

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Mauryan Empire

Paper 1 · Unit 7

Chandragupta to Ashoka, the Arthashastra, the edicts and the imperial ideology: 65 marks in four years and the best documented ancient Indian state.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Mauryan Empire: foundation of the Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta, Kautilya and Arthashastra; Ashoka; concept of Dharma; edicts; polity, administration; economy; art, architecture and sculpture; external contacts; religion; spread of religion; literature; disintegration of the empire, Sungas and Kanvas.

Sources and their problems

Historiography now appears in Paper 1 every year, and this unit has an unusually rich and unusually treacherous source base. Establish what each source can and cannot tell you.

- **Ashokan edicts** are the only contemporary written source, inscribed on rock and pillar in Prakrit using Brahmi, with Kharoshthi in the northwest and Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar, and they were deciphered by **James Prinsep in 1837**.
- Because the edicts are the emperor's own proclamations, they record what Ashoka wished to project, so they are excellent evidence of ideology and imperfect evidence of practice.
- **Kautilya's Arthashastra** describes a highly centralised state, but its date is contested, with **Thomas Trautmann's** statistical work suggesting composition over several centuries and a final redaction around the second or third century CE.
- Treating the Arthashastra as a straight description of Mauryan administration is therefore a serious error, since it is a normative treatise on statecraft rather than a gazetteer.
- **Megasthenes**, Seleucus Nicator's ambassador at Pataliputra, wrote the *Indica*, which survives only in quotations by Arrian, Strabo and Diodorus, and his account of seven castes and of an administration without slavery is demonstrably confused.
- **Buddhist sources**, the Sri Lankan Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa and the north Indian Divyavadana, preserve traditions about Ashoka's conversion and his sponsorship of missions, and they are hagiographic in intent.
- Jain tradition holds that **Chandragupta abdicated, became a Jain monk under Bhadrabahu and died by Sallekhana at Shravanabelagola**, and this is attested in later Digambara texts rather than contemporaneously.
- **Visakhadatta's Mudraraksasa**, a play of much later date, supplies the popular narrative of Chanakya's stratagems and should be used as literature rather than as history.

KEY TERMS

Dhamma — Ashoka's Prakrit term for his ethical programme, distinct from Buddhist Dharma as a doctrinal system.

Foundation and expansion

Political narrative is the shortest part of this unit, so keep it compact and spend the marks elsewhere.

- **Chandragupta Maurya** overthrew the Nanda ruler of Magadha around 321 BCE with Kautilya's assistance, and the empire he founded was the first to unite most of the subcontinent.
- Conflict with **Seleucus Nicator** around 305 BCE ended in a treaty by which Chandragupta gained Arachosia, Gedrosia, Paropanisadae and Aria in return for five hundred war elephants, and a marriage alliance was agreed.

- **Bindusara**, called Amitraghata by Greek writers, extended control southward and maintained diplomatic contact with Antiochus I, requesting figs, wine and a philosopher.
- **Ashoka** ruled from about 268 to 232 BCE, and his **Kalinga war in the eighth year of his reign**, described in Rock Edict XIII with its figures of 100,000 killed and 150,000 deported, is the pivot of his career.
- Empire extent under Ashoka ran from Afghanistan to Bengal and south to Karnataka, excluding only the extreme south, where the edicts name the **Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras, Keralaputras and Tamraparni** as neighbours rather than subjects.
- Later Mauryan rulers, including Dasaratha, Samprati and finally **Brihadratha**, presided over contraction, and the dynasty ended around 185 BCE.
- **Pushyamitra Sunga**, the commander in chief, assassinated Brihadratha and founded the Sunga dynasty, which held a much reduced territory centred on Vidisha and Pataliputra.
- **Kanvas** succeeded the Sungas around 73 BCE under Vasudeva and lasted about forty five years before the Satavahanas absorbed their territory.

Ashoka and the concept of Dhamma

Named separately in the syllabus and the single most examinable idea in the unit. The essential distinction is between Ashoka's Dhamma and Buddhism as a religion.

- **Dhamma** as Ashoka expounds it is an ethical code rather than a creed: non-violence, respect for elders and teachers, generosity to Brahmins and shramanas, kindness to servants and slaves, truthfulness, and tolerance between sects.
- Nothing in the edicts requires belief in the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, nirvana or the Sangha as objects of faith for the population, which is why **Romila Thapar** argues that Dhamma was a civic ethic and not an evangelism.
- Thapar's reading is that a vast, ethnically and religiously plural empire needed an integrating ideology, and Dhamma supplied one that no single sect could monopolise.
- **Rock Edict XII** on tolerance is the clearest evidence, since it instructs that one should honour other sects and that praising one's own sect while disparaging others harms one's own.
- Ashoka's **personal Buddhism** is nonetheless documented: the Minor Rock Edicts record his relationship with the Sangha, the **Schism Edict** at Sarnath, Sanchi and Kausambi threatens expulsion of dissenting monks, and Rummindei records his visit to the Buddha's birthplace.
- Machinery for Dhamma included the **Dhamma Mahamattas**, officers appointed in the fourteenth year to promote the code and look after the welfare of sects, women and border peoples.
- Practical measures announced in the edicts include planting banyan trees and mango groves, digging wells along roads, building rest houses, and providing medical treatment for humans and animals.
- Ashoka also **restricted animal slaughter** in the royal kitchen and banned certain hunting festivals, though he did not prohibit meat eating generally, which is a common overstatement.
- Whether Dhamma contributed to Mauryan decline, as **Haraprasad Sastri** argued through Brahmanical reaction, is a live debate, and Thapar and others reject it on the ground that the edicts show conspicuous respect for Brahmins.

