THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

In 330 BCE, Alexander the Great, king of Macedon, defeated and killed Darius III of Iran. Alexander and his army then headed east through Iran to northwestern India, which had been conquered by the Iranians almost 200 years earlier. Alexander reached Indian Punjab, but when his army threatened to mutiny, he withdrew. A man named Chandragupta Maurya, and his Brahmin adviser who is called Kautilya, Chanakya, or Vishnugupta, apparently took advantage of the disorder that followed the Macedonian withdrawal to seize territory in Punjab. From this base, they moved eastward, and, about 325 or 321 BCE, defeated the king of Magadha. Chandragupta founded the Mauryan dynasty of Magadha. He must have ruled all, or almost all, of the Aryan world. In 305 BCE, he seems to have defeated Seleucus Nicator, a Greek general who had made himself king of Syria and Iran after Alexander’s death, and added parts of Afghanistan to his dominions.

Chandragupta ruled Magadha until about 297 BCE, when his son Bindusara became king. Bindusara probably conquered territory in the vast Deccan plateau of peninsular India (the modern states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh). He died about 272 BCE. The next king was his son Ashoka, one of greatest monarchs in the history of India. Thanks to the conquests of previous kings of Magadha, Ashoka ruled a huge empire, extending from Afghanistan to Karnataka, and from Gujarat to Kalinga on the Bay of Bengal, even if he did not (as is sometimes said) rule the whole subcontinent. Kalinga played a pivotal role in Ashoka’s life, as eight years after he became king, he subjugated the region in a bloody war. Ashoka claimed to have been transformed by remorse over the loss of life in Kalinga. Whether he really was or not, he apparently became a Buddhist and adopted a new ethical system in his administration.

Ashoka was the first known ruler in South Asia to set up inscriptions, texts carved in stone and publicly displayed. His inscriptions, which are found all over India, include a pillar at Sarnath, where Buddha is said to have preached his first sermon. Its capital bears sculpted lions, which have been adopted as a symbol of modern India. Thanks to his inscriptions, we know more about Ashoka than any previous Indian king. The inscriptions suggest that Ashoka was a devout Buddhist. But despite what has sometimes been said, Ashoka’s personal Buddhist beliefs seem to have been distinct from the ethical policy that he adopted after the Kalinga war. He used the Prakrit word dhamma for this policy, which called on his people to make kindness to other living things the guiding principle of their lives. He led the way by providing medical care for humans and animals, planting fruit trees along the sides of roads to give shade and food, and becoming a partial vegetarian. It is likely that the policy of dhamma agreed with Ashoka’s own beliefs, but it was also politically useful: the king probably hoped it would bridge the many divisions (religious, linguistic, economic, cultural) among his subjects with an ideology that almost everyone could accept, all under his leadership.

Besides Ashoka’s inscriptions, we have two major sources of information about Mauryan India. One is the fragments of a book by Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to Chandragupta’s court. The other source is a Sanskrit book called Arthashastra, which is said to have been written by Chandragupta’s adviser Kautilya. The existing version of Arthashastra was edited 500 years after Kautilya’s time, but many scholars believe it contains passages by Kautilya, along with later additions. Kautilya supposedly wrote Arthashastra to show Chandragupta how to rule Magadha. The book contains information on Mauryan government, although it is unclear how much of it is what Kautilya (or later authors) wanted and how far it reflects the way things really were. In any case, Arthashastra describes a centralized administration, under the personal control of the king. It recommends that the king have secret agents all over the country, both to detect dissent and to keep in touch with the people. Whether this was actually done or not, we know that Ashoka ruled through a large body of paid bureaucrats.

The majority of the population of Mauryan India was rural. As they do today, peasants lived in villages near their fields. Their main food crops were wheat and barley in the north, rice in the Gangetic plain, and millet in dryer areas (such as the Deccan). From before the time of the Mauryas, the principal tax in India
was the land revenue, later called the lagaan, which was collected at a rate of between one sixth and one third the value of the crop.

By the time of Chandragupta, cities existed in the old Aryan world of north India, and probably also in the Deccan. Elsewhere, the Mauryas may have established new cities, for by the end of the dynasty, urban settlements existed in all parts of India except the extreme south. Nevertheless, outside of the Gangetic plain, Mauryan cities fall into distinct clusters. These were apparently separated from one another by regions inhabited by Tribals, where the Mauryas may have only controlled the roads linking the urbanized areas.

