The Mauryan empire in early India*

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Abstract
This article attempts to differentiate a kingdom from an empire by arguing that an empire is a more evolved form of the state than a kingdom. An essential feature of empire has generally been extensive territory held together by continuing conquests and a centralized administration. The argument in this article is that an empire requires the restructuring of the economy to provide a substantial revenue, the introduction of administrative forms that are appropriate to regional and local governance, and the encouragement of an ideology sufficiently flexible to be acceptable to the constituent societies. Imperial systems have to control diverse communities and their complexity lies in the varying nature of this control.

The idea of empire in India became part of historical discussion in the nineteenth century. The notion of a British empire led to a search for earlier empires in Indian history and mention was made of the Mauryan, the Gupta and, pre-eminently, the Mughal empires. The British empire was projected as a successor to the earlier ones, enhancing the prestige attached to the British conquest of India. In the context of European history, the British empire was viewed as modelled on the Roman.

The distinctive difference between old and new was said to be that India’s pre-British empires had conformed to the model of Oriental despotism, a concept rooted in descriptions of the Persian empire in Greek sources, endorsed by the grandeur of medieval Islamic courts. Even the dialectical analyses of Karl Marx failed him when it came to Asia; his Asiatic mode of production drew heavily on the concept of Oriental despotism. These layers of history moulded the idea of India having had a series of empires exhibiting extraordinary wealth derived from despotic oppression. In the indiscriminate use of the term empire by subsequent historians of India, many Indian kingdoms have been given this label without an attempt at defining empire.

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The stereotype of empire culled from these models in the late nineteenth century hinged on territory, revenue and ideology. The territory, acquired through conquest, had to be extensive; the administration had to be centralized, with power focused on the king as emperor, although authority also lay with the officers maintaining the laws; and the ideology had to support attempts at cultural uniformity. When applied to Asian empires conquest meant large armies both to acquire and control far-reaching territories and to generate a prosperous economy through booty and prisoners-of-war. The provinces, uniformly administered, channelled the revenue to the centre. It was said that the king claimed ownership of the land, a statement based on Hellenistic sources about Asia and doubtless quoted in the nineteenth century to justify similar modern colonial claims. The revenue came through peasant agriculture, described as slave labour, although Indian sources differentiate between lower caste labour and slaves and do not associate slaves with agriculture on any substantial scale. Commerce was thought to have been of marginal importance. The administration concentrated on revenue from agrarian sources, intended largely for the enrichment of the ruling class. The ideological confrontation was between the civilized and the barbarian, and religion became an agency of civilizing the barbarian.

Past ‘glory’ was measured by monumental architecture, imperial edicts and grand public works. Significantly, the crucial factor of economic appropriation, although admitted as part of the scheme, was dismissed at a simplistic level. There was little analysis of the relationship between empire and its constituent parts. This would have required a typology of states, of the economies that went into the making of states, and of their relation to the empire. Pre-modern Indian empires are named after dynasties and this gives little clue to the differentiation between kingdoms and empires.

The characteristics of empire have been widely discussed in the context of colonial empires and some of these are relevant to earlier empires as well. Thus, empire assumes absolute sovereignty on the part of those ruling and sovereignty is exercised through the right to wage war and to make laws. Size was measured in terms of extensive territories beyond the homeland. This allowed for a differentiation between core and periphery, with the assumption that, the core being dominant, its culture was superior to that of the periphery. In a sense this also encouraged an attitude of internal colonialism. Although diversity was recognized, it did not imply equality between diverse communities. Different cultural levels are registered within elite and non-elite groups, but these are not necessarily sharp demarcations. Empires grew out of states and communities that were previously independent. The aspiration of empire builders was to achieve universality, perhaps through an over-arching

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ideology. The fear of cultural divisiveness leading to political dismemberment was always present.

The tension and play between the core and the periphery was a significant aspect of imperial policy. Culturally distant communities could be viewed as barbarians or as outside the social pale, requiring efforts, where possible, to incorporate them by converting them to the culture of the core region. This inevitably meant that the latter had also to undergo some change. Often this incorporation required enlisting the local elite who, in return for allowing them their existing wealth, status and power, ensured the obedience of the local people, as well as their willingness to provide a militia and to be taxed for revenue. Such arrangements often involved some degree of violence. Symbols of conquest were made visible through monuments and inscriptions glorifying imperial power. The ideology of power legitimized economic demands and these were facilitated through the conquest of territories that had economic potential. Since the system rested on exploitation, tribute of every variety – in cash, in kind or in human labour – became essential. This was also the basis for the provisioning of armies which both conquered territory and policed it.

Some of these features can be observed in the Mauryan empire. The more significant question, however, is the manner in which they are interrelated. This not only differs from empire to empire but also from the model accepted by earlier historians. Rather than seeing empire as a radical change or a static pattern, it might be helpful to the investigation of pre-colonial empires if they are viewed as a further and more evolved form of the state. Therefore, the formation of states becomes a precursor to empire and in the typology of states empire becomes a distinctive form.

