Chapter-2

Theoretical Base of the Mauryan State: Context of the Arthashāstra
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Since this research work deals with the Mauryan empire from a political perspective, a brief discussion regarding the sources, chronology, nature of state, statecraft and administrative institutions and procedures of the Mauryan period will help us to understand the topic properly.

The Mauryas are important in Indian history for more than one reason. They are considered to be the first historical dynasty in India. A new chapter in the political and cultural history of India begins with the advent of the Mauryas. It was under the banner of the Maurya dynasty that India witnessed political unity for the first time. Chandragupta Maurya initiated this process and his successors Bindusara and Ashoka took it to its culmination. During the reign of Ashoka the boundaries of the Mauryan empire covered almost all parts of today’s India barring some parts of North-Eastern and South India. In the West, its frontiers expanded to the West of the river Indus up to the line of Hindukusha. Therefore, one may say that the Mauryas achieved the natural boundary line of India for which in the medieval period powerful kings like Akbar, and in the modern period Britishers aspired to but which they could not achieve. The founder of the Maurya dynasty Chandragupta Maurya turned the Greeks out of North-Western India. With the establishment of this dynasty India attained political unity. Again, it was under the Mauryas that a uniform system of administration, which even claims the admiration of modern writers for its efficiency and smooth running, was set up throughout the empire. The uniform administration under Chandragupta and his successors had also brought into its domain a certain cultural unity of the country. The Mauryas also established political and cultural contacts with other civilised monarchs like Seleucus. In short, in this age India enjoyed the blessings of continued peace. Particularly, during the regime of Ashoka, there was a transition
from a programme of territorial expansion to that of promoting the moral and material welfare of the subjects. Ashoka, the greatest among the Mauryas formulated a moral-social code in the form of the policy of dhamma which is based on the principles of tolerance and peaceful co-existence and suggests how in a multi-cultural society people should live with each other and how the state should act in such a rainbow society. According to G.M. Bongardlevin, “it was in the Mauryan period that the basic features of the social structure, the varna and caste system, and major institutions of ancient Indian society and state emerged and took shape”.¹

2.1 A Brief History of the Mauryas

Fourth century B.C.E. when the Mauryan empire was founded was an era of great turmoil in Indian history. Alexander invaded India in 326 B.C.E. and defeated some small border kingdoms. But the main centre of power at that time was Magadha with Pātaliputra (modern Patna) as its capital. The first dynasty to rule Magadha was The Hariyanak in which powerful monarchs like Bimbisara and Ajatashatru ruled. This dynasty was replaced by the Shishunaga and this Naga dynasty itself was overthrown by Mahapadma, the founder of the Nanda dynasty. At the time of Alexander’s conquest of India, a descendant of Mahapadma, named Dhananand was ruling the kingdom of Magadha.

From various sources, we are informed that the Nanda kings (predecessors of the Mauryas) were of low caste origin. The last Nanda king Dhananand was quite unpopular among his subjects. Chandragupta Maurya, with the help of Kautilya or Chanakya (who later became his prime minister) defeated the last Nanda king and laid the foundation of the Maurya dynasty. He also restricted the rule of the successor of Alexander called Seleucus, who after the death of Alexander, emerged to be the most powerful among the fighting generals of Alexander. Alexander’s death was followed by a war of succession among his generals. Seleucus emerged victorious in the contest and established his sway over
the entire Greco-Asiatic empire. Being an ambitious person, he wanted to recover the lost conquests of Alexander in India. A war took place between Seleucus and Chandragupta Maurya which resulted in a treaty of friendship signed by the two monarchs. It was further attested to by a matrimonial alliance and Seleucus gave his daughter in marriage to Chandragupta. He sent an envoy named Megasthenes to Chandragupta’s court who wrote a brilliant account of Pātaliputra, the Mauryan capital and his kingdom. The much important political aspect of this treaty was acceptance of Hindukush as the frontier between the Magadhan and Greek kingdoms. Thus a natural frontier for India was secured by its first historical ruler. After Chandragupta, two great rulers—Bindusara (the son of Chandragupta) and Ashoka (the son of Bindusara) strengthened and expanded the empire. During the reign of Ashoka, the Mauryan empire reached the peak of its glory. But after Ashoka, its downfall started and finally in the 185 B.C.E. the last Mauryan ruler was killed by his own commander-in-chief, Pusyamitra Sunga who laid down the foundation of the Sunga dynasty. In this way the Mauryan empire ended.

2.2 The Mauryan Chronology

The Mauryan chronology is not free from confusion and uncertainty. How widely the views of scholars regarding the coronation of Chandragupta Maurya differ can be seen from the variety of suggested dates by the different scholars which may be listed as 325\(^2\) B.C.E., 324\(^3\) B.C.E., 322\(^4\)B.C.E., 321\(^5\) B.C.E., 317\(^6\) B.C.E. and 314\(^7\) B.C.E. Why is it so disputed? The main problem regarding chronology in ancient India is the absence of a number system to denote a year. Hence, each past year was known by a well known event that occurred in it and so in every locality the same year might be differently recalled. In India the earliest textual evidence for the use of numbered years came from the Ashokan inscriptions of the third century B.C.E.

Irfan Habib\(^8\) suggests the following chronology table for the Mauryas:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>B.C.E.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Installation of the Nanda dynasty in Magadha</td>
<td>c. 344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander’s conquest of North-Western India</td>
<td>c. 327-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Alexander</td>
<td>c. 323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overthrow of the Nandas; accession of Chandragupta Maurya</td>
<td>c. 322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandragupta’s annexation of North-Western India</td>
<td>c. 311-05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treaty with Seleucus; Megasthenes sent as envoy</td>
<td>c. 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Chandragupta; accession of Bindusara</td>
<td>c. 298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Bindusara; accession of Ashoka</td>
<td>c. 270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conquest of Kalinga</td>
<td>c. 262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the basis of the date of death (parinirvāna) of Buddha, Romila Thapar\(^9\) suggests the following chronological tables:

**I. Assuming 486 B.C.E. to be the date of the parinirvāna.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chandragupta</td>
<td>324 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bindusara</td>
<td>300 B.C.E. died in 272 B.C.E. (28 regnal years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interregnum</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashoka</td>
<td>269-268 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13(^{th}) Rock Edict</td>
<td>256-255 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The eclipse</td>
<td>249 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**II. Assuming 483 B.C.E. to be the date of the Parnirvāna.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chandragupta</td>
<td>321 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bindusara</td>
<td>297 B.C.E. died in 272 B.C.E. (25 regnal years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interregnum</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashoka</td>
<td>268 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since this research work is basically an effort to analyse the Mauryan state from a political perspective, I would not go into the details of establishing the Mauryan chronology. But finally it may be concluded that Chandragupta, with the help of Chanakya, laid down the foundation stone of the Maurya dynasty in between the years 325 B.C.E. to 321 B.C.E.

2.3 Sources of the Mauryan History

Tremendous literary and archaeological sources are available for the study of Mauryan history. These sources may be divided into two categories:

1. Literary Sources
2. Archaeological Sources

2.3.1 Literary Sources

Among literary sources, we see two types of literature—religious and secular. Among religious literature, Buddhist sources are the most important. Various jātakas reveal a general picture of the socio-economic condition of the Buddhist period which to a large extent continued in the Mauryan period also. Certain sections of Buddhist scriptures like Dīgha Nikāya are important in determining the influence of Buddhist ideas in the then political sphere, for example the concept of chakravartī (or universal emperor) as a political idea.

