



# The Mauryan Empire

*By Eman M. Elshaikh*

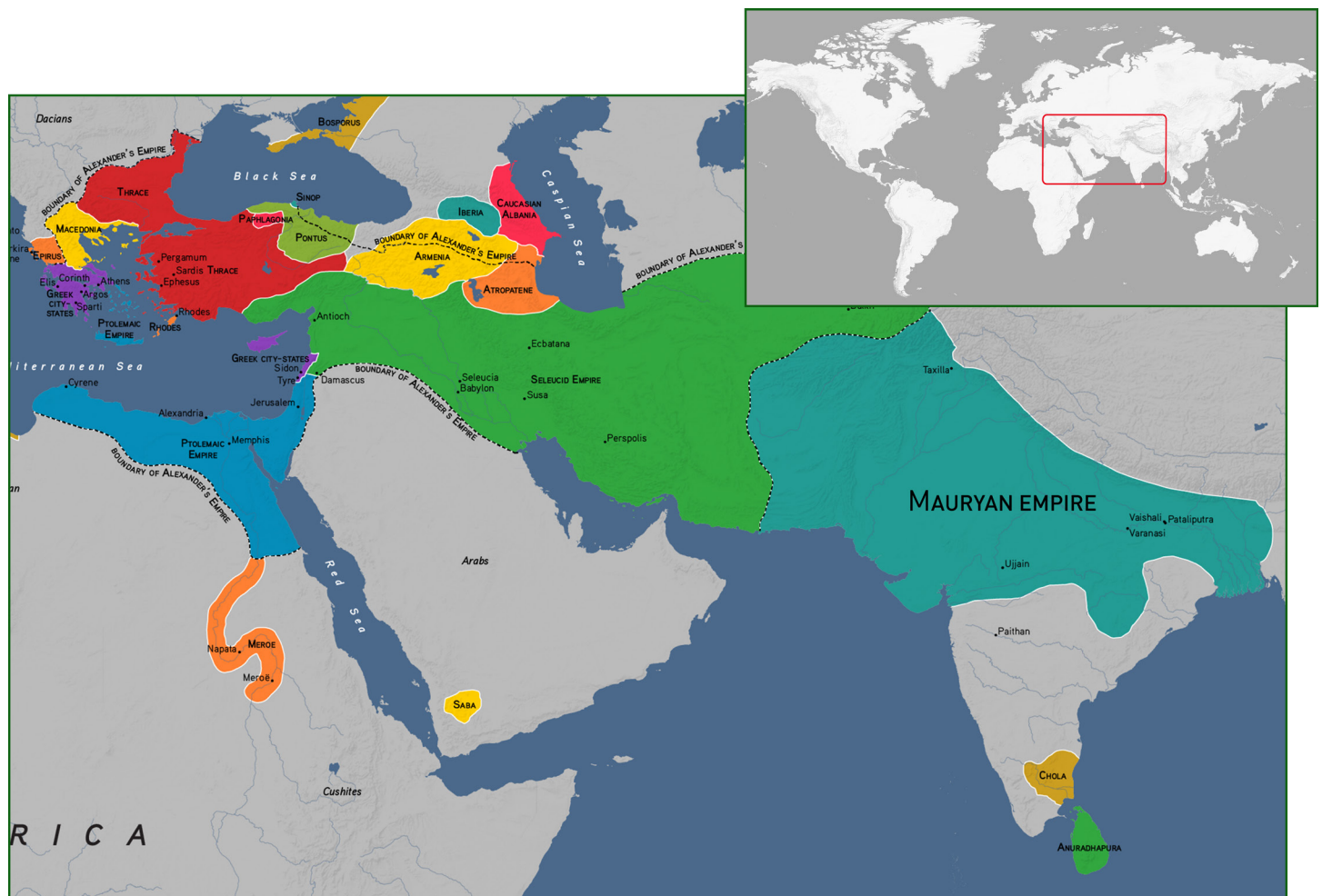
If your government wants to talk to you, it can do that in many ways: through the Internet, television broadcasts, or the mail. Emperor Ashoka lived between 304–232 BCE. He ruled the Mauryan Empire from 321–85 BCE. This was long before the Internet and television were around. But he still found a way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

## 700L

## Geography and Environment

These pillars tell us a lot about Ashoka's big **empire**. The empire stretched across the Indo-Gangetic plain. This rich, plentiful area is between the Indus and the Ganges Rivers. The Mauryan Empire included most of modern-day India. It covered all of modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh. It also included parts of modern-day Nepal, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Like societies before it, the Mauryan Empire used the rivers for transport. It used the rich soils for farming. **Monsoon** rains made the soil excellent 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







### The emperor's ancient billboards

Ashoka's pillars were hard to miss—some were 50 feet high. They were a bit like modern billboards but 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.