The emergence of empire in India was gradual. In about the sixth century B.C.E. there are references to well-established kingdoms, the rajyas, and also to the gana-sanghas, the chiefdoms of clan-based societies. These polities are each identified as a community of common ancestry, custom, language and religion, but they had divergent views about the origins of the state. Brahmanical sources of that time approved of the kingdoms and held that, although the state emerged from a contractual relationship among people, the contract had to be validated through the intervention of deity. At the practical level the requirements of the state were said to be its seven limbs, the saptanga: these were the king, the territory, the ministers and officers, the fortified capital city, the treasury, the resort to coercion, both militarily and through punishments, and the ally. The king’s duty was to protect his subjects, referred to as praja

4 Howe, pp. 36ff.
5 R. Thapar, Early India: from the Origins to A.D. 1300 (Delhi, 2003), pp. 137–73.
– literally, children – and to enforce the *dharma* – the social obligations and sacred duties of members of society – and, if necessary, to resort to *danda*, or coercion, in order to do so.

Brahmanical sources ignored the chiefdoms but the latter drew their legitimacy from contemporary Buddhist, Jaina, Ajivika and other heterodox thinkers, referred to jointly as the Shramanas. Buddhist theory argued for a social contract, but one devoid of divine intervention since at this time gods were largely extraneous to the Buddhist scheme of things.\(^7\) The confrontation between kingdoms and chiefdoms, therefore, was not restricted to the eventual conquest of the latter by the former, but also included the continuing and opposed theoretical explanations of how the polities evolved. This duality of thought moved along parallel paths and is especially evident in discussions on social ethics, notably in the context of the debate on *ahimsa*/non-violence. Whereas Brahmanical views held that violence was justified if social obligation required it, the Buddhist view was firm that conforming to the Middle Way of avoiding extremes should be the more persuasive ethic.

By about the fifth century local cultural variations had surfaced, orthodox ritual practices were being questioned and there were arguments over the diverse theories, many denying divine revelation and claiming derivation from attempts at logical analysis. The comfortable earlier orthodox system was beginning to come apart. This was the point of change. The large kingdom of the Nandas annexed the earlier small polities and was itself a departure from what characterized these polities. In contrast to the rulers of the earlier states those of the Nanda dynasty were said to be of low social status. Politics was becoming a relatively open field and kingship was not restricted to the upper caste aristocracy as the Brahmanical normative texts advised.

The kingdom of the Nandas extended across almost the entire Ganges plain and had its nucleus in the central region of the plain in the territory of Magadha (present-day south Bihar), which had been among the earliest kingdoms dating to the sixth century B.C.E. Magadha was an important political and economic heartland, apart from being the focus of contending philosophical sects. It was the spine of the Ganges plain, through its control of traffic on the river and its tributaries, and it was further strengthened by its extensive rice-land, forest wealth, and copper and iron deposits. Expanding these resources required the availability of labour, obtained possibly from prisoners-of-war and by relegating the lowest castes to this manual work. The kingdom was also associated with considerable wealth derived from the systematic collection of revenue. This allowed the maintenance of an army so large that it is thought to have discouraged the soldiers of Alexander the Great from continuing the

\(^7\) *Digha Nikaya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and E. Carpenter (3 vols., 1890–1911), ii. 253; *Jataka*, v, sect. 238.
Greek campaign eastwards. The Nanda king was soon overthrown by the young Chandragupta, the first Mauryan ruler, acting on the advice of Kautilya, the author of the well-known treatise on political economy, the *Arthashastra*. Magadha became the hub of the Mauryan empire – this was the inheritance of the first Mauryan ruler.

This article primarily draws on three historical sources. The first and most important of these consists of a number of edicts of one of the emperors, Ashoka, that were inscribed on rock surfaces and specially erected pillars in various parts of his empire. Some of these edicts, or statements, are personal in nature and some reflect his concerns as a statesman and ruler; they can be precisely dated and refer to events and personalities of that period. The second source is the account of Mauryan India written by Megasthenes, a friend of Seleucus Nicator, who ruled the territories in west Asia on the death of Alexander. It is said that Megasthenes came as ambassador to the Mauryan court. Unfortunately his original account does not survive and all we have are lengthy paraphrases from the original incorporated into geographical works and biographies of Alexander written in subsequent centuries by Strabo, Diodorus and Arrian.\(^8\) The third source – the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya – is more controversial as its date is uncertain. Most historians take it to have been written in an early form in the reign of the first Mauryan ruler, as Kautilya was his minister, but this form was revised and possibly rewritten in the third century C.E. A linguistic study of the text suggests different periods of composition for different parts.\(^9\) The section that parallels aspects of Mauryan administration is the one that seems to be the earliest in date, and it is this section that is most frequently quoted as relevant to the concepts of Mauryan economic polity.

The dates of the Mauryan empire are roughly from 321 to 185 B.C.E. It was founded just after the campaign of Alexander of Macedon, who marched through north-western India from 327 to 325 and then returned to Babylon. It was a close successor to the Achaemenid Persian empire to the west of it. Territories at the eastern frontier of the Persian empire in the Indus plain were the western frontier lands of the Mauryan. The closeness is also evident from a few stylistic similarities associated with the Mauryan empire: Mauryan royal patronage, it has been argued, may have borrowed some Persian forms, although the Mauryan style is quite distinctive. The chronological hyphen between the two empires was Alexander.

