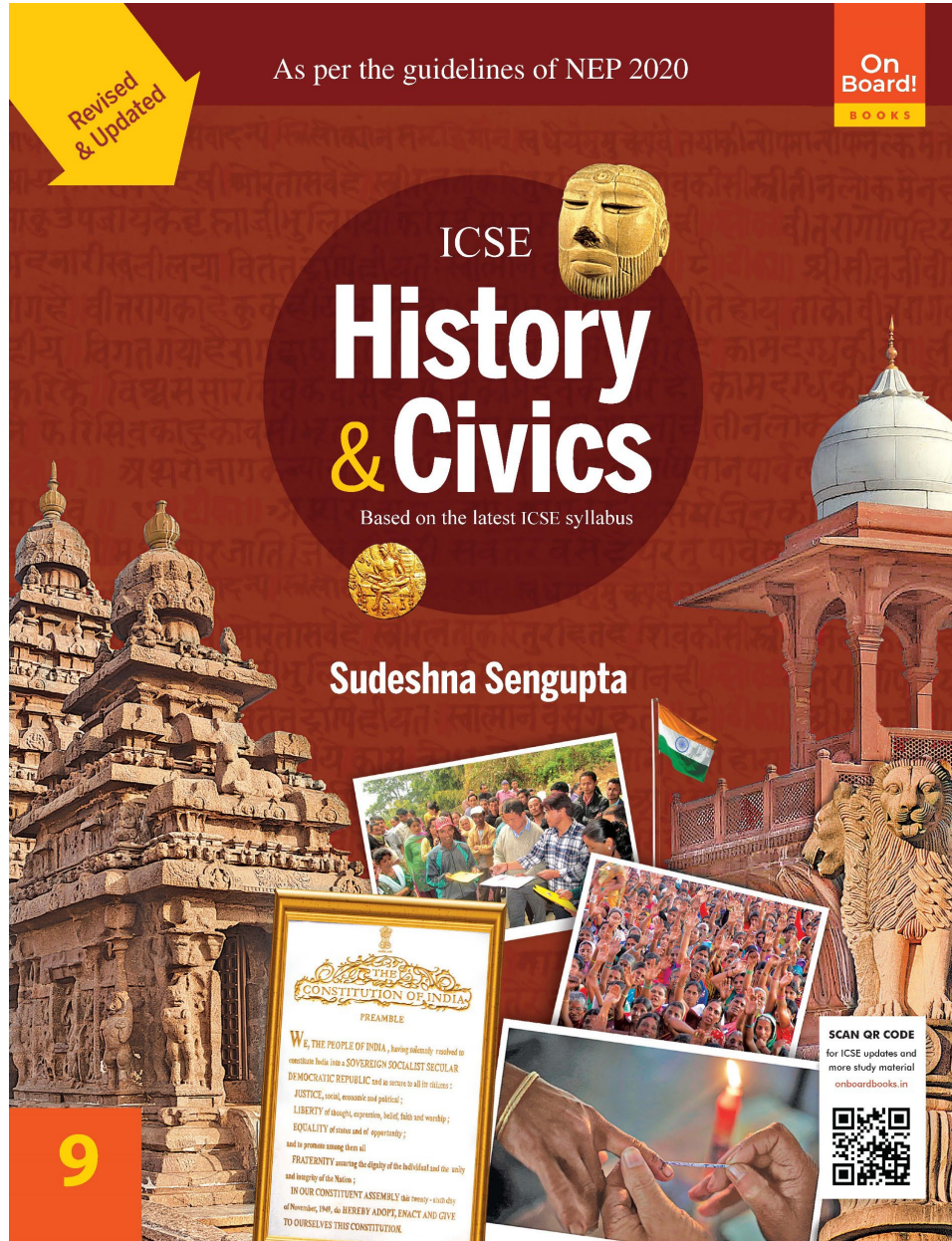


On Board!

B O O K S

History and Civics 9



History 9

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Chapter 4: The Mauryas

The Mauryan Dynasty marked a new era in the history of India. The Mauryas established the first ever 'empire' in the history of India and thus provided a semblance of unity to the country.

Sources

Some of the sources that help us to know about Mauryan India are the archaeological sources like the rock edicts and pillar inscriptions of Ashoka.

Literary sources that tell us about Mauryan India are as follows:

- Indica, the account of Megasthenes, who was an ambassador of Seleucus Nicator in the court of Chandragupta Maurya.
- The treatise on statecraft called the Arthashastra by Chanakya (also known as Vishnugupta and Kautilya) supplements the information provided by Megasthenes.
- Vishakhadatta's political drama called the Mudrarakshasa, deals with the destruction of the Nanda Dynasty and the founding of the Mauryan Dynasty. It also informs us about the social, economic and political conditions prevailing during that time.

CHANDRAGUPTA MAURYA (321–297 BC)

The rise of the Mauryas was a political phenomenon of great consequence in the history of India. It is as remarkable and as captivating as its founder, Chandragupta Maurya, who ushered in a new era of unity and imperial rule.

