



The Mauryan and Gupta Empires

By Rosie Friedland, adapted from Khan Academy

The Mauryan (322-185 BCE) and Gupta (320-550 CE) empires of India united large areas of the subcontinent. Ashoka's reign spread Buddhism far and wide, and under the Guptas, India's arts and sciences flourished.

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Background

Before the Mauryan Empire, the Indian subcontinent was divided into hundreds of small kingdoms. These kingdoms were frequently at war with each other.

In 327 BCE, Alexander of Macedon, commonly known as Alexander the Great, and his troops entered India and overran the Punjab region. Alexander left after only two years. However, his defeat of the region's major powers gave other groups the opportunity to seize control.

The kingdom of Magadha was the first new power to emerge. It had survived the Macedonian expansion by being just out of Alexander's reach. Alexander's reached the kingdom's borders, but refused to go on. After Alexander's departure from India, the rulers of Magadha took advantage of the weakened state of many Indian kingdoms. They gained control of trade networks that passed through the Ganges valley and of sea routes to the Bay of Bengal.

Formation

After Magadha gained control of the area from the Ganges to the Bay of Bengal, Chandragupta Maurya took control of the kingdom. His conquests transformed the Magadha kingdom into the Mauryan Empire. He expanded to the west. Chandragupta Maurya conquered northwestern India and Bactria (modern Afghanistan). Chandragupta Maurya successfully unified the divided communities of the northern and central Indian subcontinent under one empire.

Administration

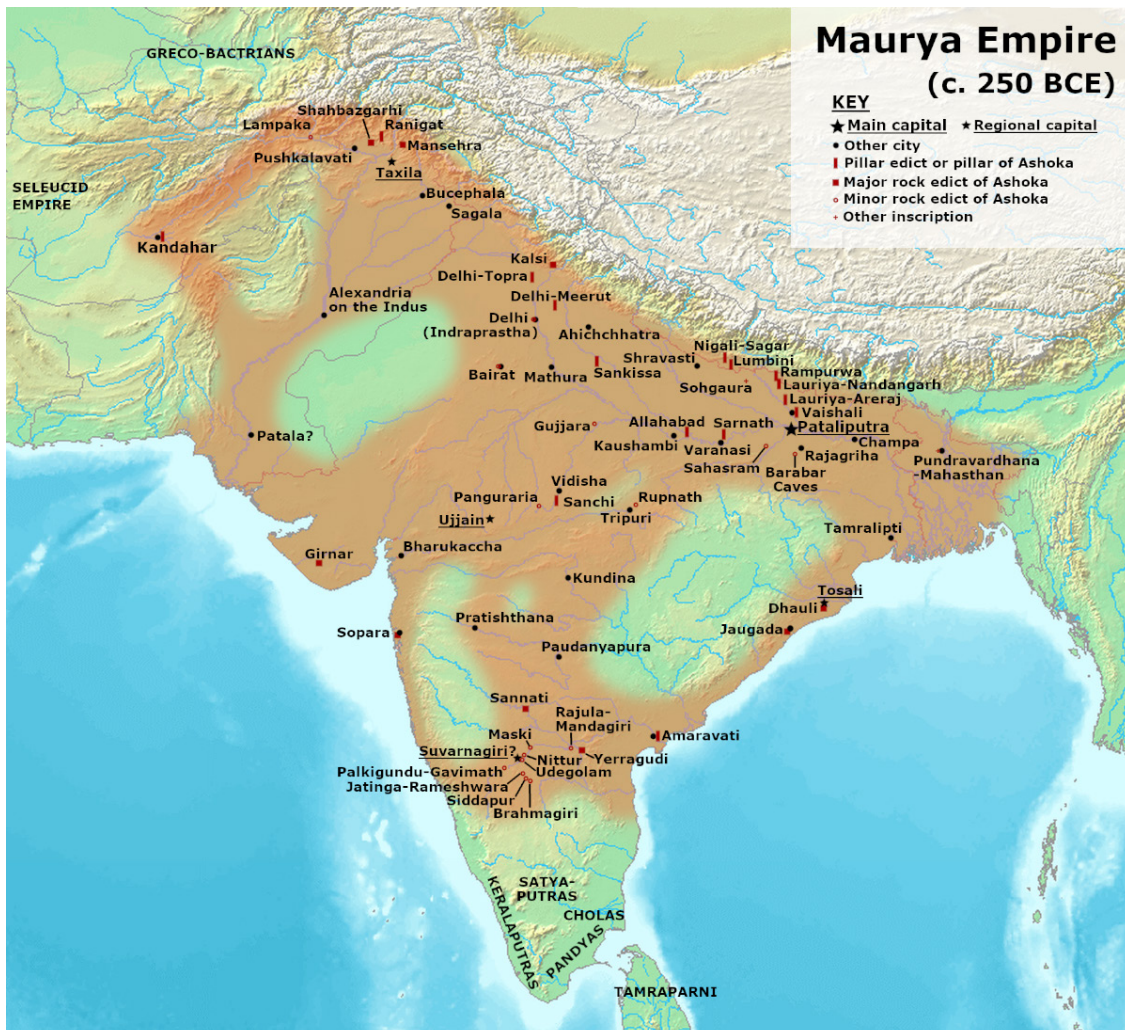
Chandragupta ruled from 324 to 297 BCE. He used his army to expand the empire and maintain control over it. In 305 BCE, Seleucus I Nicator, the emperor of the Seleucids, began to wage war against Chandragupta. Seleucus was one of several of Alexander's generals who proclaimed themselves emperor after Alexander died unexpectedly with no heir. The Seleucid Empire stretched from the Mediterranean Sea all the way to northwestern India. The Seleucids ruled a mighty empire, but Chandragupta raised an army to challenge their power. The stronger Mauryan army forced Seleucus to sign a peace treaty.

