

Study of Literary Sources & Inscriptions: Maurya Era

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest dynasties of India was the Mauryan empire which had a great line of kings and their contribution to history is immense.

Mauryan dynasty was established by Chandragupta Maurya/Candirakupta ma ur riyā under the able advisory of Chanakya. This period is known for their contribution in terms of education centres, stupas and edicts. Even the ancient university Takshashila was said to be developed during the time of the Mauryas. The ancient Indian treatise on kingship, politics and other such aspects called the Arthashastra/Arttacāstiram came up during this era.

The major sources for history or how we get to know about ancient dynasties is through the architectural work, inscriptions, coins and other excavations that have been found out. These sources are very important as they help us trace out the social practices, economy and lifestyle that was followed.

This research will focus on the Mauryan inscriptions and what information they have left behind.

INTRODUCTION

The Mauryan empire covered most of the Indian subcontinent from the end of the 4th century to the beginning of the 2nd century. Chandragupta Maurya/Cantirakupta ma ur riyā/Cantirakupta ma ur riyā, the founder of the dynasty, defeated the Nanda dynasty that had ruled Magadha (current day Bihar and had their capital established at Patali-putra (current day Patna).

According to various historical sources, Chandragupta Maurya/Cantirakupta ma ur riyā became ruler with the advice and guidance of Kautilya/Keṣṭilyā or Chanakya/Cāṇakyā, a Brahmin advisor who was the author of the great ancient Indian treatise on warfare, politics and economy the Arthashastra/Arttacāstiram. There are some preserved records of Megasthenes, a Seleucid ambassador to the Mauryas/Ma-vuriyā.¹

The Mauryan empire reached its peak during the time of Ashoka. The conquest of Ka-linga (modern Orissa) in the eighth year of his reign caused Ashoka to express great remorse and he changed his path to Dharma. Archaeological remains of stupas and monasteries established during the Mauryan period show that Buddhist centres in these regions functioned as bases for the transmission of Buddhism to Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

The succession of Mauryan/Mavuriyā rulers after Ashoka is not certain since the in-formation in surviving texts differ. The Mauryan empire disintegrated within fifty years after Ashoka's death but his legacy is preserved in many inscriptions and have also been mentioned in numerous literary texts and in Mauryan artistic traditions such as the Lion capital on the Ashokan pillar at Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh), which is now the official seal of the Government of India.

¹ <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/mauryans/essay.html> (accessed on 11th December 2019)

Chandragupta Maurya/Cantirakupta ma ur riyā

He was the founder of the Mauryan dynasty and he is one of the first kings to have been credited with the achievement of having a Pan-Indian empire. He was aided by his adviser, minister Chanakya/Cāṇakyā or Kautilya/Keḷaṭilyā/Keḷaṭilyā. Sources also mention that he battled with Alexander the Great, who invaded the Indian kingdom in 326 BCE, and prevented the Macedonian king from conquering the far side of the Ganges.

He brought the Indian subcontinent under a single unified kingdom which lasted from 322 BCE to 298 BCE. The Mauryan dynasty under his immediate successor did well especially under notable emperors like Chandragupta's son Bindusara and grandson, Emperor Ashoka.

In an attempt to advance friendly relations and to improve trade with kingdoms across the seas, he married the daughter of Seleucus. This proved to be a beneficial alliance because Seleucus ended up surrendering a significant amount of territory to him. So this shows that trade across seas is definitely not a new aspect which is existing now and has definitely been in place before.²