Background

Let us first understand the background against which he rose to make the Mauryas a formidable force in India. Alexander, the king of Macedonia had invaded India in 326 BC. His campaigns had dislocated many kingdoms of north-west India.

As mentioned earlier, Magadha, in eastern India, had emerged as a powerful state. At a time when north-western India was facing Alexander's invasion, Magadha and its people were reeling under the tyrannical rule of the Nanda king, Dhanananda. Armed conflict was the only way to shake off the yoke of foreign rule as well as to end the tyrannical rule of the Nandas.

Early life

The story of Chandragupta's early life and rise to power is of great interest. Taking advantage of the political turmoil, resulting from Alexander's invasion and the seething discontent of the Magadhans against the Nandas, Chandragupta overthrew the Nandas and became the ruler in 321 BC.

After consolidating his position in Magadha, Chandragupta defeated the Greek governor and ended the Greek rule in Punjab. He also invited the wrath of Seleucus Nicator, the Greek general of Alexander, in 305 BC. In the battle that ensued, Seleucus was defeated and made to sign a peace treaty. In lieu of 500 elephants, Seleucus ceded eastern Afghanistan, Baluchistan and areas beyond the Indus river.

BINDUSARA (297–272 BC)

According to Jain sources, towards the end of his life Chandragupta Maurya embraced Jainism. He was succeeded by his son Bindusara in 297 BC. He had friendly relations with the Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus I. He succeeded in keeping the Mauryan Empire more or less intact.

ASHOKA (269–232 BC)

Ashoka succeeded Bindusara in 269 BC. Some historians have hailed Ashoka as the greatest of kings.

Early life and achievements

Much of our knowledge about the history of Ashoka's reign is based on inscriptions engraved on rocks and pillars. Ashoka's accession to throne was not a smooth affair.

The Kalinga War (261 BC)

Ashoka's edicts mention of only one military campaign, which is the Kalinga War in 261 BC. Some of the causes that led Ashoka to conquer Kalinga were:

- Kalinga was under the Nandas. But taking advantage of the chaos that had resulted following the overthrow of the Nandas, Kalinga had asserted its independence.
- A major cause for the conquest of Kalinga was its military strength. R C Majumdar remarks that Kalinga was a populous and a powerful state.

Thus after a fierce battle Kalinga was conquered.

Impact Acting upon his feelings of remorse and sorrow, Ashoka abstained from aggressive war for the rest of his life. To sheathe the sword at a moment which would have definitely led to further success by way of conquest of the Tamil countries, is a unique experience in the history of imperialism. It was at this stage that Ashoka came under the influence of Buddhism—a religion that stood for peace and non-violence.

Ashoka's Dhamma

The death, destruction and suffering witnessed in the Kalinga War filled Ashoka's heart with remorse. He decided to replace the policy of Digvijaya, i.e. world conquest by Dhammavijaya, i.e. conquest by Dhamma.

Dhamma was synonymous to the Sanskrit word Dharma signifying virtue, morality, law and duty. It did not involve worship of a God or performance of sacrifices. Rather, it was a code of conduct and morals to be followed. It was inspired by Buddhism.

Tenets of Dhamma Through Dhamma, Ashoka wanted to instil a spirit of tolerance, co-existence and non-violence. The fundamental tenets of Dhamma were:

- Obey the elders.
- Be kind to all, including servants and slaves.
- Respect other religions.
- Follow the path of 'ahimsa'.
- Salvation was possible only through kindness and morality.

Spread of Dhamma Ashoka took various steps to encourage the spread of Dhamma.

- A special class of officers called the Dhamma Mahamattas was created to enforce the moral code and work for the welfare of the people.
- Ashoka himself undertook dhammayatra which were royal tours wherein he preached the policies of Dhamma.
- Ashoka also sent missionaries to countries like Syria, Egypt and so on. He sent his son Mahendra and his daughter Sanghamitra to Ceylon to spread Dhamma.

Dhamma and art It is important to note that Ashoka's Dhamma greatly influenced the art of that period. Mauryan art reached perfection during the reign of Ashoka. It is believed that Ashoka built over 84,000 stupas and viharas. For example, the Ashokan Pillar at Sarnath (near Varanasi) and the Lauriya Nandangarh Pillar in Bihar.

Welfare Measures

Ashoka undertook a number of welfare measures. He built roads and planted trees like banyan and mango groves.

Extent of Ashoka's Empire

The conquest of Kalinga marks the end of an era in the history of Magadha as also of India. While it ended the era of Magadhan imperial expansion, it marked the beginning of an era of peace and social progress, of brotherhood. Ashoka ruled for almost forty years.

MAURYAN ADMINISTRATION

Megasthenes's Indica and Kautilya's Arthashastra are our chief source that shed light on the Mauryan administration. The Mauryan administration can be studied under the following heads—central, provincial, district and village. The administration of the city of Pataliputra was separate.