These pillars were a way for Emperor Ashoka to talk to the public. He could make announcements and share new laws. The pillars often had messages about peace and tolerance. But they also communicated Ashoka's demand for loyalty from his people.

*Ashoka's Pillar in Delhi. © Getty Images.*

### 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 important 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 was Ashoka's grandfather and the founder of the Mauryan Empire. When he took over, he expanded his rule. He brought together many kingdoms.

There are peaceful messages on the giant stone pillars. They are written in different languages. They make people think of Ashoka as 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 particularly horrible battle, Ashoka changed his mind about war and adopted peaceful Buddhist ideas. That didn't mean the Mauryan leaders gave up their military, though.



*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 and allies. 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 collected information from across the empire.

The Mauryans had a lot of control over the empire's **economy**. They were actively involved in setting up farms. They collected money for providing this service. The state controlled weights and measurements. It controlled manufacturing, mining, and trade. The Mauryans made their own silver coins to trade with. To allow for safe and speedy movement, they built roads and continued to use rivers for transport.

### ■ 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 an official religion. However, Ashoka's pillars sent messages of peace and tolerance. Many pillars were about *dharmma*. This is a concept important to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. It is about living a selfless, obedient, and compassionate life. In Ashoka's political messages, it meant a natural balance. Ashoka's use of *dharmma* 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, nor did he punish non-Buddhists. However, he wasn't too kind to those who insulted the Buddha. 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, which 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?



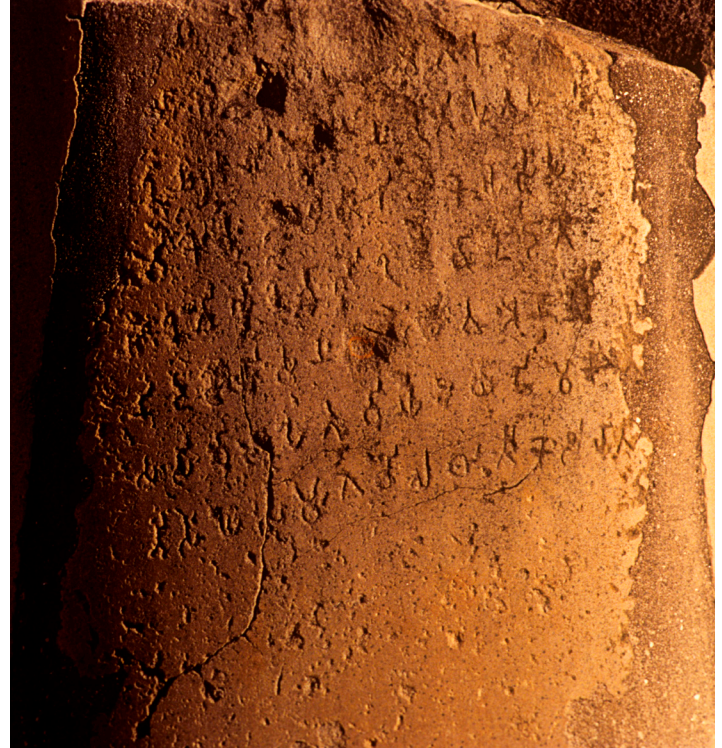
## Society

Historians think Mauryan society was more open-minded than the empires that followed it. The Mauryans were tolerant of different groups. Those who served in the civil service or army were treated well. People believed in family duty and respect for animals and plants. Nonviolence was particularly important. Many of these beliefs were drawn from Buddhist ideas.

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. Like most complex **urban** societies, 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

Despite Ashoka's successes, his empire did not last. After Ashoka died, many parts of the empire declared themselves independent. Neighboring powers swept in and took back their lands. However, many Mauryan tools and ideas spread to other kingdoms. This exchange made them stronger. This was especially the case when it came to iron tools and weapons.

The Gupta dynasty followed the Mauryan Empire. The Guptas took over many parts of northern India, ruling from 320–550 CE. Like the Mauryans, the Guptas had a tax system. Their regions also had their own local government. The Guptas were peaceful, and the arts and sciences did well during their rule.

The Mauryan Empire is remembered as the kingdom that helped form India. 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, 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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Eman M. Elshaikh is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K–12, undergraduate, and graduate students in the United States and in the Middle East. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's in social sciences and is currently pursuing a PhD. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop a curriculum for AP® world history.

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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.

**Detail of inscription on an Ashokan pillar,** Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. © Shalini Saran / India Pictures / Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

**Modern Indian national symbols show the Mauryan Empire's legacy.** © Pallava Bagla via Getty Images.



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