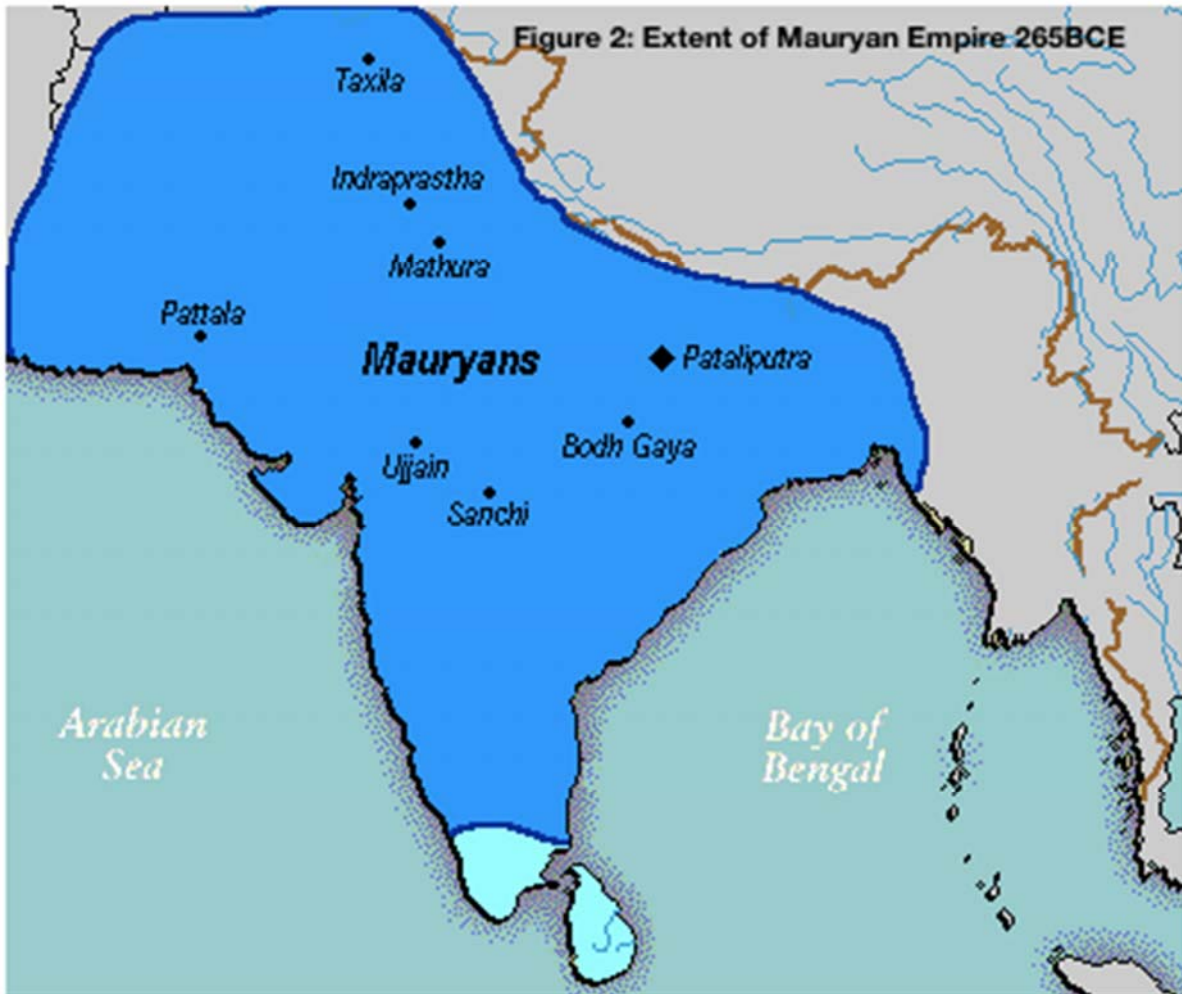
Figure 1: Chandragupta Maurya



SOURCE: Dr Avantika Lal for www.ancient.eu

² <https://www.amarchitrakatha.com/blog/chandragupta-maurya-story/> (accessed on 23rd December 2019)

Extent of the empire



SOURCE: Vastu for www.courses.lumenlearning.com

KING ASHOKA AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS

Bindusara died in 272 BCE, and was succeeded by his son, Ashoka the Great (304-232 BCE). As monarch, he was ambitious and aggressive. But it was his conquest of Kalinga (262-261 BCE) that proved to be the pivotal event of his life. Hundreds of thousands of people were adversely affected by the destruction and fallout of war. When he personally witnessed the devastation, he embraced the teachings of Buddhism, and renounced war and violence. He sent out missionaries to travel around Asia and spread Buddhism to other countries. Perhaps, one of the greatest-known accomplishments of Ashoka was the creation of his edicts, which were erected between 269 BCE and 232 BCE. The Edicts of Ashoka, set in stone, are found throughout the Subcontinent. Ranging from as far west as Afghanistan, and as far south as Andhra (Nellore District), Ashoka's edicts state his policies and accomplishments. Ashoka's edicts mentioned social and cultural attributes of his empire, emphasizing Buddhism, though not condemning other religions.³ In addition

to his edicts, Ashoka built stupas, monasteries, and other religious structures at noteworthy Buddhist sites, such as Sarnath. He efficiently managed a centralised government from the Mauryan capital at Pataliputra. A large bureaucracy collected taxes. Inspectors reported back to the emperor. Irrigation expanded agriculture. Familiar hallmarks of ancient empires, excellent roads were built connecting key trading and political

centres; Ashoka ordered that the roads have shade trees, wells, and inns.⁴

Figure 3: King Ashoka



SOURCE: CRISTIAN VIOLATTI for www.ancient.eu

³ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-worldhistory/chapter/the-maurya-empire/> (accessed 22nd December 2019)