The Dīpavamsa and the Mahāvamsa may also be regarded as source materials, since they describe at great length the part played by Ashoka in spreading Buddhism. The Divyāvadāna depicts Ashoka in a legendary way. These Buddhist texts also help in tracing the origin of the Mauryas. They also give us an account of rise of Chandragupta Maurya to the throne of Magadha, the coronation and life sketch of Bindusara and Ashoka and conversion of Ashoka to Buddhism.

Jaina sources like the kalpsūtra, Parishistparva and Bhadrabāhucharita throw light on the life and activities of Chandragupta Maurya. Various Purānas
and Mudrārākšhas of Vishakhadatta are important Sanskrit texts which throw light on the Mauryan historiography. List of the Mauryan kings are included in the Purānas. Purānas also help in ascertaining the origin of the Mauryas.

Of the secular literature on the Mauryan period, the most important single source is the Arthashāstra of Kautilya. There is a great controversy about the date of the Arthashāstra. R. Shamasasty, N.N. Law, V.A. Smith, Fleet and K.P. Jayasawal maintain that the magnum opus, the Arthashāstra, was written by the famous minister of Chandragupta Maurya. On the other hand Winternitz, Jolly, Keith and D.R. Bhandarkar claim that it is a later work, written in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The second school (which considers the Arthashāstra to be a later work) points out that if the book was really written by Kautilya, the Mauryan prime minister, it is strange that it doesn’t contain some references to the Mauryan empire and its administrative machinery, so well known to us from Greek sources. The fact that the views of Kautilya himself are quoted in the third person suggests that the actual author of the work was different from him. Shamasasty and K.P. Jayasawal do not agree with these conclusions. They support the authorship of the book by Kautilya, the premier of Chandragupta. To say that the author was not familiar with a wide empire is incorrect, for he states that the sphere of jurisdiction of a chakravartī extends from the Himalayas to the ocean. The book describes the machinery and organisation of a big empire which was only an occasional phenomenon in Indian history. Therefore, it may be concluded that the author of the Arthashāstra was well acquainted with the Mauryan empire though he does not mention its name. Regarding the reference to Kautilya in the third person, it can be said that it is quite a common practice among Indian authors to refer to themselves by their own name in the third person singular rather than in the first person singular. Thus, the reference to Kautilya in the third person need not necessarily show that he was not himself the author of the book.
In this research work I have also taken the first view and accepted the *Arthashāstra* as the main literary source for the Mauryan historiography because other sources, mainly the archaeological sources for example the edicts of Ashoka, complement the *Arthashāstra* and hence we find a co-relation between Mauryan real politic and the verses of the *Arthashāstra*. Many institutions are common in the Ashokan inscriptions and the *Arthashāstra*. Similarities between the terms used in the *Arthashāstra* and in the Ashokan edicts suggest that the Mauryan rulers were well acquainted with the book. It seems that originally it was a Mauryan document though the book was edited and rewritten during later centuries. The description of the Mauryan state in this research work is also chiefly based on the *Arthashāstra* of Kautilya.

The *Arthashāstra* is different from many other ancient Indian texts because it is secular in its formulations. In *Dharmasūtra* works (like *Manusmriti*), *Rājdarshma* or *Dandanīti* (Politics) forms only one section. But in *Arthashāstra*, the study of state is the central theme, though the king is expected to master the Vedas and philosophy. The *Arthashāstra* is divided into 15 books. Book I discusses the various problems related to kingship; Book II deals with civil administration in quite some detail; the 3rd and 4th books deal with civil, criminal and personal law. Book 5 deals with the duties and responsibilities of the courtiers and retainers of the king. Book VI is very important as it describes the nature and functions of the seven elements of the state. Then the work devotes its last nine books to an exhaustive discussion of the problems related to foreign policy, the circles of kings and the policy to be followed in connection with its different members, (the *Mandala* Theory), the ways and means by which to establish one’s ascendancy among them (*sāma, dāma, danda, bheda*), the occasion suitable for war and peace and the manner in which warfare was to be conducted.

Besides these indigenous literary sources, the classical writings in Greek and Latin by the foreign visitors are also important literary sources. Foremost
among these is the account of Megasthenes who visited the court of Chandragupta as the representative of the Greek ruler Seleucus Nikator and remained at the capital Pātaliputra for some time. His classical work is known as Indika/Indica. Unfortunately the original document is lost and what remains are only quotations from it in various classical texts. Later Greek writers such as Strabo, Diodorus and Arrian quoted Megasthenes.

But whenever we are dealing with a literary source we must be careful about its authenticity. For example various religious sources like Buddhist sources are biased as they wanted to show the supremacy of Buddhism over other religions. Cross-checking of evidence from other sources like archaeological sources may be a solution to this problem.

2.3.2 Archaeological Sources

Among the archaeological sources, edicts of Ashoka are most important. Ashokan edicts are of three types—rock edicts (major rock edicts and minor rock edicts), pillar edicts and cave inscriptions. Rock edicts consist of fourteen major rock edicts located at Kalsi, Mansehra, Shahabazgarhi, Girnar, Sopara, Yerragudi, Dhauli and Jaugada; and a number of minor rock edicts and inscriptions at Bairat, Rupanath, Sahasram, Brahmagiri, Gavimath, Jatinga-Rameshwar, Maski, Palkigundu, Rajula-Mandagiri, Siddapura, Yerragudi, Gurjarra and Jhansi. Seven pillar edicts exist at Allahabad, Delhi-Topra, Delhi-Meerut, Lauriya-Araraja, Lauriya-Nandangarh, and Rampurva. Other inscriptions have been found at the Barabar Caves (three inscriptions), Rummindei, Nigali-Sagar, Allahabad, Sanchi, Sarnath, and Bairat. Recently a minor inscription in Greek and Aramaic was found at Kandahar. The language of Ashokan inscriptions is Pali and the script is Brahmi though two major rock edicts at Mansehra and Shahbajgarhi are inscribed in Kharosthi, a script derived from the Persian Aramaic. Among other archaeological sources the most important source is the coins. They consist largely of silver and copper punch-marked coins and silver bar coins. These coins
have been found in large numbers and it seems that they were in circulation throughout the empire. But these coins are punch-marked which means there is absence of names and dates which makes them a less important source regarding the Mauryan history.

2.4 Origin of the Mauryas

There is absence of unanimity among historians regarding the origin of the Mauryas. There are four prominent viewpoints in this respect.

2.4.1 Theory of Persepoliton Origin

D.B. Spooner who carried out excavations in Pātaliputra formulated this theory. Spooner traces out the origin of the Mauryas to Persia. He points out various similarities between the social, political and religious institutions and traditions of Mauryan India and Persia. He describes the Mauryan art as Persian art. But Spooner’s views are not acceptable because many institutions and traditions in the Mauryan India and Persia were totally different and did not resemble each other at all.