Central administration

The king was the supreme head of the state and had fourfold functions: military, judicial, executive and legislative. The king personally adjudicated the cases that came before them. It is said of the Mauryan kings, especially Chandragupta Maurya, that he never kept his petitioners waiting. He obviously followed the exhortations of Kautilya, his minister, who observed in his Arthashastra that, 'when in the court, he (the king) shall never cause his petitioners to wait at the door, for when a king makes himself inaccessible to the people and entrusts his work to his immediate officers, his downfall is inevitable.' The king was assisted by a Mantri Parishad or a Council of Ministers. The various branches of the administration were under officials called the Amatyas. In military affairs, the king was assisted by the Senapati, i.e. the Commander-in-Chief.

Besides the Amatyas and the Senapati, we also get references of officials like Pulisani and the Prativedakas. The Pulisani kept the emperor reported on the public opinion in the kingdom. The Prativedakas, on the other hand, were special reporters. They had access to the king at all hours.

The espionage system was a unique feature of the Mauryan administration. Spies were appointed from among the most faithful.

Provincial Administration

The empire was divided into provinces, each under a Kumara or Aryaputra (prince). The Kumaras worked in the capacity of viceroys or governors. Ashokan edicts inform about the four provincial capitals, namely, Taxila (capital of the northern provinces), Ujjain (capital of the western provinces), Tosali (capital of the eastern provinces) and Suvarnagiri (capital of southern provinces). The Kumaras were assisted by Mahamattas.

District Administration

The provinces were divided into a number of districts. These districts were administered by:

Pradesikas They were officers-in-charge of the overall administration of a district.

Rajukas They looked after the law and order and revenue collection.

Yuktas They were subordinate officers who kept accounts.

Village Administration

The districts were divided into a number of villages. Gopa and Sthanika were important village officials. It is interesting to note that the Gopa kept a census of the population of each village.

City of Pataliputra

Pataliputra was the capital of the empire. It was surrounded by a wooden wall. There was also a moat around the city to protect it from enemy attacks. A committee of 30 members looked after the city. This committee was divided into six boards, each consisting of five members.

Military Administration

The Mauryans maintained a vast standing army of more than 600,000 men. The king controlled the military through a war office comprising thirty members, who were experts in different branches of warfare.

The war office was divided into six boards of five members each, namely:

- Board of Admiralty
- Board of Infantry
- Board of Cavalry
- Board of War Chariots
- Board of War Elephants and
- Board of Transport and Commissariat and Army service.

Such scientific division and control of the military administration while making the Mauryan army invincible, spoke eloquently of the efficiency and ability of the Mauryas.

Revenue Administration

We get references of bhaga and bali being collected by the Mauryans. Bhaga was the king's share of the produce of the soil. It was normally fixed between one-fourth and one-sixth of the produce. Bali was a land tribute.

Other sources of revenue were mines, forests, roads, tolls, fines, goods and precious stones. The money collected on taxes was spent on maintenance of the army, paying salaries to government officials, charities and on public welfare activities such as building hospitals and repairing roads.

CHARACTER OF THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

The Mauryas were able administrators who established a centralized empire. Kautilya's Arthashastra mentions autonomous tribes existing within the periphery of the Mauryan Empire. Thus it may be said that the Mauryan administration was a combination of monarchy and autonomy.

To Remember

Introduction—The Mauryan Dynasty marked a new era in the history of India, Sources: Archaeological sources like Ashokan edicts and pillar inscriptions and literary sources like account of Megasthenes, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*.

Chandragupta Maurya—Chandragupta Maurya is the founder of the Maurya Dynasty, Background: Alexander's invasion of 326 BC dislocated kingdoms in the north-west, Early life: Trained by Kautilya, taking advantage of the political turmoil and unpopularity of Dhanananda, Chandragupta overthrew the Nanda Dynasty, also dealt with the Greeks very firmly, extended the empire.

Bindusara—Succeeded the throne in 297 BC, managed to keep the empire intact.

Ashoka—Hailed as the greatest of the kings by the historians, accession to the throne was not a smooth affair, Kalinga War: It was fought in 261 BC, Impact: Filled Ashoka's heart with remorse, decided to replace Bherighosh with Dhammaghosh, Ashoka and Dhamma: Dhamma a way of life, tolerance, peaceful co-existence are some of the tenets of Dhamma, Ashoka undertook Dhammayatras and appointed Dhamma Mahamattas to spread Dhamma, Welfare measures: Ashoka believed that all men were his children and therefore it was his duty to look after the people, built rest houses, hospitals and so on, Extent of Ashoka's empire: The Mauryan Empire witnessed utmost expansion under Ashoka.

Mauryan administration—King supreme, assisted by the commander-in-chief or senapati and Mantri Parishad, administration divided into central, provincial, district and village administration, run by a hierarchy of officers, espionage system the hallmark of the Mauryan Empire, revenue from *bhaga* and *bali*.

Character of the Mauryan Empire—A blend of monarchy and autonomy.

Thank You