⁴ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/people/reference/ashoka/> (accessed 22nd December 2019)

KALINGA WAR : TWO VIEWS

Kalinga war happened during the 12th year reign of King Ashoka. Kalinga was an autonomous zone as the seceded from Magadha. It was a prosperous zone and was a coastal zone. There are references in the Mahabharata about Kalinga. Mentioned in the Mahabharata, Kalinga probably played host to more than one small kingdom. Two early capitals were at Dantapura and Rajapura, and the kingdom is said to have originated from King Vali, who may have been the king of Magadha, along with the originally non-Vedic lines of Anga, Pundra, Suhma, and Vanga.⁵

The reason which forced king Ashoka to invade Kalinga was mainly to complete the political unification of India. Since Kalinga territory was like the land bridge between the north and the south, its conquest could result in safe passage for the Magadha army for aggression in the far south. The existence of a powerful independent state touching upon the Magadha territory was like a direct threat to Mauryan imperialism.⁶

Kalinga war as described generally: During the time of Chandragupta, the Mauryan army contained 6 lakh of infantry, 30 thousands cavalry, 9 thousand elephants and 8 thousand war chariots. By the time of Ashoka, the size of the army could have been much larger, with fighting forces from all parts of the empire. Some historians suggest that his army also contained mercenaries from Syria and Bactria.⁷ The Kalinga army had only 60,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalry and 700 elephants. On the other hand, the Greek ambassador Megasthenes mentions the military strength of Kalinga to be of about one lakh, which consisted of 1700 horses, thousands of elephants, and 60 thousand soldiers. Kalinga army also had a powerful naval force. Ashoka became victorious and, as a result ruled Kalinga. Ashoka saw the blood-filled battlefield with his own eyes. 100,000 men lost their lives and 1,50,000 were taken as prisoners. An equal number of Mauryan soldiers died. He saw the corpses of horses, elephants and soldiers in the battlefield. Countless people suffered due to the war. The whole of Kalinga was

⁵ <https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsFarEast/IndiaKalinga.htm> (accessed on 23rd December 2019)

⁶ <http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/what-are-the-causes-of-the-kalinga-war/2415> (accessed on 23rd December 2019)

⁷ <http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/what-are-the-causes-of-the-kalinga-war/2415> (accessed on 23rd December 2019)

destroyed in front of his own eyes. He conquered Kalinga but there was not a single man left to live a life of slavery. The Kalinga War prompted him to devote the rest of his life to non-violence (Ahimsa) and to victory through Dhamma (Dhamma-Vijaya). He became a follower of Buddhism.⁸

Kalinga war an alternate view: According to Sri Lankan writer Daya Dissanayake who wrote the book "Who is Ashoka?", Kalinga war may not have taken place. He said that the rock edict at Daya River in Odisha does not mention about Kalinga War. Instead the incident has been mentioned at a rock edict far away from Odisha.⁹

According to Biswa Bhusan Harichandan; BJP leader, the Kalinga war may have been a fiction. He said, "If one lakh soldiers were killed in the war, one lakh injured and more than 1.5 lakh imprisoned, then the Kalinga army must have had a strength of more than eight lakh. If you take that, the strength of the army would have been one third of Kalinga's population. It looks strange. Besides, there must have been a powerful king. There are some historians who argue that Kalinga was a kind of federation at that time and no one king ruled. If that is so, who was the prime minister of that federation or who was the leader. These questions need to be answered."¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.mapsofindia.com/history/battles/kalinga-war.html> (accessed on 23rd December 2019)

⁹ <https://indiaeducationdiary.in/no-evidence-to-suggest-kalinga-war-took-place-asoka-book-author-daya-dissanayake/> (accessed on 24th December 2019)

¹⁰ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/odisha/kalinga-war-a-myth/cid/1391237> (accessed on 24th December 2019)

Sources of History

- 1. Literary:** Literary sources, are all written records in the form of texts, essays or descriptions, manuscripts, epics, etc.
- 2. Epigraphic:** Epigraphy is the science of identifying graphemes, clarifying their meanings, classifying their uses according to dates and cultural contexts, and drawing conclusions about the writing and the writers. So, these evidences are the ones identified on inscriptions, clay tablets, etc.
- 3. Archaeological sources:** Archaeological sources are basically the material evidence like historical buildings, coins, inscriptions and other remains that gives important and detailed information pertaining to a particular period.