2.4.2 Theory of Shudra Origin

In some of the Purānas the Mauryas are described as shūdra-prāyāstv-adhārmikāh (mainly shudra and unrighteous). The Mudrārākshasa of Vishakhadatta uses the terms vrishal, kulāhīna and Nandānvaya for the Mauryas. Kshemendra and Somadeva refer to him as pūrvanandasuta, son of a genuine Nanda. The Commentator on the Vishnupurāṇa (named Ratnagarbha) says that Chandragupta was the son of Nanda by a wife named Mura, whence he and his descendants were called the Mauryas. Dhundiraja, the commentator on the Mudrārākshasa, informs us on the other hand that Chandragupta was the eldest son of Maurya who was the son of the Nanda king Sarvarthsiddhi by Mura, daughter of a vrishal. Vrishal generally means “son of shudra”.
But this also doesn’t seem to be a correct theory regarding the origin of the Mauryas as most of these sources are post-Mauryan and don’t deal with the issue neutrally and impartially. Regarding the term *vrishal* used in the *Mudrārākshasa* to denote Chandragupta, Radha Kumud Mookerji says that, “a passage in the drama itself (III.18) uses the term *vrishala* as a term of honour to mean one who is *vrisha* among kings, the best of kings.”\(^{15}\) Since the Mauryan kings did not strictly adhere to the guidelines of traditional brahminism, therefore, brahmins might have formulated negative and prejudiced thoughts regarding their origin. According to H.C. Raychaudhuri, the term “*vrishal*” was used for those kshatriyas who didn’t strictly adhere to the rules of conduct of *dharma*. The most important source invalidating this viewpoint is Kautilya’s *Arthashāstra*. Kautilya was a great supporter of *varnāshrama*. There are various references in the *Arthashāstra* which clearly instruct the various varnas to perform their own *dharma* and not to interfere in other’s *dharma*. How could a person like Kautilya have helped a shudra to rise to power?

### 2.4.3 Theory of Vaishya Origin

Romila Thapar supports this theory. Citing *Epigraphica Indica*, Romila Thapar argues that the Junagarh rock inscription of Rudradaman dated A.D. 150 mentions the vaishya Pusyagupta as the provincial governor of the Mauryan king Chandragupta. Pusyagupta was the brother-in-law of Chandragupta. It is quite feasible that Chandragupta appointed his brother-in-law to govern the Western province of his empire. This would imply that the Mauryas may have been of vaishya origin, since the suffix “gupta” is known to have been used largely by the vaishyas. Citing references from Justin Romila Thapar also maintains that European classical writers described Chandragupta as a man of humble origin. The theory of vaishya origin complements this viewpoint of humble origin.\(^{16}\)

But this viewpoint is also not satisfactory because there are examples of brahmins and kshatriyas bearing the title gupta. The childhood name of Kautilya
himself was Vishnugupta. Also, Kautilya a staunch supporter of the varna system would not have helped a vaishya to become the king as it goes against the principles of the varna system.

2.4.4 Theory of Kshatriya Origin

Buddhist and Jaina literature formulate this theory. This viewpoint is also supported by the descriptions of foreign travelers and certain archaeological sources. Buddhist writers have attempted to link the dynasty with the tribe of the Shākyas to which the Buddha belonged. The region from which they came was full of peacocks (mayura in Sanskrit and mora in Pali). Hence they came to be known as the Mauryas.

H.C. Raychaudhuri also supports this view and formulates that, “in the sixth century B.C.E., the Moriyas were the ruling clan of the little republic of Pippalivana which probably lay between Rummindei in the Nepalese Tarai and Kasia in the Gorakhpur district.” The Buddhist text Divyāvadāna also refers to Bindusara, son of Chandragupta, as an associated Kshatriya. According to the Mahāvamsa Chandragupta was a scion of the kshatriya clan called Moriya.

The theory of kshatriya origin offers a more satisfactory explanation of the origin of the Mauryas. Kautilya was a great supporter of the varna system. According to traditional varna system, each varna was obliged to perform a particular task. The preferred task for kshatriya was to rule and protect the society. Only they had the right to possess arms. A staunch supporter of varna system like Kautilya supports Chandragupta’s rise to the throne. This also suggests that the Mauryas were kshatriyas.

After having a brief discussion on Mauryan history let us look at the notion of state as formulated in the Arthashāstra. The theory of state formulated in the Arthashāstra is called the Saptānga theory of state.
2.5 The Saptānga Theory of State

In the Arthashāstra the state is depicted as an organization consisting of seven organs or elements (saptānga). These seven elements are— Svāmī, Amātya, Janapada, Durga, Kosa, Danda and Mitra.18

1. **Svāmī**: Svāmī means the head or the master. According to Kautilya svāmī should be endowed with qualities flowing from noble birth, wisdom, enthusiasm and personal ability. Svāmī is the most important element of the state.19 The whole political machinery revolves around him. He is the chief executive, chief legislator and chief judge. He plays the pivotal role in the body politic.20 He appoints and terminates all the state officials. The main duty of the svāmī is happiness and welfare of the people. He should work tirelessly for the welfare of his subjects. The Arthashāstra suggests a time table for the king according to which he should work for 18 hours.

2. **Amātya**: Normally amātya is translated as minister. But a deep study of the Arthashāstra shows that amātya included various types of government officials along with the ministers. Citing examples from the Arthashāstra, Ram Sharan Sharma formulates that in the Arthashāstra amātya constitute a regular cadre of service from which all high officers such as the chief priest, ministers, collectors, treasurers, officers engaged in civil and criminal administration, officer in-charge of harem, envoys and the superintendents of various departments were to be recruited.21 Thus, the Arthashāstra talks of two different categories of officials— mantrins and amāyas. He restricts the number of mantrins to three or four but in the case of amāyas he states that their number should depend upon the capacity to employ them.22 While stating the requisite qualifications for the amāyas, Kautilya advises that all can be appointed amāyas in deference to the needs of time, place and work but this formula cannot apply to the mantrins. Amātya stands for the governmental machinery. The main
function of the *amātya* was to conduct the business of the government whereas the *mantrins* were charged with the duty of advising the king.

3. **Janapada**: The nature of *janapada* defined in the *Arthashāstra* indicates that both population and territory are intended to be covered by this expression. The territory should have a good climate, should provide grazable land and should be fertile so that it yields grain with little labour. Further, it should be inhabited by industrious peasants who are capable of bearing the burden of taxes. Lastly, it should contain intelligent masters and be predominantly populated by members of the lower classes and its people should be loyal and devoted.\(^{23}\)

4. **Durga**: The expression *durga* is understood in the sense of fortress. But *Arthashāstra* gives it a wider meaning. The *Arthashāstra* describes it in the sense of a fortified capital.

5. **Kosa**: *Kosa* means treasury. According to Kautilya the treasury accumulated by righteous and legitimate means should be retained by the king.\(^{24}\) Filled with gold, silver, precious jewels and gems, the treasury should be able to stand the strain of expenditure during times of adversity, such as famines. Kautilya maintains that without treasury, it is not possible to maintain the army and to keep it loyal.\(^{25}\) This is a clear recognition of the vital link between the two elements of the state, although he also makes a broad assertion that all activities depend upon finance.

6. **Danda**: *Danda* or army is the sixth element. According to Kautilya, the army should consist of hereditary, hired, forest and corporation soldiers comprising infantry, charioteer, elephantry and cavalry. Kshatriyas are best suited for the army.\(^{26}\) The army should be hereditary and loyal; their sons and wives should be contented with the maintenance received from the state; they should be equipped with all the necessary provisions at the
time of invasion; they should be invincible, patient, skilled in work, indifferent to losses and gains and should act as the king desires.\textsuperscript{27}

7. \textit{Mitra:} Mitra is friendly state. According to Kautilya, the ally should be hereditary, not artificial, one with whom there is no possibility of dissent and one who is ready to come to help when occasion demands it.\textsuperscript{28}

The machinery of government was highly organised during the rule of the Mauryas. At the top of this administrative machinery stood the king, assisted by a number of ministers, and a council. The detailed work of administration was divided among a number of departments, and managed by an efficient and highly organised bureaucracy. In order to have an idea of the Mauryan political institutions we must have some knowledge of its main elements.