Interestingly, there is no mention of Alexander in Indian sources. But in subsequent generations there were close links between the Mauryas and the Hellenistic kings who succeeded to the territories that he annexed. Spatially the Mauryan empire controlled virtually the entire sub-continent,

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and in addition included eastern Afghanistan. The latter was an asset; at the cross-roads of an embryonic pan-Asian trade, it was ideally placed to serve as a source of revenue and a forum for more stimulating cultural exchange between multiple communities of Greek, Aramaic and Prakrit speakers. The chiefdoms of the far south of India were not included, probably because they were of marginal importance. Their potential became visible in the post-Mauryan period with the extensive commercial exchange between the merchants of Alexandria and those of the Indian peninsula. The territories of the Mauryan empire were contiguous, which made administration less complicated. To date, estimates of population—a figure of 181 million has been suggested—have been vastly exaggerated; more reliable demographic studies are awaited.

Apart from textual sources, the Mauryan presence is visible from artefacts, but these are of a limited kind. The more significant were the imperial edicts inscribed in various parts of the empire, indicating a Mauryan presence. A particular luxury-ware pottery—the northern black polished ware—and silver and copper punch-marked coins are associated with the period immediately before and increase in the Mauryan period. Their distribution is taken as an indicator of the locations touched by imperial administration and commerce. Terracotta figurines were noticeably common and many suggest popular fertility icons. Some sealings have been found with Prakrit names, inscribed in the Brahmi script used in the edicts, but the style used is less refined. Iron objects associated with city life occur with other finds; urban sites have brick built structures, and houses have terracotta ring wells and soakage jars. The empire was an area of multiple and diverse cultures, speaking a variety of languages, reading a variety of scripts, and varying immensely in forms of worship, in economic patterns and in social organizations. Some of the conquered territories had earlier been kingdoms and some chiefdoms. As such, the kingdoms at least were forerunners of a system that mutated into empire. How was this territory and its varied patterns of living to be welded together into an empire?

The Mauryas were an obscure family referred to contemptuously in Brahmanical sources as being of the lowest caste and heretics because they patronized the heterodox sects of Jainas, Ajivikas and Buddhists, all three of which accorded them the high kshatriya status of the aristocracy in their narratives. Chandragupta campaigned in central and western India, which secured the routes to the peninsula as well as to the ports of the west coast which had maritime contacts with west Asia. A campaign in the north-west against Seleucus Nicator was terminated in a treaty which

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10 Prakrit was the language used by the majority of the subjects of the empire and was of the Indo-Aryan group.
brought territories in eastern Afghanistan into the Mauryan sphere. Seleucus sent an ambassador, Megasthenes, to the Mauryan capital at Pataliputra (modern Patna), and his observations on India, the *Indica*, have survived in the form of quotations in later Greek texts.\(^{12}\) Some Greek commentators have doubted that Megasthenes spent time at the Mauryan court and suspect that he picked up his information from Indian visitors to eastern Afghanistan. It is certainly surprising that he makes no specific mention of the Mauryan emperor. Greek accounts of India began largely as fantasy, such as that of Ktesias, and then gradually became more reliable in their descriptions. The overlap between the two is apparent in some parts of the narrative by Megasthenes. The major problem is that the original text has not survived and, as mentioned above, what we have are quotations in later writings, which do not necessarily always tally.

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son, Bindusara, who appears in a number of sources. He is said, for example, to have asked Antiochus I to send him a gift of sweet wine, figs and a sophist.\(^{13}\) A much later Buddhist text mentions his having conquered the land between the two seas – a reference it would seem to the conquest of the peninsula.\(^{14}\) Tamil poems refer to the chariots of the Mauryas racing through the landscape, although they never in fact conquered so far south.

Bindusara’s son Ashoka was the most remarkable of the Mauryan kings. Although virtually forgotten in the subsequent hegemonic Brahmanical tradition, he was much lauded in Buddhist texts, having been a Buddhist himself.\(^{15}\) Information on his reign comes primarily from his many edicts, which provide an unusual glimpse of imperial rule.\(^{16}\) The elaborate discussions on social ethics and kingship in post-Mauryan texts authored by Brahmanas were probably provoked by the projection of Ashoka as a role model in Buddhist literature.\(^{17}\) The concept of the *chakravartin* (the universal monarch), mentioned in the post-Ashokan period, again registers a difference between Brahmanical and Buddhist views. The first gives primacy to conquest and the protection of caste society, with a social ethic differentiated according to caste; in the Buddhist concept, primacy is given to the universally applicable social ethic, projected as the law that protects society, and not to conquest.

The territories of the Mauryan empire were at their most extensive during Ashoka’s reign. This is gauged by the location of his edicts in various parts of the sub-continent and by the languages and scripts in which they were written, differing according to location. Ashoka refers

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\(^{12}\) J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthênês and Arrián* (Calcutta, 1877).

\(^{13}\) Athenæus, ch. iii, sect. 444, ch. xiv, sects. 652–3.

\(^{14}\) Taranatha, *Geschichte des Buddhismus in Indien* (St. Petersburg, 1869), pp. 80–9.

