

The Mauryan Dynasty

One of the largest and most influential dynasties in Indian history was the Mauryan Dynasty. It is speculated that in 321 BCE, a man named Chandragupta Maurya and his army defeated the Macedonian army to seize the throne of Magadha. The previous rulers of the throne, labeled the Nanda Dynasty, had belonged to the *vaisya* caste. Chandragupta on the other hand, is thought to have been raised by a clan of peacock-tamers in Magadha (Avari 106). In various texts Chandragupta is thought to have belonged to the Sudra caste as well as the *kshatriya* caste, so it is not entirely certain exactly where and how Chandragupta was raised. After Chandragupta defeated the Nanda Dynasty and came into power, he continued across the Indian subcontinent. The civil war in Punjab, caused by one of Alexander the Great's successors, Peithon, allowed Chandragupta the opportunity to capture the capital, Taxila, and with it the Punjab territory. After discussions with another of Alexander's successors, Seleucus, Chandragupta was able to unite the Indus and Ganges Valley establishing a powerful empire. The capital of the Mauryan Dynasty was located at Pataliputra and was known as one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Chandragupta, Bindusara, and Asoka are the most renowned emperors, with Asoka being the most known. Hinduism had a very strong influence throughout the Mauryan Dynasty (Habib and Jha 138). However, during the course of the Mauryan Dynasty, Vedic sacrifice began to decline in popularity (Habib and Jha 138). Although sacrificial rituals were on the decline, the worshipping of various deities was still widespread. Many of the gods and goddesses worshiped during this period are still popular amongst Hindus

today; examples being Indra, Agni, and Visnu (Singh 350). During the reign of the Mauryan Dynasty, Hindu sects involved with worshipping a major deity also existed (Singh 359). These sects are seen as reform movements within Hinduism. Examples of these sects include Vaisnavism and Saivism. Both of these sects focused their devotion on one of the two most popular deities in Hinduism: Vaisnavism on Visnu and Saivism on Siva. The *Arthashastra* was written during Candragupta's reign of the Mauryan Dynasty by Kautilya and outlined the duties and responsibilities of a king (Sharma 182). It encouraged a king to consider anything that pleases himself as dangerous, but whatever pleases his people should be considered good (Sharma 182). Kautilya was Candragupta's Prime Minister during his reign and has also been referred to as Visnugupta and Canakya in various texts across different religions. The *Arthashastra* helped enforce Hinduism as the prevalent religion during the time. An example of how it did this was by asking, "that the king have as his most important minister a *purohita*, or Brahmin priest" (Singh 138).

Hinduism has remained the prevalent religion in India for many thousands of years; however, during the Mauryan Dynasty a few other religions were patronized. These religions are seen as heterodox religions as they do not follow the Hindu system. The founder of the dynasty, Candragupta, was thought to have favored Jainism. In his late and final years Candragupta performed the ritual of *santhara* in the city of Karnataka (Avari 107). This "fasting death" is common among people who follow the Jain tradition and "is the first significant indication of the influence that the heterodox religions were to have on the future rulers of India" (Avari 107). There is little known about the second major emperor of the Mauryan Dynasty, Bindusara, but it is thought that he favored

Hinduism. The third major emperor, Asoka, is the most recognized of the three and is credited with helping spread Buddhism. It is usually thought that Asoka favored Buddhism over Hinduism; however, he believed that no religion is better than another. Asoka had been set on expansion of his empire and had done so through several wars. His second, labeled the Kalinga war, left a very deep impression on Asoka. This eventually led Asoka to Buddhism, which he promoted ahimsa (non-violence) and Dharma for the rest of his reign. A quote by Asoka shows his peaceful ways, "There will be no beating of war drum but the drum of Dharma will be beaten" (Sharma 185). Dharma has different meanings in the different religions. Examples of this are Buddhism and Hinduism. The Dharma that Asoka preached is not seen as a clear definition, but is seen as a "moral law independent of any caste or creed" (Sharma 222). This is due to the fact that Asoka accommodated all religious systems and did not believe one to be better than another.

Before Asoka converted to Buddhism, he had been practicing the traditional religion of his ancestors (Sharma 216). During his first thirteen years of rule, he worshipped various gods and goddesses, his favorite being Siva. After his conversion to Buddhism, Asoka began to promote the Buddhist tradition. He did so in various ways, examples being the pillars he erected throughout his empire and the holding of the Third Buddhist Council. The chairman of the Council was Moggaliputta Tissa. The Council was held to resolve the disputes among the various monastic sects across the dynasty. The sects had different views on issues such as monastic discipline. The pillars had inscriptions on them outlining various Buddhist ideals, such as the practice of *ahimsa*. To

this day many of the pillars still stand and scholars have been able to decipher and study the pillars to understand more about the Mauryan Empire under Asoka's rule.

