Chapter 17 – The First Unification of India

How did Ashoka unify the Mauryan Empire and spread Buddhist values?

17.1. Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn about an Indian leader named King Ashoka (uh-SHOHKE-uh). He gave up wars of conquest and instead began to spread Buddhist values to unify India.

King Ashoka was a member of the Maurya (MOW-ree-yuh) family, the first leaders to unite the various kingdoms of India. The Mauryan Empire flourished from about 322 to 187 B.C.E. The Mauryas, including Ashoka, fought wars of conquest to build their empire. Then a great change came over Ashoka, and he turned to peaceful ways of keeping India united.

It is said that the change came about in this way. When King Ashoka was a young man, he was sitting on his horse one day, looking out over a bloody battlefield. Men and animals lay dying under the hot sun. Ashoka could hear the wounded groaning in pain. With growing horror, he thought of the thousands of people who had been killed or enslaved in his family’s ongoing quest for land. In that moment, the king swore to give up the ways of violence.

Ashoka’s promise led him to the Buddhist religion. Rather than rule by war, he chose to create an empire based on Buddhist values. He spread Buddhist beliefs through edicts, official orders or messages, carved on walls, rocks, and tall pillars. In this chapter, you will read about how the Mauryan family unified India. Then you will see how King Ashoka used Buddhist values to rule his empire.

17.2. The Mauryas Unify India

The Mauryas were the first leaders to unify India. The Indian subcontinent, once divided into many small kingdoms, covered more than one million square miles. Because India was huge and diverse, the unification of this vast land by the Mauryas was a major accomplishment.

Chandragupta (chun-druh-GOOD-tuh) Maurya began to build the Mauryan Empire in the 320s B.C.E. He saw that the kingdoms of northern India were weak.
Fighting among themselves, they had wasted too much money and lost too many soldiers. Chandragupta used his great army of 700,000 soldiers, with 9,000 elephants, to overthrow the rulers of these kingdoms. He conquered and united all of northern India.

Chandragupta Maurya kept his empire strong by using force whenever necessary. He was deeply afraid of enemies. He used his powerful army, a network of spies, and torture to keep his subjects in line.

Chandragupta’s rule was harsh, but it was successful in some ways. He created a strong central government. He wrote laws. He made sure farmers had water for their crops. To help connect the parts of his empire, he built a royal road more than one thousand miles long.

Toward the end of his life, Chandragupta gave up his power. Tradition says that he became an ascetic, or a person who has given up worldly pleasures. He lived in poverty and traveled with monks (simple holy men). Meanwhile, the empire grew even larger. Under the rule of Chandragupta’s grandson, King Ashoka, it included nearly all of the Indian subcontinent.
The Mauryan Empire reached its peak under King Ashoka, grandson of Chandragupta Maurya.
17.3. Ashoka’s Rule

The Mauryan Empire reached its height during the reign of King Ashoka. He ruled the empire from about 269 to 232 B.C.E.

During the early part of his reign, Ashoka expanded the empire to the south and east through a series of wars. Then, after one very brutal battle, he made his decision to reject violence and find a more peaceful way to rule.

Ashoka decided to embrace Buddhism. He supported the Buddhist values of love, peace, and nonviolence. As a Buddhist, he respected all living things. He gave up hunting and became a strict vegetarian. (A vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat.) He visited holy Buddhist sites. Perhaps most surprisingly, Ashoka gave up wars of conquest. Never again would he fight another kingdom for its land.

Ashoka wanted his people to follow the Buddhist path. He urged them to be respectful, kind, and moral, which means to know right from wrong ways of behavior. He told the people to treat their servants well, to respect their elders, and to tolerate those who practiced different religions. Ashoka saw himself as a wise and loving father figure. He often referred to the people he ruled as his children.

Ashoka spread Buddhism beyond India. According to tradition, he sent Mahinda, his son, to Ceylon, a large island south of India. (Today, it is called Sri Lanka.) Mahinda converted Ceylon’s king to Buddhism, which became the official faith of the kingdom.

Not all of Ashoka’s actions reflected Buddhist values. For example, under his rule, the practice of slavery was allowed, and people could be executed for serious crimes. Ashoka also continued to maintain a strong army. Although he gave up battles of conquest, he did not return any of the lands the Mauryas had already conquered.
King Ashoka originally built this dome-shaped structure, called a stupa, to hold sacred objects associated with Buddhism.

17.4. Ashoka’s Edicts

The symbol seen here on one of Ashoka’s pillars and on the flag of India is called the Ashoka Chakra or the Wheel of the Law. It stands for the perpetual movement and change that is part of all life.

Ashoka wanted a strong, united empire guided by Buddhist values. To spread those values to his people, he had edicts carved into walls, rocks, and tall pillars.
throughout the empire, in places where the greatest number of people could see them.

Ashoka’s edicts were designed to **promote** four main goals:

- **Buddhist Values** These edicts encouraged the Buddha’s teachings. They asked people to be loving and respectful, and to practice nonviolence. They said people should not get attached to worldly things, such as money. They also told people to act morally (do right rather than wrong).

- **General Welfare** These edicts promoted people’s wellbeing. They were intended to make sure people had good health, shelter, clean water, and enough food.

- **Justice** These edicts were in regard to fair laws. They also described the way people were to be treated in the empire’s courts and jails.

- **Security** These edicts were concerned with enemies of the Mauryan Empire and people who were not citizens. They often dealt with issues of peace and conquest.

Ashoka’s four goals were intended to give his empire a strong foundation. His reign is still remembered in India as a time of great achievements and progress. But his dream of a united empire did not last. About 45 years after his death, the empire broke apart into separate kingdoms.

A more lasting legacy was Ashoka’s support of Buddhism. As you have read, Ashoka sent his son to introduce Buddhism to Ceylon. Later, around the start of the Common Era, Buddhism spread from northwestern India to Central Asia. From there, it traveled to China, Korea, and Japan.
During his reign, King Ashoka worked to spread Buddhist beliefs across the Mauryan Empire and beyond its borders.

**Summary**

In this chapter, you learned how the Maurya family unified and ruled India, first through the use of force, and later by spreading the ideas of Buddhism.

**The Mauryas Unify India** The Mauryas were a family of powerful rulers who created an empire through a series of wars and conquests. They reigned over a unified India for several generations, from about 322 to 187 B.C.E.
Ashoka’s Rule  King Ashoka first expanded his empire through war. Then he embraced Buddhist values of love and nonviolence and spread these ideas. However, he allowed slavery and executions for serious crimes. He also maintained a strong army.

Ashoka’s Edicts  Ashoka carved edicts into walls and pillars throughout the empire. These edicts promoted Buddhist values, general welfare, justice, and security. The spread of Buddhism in Asia was Ashoka’s most lasting legacy.

Chapter Vocabulary

**horror:** a feeling of great fear and surprise

**vast:** a very large area

**Mauryan Empire:** an empire lasting from about 322 to 187 B.C.E., during which the Mauryan family unified India for the first time

**Ashoka:** the ruler of the Mauryan Empire from about 269 to 232 B.C.E., whose edicts reflected Buddhist values

**reject:** to refuse to have or accept

**execute:** put to death, usually as a legal punishment

**edict:** a command that is obeyed like a law

**promote:** to help something grow or prosper