2.6 The Mauryan Political Institutions

2.6.1 King

King was the real head in the Mauryan polity. Sovereignty was vested in him. All forms of power were concentrated in his office. He wielded legislative, executive, judicial and military powers. As to the legislative functions of the king, Kautilya’s \textit{Arthashastra} calls him “\textit{dharma-pravrttaka}” or one who enforces law. But the Mauryan kings were law-makers also. \textit{Rājashāsana} (orders of the royalty) was one of the important sources of law. Royal decree had an independent validity of its own. Its validity was so overriding that it prevailed against equity, private treaty or contract and social usage.\textsuperscript{29}

Kautilya exalts reason (\textit{nyāya}) above the prescription of texts (\textit{shāstra}). In case of conflict between the two he boldly justifies reason on the plea that texts become corrupt with lapse of time. This approach clearly marks an attempt to evolve a new norm in civil law in the establishment of which the royal authority would be actively exerted both directly by the king himself and indirectly by the
judgments and ruling of the higher officials of state delivered in the name of the king.

Here it would not be inappropriate to compare Kautilya with the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Plato also gave supremacy to the virtue or wisdom of the king over established traditions. According to Plato the philosophers (the most knowledgeable persons) should be made king because they are the only ones who possess the knowledge of the ideas of the good, justice, beauty, truth, courage and the other moral attributes. Only they have the right to rule and their will should prevail over every established notion. Book V of the Republic declares that until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils — nor the human race, as I believe — and then only will this our state have a possibility of life and behold the light of day.30 G.H. Sabine also opines that “the true romance of the Republic is the romance of free intelligence, unbound by custom, untrammeled by human stupidity and self-will, able to direct the forces even of custom and stupidity themselves along the road to a rational life.”31

Executive functions of the king included the posting of watchmen, attending to the accounts of receipts and expenditure, appointment of ministers, priests and superintendents, correspondence with the mantriparishad or the council of ministers, collection of the secret information gathered by spies and reception of envoys. It was the king who laid down the broad lines of policy. Even the most distant officials were controlled by an army of secret reporters and overseers.

King was the chief and supreme judge too. He sat in his court to administer justice. Strabo mentions about Chandragupta that “he remains there all day thus occupied, not suffering himself to be interrupted even though the time arrives for
attending to his person. This attention to his person consists of friction with pieces of wood, and he continues to listen to the cause, while the friction is performed by four attendants who surround him.”

The Mauryan kings were absolute rulers. U.N. Ghosal citing references from Megasthenes and Ashokan inscriptions formulates that the Mauryas combined the headship of the civil and military administration in accordance with the ancient Indian monarchical tradition. Over and above these powers Ashoka claimed for himself after his conversion to Buddhism the virtual headship of the Buddhist church.

Was the King a Despot?

Though the Mauryas based their rule on the theory of concentration of powers and historians like V.A. Smith support the theory of Oriental despotism, (see the first chapter) there were several checks on the monarch which restricted him from becoming a despot. The council of ministers was one such control. Dharma or sacred laws were other checks (for detail see the first chapter).

On the basis of Ashokan inscriptions U.N. Ghoshal formulates that even the greatest of the imperial Mauryas, Ashoka was content with the simple royal title of rājan or the king, prefixed or affixed to his proper name Piyadassi (Sanskirt Priyadarsin). To this he added the honorific designation of “devānāmpiya” (beloved of the Gods) as a mark of divine favour and nothing more. This presents a striking contrast with the imperial titles “great king” and “king of kings” assumed by the Achaemenid predecessors and the Hellenistic contemporaries of the Mauryas as well as with the divine honours claimed for themselves by the latter.

Megasthenes tells us that Chandragupta Maurya used to hear public suits even while his limbs were being massaged by his attendants. This was the spirit of devotion to state duties which led Kautilya to compare the king’s exertion and
attention to public business with the performance of a religious sacrifice. In the rock edict X Ashoka declares himself as exerting for the welfare of his subjects. In one of his inscriptions (rock edict VI) Ashoka conveys an order to reporters (prativedakas) to report to him at all hours on the public business and in particular he calls for immediate reports at all hours in the event of dispute or debate among the council of ministers.\(^{36}\) Kautilya also advises the monarch not to make him self inaccessible to persons who wished to meet him. The *Arthashāstra* also says: “when a king makes himself inaccessible to his people, and entrusts his work to his immediate officers, he may be sure to endanger confusion in business and to cause thereby public disaffection, and himself a prey to his enemies.\(^{37}\)

Thus the Mauryan kings always gave due attention to the welfare of the people. Such type of rule can’t be termed as a tyrannical rule. Even if it was despotism, it was a type of benevolent despotism. Aristotle while making a classification of constitutions talks of Monarchy and Tyranny as two forms of government (the other four forms being Aristocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy and Polity).\(^{38}\) Both are the types of rule by one person. But in Monarchy the ruler rules for the welfare of the society where as in Tyranny he rules to fulfill his own self-interest. In Aristotlian terminology, we may say that the Mauryas established a Monarchy and not a Tyranny.

*Arthashāstra* holds that the king should get three times the salary of the officers of his equal acquirements (*samānavidyā*).\(^{39}\) Prime minister and *senāpati* may be regarded as *samānvidyā* to the king. Thus it may be concluded that the king in essence was considered to be one of the officials, though the highest one. Then how could he be a dictator? The ideal form of government in ancient India was one in which the three elements, the king, the bureaucracy and the people were equally balanced and served as checks against one another.\(^{40}\) Thus we may conclude that the Mauryan kings were strong rulers but they never tended to act as tyrants.
2.6.2 Council of Ministers

It is very clear from the *Arthashāstra* that there used to be a council of ministers to aid and advise the king. The *Arthashāstra* declares that sovereignty is possible only with assistance. A single wheel can never move. Hence the king should employ ministers and hear their opinion.\(^4\) Other ancient Indian authors on the polity too, looked upon the ministers as an organic part of the government. In the Ashokan rock edicts (rock edict 3 and 5) we find the term *parisā* for the council of ministers. Ministers were appointed by the king and they held their office at the pleasure of the king.

*Qualifications for the Ministers*

Kautilya held the view that ministerial appointments should depend solely on qualifications and not on the considerations of family or back-stair influence. He prescribes various qualifications for a minister. According to him an ideal minister should be a native of the country, born of high family, possessing influential personality, well trained in arts, possessed of foresight, wise, strong in memory, bold, eloquent, skilful, intelligent, enthusiastic, pure in character, affectionate, firm in loyal devotion, endowed with excellent strength, health and bravery, free from procrastination and fickle-mindedness and such defects as excite hatred and enmity.\(^4\)

According to Altekar in actual practice all these qualities could not be ensured in every minister; it was, therefore, recommended that an effort should be made to make the selection in the light of the ideal.\(^4\) Before employing ministers on responsible duties, their character was tested by secret agents, and the king employed those persons as ministers who proved themselves superior to the allurements that usually lead a man astray from his duties.

