and artificial ponds called tanks. More elaborate reservoirs and embankments were built with local resources, though the empire assisted irrigation works in newly settled lands. Evidence suggests that irrigation works were locally controlled.

The Mauryans appear to have had interest in gaining revenue from trade. They did not, here, either, however, take an active role in the regulation of trade. This is indicated by the fact that they appear not to have issued metallic money of a distinctive kind. The modest punch-marked coins which have been found may very well have been issued by guilds or other local bodies. It is curious, however, that when the great emperor Ashoka set up pillars or had his edicts sculpted into rocks, he had these placed in centres associated with trade and along the extended trade network radiating from the metropolitan kingdom. Ashoka erected numerous edicts along nodal points on important trade routes and areas of raw materials. The nodal points beyond the Ganges valley were Kandahar, Taxila, Ujjain, the northern Konkan, Raichur and Bellary districts, and Kalinga, all of which have provided evidence of inscriptions. Ashoka had roads built both to serve the needs of imperial administration and to facilitate trade. Imperial control of trade routes and major trading centers gave revenue without necessitating control of upland areas.

The state attempted to maintain control over individual traders and guilds, inspecting their identity, their merchandise and their profits. The sale of goods at the place of production was not permitted, presumably because sale in markets was more accessible to revenue collectors. The state collected a series of taxes at various points in the production of goods from raw materials to commodities. Special officers were appointed to ensure standards and prevent fraud as well as to intercept trade in those items which the state had a monopoly such as,

weapons, armor, metals, and gems. Commodity production was therefore an independent enterprise geared to a market and trade was a major revenue resource for the state.

During the rule of Ashoka the Mauryan Empire was organized formally into five parts. Magadha and some adjacent mahajanapadas were under direct administration. There is evidence from the reports of Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador, and from the Arthashastra, of relatively centralized administration in the center part. There were four provinces governed by princes. There was one in the northwest, with Taxila as its capital, one in the east--Kalinga, one in the west--with the city of Ujjain, and one in the south with a capital near Kurnool in present day Andhra. These provinces were divided into extensive districts headed by mahamatras who were assisted by scribes and revenue collectors.

The administrative network consisted of an upper bureaucracy recruited from the upper castes and receiving handsome salaries. There was no central method of recruitment and local persons appear to have been appointed in areas distant from the metropolitan state. The lower bureaucracy was most likely also recruited from the locality. The upper bureaucracy had a largely managerial function. The bureaucracy was not required to restructure conquered areas to conform to a uniform pattern but to ensure the flow of revenue. At the peak period of the empire mention is made of a group of officers, basically concerned with revenue administration, who appear to have been centrally appointed and who were required to tour the areas under their jurisdiction and enquire into the well-being of the subjects.

That the culture of the metropolitan state extended to a certain degree out into the peripheral states is seen in that Prakrit (a derivative of Sanskrit) was used in the royal inscriptions, though in areas with a strong linguistic identity regional languages were used, for example, in the northwest. However, there was no uniform legal code. Instead, the varna model spread to periphery areas as a way to integrate new groups into an expanding sub-continental society.

How did the Mauryans attempt to integrate this complex, spread-out imperial structure, To answer this question we return to the story of the Buddha again.

The centuries preceding the establishment of the Mauryan Empire--the period which was the development of the Kosala and Magadha kingdoms--were a period of relatively rapid social and economic change. We have discussed the disintegration of tribal polities, the development of the varna model and the move to the rice lands of the Eastern Gangetic Valley. In times of the disintegration of old social ties, during the establishment of new ways of being in social and political relationships, we find ideological upheaval. The emergence of Buddhism and Jainism was a manifestation of this upheaval. Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha ("Enlightened" or "Awakened"), came from a chiefly family of the Sakyas tribe who lived in the Himalayan foothills north of Magadha. He was born in about 563 B.C. and led a sheltered and pampered existence for the first 29 years of his life. When he became aware for the first time of the suffering caused by sickness, old age, and death, he left his wife and infant son and set out to find a solution to this suffering.