Cities were centers for administration, manufacturing, and commerce. Mauryan India had an extensive trade with the Mediterranean world. Its significance is shown by the fact that Indians called all foreign merchants Yavanas, Greeks. Merchants had used writing for several centuries before the accession of Ashoka, and it was now employed by the government as well. The language of administration was Magadhi, the Prakrit spoken in Magadha. There is little evidence that Sanskrit was written before Mauryan times, but Arthashastra is in Sanskrit, and it is difficult to believe that it was handed down orally. This suggests that Brahmans like Kautilya now wrote in Sanskrit, most likely in the Brahmi script that was already used for Prakrits.

The greatest Mauryan city was the capital, Pataliputra, in the modern state of Bihar. In Pataliputra, archaeologists have found a pillared hall, apparently built by Chandragupta, which is the oldest known stone building in India. In keeping with his Buddhist leanings, Ashoka built at Buddhist holy places. The Mauryan period seems to mark the beginning of Buddhist construction in permanent materials. Ashoka died about 235 BCE. The Mauryan empire began to disintegrate almost immediately, showing that dhamma was insufficient to hold together so vast a territory. The decline has been connected with economic eacy, poor communications, problems in managing the bureaucracy, or war. About 185 BCE, the last Mauryan king of Magadha was overthrown, but the Mauryas had played a key role in the development of South Asia. By bringing Gangetic civilization to more of India than ever before, they created lasting cultural and economic ties over much of the country, particularly among the urban areas. India was politically divided after the death of Ashoka, but cities and the Gangetic civilization (which now becomes Classical Indian civilization) continued to spread, and trade grew steadily.

Buddhism and Hinduism

Probably thanks to Ashoka, Buddhism spread across India after the Mauryas. This was accompanied by a change in Buddhist theology. A belief arose that rather than reach Nirvana, someone who lived an exemplary life would be reborn as a Bodhisattva ("one whose essence is perfect knowledge") with the power to answer the prayers of ordinary mortals for salvation. It has been suggested that this doctrine was borrowed from Christianity.

Buddhists who believed this teaching called it the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle to Nirvana, and they referred to traditional Buddhism as the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle. Indian monks carried Mahayana Buddhism to China, from where it reached Japan. By the time of the Guptas (ca 4th-5th centuries CE), Mahayana had replaced Hinayana as the dominant form of Buddhism in India. Hinayana survived in Sri Lanka, and from there it was taken to Southeast Asia. In the eighth century CE, a third form of Buddhism appeared, Vajrayana, the Vehicle of the Thunderbolt. Vajrayana Buddhists used magic, called the thunderbolt, to maintain the goodwill of a pantheon of goddesses. In the eleventh century, Vajrayana Buddhism was adopted in Tibet, where it developed into modern Tibetan Buddhism.

It is sometimes said that during the first millennium CE, the old Brahminical religion won back the allegiance of Indians whose ancestors had lapsed into other faiths. It would be more correct to say that in this period the Brahminical religion merged with folk beliefs, regional traditions, and elements of Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions to form a new faith. The term Hindu was not used in India until long after this period, but it is convenient to refer to this new faith as Hinduism. Hinduism is now the religion of 81 percent of the population of India, or 814 million people, and 16 million in Pakistan and Bangladesh.
India in the Age of Empires

In its long history, India has been politically fragmented more often than not. Between the third century B.C.E. and the sixth century C.E., however, India witnessed the rise and flowering of two great native empires, each of which participated in the general interchange of goods, ideas, and peoples that characterized this age of Afro-Eurasian interchange.

First there was the mighty Mauryan Empire (ca. 315–183 B.C.E.), which controlled all but the most southern portions of the subcontinent. Centuries later the Gupta Empire (320–ca. 550 C.E.) arose, centered on the Ganges River in the northeast but exercising authority over most of northern and central India. Although neither equaled the Han and Roman empires in size, military power, or longevity, both Indian empires provided peace and a general prosperity based in part on energetic administration and benign social intervention. At the height of the Gupta Empire under Chandragupta II (r. ca. 376–415 C.E.), India possibly was the most prosperous and peaceful society in the entire world. China was then immersed in an interdynastic time of troubles; Greco-Roman civilization was undergoing severe stresses at every level; and the powerful Sasanian Empire of Persia was embroiled in internal religious turmoil and wars on its frontiers.

