

Homework Document: Maurya and Gupta HOWO

Unification and military

Before the Mauryan Empire, the Indian subcontinent was fragmented into hundreds of kingdoms that were ruled by powerful regional chiefs who engaged in warfare using their small armies.

In 327 BCE, Alexander of Macedon and his troops entered India and overran the existing kingdoms in the Punjab region. He left after only two years, but his destruction of the regional powers opened the opportunity for other groups to seize control. The first group, the kingdom of Magadha, used their military to gain control of trade routes through the Ganges valley and the sea routes to the Bay of Bengal.

Soon after, however, Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Maurya Empire, successfully seized control of Magadha. He started on the outskirts and eventually made his way to the heart of the kingdom. Eventually, he gained control of northwestern India and Bactria—what is today Afghanistan and was at that time controlled by the Greeks. Chandragupta Maurya successfully unified the Indian subcontinent under an empire.

Chandragupta ruled from 324 to 297 BCE before voluntarily giving the throne up to his son, Bindusara, who ruled from 297 BCE until his death in 272 BCE. This led to a war in which Bindusara's son, Ashoka, defeated his brother and rose to the throne in 268 BCE, eventually becoming the most successful and powerful ruler of the Maurya Dynasty.

The Mauryan Army, the largest standing military force of its time, supported the expansion and defense of the empire. According to scholars, the empire wielded 600,000 infantry, or foot soldiers, 30,000 cavalry, or soldiers on horseback, and 9,000 war elephants. A vast spy network collected intelligence for both internal and external security purposes. Although Emperor Ashoka renounced offensive warfare and expansionism after converting to Buddhism, he maintained this standing army to protect the empire from external threats and maintain stability and peace across Western and Southern Asia.

This extensive army was made possible partly through an intricate web of administration. One of Chandragupta's advisors had instituted a series of detailed procedures which Ashoka inherited. Ashoka established a capital at the walled city of Pataliputra, which served as the centralized hub of the empire. Officials made decisions about how to collect taxes for the central treasury, which funded the military and other government jobs.

Centralization and taxation

Centralized government also came in handy when emperors had to deal with trade and farming. Chandragupta Maurya established a single currency across India, a network of regional governors and administrators, and a civil service to provide justice and security for merchants, farmers, and traders.

Through the disciplined central authority of the Mauryan Empire, farmers were freed of regional kings' tax and crop collection burdens. Instead, they paid through a nationally administered system of taxation. The system operated under the principles of the Arthashastra, an ancient Indian treatise that included advice on how to collect taxes, administer trade and agricultural resources, manage diplomacy, and even how to wage war!

During his rule, Ashoka also made his laws clear in central public spaces on rock and pillar edicts, stone slabs that alerted citizens to the rules that governed them. The Mauryan Empire was strict in revenue collection, but it also funded numerous public works projects to enhance productivity. Ashoka sponsored the construction of thousands of roads, waterways, canals, rest houses, hospitals, and other types of infrastructure.

Trade and commerce

The Maurya Empire's political unity and internal peace encouraged the expansion of trade in India. During Ashoka's reign, government oversaw the building of major roadways, and the Mauryan international network of trade expanded. India's exports to places like Bactria and Persia included silk, textiles, and spices.

Dissolution of Maurya and rise of the Gupta Empire

The Maurya Empire began to dissolve with Ashoka's death. Costly salaries for soldiers and government officials ended up bankrupting the central treasury. In place of an expansive empire, local rulers began to take charge of smaller regions, placing themselves strategically along trade routes. The future leaders of the Gupta dynasty arose out of these small kingdoms a few centuries later. They conquered many regions of the former Maurya Empire and forged alliances with kingdoms that chose not to fight against them.

The Gupta empire was founded by Sri Gupta sometime between 240 and 280 CE. Sri Gupta's son and successor, Ghatotkacha, ruled from around 280 to 319 CE. Chandragupta, Ghatotkacha's son, ascended the throne around 319 and ruled until 335 CE.

Gupta Empire expansion

Samudragupta succeeded his father, Chandragupta I, in 335 CE and ruled for about 45 years. By his death in 380 CE, Samudragupta had incorporated over 20 kingdoms into his realm and extended the Gupta Empire from the Himalayas to the Narmada River in central India and from the Brahmaputra River to the Yamuna—the longest tributary of the Ganges River in northern India.

Gupta Empire of Chandragupta II

After gaining power, Chandragupta II expanded the Gupta Empire through conquest and political marriages until the end of his reign in 413 CE. By 395 CE, his control over India extended coast-to-coast. Just like Ashoka, Chandragupta II made Pataliputra the capital of his empire and centralized the government there. He used tribute money from allies to fund government projects and salaries. Unlike Ashoka, Chandragupta did not rely on a network of spies or closely monitor the affairs of foreigners or allies. Instead, he let regions make their own decisions about administration and local governance.

Some scholars have argued that the Gupta empire was a golden age of India. The empire was marked by peace and public safety, and scholars flourished in this environment. Kalidasa, a poet of the time, is considered the greatest poet and dramatist of the Sanskrit language. Aryabhata, who lived during Gupta empire, was the first of the Indian mathematician-astronomers who worked on the approximation for Pi. Vishnu Sharma is thought to be the author of the Panchatantra fables, one of the most widely-translated non-religious books in history.

The Gupta empire ended with the invasion of the White Huns, a nomadic tribe of people from central Asia, at the end of the fifth century CE. Until the sixteenth century, there was no unifying empire; regional political kingdoms ruled India.

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1. How did Ashoka use the military and in what way(s) was it bad for his image as a ruler?
2. What did India look like politically before the Mauryan Empire rose to power?
3. Would it be beneficial for Mauryan rulers to have a population that was able to read? Why?
4. How was a nationally administered system of taxation helpful to citizens of the Mauryan empire?
5. What is one way life under a centralized government might have been different from a government under a large number of smaller kingdoms?
- 6/ Can you identify a pattern of governing/rule tracing back to before the Maurya empire up through the end of the Gupta empire?
- 7/ Why do you think the Gupta Empire may have been a golden age?