Teachers and proposed solutions of every sort abounded in North India at that time. Siddhartha tried two different systems of philosophy and meditation, and then spent several

years as an ascetic punishing his body with fasting, trances, retention of breath and exposure to the elements. None of these solutions was adequate, since none led to his goals of “absence of passion, cessation, tranquility, higher knowledge and *nirvana*” (loss of a sense of the self in enlightenment). Siddhartha decided finally to try a system of his own that emphasized control of mental states instead of bodily punishment. He began to meditate under a tree that tradition calls the “Bodhi tree”, the “tree of Enlightenment.” Controlling his senses “without sensual desires, without evil ideas,” he passed through progressively deeper stages of concentration. Siddhartha reached a state of concentration in which his mind was completely undisturbed and he was able to remember details of his own past lives and see the effects of actions on the passing away and rebirth of beings. Finally, directing his mind to the central problem of transmigration, he discovered the basic causes of bondage: sensual desire, desire for existence, and ignorance. These, he realized, can be understood in their true nature and eliminated; with their elimination comes cessation of the suffering, sorrow, and transiency that characterize the world. The insight gained through meditation removed the causes of his continuing rebirth. Knowledge and light replaced ignorance and darkness and Gautama Siddhartha became the Buddha.

The Buddha’s experience set him against both the Vedic tradition and the radical asceticism practices by Jains and Ajivakas. His was a Middle Way of discipline, meditation and knowledge, leading to an awareness of the transience of all existence, including the existence of the so-called “self” of man.

The Buddha argued that there was no self, no *atman*, and that the person consisted of the five factors of grasping: matter, sensations or feelings, perceptions, mental formations and volitions and consciousness. A person was a particular bundle of factors, the result of ignorance and desire: ignorance of the impermanence of all existence, and desire for attachment and continuing individual existence. Metaphysical speculation would not solve the problem of individual rebirth. The Buddhist solution was by contrast personal and pragmatic. Salvation was an individual problem, a person started where he was and worked toward enlightenment by his own efforts.

Now what does the integration of the Mauryan Empire have to do with the story of Gautama Siddhartha? Ajivaka, Jain and Buddhist activity from the 6th to the 4th centuries B.C. was confined largely to the Ganges Valley, which by the 4th century was dominated by Magadha. The Mauryans who seized the throne of Magadha may not have had strong ties with the Vedic tradition. The Mauryans patronized all of the major religious groups, donating caves to Ajivaka ascetics, for example. Jain tradition has it that Chandragupta Maurya (322-298) became a Jain monk the end of his reign and went to live in South India.

Buddhists benefited most from Mauryan rule, especially during the reign of Chandragupta’s grandson, Asoka (269-232). In his ninth year as emperor, he conquered the territory of Kalinga in eastern India at a terrible cost in human lives and destruction. Afterwards Ashoka began to set forth a new policy in edicts engraved on rocks and pillars throughout the empire. Addressing his people in unique confessionals, he expressed his distress at the misery caused by his warfare and dedicated himself thereafter to a “rule of righteousness (*dhamma*)”. He renounced further wars of conquest and substituted conquest by righteousness, widely defined.

Ashoka's edicts indicate little knowledge or concern for the fine points of Buddhist doctrine. His overriding interest was instead those Buddhist teachings that could be adopted and put in practice by all his subjects. He stressed the values of compassion, generosity, truth, and *ahimsa*, no injury to living beings. His general concern for righteousness was indicated by his donations to Ajivakas, who were bitter rivals of the Buddhists, and his praise of worthy Brahmins as well as Buddhist monks. He encouraged his subjects to pay attention to all teachers of righteousness no matter what their label.

You can see from these edicts (which I have shown here) that Ashoka had more than just the salvation of his subjects on his mind. He was attempting a form of ideological unification of his Empire. Ashoka did not have the military or administrative capacity to extend the reach of the metropolitan state deeply into the distant core areas or peripheral zones. That he had unifying visions which departed from previous north Indian traditions is seen in his need to borrow imperial symbolism from the Achaemenids. Ashoka attempted to seek legitimation in a relatively simple message of right conduct which could appeal to all communities. In focusing on dharma, he was appealing both to agrarian Hindus and trading Buddhists, even though they might conceive of dhamma/dharma in slightly different ways. In the western part of his empire the message of dhamma, for example, was expressed in a Greek version a religious idiom from which Greeks could recognize from their traditions. In the Aramaic version, the message is harmonized with Zoroastrian beliefs.

In communicating to subjects in a society not yet completely absorbed in varna categories, Ashoka did well to emphasize universal moral qualities and not particular sects and groups. Ashoka's ideas came from debates current at the time on dharma, but he set his notions within an imperial framework. The universalistic ethic of Jainism and Buddhism as opposed to the caste-based ethic of Brahmanical teaching suited the needs of empire since it could forge new ties cross clans, tribes and castes.