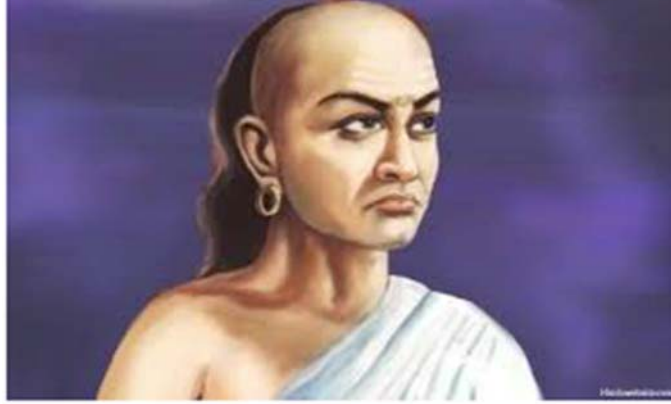
Literary Sources

a) Kautilya/Keṣṭilyā's Arthashastra/Arthacāstiram:

Kautilya/Keṣṭilyā was the Prime Minister of Chandragupta Maurya. Chandragupta founded the Mauryan Empire with his help. Arthashastra/Arthacāstiram was written by him. It is the most important source for writing the history of the Mauryas and is divided into 15 Adhikarnas or sections and 180 Prakaranas or subdivisions. It has about 6,000 slokas. The book was discovered by Shamasastri in 1909 and ably translated by him. It is a treatise on statecraft and public administration. Despite the controversy over its date and authorship, its importance lies in the fact that it gives a clear and methodological analysis of economic and political conditions of the Mauryan period. The similarities between the administrative terms used in the Arthashastra/Arthacāstiram and in the Ashokan edicts certainly suggests that the Mauryan rulers were acquainted with

his work. As such his Arthashastra/Arttacāstiram provides useful and reliable information regarding the social and political conditions as well as the Mauryan administration.¹¹

Figure 4: Kautilya



SOURCE: www.hinduwebsite.com

b) Mudra Rakshasa

“Signet Ring of the Rakshasa, the chief minister of the last Nanda king”, a historical play in Sanskrit by Vishakhadatta (4th century CE) narrates the ascent of the king Chandragupta Maurya to power in Northern India with the aid of Chanakya, his Guru and chief minister.¹²

c) Indica:

Megasthenes stayed as Ambassador of Seleucus at Chandragupta Maurya’s court at Pataliputra for several years around 300 B.C. His book Indica, which he wrote as a keen-witted observer survived only as fragments quoted by Diodorus, Strabo and, in particular, by Arria. Of particular interest is Megasthenes’ detailed description of seven ‘divisions’ of the Indian society. They depict a fascinating and, in fact the earliest detailed description of the Indian society, as observed by a foreign visitor to India’s capital and its surroundings.¹³

¹¹ <http://www.historydiscussion.net/empires/the-history-of-the-mauryan-empire-in-india/622> (accessed on 13th December 2019)

¹² <http://www.sanskritebooks.org/2009/06/mudrarakshasa-of-visakhadatta-sanskrit-drama-with-english-translation/> (accessed on 13th December 2019)

¹³ <http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415485432/3.asp> (accessed on 13th December 2019)

d) Buddhist Literature

Buddhist texts such as Jatakas reveal socio-economic conditions of Mauryan period while Buddhist chronicles Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa throws light on the role of Ashoka in spreading Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Divyavadam, the Tibetan Buddhist text informs us about Ashoka's efforts in spreading Buddhism.

INSCRIPTIONS

Inscriptions are basically writings, scriptures and drawings on monoliths, stones and relatively on hard materials and act as an important source for history as they tell us about aspects varying from messages, ownership of property, victories over other kingdoms, hymns, shlokas, story of the monument, praises on the king and much more to add on to the list.