The number of ministers varied according to circumstances, from three to four to twelve. One of them was appointed prime minister. Individual ministers
were in-charge of separate departments. The king might ask his ministers for their opinion, either individually or collectively.

In the Mauryan era we see the existence of two types of ministerial councils. There was a small group of ministers (*mantrins*) numbering three to four. K.P. Jayaswal calls it the inner cabinet.\(^{44}\) R.C. Majumdar designates it as executive council and differentiates it from the larger body which he calls state council.\(^{45}\) It was with this small group that the king constantly conferred. *Purohita*, *senāpati*, and *yuvarāja* were the members of this inner cabinet. Apart from this cabinet which had the real executive authority, there was a larger body called *mantriparisad*. The *mantriparisad* was not solely composed of the *mantrins*. According to Jayaswal it was composed of -

1. The *mantradhars* (inner cabinet),
2. Other cabinet ministers who held portfolios,
3. Ministers without portfolios and
4. Others

*Mantrins* assisted the king in examining the character of the *amātyas* who were employed in ordinary departments. All kinds of administrative actions were taken on the basis of consultation with three or four of them.

The members of the larger body i.e. *mantriparisad* evidently occupied an inferior position in comparison to *mantrins*. Their salary was only 12,000 *panas* (the Mauryan coin) whereas the salary of a *mantriparisad* was 48,000 *panas*. They were not consulted at ordinary occasions, but were summoned along with the *mantrins* when works of emergency had to be transacted. Thus in the *Arthashāstra* we find the reference of three types of officials— *amātya*, *mantrins* and *mantriparisad*. *Amātya* was a general term used to denote all government officials including *mantrins*, the *mantriparisad* and other officials like superintendents. *Mantrins* were the topmost three or four *amātyas* with whom the king consulted on various
issues. *Mantriparisaḍ was a larger body which was consulted by the king on occasions of emergency.

**Functions of the Council of Ministers**

The main function of *mantrins was to advise the king whereas the scope of the work of the *mantriparisaḍ included the whole administration. It was to formulate new policies, to ensure their successful working, to remove any difficulties that may crop up, to supervise and direct the state policy regarding taxation and expenditure, to take measures for the proper education and training of the princes, to participate in their coronation, and to direct the foreign policy both with respect to internal feudatory kings and external independent states.

**Working of the Council of Ministers**

Rock edicts III and VI of Ashoka throw light on the functioning of the council of ministers. The third edict shows that the council’s orders were to be duly recorded and expounded to the public by local officers. The sixth edict discloses that the verbal orders of the emperor as well as the decisions of the departmental heads taken in urgent cases were subject to review by the council of ministers.

Generally the decision was taken on the principle of majority. Whether the king was bound to accept the decision of the *mantriparisaḍ or not is a matter of dispute. Citing examples from the *Arthashāstra, K.P. Jayasawal supports the view that the king was bound to accept the decision of the council of ministers. Jayasawal cites the Book I, Chapter 15 of the *Arthashāstra which reads as “when there is an extraordinary matter the *mantrins and the *mantriparisaḍ should be called together and informed. In the meeting whatever the majority decides to be done, should be done (by the king).” Thus Jayasawal says “it is remarkable that the king is not given even the power of vetoing.” This view gets support from the Buddhist text *Divyāvadāna which mentions that the council of ministers under
the premiership of the chancellor Radhagupta refused to make further gifts to *Kukkutārāma* Buddhist monastery on the order of emperor Ashoka. But this does not seem to be the complete truth. The *Arthashāstra* only suggests that the king accept the advice tendered by the council of ministers. It does not make it compulsory for the king to accept such advice. The *Arthashāstra* should be studied in totality not in fractions. As we saw earlier, the *Arthashāstra* describes the king as the main element of the state. The king acquires central place in the body politic. Therefore the council of ministers could not have overriding authority. Hence, we cannot accept that the king was bound to accept the recommendations of the council of ministers. The Mauryas had established an empire governed by a monarch. In such a system the council of ministers could not have overriding authority which would by pass the monarch himself. But still the council of ministers was an important institution and its decisions were given due attention by the king. It was not merely a recording body, for very often it used to suggest amendments to the king’s orders or even recommended their total reversal. ⁵⁰

As we saw earlier, emperor Ashoka in his 6th rock edict says that when he has passed an order with regard to a gift or a proclamation, discussion should take place in the *parisad* (the council of ministers) and he should be informed if there was a division of opinion with regard to his proposal in the *parisad* or a total rejection of it. Thus, it is clear that the ministers had the freedom to oppose the rulings and proposals of the emperor. Megasthenes while making his sevenfold division of Indian society admired the seventh class consisting of the counselors and assessors. ⁵¹ His writing indicates that the actual government did vest a lot in the cabinet or council, that the council was very much respected and that it had a high character and tradition of wisdom behind it.

Like modern parliamentary cabinets, secrecy was one of the important features of the functioning of the council of ministers. The *Arthashāstra* suggests
capital punishment for those who disclosed the secrets of the proceedings of the
council of ministers. The *Arthashāstra* declares that “the subject matter of a
council shall be entirely secret, and deliberation in it shall be so carried out that
even birds cannot see them; for it is said that the secrecy of counsels was divulged
by parrots, minas, dogs and other low creatures of mean birth. Hence, without
providing himself with sufficient safeguard against disclosure, he (the king) shall
never enter into deliberations in a council. Whoever discloses counsels shall be
torn to pieces.”

Ministry was regarded so essential for good government that the
crown princes and viceroy used to have their own council of ministers. For
example the viceroy of Taxila had his own council of ministers.

**2.6.3 Administration**

A distinguished feature of the Mauryan political system was development
of a well organised bureaucratic structure. According to K.A. Nilkanta Shastri, “in
fact, the great elaboration with which the machinery of Central government is
dealt with by Kautilya in the *Adhyaksha-prachāra* (Book II of the *Arthashāstra*) is
worthy of a modern manual of administration.”

R.C. Majumdar talks of two branches of administration:

(i) *Mantrins*, *sannidhātā*, *samāhartā* formed the higher branch of
administration.

(ii) Next came the lower branch consisting mainly of superintendents of
various departments.

**Central Administration**

There were various officers who conducted the affairs of the state. Kautilya
mentions 18 *tirthas* who are also called *mahāmātras* or high functionaries. In
Ashokan edicts we see the counterpart of this term as *amātya*. They were the top
administrators. The highest *amātyas* were appointed as *mantrins*. Important
*amātyas* were
1. The high priest (*purohita*)
2. The commander-in-chief (*senāpatī*)
3. The chief judge
4. The door keeper (*pratihārī*)
5. The collector general (*samāhartā*)
6. The high treasurer (*sannidhātā*)

*Samāhartā* and *sannidhātā* played very important roles in the administration. The main task of *samāhartā* was to supervise the collection of revenue from the whole kingdom. He had to give his attention to all fortified towns, provinces, mines, gardens, forests and trade routes which were the chief source of income. Tolls, fines, fees for assaying weights and measures, police, currency, passports, liquor, slaughter house, oil, sugar, goldsmith, prostitutes and gambling formed the chief source of revenue from towns. The *sannidhātā* whose duties combined those of chamberlain and treasurer had charge of the construction of treasuries and warehouses of suitable strength and proportions wherever they were required, and was the custodian of the realised revenue in cash and kind.