Between these two homebred imperial periods, India underwent a series of invasions from the northwest that resulted in portions of northern India falling under the domination of alien rulers and being joined to important Central Asian kingdoms and empires. The first of these invaders were Greeks from Bactria (source 32), who came in the early second century B.C.E. and established a number of competing kingdoms in northern India. The Greco-Bactrians did not remain in India long. They soon gave way to various nomadic invaders from East Asia, whose lives had been disrupted by the emergence of Chinese imperialism in the late third and second centuries B.C.E. and also by intertribal conflicts.

The most significant of the new invaders were the Yuezhi, who created the Kushana Empire toward the end of the first century B.C.E. The Kushana, whose imperial focus was always Central Asia, lasted into the third century C.E., and during their centuries of empire provided India with connections to Southwest Asia and China. Much of that interaction was the peaceful exchange of goods and ideas, but Chinese annals also tell how General Ban Chao, brother of the historians Ban Gu and Ban Zhao (source 36), destroyed a Yuezhi army in 90 C.E. when the Kushana emperor launched a retaliatory strike against the Chinese after he was refused the hand of a Han princess.

All of these important political developments should not blind us to the fact that the most significant developments taking place in India during the period 300 B.C.E.–500 C.E. were cultural. The Gupta Era is especially important in this regard and is rightly acknowledged as one of traditional India’s golden ages.

The Softening Effects of Dharma

As Alexander the Great and his Macedonian generals pulled back from northwest India, a local lord, Chandragupta Maurya (r. ca. 315–281 B.C.E.), began the process of carving out what would become the greatest of India’s ancient empires. Under the founder and his son, Bindusara, the empire expanded and functioned with brutal efficiency. Around 269 B.C.E. Bindusara’s son Asoka (r. ca. 269–232) inherited the throne and initially continued his family’s tradition of imperial aggression.

In the eighth year of his reign, however, he underwent a spiritual conversion when he beheld the bloodshed and misery that resulted from his conquest of the land of Kalinga, along India’s southeastern coast. As a consequence, Asoka embraced the teachings of the Buddha and embarked on a new policy of government. Probably inspired by the public monuments of the kings of Persia, Asoka publicized his change of heart and new imperial policies in a series of engraved rock and pillar inscriptions scattered throughout his lands.
QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Is there any evidence in this source that Asoka promoted Buddhist missionary activities? Be specific.
2. What was Asoka's attitude and policy toward all non-Buddhist religions and ceremonies?
3. Following his conversion, what did Asoka consider to be the purpose of good government? What structures and policies did he institute in order to achieve his vision?
4. Asoka saw himself as a follower of the Buddha's Law of Righteousness (Dharma). Review source 19 in Chapter 3. Based on your reading of these two lessons by the Buddha, respond to the following questions: Where would the Buddha agree with Asoka's policies and beliefs? Where would he disagree with Asoka? What would be the Buddha's overall evaluation of Asoka's understanding of Buddhist teachings?
5. Imagine that three Chinese travelers — a Confucian, a Legalist, and a Daoist — read these inscriptions. What would be their reactions?

ROCK EDICT XIII

The Kalinga country was conquered by King Priyadarsi, a Beloved of the Gods, in the eighth year of his reign. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were carried away captive, one hundred thousand were slain, and many times that number died.

Immediately after the Kalingas had been conquered, King Priyadarsi became intensely devoted to the study of Dharma, to the love of Dharma, and to the inculcation of Dharma.

The Beloved of the Gods, conqueror of the Kalingas, is moved to remorse now. For he has felt profound sorrow and regret because the conquest of a people previously unconquered involves slaughter, death, and deportation.

But there is a more important reason for the King's remorse. The Brahmanas and Sramanas as well as the followers of other religions and householders — who all practiced obedience to superiors, parents, and teachers, and proper courtesy and firm devotion to friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, slaves, and servants — all suffer from the injury, slaughter, and deportation inflicted on their loved ones. Even those who escaped calamity themselves are deeply afflicted by the misfortunes suffered by those friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives for whom they feel an undiminished affection. Thus all men share in the misfortune, and this weighs on King Priyadarsi's mind.

