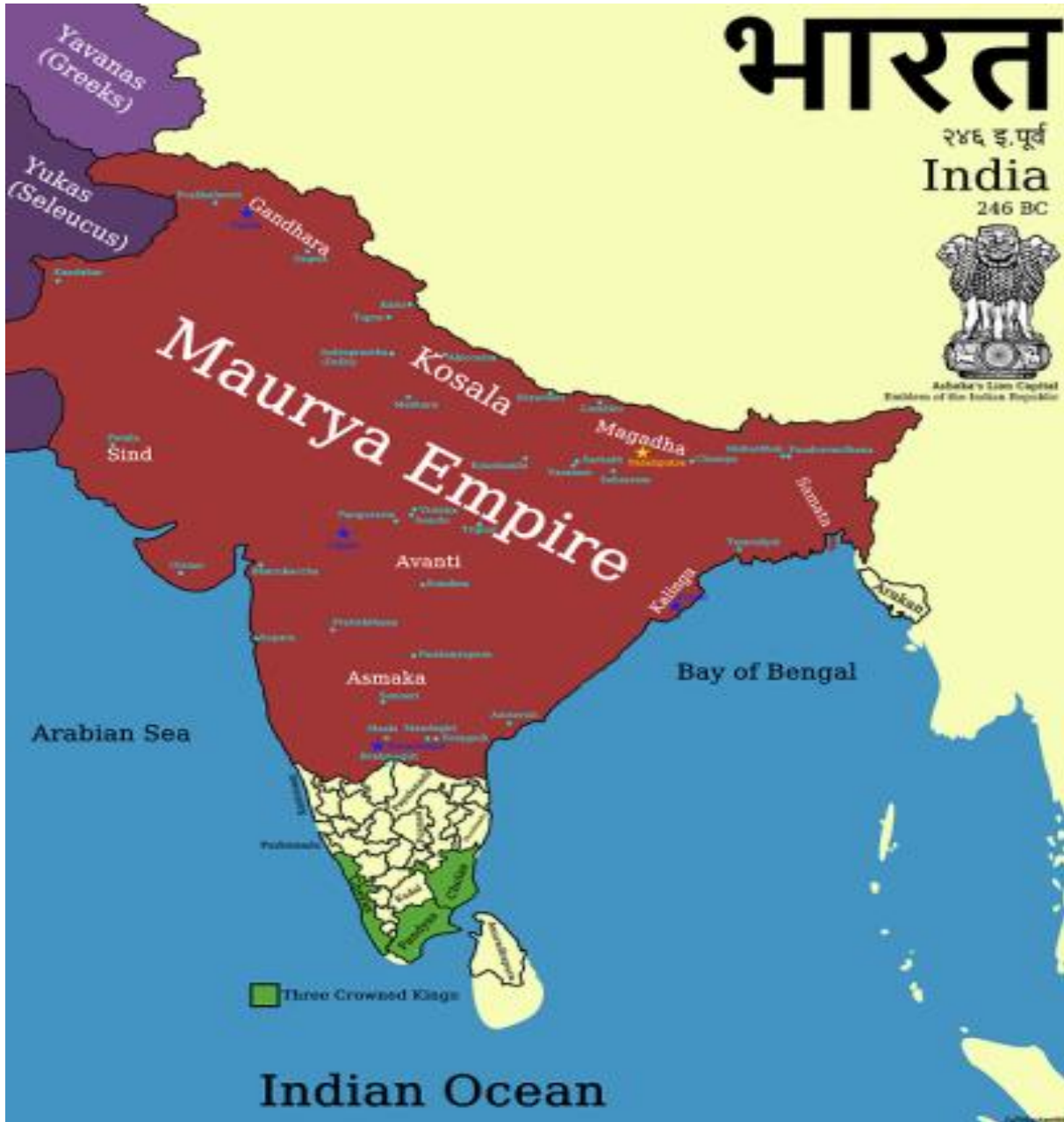


THE MAURYA EMPIRE (c. 324 – 187 BCE)

