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# Ashoka the Great

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## Introduction

Ashoka the Great (c. 304 - 232 BCE) stands among the most remarkable figures in world history, an emperor whose story encompasses violence, transformation, and an enduring quest for justice and moral governance. As the third ruler of the Mauryan Dynasty, Ashoka presided over the Indian subcontinent at the height of its imperial grandeur, expanding and consolidating the realm built by his father Bindusara and grandfather Chandragupta Maurya. Yet it is not only for his political achievements that Ashoka is remembered, but for a legacy shaped by profound personal change and an unwavering commitment to ethical rule.

Born in the ancient city of Pataliputra, Ashoka's early life was marked by promise and complexity. Though not the eldest son, his exceptional abilities—in administration, military tactics, and leadership—quickly brought him prominence. Rising amidst dynastic intrigue and a fierce struggle for succession, Ashoka secured his place atop one of the era's most formidable empires. Accounts of his ascent, often colored by legend, depict a ruler willing to use ruthless means to ensure stability, but also one with the vision to steer the empire to greatness.

Ashoka's reign was destined to be defined not only by conquest but by conscience. The devastating Kalinga War, fought in the eighth year of his rule, became a catalyst for his transformation. Shocked by the scale of human suffering wrought by his armies, Ashoka publicly embraced the principles of *Dhamma*, a code of personal and civic conduct grounded in non-violence, compassion, and respect for all faiths. This remarkable shift from warrior king to philosopher monarch set Ashoka apart from his contemporaries, earning him reverence across centuries as an exemplar of humane governance.

The impact of Ashoka's vision transcended the boundaries of his own kingdom. Through royal edicts inscribed on rocks and pillars across his empire, Ashoka articulated an ideal of leadership based on tolerance, social welfare, and the universal values of truth and righteousness. His patronage of Buddhism played a pivotal role in transforming it from a regional Indian sect into a world religion, spreading its teachings as far afield as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Mediterranean. At home, his initiatives in infrastructure, healthcare, and social reform laid early foundations for the concept of the welfare state.

Drawing on inscriptions, archaeology, ancient chronicles, and later traditions, this biography endeavors to retrace the life and times of Ashoka the Great. In doing so, it seeks not only to reconstruct the historical reality of his reign, but also to explore the enduring ideals and resonances of his legacy. As a ruler who strove to balance power

with principle, Ashoka's journey offers insights into leadership, ethics, and the possibilities of transformative change—both for individuals and for civilizations.

Ashoka's story, rediscovered in modern times through the decipherment of his edicts, remains a source of fascination and inspiration. In remembering Ashoka the Great, we are invited to reflect upon the responsibilities of power, the value of self-reflection, and the timeless pursuit of peace in a world too often divided by conflict. His vision, etched in stone across the Indian landscape, continues to speak to humanity's highest aspirations.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The World Before Ashoka: India in the Early Mauryan Period**

Before the era of Ashoka the Great, the Indian subcontinent was already a land of profound complexity and burgeoning power. For centuries, it had been a tapestry woven from myriad kingdoms, republics, and tribal territories, a politically fragmented landscape often characterized by regional rivalries and shifting alliances. While powerful mahajanapadas, or "great kingdoms," had risen and fallen in the preceding centuries, none had managed to achieve lasting, widespread dominion over such a vast and diverse terrain.

The political geography of the subcontinent in the 4th century BCE was a complex mosaic. While some areas boasted centralized monarchies, others retained more republican forms of governance. Trade routes crisscrossed the land, connecting vibrant urban centers and facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and peoples. Yet, stability on a grand scale remained elusive, with power often concentrated in regional strongholds rather than unified under a single overarching authority.

This era of fragmentation was dramatically reshaped by the rise of Chandragupta Maurya. From humble beginnings, possibly assisted by the astute strategist Kautilya (Chanakya), Chandragupta embarked on a series of conquests that fundamentally altered the political landscape. He overthrew the Nanda dynasty, a powerful kingdom centered in Magadha (modern-day Bihar), and rapidly expanded his control outwards, laying the foundation for the Mauryan Empire.

By the close of the 4th century BCE, Chandragupta had forged an empire that stretched from the Indus River in the west to Bengal in the east, and from the Himalayas in the north down into parts of the Deccan plateau. It was an achievement of unprecedented scale in Indian history, uniting diverse peoples and territories under a single imperial authority for the first time. This vast domain required a sophisticated and robust system of administration to govern effectively.

The Mauryan state established by Chandragupta was a highly centralized monarchy, though perhaps not as rigidly uniform as once thought. The capital, Pataliputra, became one of the largest and most magnificent cities in the ancient world, serving as the nerve center of the empire. From here, the emperor and his council of ministers directed the affairs of the realm, overseeing a vast bureaucracy responsible for taxation, justice, and public order.

