

MAURYAN CULTURE

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- ▣ The Maurya Empire displayed many attributes that are common or indicative of several empires throughout world history. Perhaps the most important feature is when the government unifies several different groups under a single ideology, which was Buddhism in the case of the Mauryans. Ashoka's personal conversion to Buddhism and the ways he promoted Buddhist ideas were important, but the king also molded some aspects of Buddhist theology to fit with his religiously pluralistic kingdom.

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- ▣ All branches of Buddhism and all practicing Buddhists recognize the Four Noble Truths as the core tenets of the religion. The Four Noble Truths are as follows: to live is to suffer; suffering comes from desire; it is truthful to eliminate suffering; and the elimination of suffering comes from following the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path involves these thoughts and actions: right view, right thought, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

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- ▣ When one examines the theology espoused in Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts, it becomes clear that the king did not promote a traditional form of Buddhism, but one- that was more in line with older Indian religions. Neither the Four Noble Truths nor the Noble Eightfold Path are mentioned in any of the edicts. With that said, the policies that Ashoka promoted in his edicts did coincide with the general idea of *ahimsa*, which was shared by Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas, and traditional followers of the Vedic religion alike.

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- One crucial aspect in which Buddhism differed from its Vedic parent religion was the recognition of the caste system. As discussed earlier, it was the Aryans who introduced the caste system to India nearly 1000 years before Ashoka, which was intended to be a beneficial way to separate the ruling Aryans from the native Dravidian people. In time, the ethnic differences in the caste system gave way to spiritual and class differences, with the priest and warrior classes being the rulers of the society. Although Buddha himself was of the warrior caste, he allowed people from all castes, even the casteless *chandalas*, or “untouchables,” to follow him. He taught that enlightenment could come to a person from any caste and was fully contingent upon that person following the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which was in many ways directly in conflict with the Vedic ideals.

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- Despite being an ardent Buddhist, Ashoka never threatened to end the caste system or slavery, for that matter. Strabo quoted Megasthenes, who visited at least one Mauryan king, in a detailed passage about the Indian caste system. Although the passage is faulty in its placement of the warriors, it is important because he points out the many sub-castes. “He says then, that the population of India is divided into seven castes: the one first in honour, but the fewest in number, consists of the philosophers; and these philosophers are used, each individually, by people making sacrifice to the gods or making offerings to the dead. ..The second caste, he says, is that of the farmers, who are not only the most numerous, but also the most respected.. .The third caste is that of the shepherds and hunters, who alone are permitted to hunt, to breed cattle, and to sell or hire out beasts of burden... After the hunters and the shepherds, he says, follows the fourth caste - the artisans, the tradesmen, and the day-labourers... The fifth caste is that of the warriors, who, when they are not in service, spend their lives in idleness and at drink- bouts, being maintained by the royal treasury. ..The sixth is that of the inspectors, to whom it is given to inspect what is being done and report secretly to the king... The seventh is that of the advisers and councilors of the king, who hold the chief offices of state, the judgeships, and the administration of everything.” (Strabo, *Geography*).

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- ❑ Either Megasthenes related some confusing details in his original account or Strabo made some mistakes in his transmissions. For instance, the warriors are the second highest caste in the Indian caste system, not the third to the bottom. With that said, the warrior caste did enjoy a life of leisure, so perhaps the confusion came when one of the two Greeks compared the caste system with their own culture.
- ❑ Megasthenes/Strabo did correctly identify that, in addition to the primary castes, there were several other sub-castes. The most important aspect of this passage, though, at least in relation to Ashoka's desire to spread Buddhism throughout his kingdom, was that the caste system persisted despite having a Buddhist king on the throne. Perhaps Ashoka knew that challenging the Vedic priest and warrior castes would have led to civil war in his kingdom, or maybe things were going so well that he did not want to shake things up too much.

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- ▣ Besides being considered by many to be one of the most enlightened empires in human history, the Maurya Empire was also incredibly wealthy. The Mauryan kings took advantage of the remarkable wealth of natural resources that they possessed to engage in trade across great distances. The wealth of the Maurya Empire can be gauged through archaeological discoveries, which show that many of the houses in the larger urban areas were made of brick, while the palace in Pataliputra was made of stone (Thapar 2002, 189). The Mauryans were able to send their precious resources to the west via their “Great Road,” which went from Taxila, in what is now northwest Pakistan, to the Mauryan capital. Smaller roads connected Taxila to central Asian cities such as Kabul and the Parthian-Persian cities farther to the west.

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- There were also sea routes that brought ships from India to Mesopotamia and even as far west as Egypt. Strabo wrote about large numbers of Roman ships sailing to India during his time, and he also noted that during the Ptolemaic era in Egypt, which coincided with the Mauryans, the routes were less used but still active nonetheless. “At any rate, when Gallus was prefect of Egypt, I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia, and I learned that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise.” (Strabo, *Geography*).
- The Mauryan rulers were able to import commodities from the west, such as furs, while exporting elephants, which the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms frequently used in their wars against each other. The trade of elephants was particularly interesting, and it naturally raised the stature of India in the eyes of the West for some time. When Alexander invaded India, his soldiers were introduced to the concept of elephant warfare but after their initial horror and shock over what the animals could do on the battlefield wore off, Alexander realized that he could bring elephants back west to use on his enemies there. When Alexander died and his conquests were divided into the Hellenistic successor states, the Seleucid Empire and Ptolemaic Egypt both used elephants against each other.