During the rule of Chandragupta, a Greek ambassador by the name of Megasthenes helped introduce the knowledge of India to the western world. Megasthenes was raised in Ionia (modern day Turkey) and when he travelled to India, represented the interests of Seleukos (Avari 108). Although much of Megasthenes' information collected and written in his diary, the *Indica* (which is now lost), was incorrect, he still was able to provide a good idea of Indian society during Chandragupta's rule. In his diary, he mentions the presence of seven "estates". Although this formulation is incorrect, his description of the castes provides us with a good understanding of society during that time. At the top of his list were what he called philosophers, who can be seen as Brahmins and renouncers who "performed public sacrifices" as well as roaming about naked (Avari 109). The second estate consisted of those Megasthenes called cultivators, which were the majority of the Indian people. The third estate consisted of herdsmen and hunters and the fourth of traders and artisans. The fifth estate consisted of soldiers, who did nothing but fight, and the sixth consisted of spies and intelligence officers. The seventh and final estate contained "those who constituted the political and imperial establishment" (Avari 109).

Another piece of valuable information that was attained from Megasthenes *Indica* was his description of the capital city, Pataliputra (Avari 110). His description ranges from describing the business of the streets, to the peace and tranquility in the city's royal park. Megasthenes' description of the city coupled with the *Arthashastra*, makes rule

under Candragupta seem as “a highly ordered and well-regulated world” (Avari 110). Megasthenes also describes the way the municipal government was set up during the Mauryan rule. He mentions that the municipal government consisted of six bodies. The first were involved with anything relating to the industrial arts (Habib and Jha 42). The second was involved with entertaining strangers, examples of this are assigning housing as well as taking care of them when sick. The third group was involved with “what time and in what manner births and deaths occur” (Habib and Jha 42). This was done not only for tax purposes, but also to try and help prevent deaths. The fourth group was involved with retail and barter by having charge of the different units of measurements for different products on the market. The fifth and final group was involved with selling articles by public notice. The markets were set up in which new items were sold apart from old ones; in which someone was charged a fine if they sold them together.

In Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, he outlines the details concerning the Royal Council. The Royal Council was not founded during the Mauryan Dynasty, but was important in shaping the rule of the Mauryan Dynasty. The meetings took place in a Council Chamber, which was held at a location that was said to not be easily accessible (Sharma 196). Members selected to be on the council were to meet several criteria in order to be eligible, which are outlined in the *Arthashastra*. Some of these qualities include; being a native of the empire, coming from a noble family, and honesty (Sharma 197). The council’s role was to provide advice to the king. This advice did not need to be taken by the King, but he generally did use it. Some of the other roles the Council provided for the

Dynasty were the control of military expeditions, as well as religious and military functions (Sharma 197). This council was a major influence within the Mauryan Dynasty.

After the death of Asoka, the Mauryan Dynasty began a slow decline. The first successor that took the throne was Kunala, one of Asoka's three sons. Although Kunala was blind, he ruled for eight years. He was not seen as the true ruler of the dynasty, but instead as a head of state (Sharma 250). After his reign was over, his son, Samprati replaced him on the throne. Samprati was a known follower of the Jain tradition and is thought to have built many Jain temples throughout his reign. At the time of his appointment to the throne, Asoka's vast empire had been divided into two parts. Samprati controlled the eastern portion while his brother, Dashratha, controlled the western portion (Sharma 250). The last emperor of the dynasty, Brihadratha, was eventually killed by Pushyamitra Sunga, who then established a new dynasty labeled the Sunga Dynasty.

There are many causes leading to the downfall of the Mauryan Dynasty. One of the biggest causes was the weakness of the emperors that followed Asoka. Since the territory acquired by the first three rulers of the dynasty had become so vast, its successors needed to be strong rulers like Candragupta and Asoka were. Unfortunately, the successors were not, which is said to have helped in the decline of the dynasty. Another cause of the downfall was the policy of *ahimsa* proposed by Asoka. Asoka's successors continued his policy of *ahimsa*, thus leading to the decline of military strength. With a weak military, the dynasty was very vulnerable to incoming empires, which ultimately led to the takeover by Pushyamitra.

References and Further Recommended Readings

Avari, Burjor (2007) *India: the Ancient Past*. New York: Routledge.

Habib, Irfan, Jha, Vivekanand, & Society, Aligarh (2004) *Mauryan India*.

Sharma, S.P. (1996) *History of Ancient India*. New Delhi: Mohit Publications.

Singh, M.V. (1988) *Society Under the Mauryas*. Aurangabad: Nav Bharat Press.

Thapar, Romila (1997) *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Related Topics

Gupta Dynasty

Asoka

Megasthenes' *Indica*

Kautilya's *Arthashastra*

The Indus Valley Civilization

Buddhism

Jainism

Asoka's Rock Edicts

Siva

Visnu

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.livius.org/man-md/mauryas/mauryas.html>

http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=mauryan_empire

<http://www.iloveindia.com/history/ancient-india/maurya-dynasty/index.html>

http://www.indianchild.com/mauryan_empire.htm

<http://ancientpakistan.info/pakistan-history-timeline/mauryan-empire/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurya_Empire

Written by Nathan Relke (Spring 2010), who is solely responsible for its content.