\(^{15}\) R. Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (2nd edn., Delhi, 1997).


to the territory that he ruled by the commonly used name, Jambudvipa – the land of the rose-apple tree. This is difficult to define as a geographical area (in cosmology it was the central place in the inhabited world), but the sense of extensive territory is indicated in his reference to the state that he ruled as *vijita*, literally, that over which he has victory, probably better understood as sovereignty. He suggests the range of his empire not in geographical terms but by mentioning the more important peoples over whom he rules, settled in various parts of the sub-continent. He also defines his territory by reference to his neighbours, the Hellenistic kings to the west and the chiefdoms of south India. Despite the size of the territory over which they held sway, Mauryan ambition was not one of unlimited expansion or there would have been campaigns against both these neighbours.

The Mauryas did not take what could be called imperial titles. Ashoka uses *devanampiya* (the beloved of the gods), in his inscriptions. It neither connoted power derived from the gods nor was used by the kings who followed the Mauryas. In one edict he calls himself by the seemingly simple title of ‘the raja of Magadha’. This is in striking contrast to even quite minor rulers who soon afterwards regularly refer to themselves as *maharajadhiraja* – the great king, the king of kings. Calling himself the *raja* of Magadha, in effect, implied much more than the title since Magadha was the heartland of the empire. Clues to empire need not lie in royal titles.

The first major event of Ashoka’s reign, eight years after his succession, was his campaign in Kalinga, in eastern India. He confesses his remorse at the suffering and death caused by this action, and mentions the resulting deportation of 150,000 people, the death of 100,000, and many more who perished unknown. This seems to have inspired his commitment to forsake violence and war, a policy that he hoped would also be followed by his descendants. The empire was large enough for there to be no need for fresh conquests, yet in terms of imperial ambitions this was a significant self-imposition. It could be argued that perhaps a fiscal crisis also encouraged the forsaking of war, but there is no mention of a reduction of the army. Ashoka’s attempt to discourage warfare contradicts a conventionally accepted characteristic of empire, namely, the glorification of continuous conquest. There was no major campaign by Ashoka’s successors and, assuming that the size of the army had been stabilized, the peasantry would have remained on the land. Megasthenes states that the cultivators were the largest section of Indian society, and adds that they continued to till their fields even when there was a battle being waged near by.

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18 Major Rock Edict XIII (Bloch, pp. 125ff).
19 Strabo, bk. xv, ch. 1, para. 40.
The Mauryan empire was described above as a highly centralized bureaucracy controlled by an efficient hierarchy of officers. But there are problems with this pattern. It assumes a pyramidal form of administration with the ruler and his court at the peak. Below this is a neat division of the empire into provinces, further sub-divided into smaller, similar units and with parallel hierarchies of administrators. The edicts do refer to smaller administrative units but these were not identical in every part of the empire. With regard to the hierarchy of officers, the edicts refer to far fewer of them than the texts. It would also seem that officers were appointed from the ranks of local people and this again would tend to have decentralized the administration. A centralized pattern relies on rapid communication between the different sections of the administration, but distances within the Mauryan empire were extensive. It has been calculated that it would have taken routine messengers from provincial centres at least two months to reach Magadha and return home.\(^{20}\) Given this, it is likely that many decisions were taken locally.

The administrative and economic patterns of the empire might be better seen as more decentralized and less uniform. This would also point to unequal power relationships between various parts of the empire, both among themselves and with the centre. Three administrative patterns can be suggested, applicable to different locations and with a gradation of control from the centralized to the local: first, there is the single metropolitan state, second the core areas and third the peripheral areas.\(^{21}\) The metropolitan state had its nucleus in Magadha and included the imperial capital at Pataliputra but extended across the entire Ganges plain. The area is in a sense demarcated by the location of specially erected pillars on which a later set of edicts was inscribed in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh years of Ashoka’s reign. In these the emperor reviews his activities and achievements – a kind of retrospective of his reign, among other things. The pillars are substantial monolithic columns, located only in the Ganges plain and characterized by a superb polish and impressively sculpted elaborate capitals. There is no mistaking that they are imperial markers. They are a striking contrast in style to the heavily ornamented terracotta figurines found in the region and elsewhere. Pataliputra, as the capital, monopolized monumental architecture incorporating halls and palaces. The city was enclosed within a vast palisade with regularly placed towers, described with some degree of awe by Megasthenes, whose words are endorsed in part by excavations.

The metropolitan state would have been administered directly and centrally. It had a history in the rise to importance of Magadha over the two previous centuries. It could well have been administered according


to the centralized norms suggested in the *Arthashastra*, with a focus on revenue. The revenue intended for the imperial treasury would be brought to Pataliputra to be redistributed in a manner conducive to the imperial economy and administration. The pattern of redistribution suggests that much less was spent on secular monumental architecture than was the case under imperial systems in other parts of the ancient world. Nevertheless, some royal patronage was expended on Buddhist monuments at the three sites where Ashoka addressed the Sangha (the Buddhist order). We also know that the officers were instructed to record the donations of the queen.\(^{22}\) Whereas the post-cremation relics of the Buddha and of important Buddhist monks were buried within huge *stupas* – tumuli decorated with stone sculpture – the relics of kings were not preserved. Cremation did not encourage the construction of graves and tombs and thereby denied to the historian of India a valuable collection of objects from the past.

