



The Mauryan Empire

By Eman M. Elshaikh

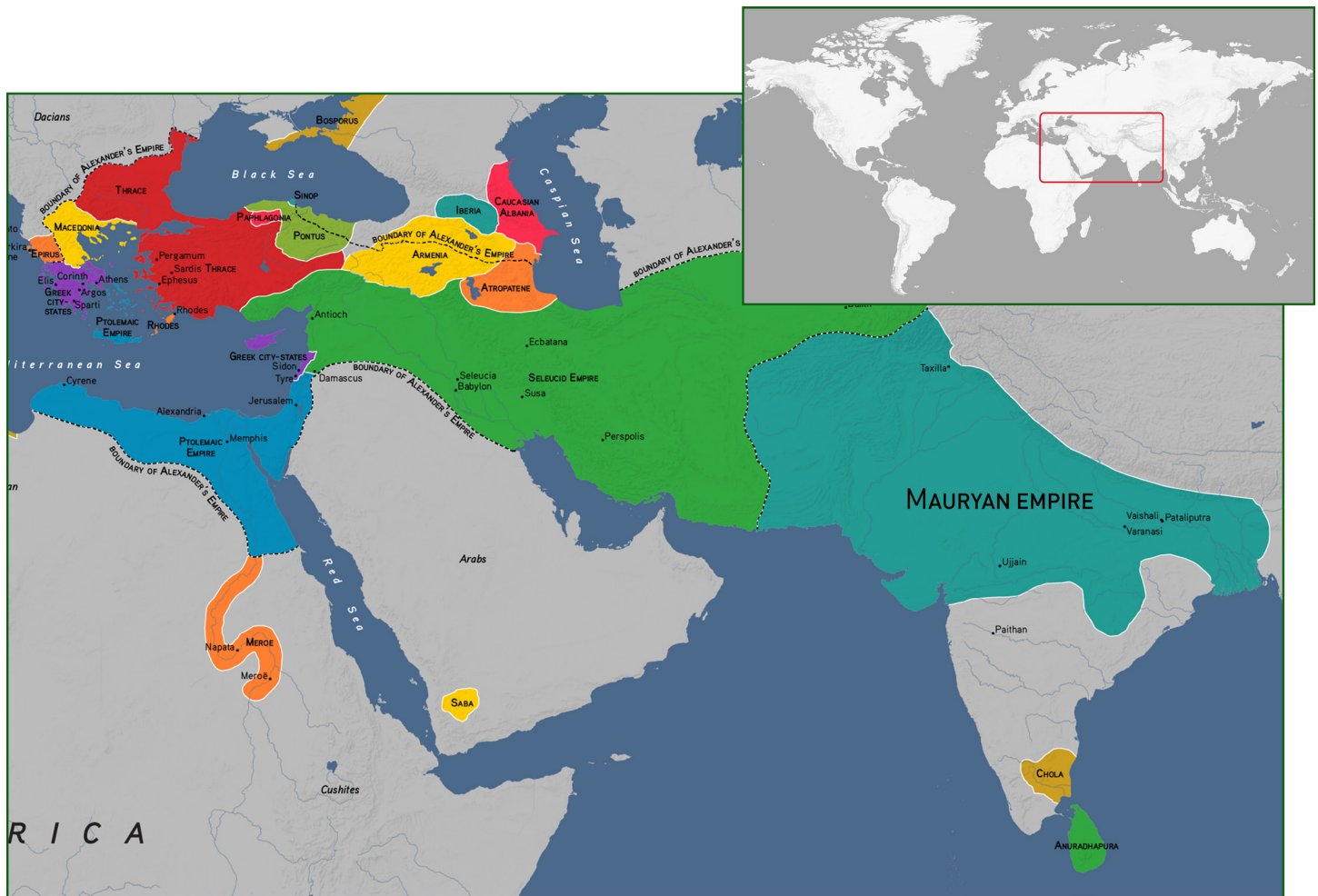
If your government wants to talk to you, it can do that in many ways. It can use the Internet. It can reach you through television broadcasts. It can contact you through the mail. Emperor Ashoka lived between 304–232 BCE. He ruled the Mauryan Empire from 321–85 BCE. This was long before the internet and television were around. But he still found a way to send messages to his people, who were spread across a big area. Emperor Ashoka communicated through messages carved into giant stone pillars.