Chandragupta adopted the Persian model of satrapies (provinces) to administer his empire. The Mauryans used vast spy networks to collect intelligence for security purposes.

Toward the end of Chandragupta's reign, the Indian subcontinent was hit by famine. The emperor felt so badly for his starving subjects that he gave up the throne and fasted. His son Bindusara took over, and after Chandragupta died from his fast in 297, BCE Bindusara expanded the borders of the empire. Bindusara died in 272 BCE. His son, Ashoka, became emperor in 268 BCE.



Chandragupta Maurya. By Dharmadhyaksha, public domain.



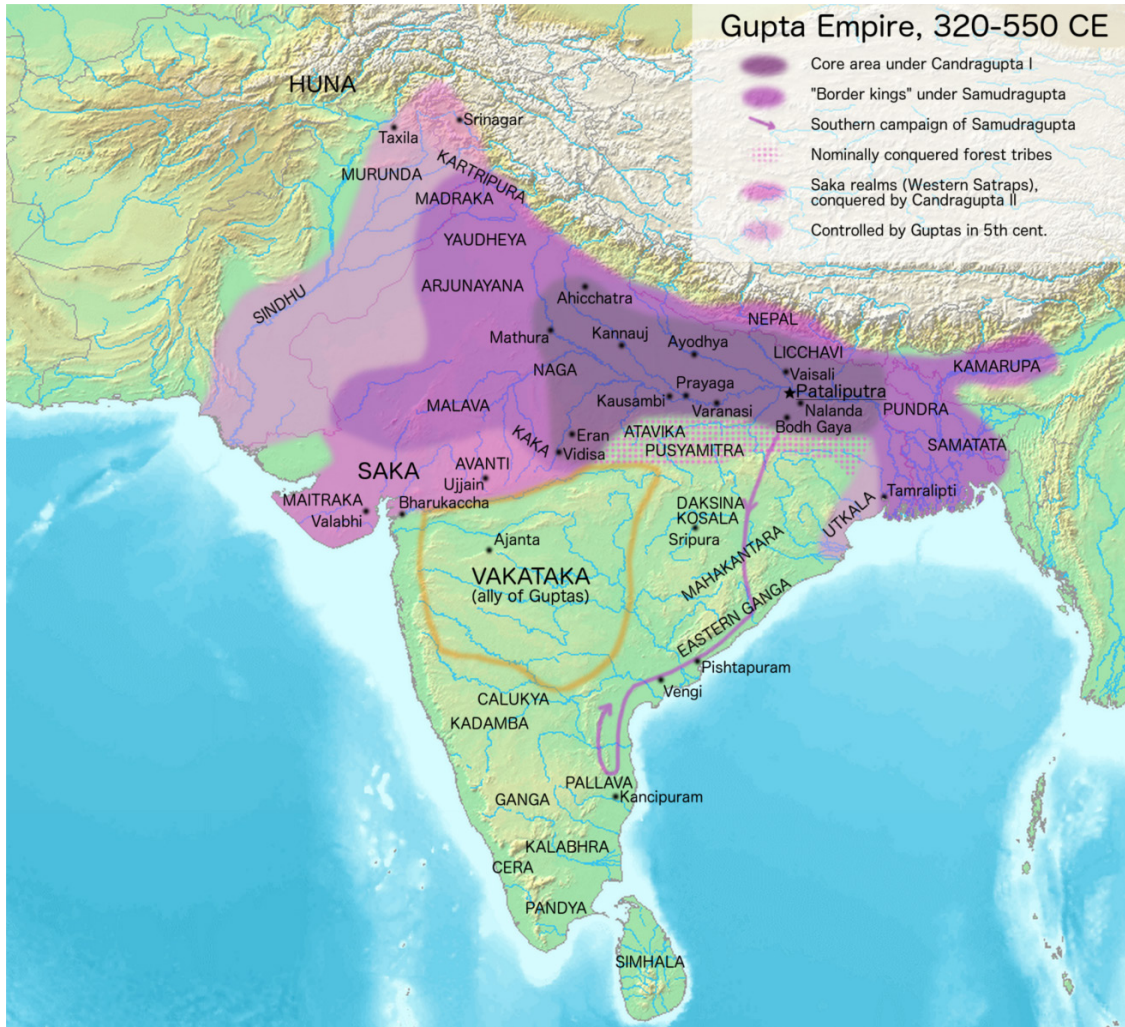
Map of the Mauryan Empire, 250 BCE. By Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Ashoka grew the Mauryan Empire through military force. After one particularly bloody battle, however, he changed. Instead of violence, he wanted “conquest by dharma,” or good deeds. Dharma is a central concept in Buddhism, which considers good deeds a path to enlightenment.

If you’re an emperor, there are a lot of ways to get people to do what you want. However, Ashoka’s conquest by dharma was a revolutionary concept. This man was known to be a brutal warrior. But, Ashoka was transformed by his conversion to Buddhism. The new, gentler Ashoka devoted the rest of his rule to spreading the Buddhist faith and helping his people. In fact, the spread of Buddhism became one of Ashoka’s most lasting legacies. He personally traveled the empire spreading his message, and he erected Buddhist structures across the empire. One of the most significant aspects of his conquest by dharma was his support of Buddhist missionaries. Ashoka sent missionaries to neighboring regions, helping begin the spread of Buddhism far outside the Indian subcontinent.

Like all empires, the Mauryan Empire could not last forever. Indeed, it only survived Ashoka by fifty years. But three centuries later, the Gupta Empire emerged in the same region. Sri Gupta founded this empire between 240 and 280 CE. His successors expanded their territory through conquest and marriage. Under Chandragupta II, who reigned from 380 to 415 CE, the Gupta Empire extended across northern India. Like Ashoka, Chandragupta II made

Pataliputra the capital of his empire and centralized the government there. However, he let regions make their own decisions about administration and local governance. The Gupta Empire was a golden age in India, marked by peace and public safety as the arts and sciences flourished.