A major drain on the economy appears to have been the payment of salaries to the upper levels of the bureaucracy, quite apart from the cost of maintaining an army. The relative cost of a domestic slave – and slaves were largely domestic – was approximately the same as the salary of an artisan working for the state, low compared to that of a public official. The *Arthashastra* recommends that senior officers receive forty-eight times the salary of a clerk, and ministers double that.\(^{23}\) Unfortunately we do not have evidence of actual salaries paid but even notionally this would have been a huge burden on the treasury. That the upper classes lived well is evident from the representation of rich donors at Buddhist sites of the second century B.C.E. Salaries were computed in coins, and where revenue was collected in kind were more likely to have been paid locally. Since all manner of human activities were taxed, including magicians and prostitutes, tax collection required not only control by the administration but co-ordination as well.

The building of roads and rest houses was part of public expenditure and served many purposes: moving the army, facilitating administration and opening up trade through linking towns. One set of edicts is located on the route from Magadha to the peninsula. Pliny mentions an impressive royal highway from Taxila in the north-west to Pataliputra, a road which was to be rebuilt more than once in later times.\(^{24}\) The centrality of trade to the income of the state is underlined in lists of committees and supervisory officers inspecting and valuing items and organizing their sale, mentioned by both Megasthenes and Kautilya.\(^{25}\)

\(^{22}\) Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, pp. 178ff.; The Queen’s Edict, ‘La Reine’ (Bloch, p. 159).

\(^{23}\) *Arthasastra*, bk. 5, ch. 3.

\(^{24}\) Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, vi. 21; Bloch, p. 170.

\(^{25}\) Strabo, bk. xv, ch. 1, para. 50 (*Arthasastra*, bk. 2, ch. 16).
The second of the three administrative categories is that of the core areas. They were not colonies but were often the nuclei of provincial administration. These lay beyond the Ganges plain and were located in parts of the north-west, western India, the southern part of the peninsula and the east. They are generally indicated by clusters of Ashokan edicts engraved on rock surfaces. The area extending from the north-west to eastern Afghanistan, for example, had a population of Prakrit, Greek and Aramaic speakers and the edicts are inscribed in all these languages. Western India was Prakrit-speaking, as was Kalinga in the east, but differences of dialect are registered in the edicts. The cluster of edicts in Karnataka in the south are also in Prakrit, although the local language in the southern regions was of Dravidian origin. Some of these edicts are addressed to local officers in charge of the area and posted to its central city. The officers were required to read the edicts to the populace, or to any interested parties, and presumably to translate them where the language was not understood. Each core area was the nucleus of a larger unit, frequently governed by members of the royal family, being groomed for more responsible functions at the centre.

The core areas were economically active but differentiated. Their economic potential was exploited and restructured to support the empire. In the north-west the nodal points in the overland exchange between northern India and west and central Asia were the cosmopolitan centres where the edicts were located. In Afghanistan the major centres were Kandahar and locations in the north-east of the country. Edicts inscribed at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehera seem literally to point towards the routes to central Asia. There is a tradition that associates Ashoka with having travelled to Khotan, and although this was said to be fantasy a century ago, more recent discoveries of routes from the northern parts of the sub-continent to central Asia suggest that a revision of these ideas may be necessary. Commercial wealth and the status that it brought gave a degree of autonomy to the elite of the area in the pre-eminent cities such as Kandahar and Taxila. References to the citizens objecting to the repressive policies of the Mauryan officials are associated with Taxila. In the first example the young prince Ashoka was sent to quell the revolt and his arrival was welcomed by the citizens. A couple of generations later the same story is narrated and this time it is Ashoka’s son Kunala who is sent. There is recognition of official high-handedness which was curbed immediately and effectively through imperial intervention.

By way of contrast, western India – Gujarat and Malwa – was a rich agricultural region, with an Iranian local governor named Tushaspa. Among the Mauryan investments in this area was the construction of a dam. That it was crucial to the agriculture of this region is evident from a series of later inscriptions at the site that refer to the renovation of the dam each time it was breached subsequently, over a period of about 700 years.\(^\text{27}\) Irrigation systems, provided and controlled by the state – referred to by some modern historians as hydraulic machinery – were cited as characteristic of oriental empires and a major source of expenditure. There is a contradiction here between Megasthenes, who refers to officers supervising the release of water for irrigation, as in Egypt, and the *Arthashastra*, which reveals a preference for irrigation managed privately by cultivators and landowners, even to the extent of their being given some tax exemptions for doing so. This dam in western India was the single irrigation system built by the Mauryan state.

The edicts in the south point to yet another economic activity, since they frequently occur in the proximity of the region’s heavily-worked gold mines. The *Arthashastra* refers to the transport of this gold and semi-precious stones from the south to the treasury at the centre. Kalinga, on the coast of eastern India, was in some ways a counterpart to the north-west, as the maritime trade going southwards along the eastern coast of India would have to pass through it. Before the Mauryas, archaeology provides evidence of chalcolithic and megalithic societies. The Mauryan period shows urban sites in these areas: Sopara in western India; Shishupalgarh in eastern India; and a number of coastal towns, together with a cluster in the Krishna and Tungabhadra plains of the south. Sannathi lies in the heart of the peninsula and was evidently linked both to the Vindhyan sites and those of the south. New settlements of an urban nature meant some increase in settlement densities.