Even though Ashoka did not associate his message of dharma distinctly with Buddhism in his edicts, he had close ties with the Buddhist sangha, the communities of the committed, the monks. The sangha prospered on royal patronage and it provided networks of loyalty which could be supportive of political needs. The orders of monks and nuns cut across both caste and clan ties and weakened existing identities--allowing for the forging of new attachments to an expanded and new concept of the state. The newly emerging leadership in the peripheral areas for these renunciatory and universal faiths useful for legitimation. This is seen in their continuing patronage to Buddhism and Jainism for a period after the decline of the Mauryas.

The teachings of Buddhism and Jainism were preserved and transmitted through orders of monks recruited from many social groups (including Brahmins). Buddhist and Jain monasteries broadened participation in high religion such that participation shifted in communities from only a handful of sacrificial priests and rich clients who paid for elaborate sacrifices and supplied materials, including cattle and other valuable animals. Buddhism was appropriate for the Mauryans, considering their dependency on trade because of the appeal of that faith and Jainism to the wealthy who wanted to protect their wealth from arbitrary appropriation and unproductive destruction in sacrifice. The link of trade and Buddhist institutions existed for the next several centuries after Ashoka because places where Buddhist

monks of the sangha concentrated for part of each year attracted the pious from all social strata and also traders to supply the wants of monks and lay clientele.

As we shall see below, all major states in pre-modern India would eventually come to appeal to a transcendent value, trying to orient subjects toward a suprapersonal and durable unity, a universal ethic which could tie diverse groups together in a single ideological framework. As Heesterman puts the case:

The traditional empire, then, fluctuates in the middle space between two diametrically opponent poles: on the one hand the total dispersion of power through out a segmentary and fluid concatenation where the political is completely merged into the social order; on the other the far-out ideal of a universalistic polity where power is made independent from the social order and is administered according to fixed, transcendent rules. The latter pole is in the literal sense transcendent in that it is beyond the limitations of actual society and can therefore possess ultimate legitimating force. It can only be imagined in an extra-societal, never-never world such as Asoka's dharma empire

Ashoka may have attempted such an ideological integration, but it was not sufficient to hold the Mauryan Empire together after his death in 232 B.C. The empire rather quickly disintegrated into successor states. While the empire may have been loosely integrated, it did leave a political legacy. As I mentioned earlier, state formation was probably accelerated in areas where there had been no states previously, and the confederacies and tribal oligarchies experienced evolution toward kingdom organization. An other legacy was the use by succeeding states of Buddhism as a universal, legitimizing principle of integration, as ambitious kings made their attempts at building empires. Here we find, too, the patronage of Buddhism and Buddhist rituals having an effect upon the development of Hinduism and the relationship of Hindu worship to the integration of state systems. The historian Ronald Inden has done an interesting analysis of this development which I will outline here.

From about 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. the developing chiefdoms and kingdoms of north India had as their central cult the Vedic sacrifice, also called the *srauta* sacrifice, We mentioned several of these royal sacrifices, the *rajasuya* and the *asvamedha*, as performing a function of legitimizing particular ruling dynasties. As we have seen today, the imperial system which developed out of the middle Ganges Valley did not take the Vedic sacrifice as the central cult of the empire. Asoka established a form of Buddhist ceremonial as its central cult, We talked a little about the main values of Asoka's Buddhist imperial ideology, but not about its ritual aspects.

The highest ritual activity which a Buddhist householder could engage in was the giving of gifts to Buddhist monks. In conjunction with these rituals of giving a *stupa* cult developed, involving the "honoring" of signs of the *uddha*. The Buddhist texts contrasted their gift-giving with the Vedic sacrifice. For Buddhists, the giving of gifts was, among other things, considered nonviolent and altruistic, and thereby productive of salvation-oriented merit, while the sacrifice was characterized as destructive of life, selfish and world-oriented.

Ordinary people were supposed to give modest daily gifts to monks. The emperor organized elaborate assemblies every five years in which he emptied the imperial treasury in bestowing lavish gifts on monks. Other less elaborate, but more regular, imperial gifting took place and became the central ritual activities of the imperial states of ancient India. At the same time, emperors effectively forbade the performance by conquered warrior kings of the older Vedic sacrifices at the centers of their (regional) states by forbidding the slaughter of animals. The performance of sacrifices in which vegetal substances--ghee and seeds--were offered was permitted.

In response to the imperial prohibition of animal slaughter, the subordinated ruling groups of the Aryan states developed a new cultic institution, emphasizing the learned Brahmin as a householder and an elaborate series of rituals, as well as more simple daily rituals, which did not require the slaughter of animals. These called instead for the offering of vegetal substances into fire. Some of the *sutra* texts--written during this period--modified the rules for Vedic sacrifices, making the royal rituals optional for Hindu kings instead of compulsory.