The Mauryan period is the remarkable period in the history of Indian sub-continent. It not only mark the establishment of first sub-continental empire, but also the development of innovative and comparatively stable governance strategies. Leaving Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and some parts of north-eastern India, the Mauryans ruled almost whole of the Indian Sub-continent. For the first time now we have at our disposal



a number of sources (literary sources like *Arthashastra* of *Kautilya*, *Indica* of *Magasthenes*, and the *Junagarh inscriptions* of *Rudradaman 1*, which attribute to the beginning of construction of *Sudarshana lake* during Chandragupta's reign) and edicts issued by Ashoka that throw a clearer light on the history of this period.

THE MAURAYAN DYNASTY

The founder of mauryan dynasty, **Chandragupta Maurya (324/321 – 297 BCE)**, inherited a large army of the Nandas, which he used to conquer almost whole of north India, the North-west, and a large part of peninsular India. There is lot of ambiguity about the origins and caste of maurya family.

In the wake of the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, Chandragupta (or Chandragupta Maurya), founder of the Mauryan dynasty, conquered the Punjab region from the southeastern edges of Alexander's former empire. The Seleucids, a contending dynasty for Alexander's legacy, attempted to advance into India in 305 BCE. They were defeated and, after the conclusion of a treaty, the Seleucids and the Mauryans maintained friendly relations. Now enjoying peace along the western border, Chandragupta was free to focus his military exploits to the east and to the south. By the end of his reign, he had extended his empire across northern India. His son, **Bindusara**, continued the empire's expansion well into the Deccan, stopping around the region known today as Karnataka.

Bindusara's son, Ashoka (reigned *c.* 265–238 BCE or *c.* 273–232 BCE), added Kalinga to the already vast empire. That addition would be the last, however, as the brutal conquest of that region led Ashoka to abandon military conquest. Rather, he embraced Buddhism and instituted dharma as the state ideology.

Much is known of the reign of this Buddhist Mauryan emperor from the edicts inscribed on exquisitely executed stone pillars that he had erected throughout his realm. Those edicts constitute some of the oldest deciphered original texts of India. After his conversion, his notion of conquest consisted of sending many Buddhist emissaries throughout Asia and commissioning some of the finest works of ancient Indian art.

After Ashoka's death the empire shrank because of invasions, defections by southern princes, and quarrels over ascension. The last ruler, Brihadratha, was killed in 185 BCE by his Brahman commander in chief, Pushyamitra, who then founded the Shunga dynasty, which ruled in central India for about a century.

THE EDICTS OF ASHOKA

Edict	Ashoka Inscription Details
Pillar Edict I	Ashoka's principle of protecting his people.
Pillar Edict II	Dhamma
Pillar Edict III	Avoiding practices of cruelty, sin, harshness, pride and anger among his subjects.
Pillar Edict IV	Responsibilities of the Rajukas.
Pillar Edict V	List of animals and birds that should not be killed on certain days. Another list which mentions animals that should never be killed.
Pillar Edict VI	Dhamma policy of the State.
Pillar Edict VII	Ashoka's work for fulfilling Dhamma. Tolerance for all sects.

Perhaps one of the greatest-known accomplishments of Ashoka was his creation of his edicts, which were erected between 269 BCE and 232 BCE. The Edicts of Ashoka, set in stone, are found throughout the Subcontinent. Ranging from as far west as Afghanistan, and as far south as Andhra (Nellore District), Ashoka's edicts state his policies and accomplishments. Although predominantly written in Prakrit, two of

them were written in Greek, and one in both Greek and Aramaic. Ashoka's edicts refer to the Greeks, Kambojas, and Gandharas as peoples forming a frontier region of his empire. They also attest to Ashoka's envoys' travels to the Greek rulers in the west as far as the Mediterranean. Ashoka's edicts also mentioned social and cultural attributes of his empire, emphasizing Buddhism, though not condemning other religions. For this, the Edicts of Ashoka are known as an early document that promoted religious tolerance.