Although some of the produce and revenue from the core areas was sent to the capital, some would have been used locally. The proportion for each cannot be assessed on the available evidence. Given the distance from the capital, control was doubtless flexible, with many decisions being taken locally. The core areas had either earlier been independent states, as in the north-west, or were in the process of developing that potential, which they did in the post-Mauryan period. Responding to the needs of imperial revenue, their economies were restructured, and this might have encouraged them to become rival centres of power, grouped around political factions and different religious ideologies, enabling them to emerge as independent kingdoms on the decline of the empire.

The third administrative category consisted of the peripheral areas – the waste land, the pastoral tracts and the forests – all of which were

\(^{27}\) Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, p. 118.
considerable in the period under consideration. They were peripheral in terms of their economic potential, but geographically they were scattered. They lay in the interstices of core areas and not necessarily only at the frontiers of the empire. Much of the peninsula, apart from the river valleys, was forested, as was the Vindhyan region extending through central India. A large stretch of Sind and Punjab and western Rajasthan was not closely settled. These were areas where the edicts have not so far been found but some of their inhabitants are mentioned therein. It was difficult to conquer such regions and bring them under direct control; administration would have tended to skirt round them. Imperial officers probably had closer links with the local chiefs from whom they collected whatever revenue was available, generally in the form of animals and forest produce, such as elephants, timber and semi-precious stones.

Curiously, the only group of people whom Ashoka threatens in no uncertain terms is the atavikas, or forest-dwellers, who were in the main hunter–gatherers.\textsuperscript{28} His reasons are unclear, but the \textit{Arthashastra} states that they sometimes burned the crops of the cultivators, presumably where forests had been cleared and the land of the forest-dwellers encroached upon by cultivators. Burning the crops would be the most effective method of retaliation (Ashoka does specifically ban the indiscriminate burning of forests). It is also said that forest chiefs made unreliable allies,\textsuperscript{29} again presumably when armies were traversing their lands. Since the forest-dwellers were primarily hunter–gatherers they may have found Ashoka’s ethic of non-violence unacceptable. In later times, however, converting forest-dwellers into peasants became a more regular activity.

The intervention of the state would have occurred and been perceived very differently in each of these three categories. The Ganges plain was by now familiar with a system of maximum intervention. The clearing of marshland and forest required a heavy investment of labour before it could be settled. Since slave labour was not used extensively for agriculture or commercial production the availability of labour was ensured through identifying certain castes as those who provided labour – their subordination was further guaranteed by ranking them as low. The availability of labour would also have helped to promote wet-rice cultivation. This gradually became central to agrarian activity wherever it was feasible, since the yield per acre was higher than other crops with more than a single harvest in the year. Consequently, there was the potential both for a food surplus and for increased revenue, provided that the agrarian resource was properly organized.

\textsuperscript{28} Major Rock Edict XIII and Pillar Edict V (Bloch, pp. 125 ff., 165 ff.).

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Arthasastra}, bk. 2, ch. 1, verse 36.
The *Arthashastra* advises that land referred to as *sita*, or royal, should be cultivated by tenant farmers. It is unclear whether these were small-scale farmers or agricultural labourers, cultivating for the state and retaining a small part of the produce for themselves but giving up the bulk of their crops as revenue. Megasthenes refers to *georgoi* but there is confusion in his account as to whether they paid a tax or a rent. The *Arthashastra* suggests that the state should also bring and settle low caste *shudra* cultivators on waste land and establish a variety of tenancies. These cultivators were, however, distinct from private landowners, who also paid taxes directly to the state. Although private ownership of land is referred to often enough in Buddhist sources, the purchase of land with money is rarely mentioned. Most land ownership came from hereditary rights, particularly after the breakdown of clan ownership into family holdings, or through grants from royalty. The latter, however, was not as common at this point as it was to become later. Private estates are not mentioned with any frequency and come into prominence only some centuries later when royal grants, especially to religious beneficiaries and institutions, became an extremely lucrative source of revenue for the grantee.

Empire changed rural land-holding patterns, with more land being cultivated as state land, but by cultivators settled on it by the state and assessed for revenue. At least two types of taxes on agriculture are well established: the tax on the amount of land cultivated; and the tax that was a share of the produce, generally a sixth or an eighth, but it could be higher in an emergency. It is likely that the 150,000 people deported after Ashoka’s Kalinga campaign were settled on uncultivated land and converted into peasants. The degree and distance to which populations can be moved and resettled might, in the context of early India, be another distinction between kingdoms and what I am referring to as empire.