The ritualists of the regional kshatriya rulers thus began to develop alternatives to the old Vedic sacrifices. The making of gifts of land to Brahmin householders became as much the duty of the regional kings as the ancient animal sacrifices. Such gifts were termed "great gifts"—mahadana--as were the Buddhist gifts to monks. Though less splendid in scope than the donations made by an emperor to Buddhist monks, these were probably modeled after the Buddhist "great gifts." There took place in Hinduism, then, a shift of emphasis in regional kingdoms from the Vedic royal (*srauta*) rites which were performed inside a royal sacrificial enclosure to the 'domestic' (*smarta*) rites which were performed outside the sacrificial enclosure, in homes. For a period from the third century B.C. to approximately 700 A.D. the imperial level and universal center were silently but dramatically conceded to Buddhism, while the regional level and the parochial periphery were taken up as the place for the Vedic cult, reformulated in the guise of a traditional household cult and made more or less consistent with the requirements set by the Buddhist cult at the center on issues such as animal slaughter.

During the period following Asoka, until the end of the 7th century A.D. the great gift ceremonies honoring the Buddha remained the central cult of Indian imperial kingdoms. When, during this long period, one of these imperial kingdoms contracted, regional rulers declared their independence by again performing the horse sacrifice and other *srauta* rites that had been in abeyance. They also made "great gifts" of land (an imperial prerogative) to Brahmin settlements at the conclusion of these rites. Once one of these contending successor states—the Sunga, Satavahana or Gupta—had devoured its neighbors and begun to take on imperial proportions, its rulers turned to Buddhism, religion of the imperial structure and made the Buddhist 'great gift' ceremony the central ritual activity. The rulers of regional states, again incorporated into an expanded imperial structure with Buddhist rites as its central cult, switched back to the domestic form of the Vedic cult and abstained from the performance of the royal *srauta* sacrifices and the donation of land to Brahmins.

Over a period of time, however, other changes developed within Hinduism. Side by side with the reformulations of the sacrificial tradition in the sutras, efforts were being made to

transform

regional deities, sages, or heroes--such as Krishna--of the various Aryan states into deities of the Vedic pantheon whose icons eventually came to be "honored" or worshipped in much the same way as the symbols of the Buddha, enshrined as Cosmic Overlord of the imperial state.

Regional rulers and their ritualists began to add more fully articulated Hindu rites to their daily liturgy, first in their houses and then, starting with the Guptas in the fourth century, in separate shrines made of permanent materials. Down through the seventh century, however, these temples continued to be considerably smaller and less lavish than the structures housing the monks and the rites of the central imperial cult of Buddhism. By the end of the 8th century, however, Hinduism had become established as the dominant religion of Indian imperial kingdoms, reversing and transforming its relationship to Buddhism and Vedism.

The establishment of Hindu image worship as the central cult in the imperial kingdoms of the eighth century and later did not imply that the old Vedic sacrifice would at long last return to the center of the ritual stage. Just the opposite happened--the performance of the older Vedic sacrifices gradually ceased.

The ceremony that came to replace the Vedic royal sacrifice was referred to as a "great gift" in the Puranas. The ritual procedure for sixteen such ceremonies given. The Hindu *mahadana* first appeared in the Deccan as a ceremony appended to the *srauta* sacrifice, but by around 753 it was performed as a replacement for the *srauta*. By the 11th century founders or restorers of imperial kingdoms in all parts of India except in the west declared their independence by performing a Hindu "great gift" ceremony.

The Hindu mahadana, emphasized in its ritual concentrated cosmic power, nonviolence, and universal, hierarchic order. Its essence shared much with Ashoka's dhamma. These values were certainly more consistent with the imperial goals of peace after conquest than the *srauta* rituals. The Vedic horse sacrifice, on the contrary, had been the combative rite par excellence of the ancient Kshatrya. This tribal world view envisioned more or less equal but combative relationships. The later Hindu perspective by contrast envisioned a concentration of cosmic power in one divine overlord (be it Vishnu or Siva) and his earthly replica, the imperial ruler. Offerings made to the Vedic fire had been seen as part of an exchange: the crops and domestic animals of men were turned into food for the gods and by them eventually into rain for the crops returning the gift made. A simple reciprocity were envisioned here. However, offerings made in puja, in worship, to the divine Overlord and gifts to Brahman and temples were to be made not in expectation of any immediate return gift, but because the honoring of superiors and altruistic giving were in themselves positive goods and helped the worshiper toward the ultimate goal of liberation and the penultimate goal of paradise.