

Downfall of the Mauryas

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- I. The Magadhan empire, which had been reared by successive wars culminating in the conquest of Kalinga, began to disintegrate after the exit of Ashoka in 232 B.C. With the death of Ashoka, a political decline set in, and soon after the empire broke up. The Ganges valley remained under the Mauryas for another fifty years. The north western areas were lost to the Bactrian Greeks by about 180 B.C. Several causes seem to have brought about the decline and fall of the Mauryan empire.
- II. Ashoka has both been blamed and exonerated for the decline of the Mauryas. He has been accused of having caused a revolt of the Brahmins because of his pro-Buddhist policy. But his general policy was neither specifically pro-Buddhist nor anti-Brahmin. It was open to acceptance or rejection by all or any.
- III. It has also been said that Ashoka's obsession with non-violence led to erosion of the army, thus laying the country to invasion. Ashoka's pacifist policy has been seen as responsible for the decline of the Mauryas. However historians argue that his non-violence was not of such an unrealistic nature, nor do the edicts imply that he weakened the army. However a long reign marked by only one military campaign in the early years may have adversely affected the preparedness of the army, and this may have been a factor responsible for the success of Greek invasion.

- IV. Many historians speak of Mauryan economy being under tremendous pressure. The need for vast revenues to maintain the army and to finance the salaries of officials and settlements on newly cleared land must have strained the treasury. Although the evacuation of the Mauryan urban sites points to an expanding economy in the early stages, the debasement of coins in the later Mauryan period suggests a different picture. The decreasing silver content of coins attributed to the later Mauryan kings has been interpreted as a severe pressure on the economy where the normal channels of revenue were not sufficient for the Mauryan state. However this alone cannot be the cause. Even though agrarian economy was dominant in the Ganga valley, there were variations in the economic patterns and revenue throughout the empire.
- V. The Mauryan bureaucracy was highly centralised, with the ruler as the key figure and all loyalty was directed to the person of the king. A change of king meant a re-alignment of loyalty, or worse, a change of officials, the system of recruitment being arbitrary, where local governors appointed by the viceroys chose their officers and the same pattern repeated itself throughout the hierarchy of office. The lack of any representative institutions to stabilise public opinion added to the problem. The system used by the Mauryas, espionage, must have created many tensions in both political and administrative activity. Thus many historians like Romila Thapar point to the absence of nationalism, the idea of loyalty to the state than to a particular king.
- VI. Since Ashoka was mostly preoccupied with missionary activities at home and abroad, he could not pay attention to the safeguarding of the passage on the north west frontier. They had become necessary in view

of the movement of tribes in Central Asia in the third century B.C. The Scythians were in a state of constant influx. A nomadic people mainly relying on the use of horse, they posed serious dangers to the settled empires in China and India. The Chinese ruler Shih Huang I constructed the Great Wall of China in about 220 B.C to shield his empire against the attacks of the Scythians.. No similar measure was taken by Ashoka. Naturally when the Scythians made a push towards, India they forced the Parthians, the Sakas and the Greeks to move towards India. The Greeks had set up a kingdom in north Afghanistan which was known as Bactria. They were first to invade India in 206 B.C. This was followed by a series of invasions which continued till the beginning of the Christian era.

- VII. Given the nature of the evidence, explanations of the decline of the Mauryan empire have to be very general. All empires rely on mechanisms of integration and control over territory, resources and people. These mechanisms include military force, administrative infrastructure and ideology. In the case of the Mauryas given the vast empire, all the three must have strained to the utmost. It was just matter of time when the distant forces broke away from the centre.
- VIII. The Mauryan empire was formally destroyed by Pushyamitra Shunga in 185 B.C. Although a Brahmana he was a general of the last Maurya King called Brihadratha. He is said to have killed Brihadratha in public and forcibly usurped the throne of Patliputra. The Sungas ruled in Patliputra and central India, and they performed several Vedic sacrifices in order to mark the revival of the Brahmanical way of life.