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Geography and Environment

The pillars tell us a lot about Ashoka's **empire**. It was called the Mauryan Empire, and it was huge. It covered most of modern-day India. It included all of modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh. It also included parts of modern-day Nepal, Iran, and Afghanistan. It was a rich, plentiful land between the Indus and the Ganges Rivers.

Like societies before it, the Mauryan Empire used the rivers for transport. It used the rich soils for farming. **Monsoon** rains made the soil great for farming. Wheat and barley were grown in the Indus Plain and western parts of the Gangetic plains. Rice was grown in other parts of the Gangetic plains.



The Mauryan Empire

321 BCE–85 BCE





Ashoka's Pillar in Delhi. © Getty Images.

The emperor's ancient billboards

Ashoka's pillars were hard to miss. Some were 50 feet high. They were like modern billboards. However, they were a lot fancier. Ashoka built most of his pillars in what is now northern India. This was the power center of the region. He put the pillars in busy places to make sure many people would see them. This included trade routes, city centers, and **pilgrimage** sites.

The pillars were a way for Ashoka to talk to the public. The pillars often had messages about peace. They also had messages about being loyal to Ashoka.

Big Question #1:

How did geography and the environment shape the development of Indian societies?

Political Structure

Before the Mauryan Empire, India was split into hundreds of small kingdoms. One important kingdom was the Magadha. It controlled essential trade routes. Magadha rulers promoted locally popular belief systems. These systems were **Buddhism** and **Jainism**. They are ancient religions. The kingdom also had a strong army. Over time, it gained control over more lands. Chandragupta Maurya founded the Mauryan Empire. Maurya was Ashoka's grandfather. He increased his rule and brought many kingdoms together when he took over the Magadha.

There are peaceful messages on the stone pillars. They are written in different languages. They make people think Ashoka was a caring ruler. But he was not always peaceful. The Mauryan Empire grew like most empires did: by forcefully conquering new lands. But after one horrible battle, Ashoka changed his mind about war. He adopted peaceful Buddhist ideas. However, this didn't mean the Mauryan leaders gave up their military.



Emperor Ashoka riding a war elephant, c. first century BCE. © Getty Images.

The Mauryan Empire needed an army to maintain its lands. From those lands, the Mauryans took **taxes** and **tributes**. A tribute is money paid to stay safe, keep the peace, or show obedience to someone. They built a government with officials. They also had spies. This system helped create a centralized rule. The empire was split into provinces, or government districts. A royal administrator ruled each. This person was usually a prince. The administrators collected, stored, and used the taxes. The Mauryan spies got information from across the empire.

The Mauryans had a lot of control over the empire's **economy**. They helped set up farms. They collected money for doing this. They controlled weights and measurements. They made their own silver coins. They controlled manufacturing, mining, and trade. Roads were built to make travel faster and safer. They still used the rivers for transport, too.

■ **Big Question #2:**

What type of ruler did the Mauryan have? What strategies did the ruler use to maintain power?

Culture

The Mauryan Empire did not have a main religion. However, Ashoka's pillars sent messages of peace. Many pillars were about *dhamma*. This is an idea important to Buddhism. It is also important to Hindu and Jain traditions. It is about living a selfless, obedient, and kind life.

In Ashoka's political messages, *dhamma* meant a natural balance. Ashoka's use of *dhamma* reminded Mauryans to behave well. It reminded them to follow the empire's rules.

Ashoka called himself "Beloved of the Gods." He sometimes built pillars near Buddhist sites. He used religious messages to ask people to be loyal to him. Ashoka didn't force people to become Buddhists. He did not punish non-Buddhists. He helped spread the message of Buddhism far and wide.

The Mauryans were excellent stonemasons. A stonemason is a skilled worker who builds things with stone. The Mauryans also used iron and steel tools and weapons. This gave them an advantage over neighboring societies. Those societies mainly used stone and bronze.



Dhamek Stupa was built to honor the location where the Buddha first preached to his five disciples. This stupa is also said to be one of the eight stupa that housed the Buddha's ashes. © Getty Images.

■ **Big Question #3:**

How did belief systems influence political systems in the Mauryan Empire?