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- Although the use of elephants certainly had advantages, armies quickly learned that they could charge elephants effectively by using small contingents of cavalry, and the supply of elephants also eventually became an issue. The Ptolemies found that Asian elephants were better for warfare than African forest elephants, but in order to keep a steady supply, they would have to go through Seleucid territory to get to the Maurya Empire. Eventually, elephant warfare became more of a fad than anything in the West, and so the demand diminished, which hurt Mauryan trade routes.
- Even after the fad of elephant warfare passed in the West, the trade routes remained quite active between the Seleucid and Mauryan capitals. In addition to the benefits that the routes brought to the royal houses of the Seleucid and Mauryan Dynasties, the routes also had the effect of dispersing wealth in a trickle-down effect throughout India, leading to the formation of merchant guilds and the creation of a middle class .

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- ▣ The great amount of wealth that flowed into India during the period of the Maurya Empire also contributed to creating a large government apparatus that far eclipsed anything in previous periods of Indian history. The Mauryans came to power through warfare, and once they established their dynasty, they rewarded the warrior caste by creating a large standing army. The army was much larger than anything India had previously seen; at its peak, the army could boast of 80,000 infantry and 700 elephants (Thapar 2002, 191). Even during Ashoka's relatively peaceful rule, the military retained its size and influence, which may point toward another compromise that the astute king was willing to make in order to keep the many factions and sects within his empire happy.

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- Although the military may have wielded considerable influence in the Maurya Empire, there is no doubt who ruled the kingdom. The Maurya Empire, like most ancient empires outside of Greece and Rome, was an absolute monarchy. The king decided the course of the government, ranging from diplomacy to war and trade, and he could even influence his subjects to follow a certain religion. With that said, the Maurya Empire was a complex bureaucracy, so the king often needed to delegate responsibilities to nobles and trusted advisors. Under the king, the two most important government positions were the treasurer and the “chief collector,” whose job it was to collect taxes from the empire’s many districts (Thapar 2002, 198). Since there were so many districts in the Maurya Empire, the king allowed a certain level of autonomy in order to make the wheels of government turn a little easier.
- It is believed that, during the Maurya Empire, princes from the priest and warrior castes retained their noble titles and were allowed to continue to rule as long as they accepted Mauryan authority and paid their taxes. Under the princes, governors were appointed to administer smaller districts (Thapar 2002, 198). Some modern scholars believe that the system was based on the Achaemenid Persian government, whereby administrative districts were based on the ethnicities of the subject groups more than any geographic area (Scialpi1984, 61).

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- Although documents from the period do not go into any detail about the system, some of Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts help make the situation a bit clearer. Rock edict three names the men who administered the districts and some of their responsibilities. "King Devanampiya Piyadasi says thus: Twelve years after my coronation have I ordered thus! Everywhere in my dominions, the officers (Yuktas, Rajukas and Pradeshikas) will embark on tours of inspection every five years for the inculcation of morality and other such works. (They will instruct my subjects that) obedience to father and mother is excellent, liberality to friends, acquaintances and kinsmen, to Brahmins and ascetics is excellent; excellent is abstention from the slaughter of animals; and abstemiousness and few possessions are excellent. The council (Parishad) will also order the officers (Yuktas) to enforce these, both in their letter and spirit." (Gokhale, Balkirshna Govind 1966, 152).

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- Pillar edict seven gives a few more details about the bureaucrats' duties. "My morality officers have engaged themselves in acts of royal benevolence in diverse ways. They are engaged among those that have renounced the world as well as the householders and among all sects. I have ordered them to be engaged in the welfare of the (Buddhist) Order as also the welfare of Brahmins, Ajivikas, Nigranthas and other sects. These high officers will engage themselves in their diverse and respective duties whereas the morality officers are engaged specifically among all denominations in addition to other duties... These and many other officers are engaged in distribution of royal charity." (Gokhale 1966, 169).
- Of course, the overarching theme and purpose of the Mauryan government, at least during Ashoka's reign, was to promote the values of Buddhism in the best way possible. The first three Mauryan kings certainly created a government system that worked quite efficiently, but after Ashoka, the wheel of government quickly came undone.

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▣ Suggested Readings:-

- ▣ Allchin, B. and Allchin, R. 1982. *The Birth of Indian Civilization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ▣ Arrian. 1971. *The Campaigns of Alexander*. Translated by Aubrey de Séincourt. London: Penguin Books.
- ▣ Gokhale, Balkirshna Govind. 1966. *Aśoka Maurya*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- ▣ Scialpi, Fabio. 1984. The Ethics of Aśoka and the Religious Inspiration of the Achaemenids. *East and West* 34: 55-74.
- ▣ Strabo. 2001. *Geography*. Translated by Horace Leonard Jones. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- ▣ Thapar, Romila. 2002. *Early India: From the Origins to CE 1300*. Penguin