Therefore, even if the number of people who were killed or who died or who were carried away in the Kalinga war had been only one one-hundredth or one one-thousandth of what it actually was, this would still have weighed on the King's mind.

King Priyadarsi now thinks that even a person who wrongs him must be forgiven for wrongs that can be forgiven.

King Priyadarsi seeks to induce even the forest peoples who have come under his dominion to adopt this way of life and this ideal. He reminds them, however, that he exercises the power to punish, despite his repentence, in order to induce them to desist from their crimes and escape execution.

For King Priyadarsi desires security, self-control, impartiality, and cheerfulness for all living creatures.

King Priyadarsi considers moral conquest the most important conquest. He has achieved this moral conquest repeatedly both here and among the peoples living beyond the borders of his kingdom, even as far away as six hundred yojanas, where the Yona [Greek] king Antiyoka's rules, and even beyond Antiyoka in the realms of the

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1 Asoka's throne name, it means "one who sees to the good of others."
2 Sources 17, 18, and 19 of Chapter 3 respectively provide definitions of Hindu and Jain dharma, and Buddhist Dharma.
3 Hindu ascetics who were members of the Brahmin, or priestly, caste. They were divided into many sects.
4 Another group of ascetics. In the context of this edict, Brahmanas and Sramanas means all Hindu and Buddhist holy people.
5 The primitive, largely uncivilized folk of the southern jungle.
6 About three thousand miles.
7 Antiocbus II Theos (r. 261–246 B.C.E.), a member of the Macedonian family of Seleucus and king of Syria.
four kings named Turamaya, Antikini, Maka, and Alikasudara, and to the south among the Cholas and Pandyas as far as Ceylon.

Here in the King’s dominion also, ... everywhere people heed his instructions in Dharma.

Even in countries which King Priyadarsi’s envoys have not reached, people have heard about Dharma and about his Majesty’s ordinances and instructions in Dharma, and they themselves conform to Dharma and will continue to do so.

Wherever conquest is achieved by Dharma, it produces satisfaction. Satisfaction is firmly established by conquest by Dharma. Even satisfaction, however, is of little importance. King Priyadarsi attaches value ultimately only to consequences of action in the other world.

This edict on Dharma has been inscribed so that my sons and great-grandsons who may come after me should not think new conquests worth achieving. If they do conquer, let them take pleasure in moderation and mild punishments. Let them consider moral conquest the only true conquest.

This is good, here and hereafter. Let their pleasure be pleasure in morality. For this alone is good, here and hereafter.

PILLAR EDICT VII

King Priyadarsi, the Beloved of the Gods, speaks as follows: ...

How can the people be induced to follow Dharma strictly? How can progress in morality be increased sufficiently? How can I raise them up by the promotion of Dharma? ... This occurred to me. I shall issue proclamations on Dharma, and I shall order instruction in Dharma to be given to the people. Hearing these proclamations and instructions, the people will conform to Dharma; they will raise themselves up and will make progress by the promotion of Dharma. To this end I have issued proclamations on Dharma, and I have instituted various kinds of moral and religious instruction.

My highest officials, who have authority over large numbers of people, will expound and spread the precepts of Dharma. I have instructed the provincial governors, too, who are in charge of many hundred thousand people, concerning how to guide people devoted to Dharma. ...

My officers charged with the spread of Dharma are occupied with various kinds of services beneficial to ascetics and householders, and they are empowered to concern themselves with all sects. I have ordered some of them to look after the affairs of the Sangha, some to take care of the brahmin ... ascetics, some to work among the Nirgranthas, and some among the various other religious sects. Different officials are thus assigned specifically to the affairs of different religions, but my officers for spreading Dharma are occupied with all sects. ...

These and many other high officials take care of the distribution of gifts from myself as well as from the queens. They report in various ways ... worthy recipients of charity. ... I also ordered some of them to supervise the distribution of gifts from my sons and the sons of other queens, in order to promote noble deeds of Dharma and conformity to the precepts of Dharma. These noble deeds and this conformity consist in promoting compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, and goodness. ...