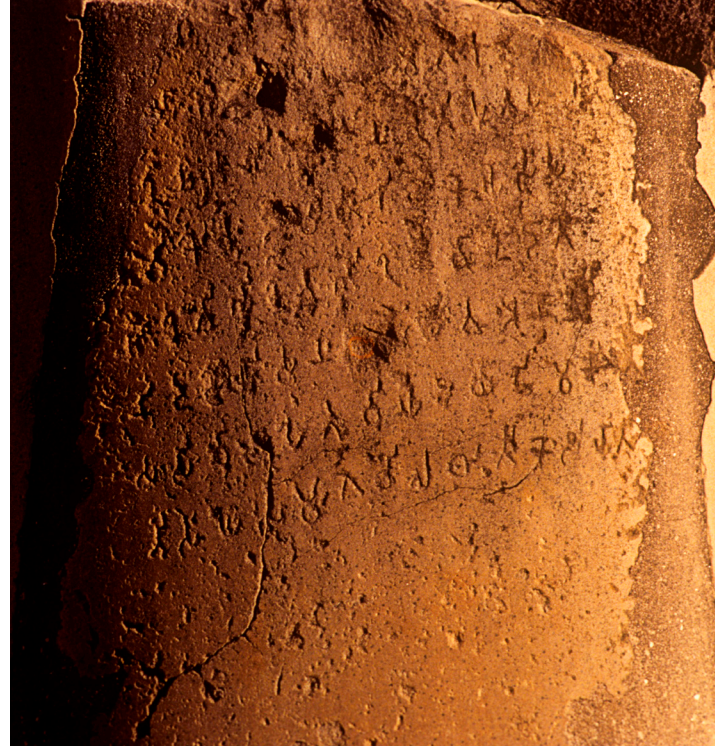
Society

Mauryan society was more open-minded than later empires. The Mauryans were tolerant of different groups. People who served in the civil service or army were treated well. People believed in family duty. They respected animals and plants. Nonviolence was very important. Many of these beliefs were drawn from Buddhist ideas. However, there were still rules to follow. People had different roles, but class systems were flexible.

On one pillar, Ashoka explained his vision for a just society:

"I consider how I may bring happiness to the people, not only to relatives of mine or residents of my capital city but also to those who are far removed from me. I act in the same manner with respect to all. I am concerned similarly with all classes. Moreover, I have honored all religious sects with various offerings. But I consider it my principal duty to visit the people personally." (Sixth Pillar Edict)

Of course, this doesn't mean that society was always fair. But historians think that **social hierarchies** in the Mauryan Empire were less rigid than other empires. People did have different jobs. But class and **caste** systems weren't always rigid. Overall, Mauryan society was pretty tolerant of differences.



Detail of inscription on an Ashokan pillar, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. © Getty Images.

■ Big Question #4:

How did belief systems influence Mauryan society including how the society was organized?

Decline and Transformation

Ashoka's empire did not last. After he died, many parts of the empire became independent again. Neighboring powers came in and took back their lands. However, Mauryan tools and ideas spread to other kingdoms. This made them stronger. This was especially the case for iron tools and weapons.

The Gupta dynasty followed the Mauryan Empire. The Guptas ruled from 320–550 CE. Like the Mauryans, the Guptas used a tax system. Their regions had their own local government. The Guptas were peaceful people who supported the arts and sciences.

The Mauryan Empire helped bring India together. Ashoka is an important symbol in India today. The Indian state symbol is three lions sitting on a wheel of dharma. It is called the Ashoka Chakra. The same wheel is also shown in the center of the current Indian flag.



India's flag and the Ashoka Chakra

The Ashoka Chakra connects ancient and modern India. It is featured in the middle of India's flag. It is on the Lion Capital of Ashoka. This is a famous statue. Both can be seen at the Vidhan Soudha state government building of Karnataka, India.

India's national symbols flag and Ashoka Chakra atop Vidhan Soudha Building in Bengaluru. © Getty Images.

■ Big Question #5:

What led to the decline and transformation of the Mauryan Empire? What replaced it?

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Map showing the extent of the Mauryan Empire. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

A photograph of a pillar in Delhi, taken in the late nineteenth century. We don't know exactly what the urban area looked like during Ashoka's time, but we can imagine these pillars in the center of town squares, near bustling trading areas, and near busy pilgrimage sites. © Royal Geographical Society via Getty Images.

Emperor Ashoka riding a war elephant, c. first century BCE. © Fine Art Images / Heritage Images / Getty Images.

Dhamek Stupa was built to honor the location where the Buddha first preached to his five disciples. This stupa is also said to be one of the eight stupa that housed the Buddha's ashes. © Rajeev Sachdeva / India Pictures / Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

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