MAJOR MONUMENTS OF MAURAYAN DYNASTY

Pillars:

The court art of Ashoka is best seen in the white- grey sandstone columns erected by him all over his empire either to mark a sacred site associated with Buddha's life or to commemorate a great event. On many of these pillars are inscribed the famous edicts of Ashoka propagating the Dhamma ([Dharma or Laws of the Buddha) or the imperial sermons of Ashoka to his people. Rising to an average height of about 40 feet, the pillars in their most developed state, are tall, tapering monoliths with sculptured capitals, incorporating a series of fluted petals in elongated shape, (which falling together take the form of a bell, commonly known as the Persepolitan Bell) surmounted by a circular abacus ornamented with animal and floral motifs in relief. There is a crowning animal sculpture on the round, which is usually the lion, bull or elephant, represented singly on the early capitals, and grouped on the later ones. In the bull capital from Rampurva (now in the National Museum at New Delhi) the bull is rendered naturalistically in a manner reminiscent of seal carving from the Indus civilisation, suggesting continuity in tradition. The lion capital once stood at Sarnath from where Buddha preached his first sermon. The animals around the drum of the capital—consecutively the bull, horse, lion and elephant between which are depictions of chakras (wheels)—almost appear to be pulling an invisible vehicle as if to perpetuate the wheel of Dhamma. The pillar in its original form had a gigantic stone wheel crowning the top of the lions. The crisp carving, smooth polish and high quality of craftsmanship have earned this work, particularly the capital, and a reputation as one of ancient India's greatest artistic achievements.

Rock-cut Architecture:

Ashoka's reign also saw the firm establishment of one of the most important and characteristic art traditions of South Asia—the rock-cut architecture. The series of rock-cut sanctuaries in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills, near Gaya in Bihar, contain a number of inscriptions which show that they were donated for the habitation of certain Ajivika ascetics, perhaps followers of the Jain religion. Architecturally, their main interest lies in being the earliest known examples in India of the rock-cut method. Also they represent a contemporary type of structure that combined wood and thatch. Sudama and Lomas Rishi caves are the two notable hermitages, each consisting of a circular cell with a hemispherical domed roof attached to a barrel-vaulted anteroom with side entrances.

The Stupa:

The stupa was not unknown in India before the time of Ashoka. It was originally a simple burial mound of earth and bricks erected by the Vedic Aryans. There is no evidence of veneration paid to relic-mounds in the pre-Maurya period.

From the time Ashoka divided up the existing body relics of the Buddha and erected monuments to enshrine them, the stupas became objects of cult worship. Gradually, in Buddhist art and religion, the stupa came to be accepted as a sort of architectural body representing the Buddha himself. The core of the stupa was of unburnt brick, and the outer face of burnt brick, covered with a thick layer of plaster. The stupa was crowned by an umbrella of wooden fence enclosing a path for pradakshina.

Human Figures:

Several stone sculptures of human figures demonstrating characteristics of the Maurya period have been found. Of these, one is an extremely well-preserved statue of a female chowrie (fly whisk) bearer (now in the Patna Museum) which was found by villagers at Didarganj. The technique, surface refinement and high polish undoubtedly relate it to the Maurya period. The figure wears a hip-hugging garment over her lower body; its diaphanous folds are depicted by double-incised lines across her legs. Heavy ornaments, including

a jewelled or beaded girdle, anklets, armbands, necklaces and earrings adorn the figure. This type of feminine attire will be seen throughout the development of Indian art with some variation, but essentially, the clinging lower garment, bare torso and abundant jewellery became the norm.

SOME FAMOUS MONUMENTS BUILT BY MAURYANS ARE:

1. **Dhamek Stupa. Opened: 500 AD. Location: Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India. ...**
2. **Sanchi Stupa. It is 46 kilometres north-east of Bhopal, capital of Madhya Pradesh.**
3. **Ashoka Pillar. Built By- King Ashoka.**
4. **Barabar Caves. Grottoe of Lomas Rishi. 3rd century BCE.**
5. **Kesariya Stupa.**

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