Inscriptions: Mainly found as

1. Rock edicts
2. Pillar inscriptions,
3. Written records

Main language: Prakrit, Pali, Sanskrit

1.Extent: Ashoka's inscriptions on stone monuments have been found in northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, western India (Gujarat and Maharashtra), southern India (Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh), and eastern India (Orissa), demonstrating a network of administrative control radiating outwards from Pataliputra. These inscriptions were written in various dialects of Prakrit and are the earliest examples of writing in the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts. Bilingual translations in Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar and Aramaic inscriptions in eastern Afghanistan illustrate the importance of spreading his messages to the inhabitants in their own languages.¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/mauryans/essay.html> (accessed on 13th December 2019)

2.Policies: Sets of major and minor rock edicts, inscriptions on polished sandstone pillars, and inscriptions in caves record public proclamations of Ashoka's moral and administrative policies, declarations to the Buddhist community (sangha), and donations to the Ajivikas (another heterodox community that received Mauryan patronage).

3.Texts: Buddhist texts provide many illustrations of Ashoka's role in giving donations to the Sangha, redistributing the Buddha's relics, and calling the third Buddhist council at Pataliputra. With Ashoka's support, Buddhist missionaries also led by his own son Mahindra and daughter Sanghamitra expanded the network of Buddhist monastic institutions throughout the Mauryan empire and in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Gandhara, and the Swat Valley.¹⁵

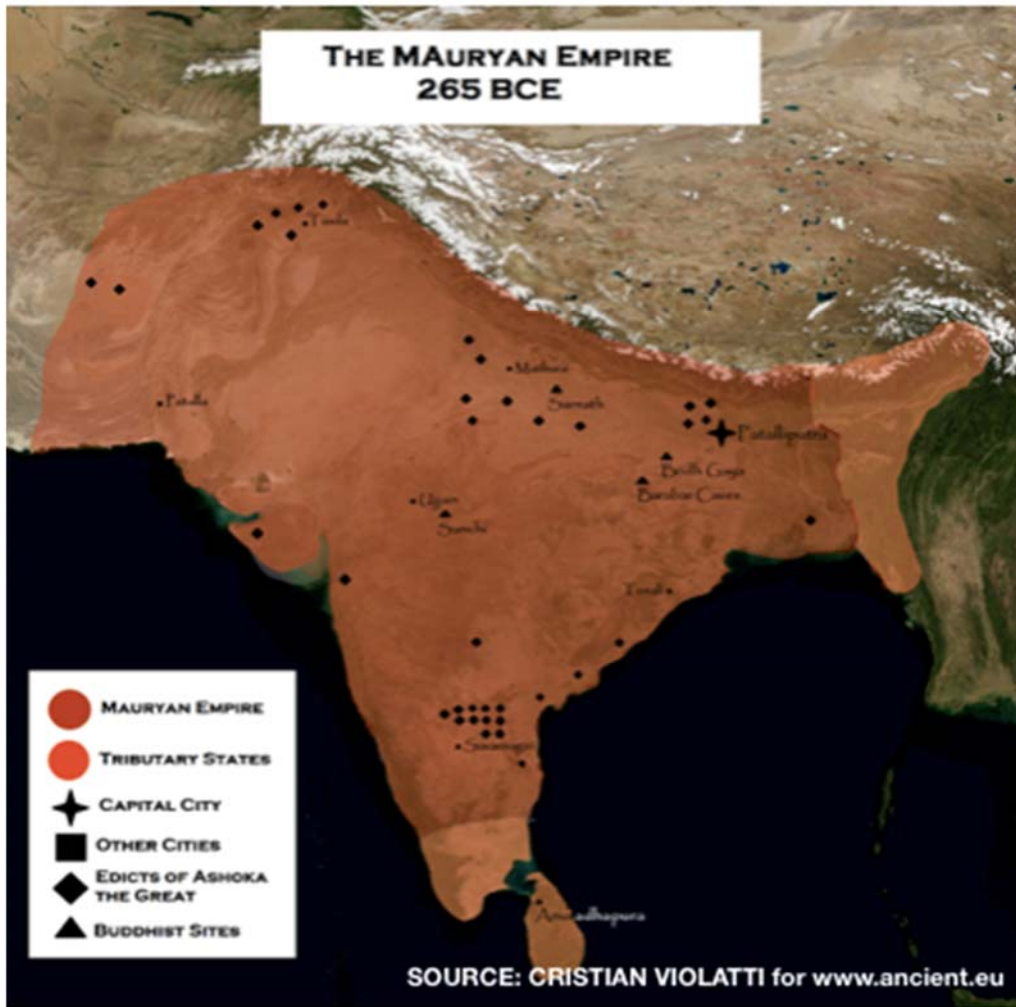
Figure 5: Ashoka's inscription



SOURCE: E. Hultzsch

¹⁵ <https://www.studyandscore.com/studymaterial-detail/sources-of-mauryan-history-inscriptions-and-literature> (accessed on 13th December 2019)