Merchants and financiers investing in trade often came from the families of tax-paying landowners. Commercial activities were tightly controlled, with the required registration of merchants and artisans and with merchandise being processed through a series of tolls and taxes. The coins used extensively in the Mauryan empire are of silver and copper and are stamped with a variety of symbols. The prototype for these

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31 The Rummindei Inscription (Bloch, p. 157).
32 Inscription and text use the same term for deportation, *apavaha* (D. D. Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956), p. 211; *Arthasastra*, bk. 2, ch. 1, verse 1; Major Rock Edict XIV (Bloch, p. 126)).
coins is traced by some numismatists to Lydian bar coins of the sixth century B.C.E. Some issues carry a legend mentioning organizations linked to towns, suggesting the parallel presence of a more localized system. The Mauryan economy extended the use of money, judging by the widespread finds of punch-marked coins in the sub-continent beyond the obvious trade routes.

It has been argued in one study that, on the basis of the identification of particular symbols with particular rulers, there was a debasement of silver coins in the later period of the empire, indicating a fiscal crisis. Further evidence for the latter is also thought to come from references to double-cropping. It could be asked if this was debasement or the use of two metals, suggesting a sensitivity to the value of silver and especially so given that silver was not widely available at this time in India. Was there an increased demand for silver coins? Would the debasement of silver alone have had a major impact on the economy or was it a manifestation of other factors causing a fiscal crisis?

The core areas, having been kingdoms or having the capacity to be so, tended to be more uniformly developed and more purposefully administered, generating revenue from agriculture and/or trade. This made them potentially important and more liable to be conquered. They were likely to have been incorporated into the administrative structure fairly easily since they were already familiar with its rudiments. These were the areas of resistance when the empire weakened and they emerged as independent kingdoms in post-Mauryan times.

The relationship of the metropolitan state to the peripheral areas was different since the former did not develop these areas as economic assets but creamed off what was needed from existing agencies; nor did it introduce new forms of administration. Peripheral areas were probably acquired more through a process of osmosis than conquest and were controlled more by fiat than by an extensive network of administration. These were the areas where, after the empire declined, either clan-based societies resurfaced, as in Rajasthan and Punjab, or small kingdoms evolved, as in the peninsula. The inter-dependence of Mauryan administrators and the chiefs of clans in such areas would have encouraged the latter to recognize the potentialities of state systems. That there was an imperial influence is suggested by post-Ashokan inscriptions in Tamil in the south using the Brahmi script of Mauryan inscriptions and largely recording the activity of chiefs clans mutating from chiefship to kingship, and merchant patronage to Buddhist and Jaina monks.34

Cultural assimilation would have been facilitated where there were settlements of the hegemonic culture among those it was seeking to absorb. Given the variation in patterns of control there was also the

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problem of supervising a large bureaucracy. This was done by the
emperor travelling through his dominions; by his senior officers – the
pradeshika and the rajuka – making quinquennial tours; and by using
junior officers and others as informers and spies.\(^{35}\) There were other ways
of attempting to introduce conformity. A statement in one of the edicts
suggests a possible uniformity of laws in the empire, but this must have
been limited as it is not apparent in the successor states. Customary laws,
with their diversities and variant forms, were more prevalent, as among
the castes that constituted Indian society. Brahmanical sources speak of
four ritual statuses and of multiple groups identified by occupation,
ethnicity and custom. Megasthenes speaks of seven divisions and gives
them caste-like features, stating, for example, that marriage circles and
occupation were specified and that transactions cutting across these
divisions were not permitted.\(^{36}\) But surprisingly, Ashoka does not
mention any form of caste. This would suggest that it was more
important to theories of social organization and less formalized in practice
at this time. Converting non-caste groups to castes as a method of
assimilation became a significant process in later periods, but the practice
is not referred to in Mauryan sources.

Given the absence of a dominant code and the presence of a
multiplicity of others, an attempt was made by Ashoka to introduce a
single code of social ethics. His intention was to persuade the people of
the empire to adopt his understanding of social ethics, which he referred
to as *dhamma*. This was not just a pious wish. He re-iterated the *dhamma*
repeatedly and appointed special officers to encourage its adoption. They
were also directly involved in various policies and practices relating to the
welfare of his subjects. *Dhamma* was the term commonly used by the
Buddha for what he taught. It referred to the universally applicable ethics
required of the individual in social behaviour and norms. At one level,
an individual’s endorsement of this ethic would ensure that he or she
acquired merit and consequent liberation from rebirth; at another, it
was directed towards creating a tolerant society and avoiding discord.
The Sanskrit form, *dharma*, used in Brahmanical texts, referred to the
differentiated social obligations and sacred duties required of each caste
separately in accordance with Brahmanical norms. There was, therefore,
a tension in the application of the two terms as the implications were not
identical. This was an important duality of the times. The Mauryan rulers
were open to non-Brahmanical ideas and were claimed as patrons of the
heterodox sects. In using the term *dhamma*, Ashoka was closer to the
Buddhist connotation than to the Brahmanical, but he gave it a uniquely
nuanced interpretation.\(^{37}\) This is especially clear from the Greek rendering

\(^{35}\) Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, pp. 103ff.

