State, Society and the Quest for Salvation in India

Chapter 9
India is large and diverse enough that, during its ancient and classical periods, it was rarely unified as a single state. Throughout much of its history, the subcontinent of India is divided into regional kingdoms, and not united under one ruler.

In this time period, India never established a tradition of one large, centralized state as seen in China and Persia.

We tend to associate the subcontinent with the country of India today but keep in mind that this development is fairly recent in the big picture of history.
Unification of India

The classical Mauryan and Gupta empires are short but important interludes because they laid foundations for commerce and religion throughout the subcontinent and into Asia that persisted well past their dynasties.
The first rulers to bring most of India together were the Mauryas (324 – 184 B.C.E.) led by Chandragupta Maurya.

Mauryan India stretched from Bactria to Ganges and was characterized by a strong military and an extensive trade network, which stretched all the way to Mesopotamia and the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. A key good was cotton.
Rise of the Mauryan Empire

**Alexander the Great**
- Alexander conquered by force in northwest India, 326 BCE
- Did not remain in India long
- Battle-weary soldiers wanted to return home, soon left India

**Mauryan army**
- Chandragupta built an immense army of 60,000 soldiers
- Chariots and war elephants
- Began conquering northern India

**Alexander’s legacy**
- Alexander’s conquest inspired Chandragupta Maurya
- Seized the throne of the kingdom of Magadha, 321 BCE
- Began Mauryan empire

**Extended empire**
- Defeated Seleucus I, 305 BCE
- Mauryan empire controlled northern India by 303 BCE
- Also controlled much of what is now Afghanistan
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strong government</th>
<th>Arthashastra</th>
<th>Empire divided</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Like Qin &amp; Han rulers, Chandragupta Maurya established a centralized government to control the empire; crushed any resistance.</td>
<td>A manual for statecraft and administrative principles, thought to be written by Kautilya.</td>
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<td>Relied on a brilliant adviser Kautilya, Brahmin / member of the priest caste.</td>
<td>Arthashastra called for strict state control.</td>
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<td>Also called for the use of spies and even assassination.</td>
<td>Chandragupta divided the empire into provinces and districts and appointed loyalists to rule them.</td>
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<td>His organized bureaucracy ran the government.</td>
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<td>Spies monitored officials, gathered information, and rooted out threats to state.</td>
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Chandragupta gave up the throne in 301 BCE and became a Jainist monk.

His son became emperor, followed by his grandson **Ashoka** (268 BCE).

The Mauryan empire reached its height under Ashoka:

- Through warfare the empire expanded to include most of India.
- Ashoka was a skilled governor who utilized a strong bureaucracy under his direct control.
- Established the capital at Pataliputra.
- Encouraged agricultural development through irrigation.
- Built roads, wells, and inns along roads to encourage trade.
Ashoka was a great warrior as a youth, known for the brutality of his conquests.

He became sickened by the violence of war after one of his greatest victories at Kalinga.

Abandoned policy of conquest and converted to Buddhism.

Began to promote and spread a policy of right conduct, Buddhism.

Supported Buddhist missionaries, worked to improve the lives of his people.

Rule under Ashoka

considered India’s greatest emperor
Rule under Ashoka  
*considered India’s greatest emperor*

- Advocated peace and tolerance, spreading those ideals throughout India by means of his **Rock and Pillar Edicts**, which were carved on rocks and pillars throughout the empire. These edicts reminded Mauryans to live generous and righteous lives.
- Ended slavery and required servants to be treated fairly.
- Admired for his justice and wisdom
- Sent ambassadors as far away as Greece and Egypt which increased foreign trade and tax revenue
- Remains famous for his efforts to create harmony between Buddhists, Hindus, and the followers of India’s other religions.
Decline of the Mauryan Empire

- The Mauryan empire began to decline following the death of Ashoka, 232 BCE
- Sons battled for power and central control weakened
- Distant provinces began to slip away
- Costs of sustaining a huge army and large administration were too heavy
- Last Mauryan emperor was killed by one of his generals in 184 BCE
- Mauryan empire lasted 140 years, then collapsed
As the Mauryan Empire collapsed, India again divided into many regional kingdoms. These kingdoms differed in the north and south.

Bactria

- Greek invaders from what is now Afghanistan formed Greco-Indian dynasties
- Introduced Greek art forms to India, influenced local styles
- Thriving commercial center linking China to the Mediterranean.
- City of Taxila thrives as a strategic trading city
Kushan Empire

- Conquered much of the north during the first century CE (ended Bactrian kingdom)
- Restored some of the grandeur of Mauryan Empire to the region
- Height in power coming under the rule of Emperor Kanishka (78-103 CE)
- Played a crucial role in the Silk Road trading network allowing merchants to travel safely across the region.
- Kushan dynasty fell, 250 CE
The Gupta Dynasty

- Controlled the region from 320-550 CE.
- Created a tributary empire that was less centralized than the Mauryans.
- Continued to provide peace and prosperity – critical to the interregional trade networks of the Silk Roads (if it’s not safe, people won’t travel).
- Territory included much of the former Mauryan empire but was smaller overall:
  - Controlled every area except the Deccan Plateau and the southern tip of India.
The Gupta Dynasty

- Chandra Gupta (no relation to Chandragupta Maurya) and his two successors expanded the empire
- Based their state in Magadha, a wealthy region in the Ganges valley
  - Capital of Pataliputra becomes the intellectual and cultural center
- Formed alliances with powerful families
- Government was more similar to the Persians than the Mauryans
  - Left governing in the provinces to local allies.
  - Stable empire for almost 200 years
The Gupta Dynasty

- Stability led to innovation and cultural expression
  - Indian physicians developed techniques of plastic surgery
  - Astronomers determined the earth is a sphere and rotates on its axis
  - Mathematicians created a Indian numerals that included a symbol for zero that made place-value notations possible → Arab and Persian scholars would eventually adopt these as “Arabic numerals”
The Gupta Dynasty

- White Hun (nomads from central Asia) invasions from the northwest split the Gupta empire into its original regions
  - Defending against the White Huns cost resources and weakened the empire
- The last Gupta rulers lost their power to regional rulers
- India became a continent of many kingdoms AGAIN.
  - Would not be unified again until the Mughal dynasty (1526-1858 CE)