Whatever good deeds I have done the people have imitated, and they have followed them as a model. In doing so, they have progressed and will progress in obedience to parents and teachers, in respect for elders, in courtesy to priests

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8Prolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (r. 285–247 B.C.E.); Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia (r. 278–239 B.C.E.); Magos of Cyrene in North Africa (r. 300–258 B.C.E.); and Alexander of Epirus in northwest Greece (r. ca. 272–258 B.C.E.).
9People of the southern tip of India.
10The major island off the southeastern coast of India; today it is the nation of Sri Lanka.
11Buddhist monastic groups.
12Jain ascetics (see Chapter 3, source 18).
and ascetics, to the poor and distressed, and even to slaves and servants.

The people can be induced to advance in Dharma by only two means, by moral prescriptions and by meditation. Of the two, moral prescriptions are of little consequence, but meditation is of great importance. The moral prescriptions I have promulgated include rules making certain animals inviolable,\(^{13}\) and many others. But even in the case of abstention from injuring and from killing living creatures, it is by meditation that people have progressed in Dharma most.

This edict on Dharma has been inscribed in order that it may endure and be followed as long as my sons and great-grandsons shall reign and as long as the sun and moon shall shine. For one who adheres to it will attain happiness in this world and hereafter.

This edict on morality should be engraved wherever stone pillars or stone slabs are available, in order that it may endure forever.

**PILLAR EDICT II**

King Priyadarsi says:

Dharma is good. But what does Dharma consist of? It consists of few sins and many good deeds, of kindness, liberality, truthfulness, and purity.

I have bestowed even the gift of spiritual insight on men in various ways. I have decreed many kindnesses, including even the grant of life, to living creatures, two-footed and four-footed as well as birds and aquatic animals. I have also performed many other good deeds.

I have ordered this edict on Dharma to be inscribed in order that people may act according to it and that it may endure for a long time. And he who follows it completely will do good deeds.

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\(^{13}\)Certain animals are not to be harmed.  
\(^{14}\)Ceremony should be understood in a metaphorical sense—the good works of Dharma as encapsulated in the Holy Eightfold Path (Chapter 3, source 19).

And what is more worth doing than attaining heaven?

**ROCK EDICT VII**

King Priyadarsi wishes members of all faiths to live everywhere in his kingdom.

For they will seek mastery of the senses and purity of mind. Men are different in their inclinations and passions, however, and they may perform the whole of their duties or only part.

Even if one is not able to make lavish gifts, mastery of the senses, purity of mind, gratitude, and steadfast devotion are commendable and essential.

**ROCK EDICT IX**

King Priyadarsi, the Beloved of the Gods, says:

People perform various ceremonies. Among the occasions on which ceremonies are performed are sicknesses, marriages of sons or daughters, children's births, and departures on journeys. Women in particular have recourse to many diverse, trivial, and meaningless ceremonies.

It is right that ceremonies be performed. But this kind bears little fruit. The ceremony of Dharma,\(^{14}\) on the contrary, is very fruitful. It consists in proper treatment of slaves and servants, reverence to teachers, restraint of violence toward living creatures, and liberality to priests and ascetics. These and like actions are called the ceremonies of Dharma.

Therefore, a father, son, brother, master, friend, acquaintance, or even neighbor ought to say about such actions, “These are good; they should be performed until their purpose is achieved. I shall observe them.”

Other ceremonies are of doubtful value. They may achieve their purpose, or they may not. Moreover the purposes for which they are performed are limited to this world.

The ceremony of Dharma, on the other hand, is not limited to time. Even if it does not achieve its object in this world, it produces unlimited merit in the next world. But if it produces its object in this world, it achieves both effects: the purpose desired in this world and unlimited merit in the next.

It has also been said that liberality is commendable. But there is no greater liberality than the gift of Dharma or the benefit of Dharma. Therefore, a friend, well-wisher, relative, or companion should urge one when the occasion arises, saying, “You should do this; this is commendable. By doing this you may attain heaven.”

**PILLAR EDICT IV**

Impartiality is desirable in legal procedures and in punishments. I have therefore decreed that henceforth prisoners who have been convicted and sentenced to death shall be granted a respite of three days. During this period their relatives may appeal to the officials for the prisoners’ lives; or, if no one makes an appeal, the prisoners may prepare for the other world by distributing gifts or by fasting.

For I desire that, when the period of respite has expired, they may attain happiness in the next world, and that various ways of practicing Dharma by self-control and the distribution of gifts may be increased among the people.