Existence of the officers like *samāhartā* and *sannidhātā* makes it clear that the Mauryas had a highly advanced system of taxation. However, Kautilya considers assessment more important than storage and depositing. The harm done to the state by *samāhartā* who was the highest officer in-charge of assessment, is thought to be more serious than that caused by the *sannidhātā* who was the chief custodian of the state treasury and storehouse. Thus the assessment machinery really seems to have appeared in the Mauryan period.

Along with these 18 *tīrthas* Kautilya provides in some detail for 27 superintendents (*adhykshas*) concerned mostly with economic functions and some military duties though social functions are not ignored. These superintendents were what we would now call heads of departments, functioning under the general control and supervision of a minister who had charge of a group of allied
departments. Their duties comprised the exploitation of crown property as well as regulation and control of the economic and social life of the community. The names of the departments mentioned in the Arthashāstra, are: treasury, mines, metals, mint, salt, gold, storehouse, trade, forest produce, armoury, weights and measures, measurement of space and time, tolls, spinning and weaving, agriculture, intoxicating liquor, slaughter houses, courtesans, shipping, cattle, horses, elephants, chariots, infantry, passports, pastures, elephant forests, spices, religious institutions, gambling, jails and ports.

Pointing out the uniqueness of the Mauryan administration, K.A. Nilkanta Shastri says:

“a government which undertook such delicate tasks as the medical inspection of or the regulation of the rates charged by courtesans, of the punishment of house holders who turned ascetics without making adequate provisions for their dependents, and of the control of the visits to villages of peripatetic parties of musicians, dancers and acrobats so as not to interfere with the productive activity of the villagers must have displayed an energy in administration altogether new in India.”

**Provincial Administration**

Though the Mauryas had established a centralised bureaucratic state, the empire was divided into various provinces for administrative convenience. In the Ashokan edicts we find reference to four provinces –

1. North-Western province (capital Taxila)
2. Western province (capital Ujjayini)
3. Eastern province of Kalinga (capital Tosali)
4. Southern province (capital Suvarngiri).
Kumārāmātyas (princes of royal blood) were the rulers of these provinces. Provinces were controlled by the Central government. Administrative heads of these provinces (Kumārāmātyas) also had their own council of ministers. But important officers were appointed by the king himself.

**Municipal Administration or Town Administration**

The Mauryas developed a well organised system of municipal administration. The administration of the city corresponded on a small scale, with that of the country. It was divided into several wards, and each ward into several groups of households like the corresponding divisions of the country into districts and villages. Corresponding to samāhartā at the Central level, the chief officer of the city was called nāgaraka or city superintendent. The nāgaraka had under him, subordinate officials called sthānika (four in number in each city) and gopa. The town was divided into wards and sthānika was the in-charge of the ward, gopa worked under sthānika and was the in-charge of some villages. Each village had a headman also.

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Nāgaraka (Head of the town)  
    ↓                        
Sthānika (Head of the ward)  
    ↓                        
Gopa (Head of some villages)  
    ↓                        
Grāmika (Head of a village)  
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Regarding the administration of the capital city of Pātaliputra, Megasthenes refers to the existence of various committees. The city was administered by thirty officials divided into six committees. The first committee looked after industry and crafts. The second committee looked after the foreigners. Its functions included arranging for their food, comfort, stay and security. The third committee was responsible for the registration of births and deaths. The fourth committee regulated trade and measurement. The fifth
committee inspected the manufactured goods. The sixth committee collected taxes on the goods sold.

**Village Administration**

The village was the smallest unit of administration under the in-charge ship of an official called grāmika or village headman. He was either nominated by the king or elected by the people of the village. With the assistance of an assembly of villagers, he transacted the affairs of the village and maintained peace and order.

Besides these officers, we find references to certain other officers in the inscriptions of Ashoka like— rajjuka, pradeshtā and yukta. Pradeshtā was entrusted with the duty of maintenance of law and order and also with some magisterial powers. R.S. Sharma compares him with a modern police-cum-magisterial officer. Rajjuka is an officer which frequently appears in Ashokan edicts. They performed various functions. They were the imperial agents who received express directions for carrying out and broadcasting the emperor’s orders. Collection and utilisation of the revenue through various departments was the main function of the yukta. Dhamma-mahāmātras were entrusted with the task of establishment and increase of piety.

The pay scale of different categories of employees suggests that the bureaucracy was highly hierarchical. The highest functionaries such as the mantrin, purohitā, senāpati and yuvarāja were paid generously as much as 48,000 panas. In contrast the lowest officials are recommended 60 panas in the consolidated pay list. It also shows a pyramidal bureaucratic structure. Sometimes this gigantic and much powerful bureaucratic structure resulted in the oppression of the subjects. In the Buddhist work, Divyāvadāna, we have stories of popular revolts at Taxila during the reigns of Bindusara and Ashoka which were provoked by the oppression of officials. More authentic evidence comes from Ashoka’s Kalinga Rock Edict which conveys strong warning to the city officials against wrongful confinements.
Military Administration

The Mauryas developed a huge military setup and a well organised control system to maintain and govern it. According to Justin, Chandragupta overran the whole of India with an army of 600,000.\(^5\) This shows the huge size of the Mauryan army.

The Mauryas maintained a large, efficient and well equipped army which was composed of six elements:

1. The hereditary army which was most loyal, reliable and composed mainly of the fighting classes.
2. The hired army consisting of mercenaries who were recruited from various countries.
3. Army formed of corporations of people (sreni) or guild consisting of soldiers provided by trade and craft guilds for short expedition.
4. The army of king’s friend (mitra).
5. The army belonging to an enemy (amitra).
6. The army composed of wild tribes.

According to Kautilya hereditary army is the best. Also, every former type is better than the latter in the order of enumeration.

The Mauryan army consisted of four limbs:-

1. The infantry
2. The cavalry
3. The elephantary
4. The charioteers.

For the efficient organisation of army a separate army department was established consisting of 30 members. This department was further divided into six boards each board having five members. These six boards were –
1. Board for navy
2. Board for infantry
3. Board for cavalry
4. Board for elephantary
5. Board for chariots
6. Board for transport

The swords, shields, lances, bows and javelins were the main equipment of the soldiers. All arms were the property of the state. Similarly horses and elephants were the property of the state and private ownership of these was not permitted. There was a separate department to look after the production and maintenance of a variety of armaments whose chief was known as *ayudhāgārādhyaksha*. Pliny, basing his statement on Megasthenes put the strength of Chandragupta’s forces at 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry and 9,000 elephants.

Ghosal\(^\text{57}\) points out certain special features of the Mauryan military system:

a. Chandragupta’s army consisted wholly of professional fighters.
b. The army was wholly maintained out of the state treasury.
c. A separate staff of attendants was employed for the equipment of the fighters.
d. The numerical strength of the army (especially infantry) was increased by Chandragupta.

**Espionage**

Spies or secret agents were an important part of administration. They were maintained not only by the king, but by almost all the important officials as a check against their subordinates. Persons to be recruited as spies were trained up for this purpose since their childhood. They were trained in various languages as well as in the art of putting on disguises appropriate to different places and trades. Disguised as householders, cultivators, merchants, hermits, ascetics and students,
they mixed with all ranks of society and collected information. The king employed them to watch the movements not only of his high officials including the priests, ministers and commander-in-chief but even of his own son and heir apparent to the throne. There were counter spies for the detection of spies and very often different bands of spies, unknown to one another were employed for the same work so that the truth might be ascertained by comparing the different accounts given by them. The spies evolved systems of signs, symbols, and cipher-writing for communicating with one another. Female spies were also popular. Spies were deputed to foreign countries also. According to the *Arthashāstra*, there were two types of spies— sansthā (posted in certain places) and sanchāra (used to travel to different places).