Gupta Empire, map based upon the work of D. Rothmund's *A History of India* (2004). By Avantiputra7, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Religion

India's three major belief systems are Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. All three share similar practices and ideals. These include fasting and vegetarianism, and a belief in the importance of nonviolence and of giving up all earthly possessions.

Religion played a significant role in the Mauryan Empire. A Jain spiritual advisor predicted a famine during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. When this prediction came true, Chandragupta embraced the beliefs of Jainism and retreated to a life of fasting.

As mentioned above, after Ashoka gained control of the empire, he converted to Buddhism and devoted his energies to spreading the religion. Ashoka is perhaps best known for his construction of pillars that were inscribed with

edicts (announcements). He also built places of meditation called *stupas*. The pillars feature the teachings of both Ashoka and the Buddha and concentrate on respecting all life. Here are some examples:

“Rock Edict VII, King Priyadarsi wishes members of all faiths to live everywhere in his kingdom. For they all seek mastery of the senses and purity of mind. ...Kalinga Edict II, King Priyadarsi says: ...All men are my children. Just as I seek the welfare and happiness of my own children in this world and the next, I seek the same things for all men. Unconquered peoples along the borders of my dominions may wonder what my disposition is toward them. My only wish with respect to them is that they should not fear me, but trust me; that they should expect only happiness from me, not misery; that they should understand further that I will forgive them for offenses which can be forgiven; that they should be induced by my example to practice Dharma; and that they should attain happiness in this world and the next” (Ashoka, 51-53).



[Ashoka pillar at Vaishali, Bihar, India.](#) By Bpilgrim, CC BY-SA 2.5.

These were the public announcements of a man who was once known for his cruelty. Ashoka's conversion had lasting effects on how he ruled and in the transformation of Buddhism into a world religion.

Trade

Trade expanded greatly under the rule of India's ancient empires. Chandragupta Maurya established a single currency across India. He also set up a network of administrators and civil servants who helped provide justice and security for merchants and traders. During Ashoka's reign, the government built major roadways. Trade with other regions, including Persia, quickly increased. India's major exports included silk, textiles, and spices.

Women and society

Much of Indian society was governed by a strict class system. Known as the caste system, this divided people by their family's professions, location, and background. A person's caste often determined their rights and responsibilities.

Caste played a large role in the lives of women. Women in both Mauryan and Gupta India were most often confined to roles as wives and mothers. Women's ownership rights were restricted. Many women maintained some rights to hold property, often gifted from their families and husbands. Most upper-caste Indian women stayed in the home, meaning they often had less freedom of movement than women from lower castes. Women of lower castes left home to work and enjoyed more freedom of movement than noble women. Many of these women worked in the textile industry. Their work generated revenue for their families, and traded their surplus goods at market. The labor of these women textile workers produced many of the export goods of both empires.

As Buddhism spread throughout India under the reign of Ashoka, many women joined Buddhist nunneries. Buddhists lived outside of the caste system. They focused on overcoming desire and achieving personal growth through enlightenment. These teachings were appealing to many women living under India's caste system.

Decline/fall

The Gupta Empire ended with the invasion of pastoralist tribes from Central Asia, at the end of the fifth century CE. The age of empires in India came to an end after the fall of the Gupta. India remained divided into several separate regional kingdoms until the sixteenth century CE, when the Mughal Empire conquered the subcontinent.

Sources

Ashoka. *The Edicts of Ashoka*. (N.A. Nikam & R. McKeon, Eds. and Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

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Rosie Friedland is a content contributor at Khan Academy. She has created materials for a variety of Khan Academy's test prep offerings, including free SAT prep in partnership with College Board. She has also worked on course materials for Grammar, World History, U.S. History, and early-grade English Language Arts.

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