	Ashoka's Dhamma	Buddhism as a doctrine
Content	Ethical conduct, tolerance, welfare	Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path
Audience	All subjects of every sect	Followers of the Buddha
Goal stated	Welfare in this world and the next	Nirvana
Institutional demand	None on the population	Refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha

Ashoka's Dhamma against Buddhism as a religion. This distinction is the answer to most Dhamma questions.

Polity and administration

Asked in 2023 on imperial ideology and in 2024 and 2025 through the diffusion of material culture. The safest position treats the empire as strong at the centre and uneven at the edges.

- Central government under the king was assisted by a **mantriparishad** of ministers, and the Arthashastra names eighteen **tirthas** or high officials including the purohita, senapati, samaharta and sannidhata.
- Provincial structure divided the empire into four or five provinces under **kumaras** or royal princes, with **Taxila, Ujjain, Tosali, Suvarnagiri** and the capital region Pataliputra named in the edicts.
- District and local administration ran through the **pradeshika, rajuka and yukta**, with the rajuka given authority in judicial matters by Pillar Edict IV, and villages under the **gramika**.
- **Espionage** is elaborated at length in the Arthashastra, with stationary and wandering spies, and Megasthenes independently mentions overseers reporting to the king, which is one of the few places the two sources converge.
- Revenue came from **bhaga**, ordinarily a quarter to a sixth of produce, from **bali**, from tolls, from state monopolies in mining, salt and liquor, and from the **sita** lands cultivated directly by the state.
- **Sohgaura and Mahasthan inscriptions**, both dealing with famine relief and grain stores, are rare non-edict Mauryan administrative documents and worth citing.
- **Gerard Fussman** and **Romila Thapar** have both argued against reading the empire as uniformly centralised, distinguishing a metropolitan core around Magadha, core areas such as Taxila and Ujjain, and peripheral zones where control was nominal.
- That graded model is the modern consensus and it explains why the empire fragmented so quickly once central authority weakened.
- **Megasthenes on seven castes** and on the absence of slavery is best treated as a Greek observer misreading occupational groups and household servitude, and saying so demonstrates source criticism.

Economy and the diffusion of material culture

The 2025 paper asked how far the Mauryans facilitated the diffusion of Gangetic material culture, which is an archaeological question rather than a political one.

- Agriculture expanded through state initiative, with the Arthashastra describing **settlement of shudra cultivators on new land** and the state maintaining irrigation, of which the **Sudarshana lake at Girnar**, built under Chandragupta and repaired under Ashoka, is the documented case.

- **Northern Black Polished Ware**, the fine luxury pottery of the middle Ganga, spreads widely in this period, and its distribution is the primary archaeological index of Gangetic cultural diffusion.
- **Punch-marked silver coins** circulated on a large scale, and iron tools, burnt brick and urban forms spread outward from the Ganga valley along the same routes.
- Roads were central to the process, and the **Uttarapatha** from Pataliputra to Taxila and the **Dakshinapatha** to the Deccan carried administration, trade and Buddhist missions together.
- **A. Ghosh** and **R. S. Sharma** argued that Mauryan expansion carried the Gangetic package of iron technology, urbanism and NBPW into new regions, which is the affirmative case for the 2025 question.
- Qualification is required, because in the Deccan and the far south the archaeological record shows **megalithic cultures continuing** with only limited Mauryan overlay, so diffusion was real but uneven.
- Craft production was regulated through guilds or **shrenis**, and the state ran its own workshops in arms, textiles and mining, which the Arthashastra treats in detail.
- **Urban centres** including Pataliputra, Taxila, Ujjain, Kausambi and Vidisha reached considerable size, and Megasthenes describes Pataliputra as a wooden-palisaded city about fifteen kilometres long, a description archaeology at Bulandi Bagh has partly confirmed.

Art, architecture and external contacts

Mauryan art is the first monumental stone art in India, and the debate about its origins is a standard question.