**Judicial Administration**

The Mauryas developed a system of courts from local level to the Central level. The central court was held in the capital. It was presided over by the king or the chief justice, and included four or five judges who were chosen for their character and expertise in law. This was the highest court of justice and exercised a sort of general supervision over the administration of justice throughout the country. The local courts were three in number. The first consisted of the kindred of the accused. The second was the guild to which he belonged and the village assembly formed the third. Between the king’s court and local courts, there were other courts in important cities, where royal officers, assisted by judges, administered justice.

There were two classes of courts, *dharmasthiya* courts and *kantakashodhana* courts. There is a great difference of opinion regarding the nature of these courts. According to P.V. Kane, “the dharma courts dealt with the disputes brought before them by the parties; In the kantakashodhana courts the actions started on the initiative of the executive.” K.A.N. Shastri opines that the *kantakshodhana* courts were a new type of court introduced to meet the growing needs of an
increasingly complex social economy and to implement the decisions of a highly organised bureaucracy on all matters that were being brought under their control and regulation for the first time and were unknown to the old legal system. The regular dharma courts dealt with vyāvahāra as developed in the tradition of the dharmashāstras; the function of kantakashodhana were quasi-judicial, and their methods had more in common with those of a modern police force than that of a judiciary. Their aim was to protect the state and people from base actions of anti-social persons, the thorns (kantaka) of society. It seems that in reality dharmasthīya courts were like modern civil courts which decided cases relating to contracts, agreements, gifts, sales, marriages, inheritance and boundary disputes. Kantakashodhana courts were like modern criminal courts which decided cases of thefts, robbery, murder, offence related to sex etc.

2.6.4 System of Taxation

The Mauryas had developed a gigantic administrative and military set-up and to support and maintain this administrative and military structure they developed a very extensive and complex system of taxation.

The chief sources of revenue from villages were the bhāga and bali. The bhāga was the king’s share of the produce of the soil which was normally fixed at one-sixth, though in special cases it was raised to 1/4th or reduced to 1/8th. The bali seems to have been an extra impost from the payment of which certain tracts were exempted. In urban areas the main source of revenue included birth and death taxes, fines and titles on sales.

There were various other sources of income of the state. The state charged toll tax and trade tax on the articles sold. There was forest tax, tax on intoxicants, fish tax, irrigation tax, license tax and various other taxes. The state owned forests. It had a monopoly of mines and traded in mineral products. The state directly participated in the organisation and development of agriculture, industry and trade.
Kautilya laid great emphasis on fiscal matters. His suggestions regarding tax collection are quite interesting and seem to be still relevant. Regarding the collection of tax the *Arthashastra* writes, “just as fruits are gathered from a garden as often as they become ripe, revenue shall be collected as often as it becomes ripe. Collection of revenue or of fruits when unripe shall never be carried on lest their source may be injured causing immense trouble.”

He puts emphasis not only on collection of revenue but also on the management of finance. The government was to be very cautious so that the money collected was not embezzled by its officials. To quote him, “as it is not possible if you have honey or poison on your tongue not to taste it, so it is for a king’s officials in the finance department impossible not to taste at least something of the King’s money.” It also writes, “as with fish moving in water it is impossible to know when they are drinking water, so it is impossible to know when they (the officials) take money for themselves.”

Under the Mauryan rule, some groups of the people were exempted from taxes. Brahmins were exempted from taxes because of their religious stature. Besides the brahmins, the list of the people exempted from taxes included children, students, women, the blind and the deaf. Kshatriya warriors were also exempted. Showing the importance of the taxation system developed by the Mauryas G.M. Bongardlevin writes that “the Mauryas exercised strict control over the activities of all units of the taxation system and implemented in practice many of the principles elaborated by Kautilya in his treatise on polity.”

**2.6.5 Welfare Measures**

The Mauryan administration, particularly during Ashoka’s regime emphasised on various welfare measures like planting of trees, construction of lakes, tanks, wells and hospitals. State assistance was given to the needy and incapacitated.
According to U.N. Ghosal, there were two distinctive characteristics of Ashoka’s welfare measures:

1. Firstly, they were inspired by the principle of the emperor’s moral obligation towards his subjects and his conception of paternal rule over them.
2. Secondly, they reflected a spirit of universal humanism based on the emperor’s appreciation of all human values within the recognised pale of Indian civilisation.

Ashoka’s welfare programmes may be divided into four categories:

1. Measures for promotion of material welfare of subjects like construction of pious and charitable works, and secondly, the grant of medical relief to the people.
2. Inculcation of virtuous living among the people. For example respectful attention to mother and father, to teachers and elders.
3. Inculcation of religious syncretism. For example his policy of toleration for all sects.

### 2.7 Nature of the Mauryan State

There is a great debate regarding the nature of the Mauryan State. The central theme around which this debate revolves is whether the Mauryan state was a centralised state or did it contain the features of decentralisation also. Ram Sharan Sharma maintains that the Mauryas established a centralised-bureaucratic state. Gerrard Fussman rejects this view to be hypothetical and based on sources which are not authentic. Fussman argues that the Mauryan empire also functioned like the British empire in a highly pragmatic manner. J.C. Heesterman takes a quite different and unique approach and describes the Mauryan state as a transition state which was trying to make a balance between tribal autonomy and
Central control. Therefore, neither the king was all powerful, nor the empire was centralised. Romila Thapar in the beginning by and large supported the centralised nature of the Mauryan state but slightly revised her view in her later works, where she argues that though the empire was sufficiently centralised in the core but the peripheral areas enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. Let us look at the main arguments in this debate.

2.7.1 Centralised-Bureaucratic State

While explaining the various stages in the ancient Indian polity R.S. Sharma describes the Mauryan phase as a “Centralised-Bureaucratic Interlude.” On the basis of numismatics, Sharma claims that the largest number of coins found in ancient India are punchmarked coins. Most of these coins can be attributed to the Mauryan era. The presence of a large number of coins helped in the development of trade and also enabled the government to pay its employees in cash. The Mauryan settlements show considerable use of burnt bricks. This new housing material facilitated widespread urban settlement and lent them stability. Discovery of iron ploughshare, sickles and other instruments show that the agricultural technology was quite advanced. Kautilya talks of reclamation of virgin land, opening up of new trade routes and control of trade and industry, and Megasthenes notes the interest of the Mauryan state in agriculture, irrigation, and in the regulation of economic activities in the capital. Ashokan inscriptions suggest the large-scale employment of masons, artisans and labourers all over India for cutting these pillars, polishing them and carrying them to the required place. All this show the presence of thriving economic activities and vast government control. Thus the distinguishing feature of the Mauryan economy is the state control of agriculture, industry and trade and the levy of all varieties of taxes on the people.65 These naturally left their impact on administration, leading to the creation of an elaborate establishment which wielded enormous power and controlled and governed the vast empire.
R.S. Sharma accepts the *Arthashāstra* of Kautilya as the main source of information regarding the Mauryan era. The *Arthashāstra* mentions about a large and complex bureaucratic organisation which included the officials like *samāhartā*, *sannidhātā*, various *tirthas*, *adhyakshas* or superintendents, *gopa*, *sthānika*, and *nāgaraka*. The pay scales of these officials were quite different and there was a large gap between the top and the bottom levels of officials. Sharma concludes from this differential pay-scale that the organisation of the Mauryan bureaucracy was hierarchical and pyramidal. In his own words:

“that this bureaucracy was highly hierarchical is suggested by the pay scale for different categories of employees. The highest functionaries such as the *mantrin*, *purohita*, *senāpati* and *yuvarāja* are paid generously as much as 48,000 *panas*, *pana* being a silver coin with a silver content equal to 3/4th of a *tola*. In contrast, the lowest officials are recommended 60 *panas* in the consolidated pay list given in the section on *bhrityabharnīyama* but at other places they are given as small a pittance as only 10 or 20 *panas*. The ratio therefore would work out at 1:4800 which indicates an enormous gap between the highest and the lowest class of government servants. What is more important for us is that it shows a pyramidal bureaucratic structure.”