Governance was guided by principles that emphasized state power, efficient

administration, and control, drawing heavily from the pragmatic statecraft outlined in texts like the *Arthashastra*. This treatise, attributed to Kautilya, detailed methods for maintaining order, collecting revenue, conducting foreign policy, and managing the military. It presented a world view where *raison d'état* often took precedence, focusing on the practical aspects of ruling a vast and complex empire.

The empire was divided into provinces, each governed by a viceroy, often a prince or a member of the royal family, or a trusted official. These provincial centers, like Taxila in the northwest or Ujjain in the west, were crucial hubs of power and administration, responsible for maintaining local order, collecting taxes, and providing troops when required. Communication across the vast distances was maintained through a network of roads and messengers, a vital infrastructure project that facilitated both administration and trade.

Economically, the Mauryan Empire was primarily agrarian, with agriculture forming the backbone of its wealth. The state exercised significant control over land and production, imposing taxes on agricultural produce. Irrigation systems were developed or improved to enhance productivity. Beyond agriculture, the empire fostered trade, both internal and external. Major trade routes connecting different regions were protected, and various crafts and industries flourished in urban centers.

Taxes were collected on a wide array of economic activities, including agriculture, trade, tolls on roads and ferries, and potentially even on mines and forests, which were often state-owned. The state maintained a large standing army, necessary both for defense against external threats and for maintaining internal control across such a vast territory. This military might was a key feature of the early Mauryan state.

Society under the early Mauryans was stratified, with a recognized hierarchy and diverse social groups. While specific details are gleaned from various sources, including the accounts of foreign visitors like the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, it's clear that traditional social structures were in place. The state, however, held significant authority and could intervene in social matters to maintain order and implement its policies.

The religious landscape of the early Mauryan period was one of considerable diversity and interaction. Brahmanism, with its emphasis on rituals and the caste system, was prevalent. Jainism, founded by Mahavira centuries earlier, had a significant following, particularly among mercantile communities. The Ajivika sect, with its deterministic philosophy, also existed. And, of course, Buddhism, the faith founded by Siddhartha Gautama, was present, gradually gaining adherents.

These different religious and philosophical traditions coexisted, sometimes peacefully, sometimes with friction. While the Mauryan state under Chandragupta and Bindusara appears to have generally tolerated diverse beliefs, historical records suggest that

rulers patronized certain traditions or maintained relationships with ascetics from various schools of thought. This environment of religious multiplicity would be the backdrop for Ashoka's later, more active engagement with faith.

Chandragupta Maurya eventually abdicated his throne and is said to have adopted Jainism, ending his days as an ascetic. His son, Bindusara, succeeded him, reigning from around 297 to 273/272 BCE. Bindusara, sometimes referred to as "Amitraghata" (slayer of enemies), continued the expansionist policies of his father, consolidating Mauryan power further into the Deccan region of southern India. His reign ensured the continuity and stability of the vast empire his father had forged.

Bindusara's administration largely followed the model established by Chandragupta, relying on the network of provincial governors and a centralized bureaucracy reporting to Pataliputra. He maintained diplomatic relations with the Hellenistic kingdoms of the West, particularly the Seleucid Empire, as evidenced by the presence of ambassadors like Deimachus at his court. These diplomatic ties highlight the Mauryan Empire's position as a major power on the global stage of the era.

While Bindusara's reign is not as extensively documented as Chandragupta's or Ashoka's, it was a crucial period of consolidation. He successfully held together the diverse territories acquired by his father and perhaps added some of his own. Accounts suggest he was a patron of the Ajivika sect, indicating a continued policy of engaging with different religious traditions. His rule provided the necessary stability and infrastructure for the empire that Ashoka would eventually inherit.

However, ruling such a vast and diverse empire was not without its challenges. Maintaining control over distant provinces, ensuring the loyalty of regional governors, and managing the complex demands of a centralized state required constant vigilance and effective leadership. The administrative machinery, while sophisticated for its time, would have faced inherent difficulties in communication and enforcement across such immense distances and varied populations.

The provincial capitals, though subordinate to Pataliputra, were powerful entities in their own right, controlling significant resources and military forces. The governors, often royal princes, commanded considerable authority within their territories. This system, while practical for managing the empire, also contained the potential for internal tensions and power struggles, particularly in the absence of a clear and undisputed line of succession.

Bindusara had multiple sons, many of whom held important governorships in different parts of the empire towards the end of his reign. This was a common practice to provide administrative training and experience to potential heirs. However, it also meant that powerful contenders for the throne were strategically positioned in key provinces, commanding armies and resources, setting the stage for potential conflict

upon the emperor's death.

As Bindusara's reign drew to a close around 273-272 BCE, the vast Mauryan Empire stood as the dominant power on the subcontinent, a testament to the vision and might of its first two emperors. Its administration was established, its economy was functioning, and its military was formidable. Yet, beneath the surface of imperial grandeur lay the inherent complexities of succession in a polygamous royal family and the potential for ambitious princes to vie for control of the throne. The stage was set for a period of uncertainty and conflict that would determine who would inherit this immense legacy and shape the future of the Mauryan world.

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