Figure 6: Location of edicts



Edicts: Ashoka's 14 Rock Edicts¹⁶ (Re-produced from http://www.historytuition.com/the_mauryan_empire/ashokas_14_rock_edicts.html)

The inscriptions on the major Rock Edicts are as follows:

Ist: Declares prohibition of animal sacrifice; also prohibits the holding of festivals; royal hunting was discontinued; only 2 peacocks and deer were killed in the kitchen of beloved of Gods.

IInd: It mentions medical treatment of humans and animals; also mentions construction of roads, wells etc and also tree planting.

¹⁶ http://www.historytuition.com/the_mauryan_empire/ashokas_14_rock_edicts.html (accessed on 13th December 2019)

IIIrd: It mentions about the Pradeshikas, Rajuks and Yuktas; declares the liberty towards Brahmanas and the Sramanas.

IVth: It mentions that the Beri Ghosa has been replaced by dharma gosha. It also mentions that the Rajuks had the power to punish.

Vth: Reference to the appointment of Dhamma mahatmas for the first time in the 14th year of his regime. It also mentions that Dhamma Mahatmas promoting the welfare of prisoners.

VIth: Mantri parishad has been mentioned; officials like Pulisani and Pratividikar has also been mentioned; it mentions “All Times I am available to the Mahamattas” - Mahamattas could bring their report to the king at any time.

VIIth: It mentions religious toleration amongst all the sects; it gives information that tension among the sects was expressed intensely; it gives information about self-centre and purity of mind.

VIIIth: In his 10th Regnal year Ashoka went to Dharmyatras to Sambodhi in Bodhgaya.

IXth: It mentions about the uselessness of the various ceremonies; it stresses on morality and moral code of conducts; it also mentions about the ceremony of Dhamma; it includes regards for slaves and servants, respect for teachers, restrained behaviour towards living beings and donation to Sramanas and the Brahmanas.

Xth: It mentions that the king desires no more fame or glory except in the field of Dhamma; it mentions about the supreme quality of Dhamma policy.

XIth: It further explains the policy of Dhammas; it emphasizes on giving respect to the elders, abstain from killing animals and liberalism and charity towards friends, Sramanas and Brahmanas and good behaviour towards slaves and servants.

XIIth: Ithijika Mahamatta has been mentioned; appeal for toleration among sects to honour the other sects; it mentions that the beloved of the Gods does not consider gifts or honor to be as important as the progress of the essential doctrines of all sects.

XIIIth: King considered the victory by Dhamma to be the foremost victory; mention the Dhamma victory on the Greek being named Antiochus; it also mentions the Dhamma victory over:

Ptolemy II Philadelphus- King of Egypt (285-247 BC)

Alexander – King of Epirus (273-255 BC)

Antigonous Gonatus- King of Macedonia (276-239 BC)

Magas- King of Cyrene

It also mentions the Dhamma victory in south over the Cholas and Pandyas as far as Ceylon; Pandyas, Cholas had Dhamma victory over Ceylon.

XIV: The purpose of the Rock Edicts has been mentioned.

CONCLUSION

Powered by Chanakya/Cāṇakya's political astuteness, the banished Mauryan prince, Chandragupta Maurya successfully overthrew the Nanda dynasty. The Mauryan kings ruled almost the entire Indian subcontinent. The Mauryan period is considered to be the greatest since the kingdom grew into a powerful one and also excelled in administrative reforms. Chanakya/Cāṇakya, the political advisor of Chandragupta Maurya/Candirakupta ma ur riyā authored 'Arthashastra'. Arthashastra is a treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy, written in Sanskrit. The 'Indica' authored by Greek traveller and historian Megasthenes presents a detailed picture of the social, economic and administrative maturity of the Mauryan empire. Chandragupta Maurya/Candirakupta ma ur riyā's successor Bindusara improved trade relations with neighbouring kingdoms, he also entered into marriage alliances with other kingdoms and annexed them. He was succeeded by his son, Ashoka who became an active exponent of peace and non-violence. Apart from the edicts and stupas, monasteries and other religious buildings were also constructed, during Ashoka's reign.

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