- **Pillars** of polished Chunar sandstone, monolithic and up to fifteen metres, carry animal capitals of which the **Sarnath lion capital** is the finest and is now the State Emblem of India.
- **Mauryan polish**, a mirror finish on hard sandstone, is a technique that appears suddenly and disappears afterwards, and it is the strongest argument for external technical influence.
- Achaemenid parallels in the pillar form, the bell capital and the use of inscriptions on rock led **John Marshall** and others to argue Persian influence, particularly after the fall of Persepolis in 330 BCE.
- Counter-argument, advanced by **Niharranjan Ray** and others, stresses that the Indian pillars are monolithic while Achaemenid ones are built in drums, that the animals are Indian, and that a wooden Indian tradition preceded them.
- **Rock-cut architecture** begins with the **Barabar and Nagarjuni caves** near Gaya, donated by Ashoka and Dasaratha to the Ajivikas, and the Lomas Rishi facade imitates a wooden barrel vault.
- **Stupas** were built in large numbers, with tradition crediting Ashoka with 84,000, and the core of Sanchi Stupa 1 belongs to his reign, though its railings and gateways are later.
- Popular art continued alongside court art in the **yaksha and yakshi figures** from Didarganj, Parkham and Besnagar, which are large, frontal and unpolished, and their existence complicates any purely Persian account.
- External contacts are documented in **Rock Edict XIII**, which names five Hellenistic kings including Antiochus II, Ptolemy II, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander, and this passage is the anchor for Mauryan chronology.
- Missions recorded in Buddhist tradition sent **Mahinda and Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka**, and monks to Suvarnabhumi and the Hellenistic west, which begins the transmission of Buddhism beyond India.

Disintegration and the successors

Explanations of Mauryan decline mirror the explanations of every Indian imperial collapse, so this section teaches a transferable structure.

- **Haraprasad Sastri** proposed Brahmanical reaction against Ashoka's policies, citing the ban on animal sacrifice and the Dhamma Mahamattas, and the theory rests heavily on Pushyamitra being a Brahmin.
- Thapar's rebuttal notes that the edicts show respect for Brahmins, that the ban applied to specific animals and festivals, and that a religious explanation cannot account for a collapse spread over fifty years.
- **D. D. Kosambi** emphasised economic pressure, arguing that the enormous administrative and military establishment strained the revenue base and led to currency debasement.
- **R. S. Sharma** stressed the exhaustion of a system dependent on continuous expansion, and the difficulty of extracting surplus from newly settled regions.
- Structural explanations are strongest: the empire depended on the **personal authority of the ruler and on an appointed bureaucracy with no independent local base**, so weak successors produced immediate fragmentation.
- **Provincial revolts** are recorded at Taxila even under Bindusara and Ashoka, indicating that the northwest was never securely held.
- Foreign pressure followed, with **Bactrian Greek incursions** from the northwest reaching as far as Pataliputra according to the Yuga Purana, and Pushyamitra's Sunga state emerged partly as a military response.
- **Sunga rule** is culturally significant beyond its political weakness, since the Bharhut stupa railing and the Sanchi railings belong to this period and the Patanjali of the Mahabhashya was a contemporary.
- Modern assessment favours a **combination of structural fragility, fiscal strain and weak succession**, and an answer that names three or four mechanisms and ranks them will outscore one that picks Sastri's thesis alone.

Last-mile revision

- Prinsep deciphered Brahmi 1837; edicts in Prakrit, Kharoshthi northwest, Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar.
- Arthashastra date contested; Trautmann's statistical study; normative not descriptive. Megasthenes survives only in quotation.
- Chandragupta about 321 BCE; Seleucus treaty about 305 BCE for 500 elephants; Ashoka about 268-232; Kalinga in year eight, RE XIII.
- Dhamma is an ethical civic code, not Buddhism; RE XII on tolerance; Dhamma Mahamattas in year fourteen; Schism Edict shows personal Buddhism.
- Provinces under kumaras at Taxila, Ujjain, Tosali, Suvarnagiri; rajuka given judicial powers by PE IV; Sohgaure and Mahasthan on famine relief.
- NBPW and punch-marked coins as the diffusion index; Uttarapatha and Dakshinapatha; Sudarshana lake at Girnar.

- Sarnath lion capital, Mauryan polish, Barabar caves for the Ajivikas, Didarganj yakshi; RE XIII names five Hellenistic kings.
- Decline: Sastri's Brahmanical reaction, Kosambi on fiscal strain, Sharma on structural exhaustion; Sungas from about 185 BCE, Kanvas about 73 BCE.

Common errors to avoid

- Using the Arthashastra as a description of Mauryan administration. Its date is contested and it is a normative treatise.
- Equating Ashoka's Dhamma with Buddhism. The edicts prescribe an ethical code binding on no sect and demand no doctrinal belief.
- Saying Ashoka banned meat eating or all animal slaughter. He restricted the royal kitchen and specific practices.
- Repeating Megasthenes on seven castes as fact. It is a Greek misreading and saying so earns marks.
- Attributing the Sanchi gateways to Ashoka. The stupa core is Mauryan; the railings and toranas are Sunga and Satavahana.
- Explaining decline by Brahmanical reaction alone. Thapar's rebuttal is standard and structural explanations are stronger.

Mains Practice

Symbiotic relationships between Buddhist establishments, traders, artisan guilds and royal support led to a close proximity of religion, economy and polity in the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

How far did the Mauryans facilitate the diffusion of the material culture of the Gangetic plains?

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

Discuss the role of Buddhism in shaping the socio-religious landscape of the Mauryan Empire.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

Analyze the contours of imperial ideology as exhibited during the Mauryan period.

15 marks · 200 words · 2023