\(^{36}\) Strabo, bk. xv, ch. 1, paras. 39–49.

of his edicts, in which dharmma is not explained as the teaching of the Buddha, but is translated as eusebeia (virtue, reverence). Ashoka was not confining himself merely to spreading the message of the Buddha; he was reflecting his understanding of the centrality of social ethics to kingship and to a king’s relationship with his subjects. Power and governance are not unconnected; power takes many forms, such as the networks that link individuals to each other, or to society or to governance. The ethic was intended for the individual but was seen as part of a complex social organization. Power can be coercive but such power is distinctly different from the attempt to persuade. Ashoka’s edicts are concerned with his definition of social ethics, his attempts to persuade his subjects to conform to these ethics, and his assessment of his own attempts to infuse a new ethic. The dharmma did not recognize ethnic and cultural boundaries, and this in turn facilitated the development of local cultures in a less uniform fashion than is assumed for empires.

That there were tensions in the societies of the empire comes through in the edicts. To take one example, Ashoka’s dharmma maintains that people should respect Brahmanas and Shramanas, and sects with diverse philosophies should respect each other’s views. Equal respect for all sects was, however, unacceptable to the Brahmanas, who claimed the superiority of divine revelation. The orthodox would have resisted the efforts of the emperor to insist that all sects be respected – the patronage by wealthy financiers and merchants of the heterodox sects was irksome to them. Similarly, the movement and settlement of populations by the state could cause conflict. It led to an increase in the number of peasants, but not necessarily to their becoming better off economically. The resistance of the forest-dwellers was an opposition to the Mauryan state encroaching on their forests and hunting grounds, an opposition that was to be a continuing feature of Indian history.

The Mauryan empire was host to a variety of distinctive cultures. Perhaps the most cosmopolitan gatherings were in the cities of the north-west inhabited by Iranians, most of whom were Zoroastrians, and by Greeks and others imprinted with Hellenistic culture, as well as by Buddhists who were doubtless at this stage largely Indian. In the peninsula, settlements before the Mauryan empire were frequently megalithic sacred sites, some connected to later Buddhist structures. Tamil was the spoken language in the south but the earliest script it used was adapted from the Brahmi script used in the inscriptions of Ashoka for his edicts.

Diverse cultures and diverse languages sometimes encouraged interconnections, but at other times they seeded confrontation. A broad-based social ethic could have welded together the various groups. The dharmma generally pointed to universally acceptable norms in its emphasis on tolerance and non-violence as prime values. Its social ethic concerned families and communities and the relations between them, and relations
between parents and children, masters and servants, friends and acquaintances, the young and the aged. This was not a radical programme but, because of its simplicity, it had to be constantly re-iterated. Its effectiveness lay in its being the attempt by the ruler to reach out to his subjects, and the tone, therefore, is conversational and informal. Some degree of paternalism enters the mood when Ashoka speaks of all men being his children. This universal monarch was less given to conquest and more to ensuring that social ethics took root. It is impressive that the attempt to seek validation from divine sources was minimal and marginal. But states are not moral agents – they are power systems. The endorsement of the dhamma by the state faded with the Mauryas. Nevertheless, its essential features continued and have often been central to debates on social philosophy in later times. It could be argued that it has been a visible strand in many movements that distanced themselves from orthodoxies – whether political, social or religious – and, ironically, from the authority of the state.

Empire, as understood here, was a specific polity, controlling a demarcated territory, with sovereign authority over its subjects exercised through administrative supervision and a philosophy of persuasive association. The territory was more extensive than that of kingdoms, but not uniformly administered. Power, in this system, was expressed in a variety of ways – economic restructuring, cultural hegemony, persuasion towards ethical norms. This kind of empire is a more complex and evolved form of the state, as it incorporates a variety of existing states or potential states of different kinds. Before being included in empires kingdoms have a nucleus of a presumed community claiming common descent, social sanctions, language and patterns of living. The incorporation of such kingdoms into an empire does not imply their integration within an overarching uniform pattern to the point where their identities are erased; it implies a flexibility in which some earlier identities are retained and some changed. These are perhaps best seen in the diversities that emerge on the break-up of the empire.

Such a flexibility can be observed through various imperial functions. Divergent economies were recognized and treated as distinct – this placed a premium on the empire restructuring some of these economies because of financial or administrative needs. Such activity differentiated empire qualitatively from kingdom. Kingdoms had relatively less scope for adjusting diverse economies or changing them effectively within their own territories. Imperial policy brought more land under cultivation, creating a larger peasantry. Protected routes and roads opened up distant areas to exchange, and this introduced migrations of new peoples whose settlements became part of a new landscape.

Attempts were made at establishing a tolerant social interface through notions of culture and ethics. The upper levels of imperial society flaunted status, but urban centres were cosmopolitan and supported
ideologies that allowed of catholic ideas, such as those of the heterodox religions. These were to spread rapidly, travelling with the traders. Belief systems underwent mutation, with a sharper divide between the orthodox and heterodox. Imperial power had to assess the advantages of where to place its patronage.

The imprint of such an empire on successor states was subtle and became visible in unexpected ways. Erstwhile core areas mutated into kingdoms with more than a hint of Mauryan administrative and economic patterns. An Ashokan pillar was repeatedly used to carry statements by later kings, invoking legitimacy, even by those who were not only unable to read the edicts but who acted in a manner contrary to the *dhamma* of Ashoka. Above all there was a continuing debate on what constituted social ethics in relation to power. Perhaps, therefore, it is not too great an exaggeration to say that the first Indian empire, in many ways, gave a direction to Indian history.