The Mauryas possessed a huge military setup. According to Justin, Chandragupta Maurya possessed 600,000 troops which was three times larger than the army of the Nandas. The power of the sword was strengthened by the royal monopoly of arms and exclusive control over artisans who produced weapons. The Mauryas also developed the first efficient system of police and criminal administration along with an elaborate system of espionage. All these elements contributed to the centralisation trend.
Sharma suggests certain other facts to justify the centralised nature of the Mauryan state. One of them is the strategic location of *Pātaliputra* from where royal agents could sail up and down the four directions. *Pātaliputra* was situated at the confluence of the important rivers Ganga and Son. Besides this, it was well connected with other parts of the empire through roads. The royal road ran from *Pātaliputra* to Nepal through Vaishali and Champarana. We also hear of a road at the foothills of the Himalayas. It passed from Vaishali through Champarana to Kapilvastu, Kalsi (in Dehradun district), Hazara and eventually to Peshawar. Megasthenes speaks of a road connecting North-Western India with Patna. Roads also linked Patna with Sasaram and from there they went to Mirzapur and central Asia. The Ashokan pillars were manufactured in the sandstone quarry of Chunar near Banaras and transported from there to the different parts of the empire. The Mauryan capital was connected with Kalinga by a route through Eastern Madhya Pradesh and Kalinga in its turn was linked with Andhra and Karnataka. All this facilitated transport leading to enhanced Central control.

Though there are a few decentralising traits in the Mauryan polity like grant of tax free lands in the new settlements to priests, preceptors and other learned brahmins, the elements of decentralisation have a subordinate place in the Mauryan polity. Thus Sharma opines that our sources convey the impression of centralised-bureaucratic control, which is consistent with the vast empire and expanding economic activities of the Mauryas. This together with a well organised police and military system and revenue machinery helped to strengthen royal power, which manifested itself in *shāsana*. The *Jātakas* hold the king responsible even for such things as want of rain, non-availability of bridegroom for the daughter and calamity befalling the oxen of a farmer. Over these things the king had no control, but as the head of the community he was seen as a performer of all those functions which once pertained to the office of a tribal chief. From this the state control of various activities recommended by Kautilya was not a far cry.
2.7.2 Decentralised State

Gerrard Fussman questions the views of many contemporary historians who consider that the Mauryan state was unitary and centralised. According to Fussman, these authors rely on the *Arthashāstra* of Kautilya as an authentic source for Mauryan historiography. But the date of the text (whether it belongs to the Mauryan period or not) itself is disputed. Originally it might would have been composed by Kautilya, but it has been revised or interpolated at a date impossible to specify. Also, the *Arthashāstra* is a treatise on politics and administration. Therefore, it is less descriptive and more prescriptive. It formulates the general guidelines which any ruler should follow. It doesn’t describe the situation of the Mauryan state per se. Therefore, Fussman suggests that the *Arthashāstra* not be accepted as the source for Mauryan historiography but to rely on those documents whose dates are certain like the fragments of the travel account of Megasthenes, and the inscriptions of Ashoka, scattered in multiple copies throughout the empire. Fussman constructs his arguments on the basis of the logistics concerning the communication network and distance between the capital city and other parts of the empire. Fussman argues that there must have been a system of governmental communication and that it had been as efficient as that of the great Mughals, which could use a system of couriers on a relay basis. It enabled them to dispatch news at speeds exceeding 100 kilometers per day, which suggests five days between Kandahar and Taxila and twenty days between Peshawar and Ahmedabad. If this figure is applied to the Mauryan empire one can calculate that a courier leaving Patna (the capital) would have taken approximately thirty days to reach Kandahar and eleven days to reach Bengal. These lengths of time are valid for communication in the Indo-Gangetic plain. Between north and south India, due to topographical factors communication was much slower. During the monsoons, communication was very difficult throughout India. On the basis of these facts Fussman now argues: “let us imagine that a governor of Kandahar wants to inform the Mauryan ruler that a raid is being planned on his town, or that
an uprising amongst the people is foreseen. It would take him thirty days to warn Patna. In the best of circumstances, he would receive instructions two months after the departure of his messenger and at least four months would pass before an army starting out from Patna could come to his assistance. These figures are also valid for the journey from Suvarnagiri (in the South) to Patna. Between the months of June and September, the time period should be multiplied by two. Is it possible to imagine that a country could be governed in this way, without relays between local governors and the central power, without concentration of troops at strategic points and the right to take initiatives granted to the sovereign’s representatives, at least in case of any emergency? Thus, one must a priori assume the existence of local representatives of the king, who had at their disposal a large amount of power.”

Citing examples from Ashoka inscriptions, Fussman argues that the emperor cared personally only for the spreading of *dhamma*. Various edicts give instructions to the officials regarding the measures directly or indirectly related to *dhamma* only. They do not address the problems of administration. They are silent on such important issues as the collection of taxes, the army and the public works, which were the main duty of the officials. Thus there is sufficient ground to assume that in these fields, officials would have acted according to the traditional principles of Indian administration and one can further assume that the farther they were from *Pātaliputra*, the more authority they enjoyed.

The Mauryan administration was not homogeneous either in its recruitment or in its practice. In central India the language of Ashokan inscriptions do not match with the local language. The languages of central India are, even today, of non-Indo-Aryan origin. But Ashokan edicts in these areas are written in middle Indo-Aryan and more specifically in a dialect which was very close to *Pātaliputra* (Magadha). The Dhauli and Jaugada edicts in Kalinga (Orissa) are also written in quasi-*Māgadhī*, a language which was not spoken in Orissa. Then it is clear that in
the South and in the East of his empire Ashoka used a bureaucracy of foreign origin (who could understand the language of inscriptions as these inscriptions are in the form of instructions for the officials). But the language of the inscriptions, located in the North-West part of the empire is very similar to the local language. Thus it may be concluded from this that Ashoka allowed the survival at Kandahar and Laghman of a bureaucracy which he probably inherited from the Persian empire and at Kandahar of a Greek bureaucracy which he inherited from the Seleucids. Therefore, in North-Western India none of the Mauryan rulers had interfered with local habits. Thus, Ashoka did not try to systematically standardise his administration. He acted according to the circumstances, letting an old and probably efficient bureaucracy survive in the North-West.

Administrative practices also were not standardised. In his first separate Kalinga edict Ashoka proclaims to the sending out on tour every five years of a superintendent to ensure that everyone worked according to his instructions. He further proclaims that from Ujjain and Taxila also, the respective viceroys will send a similar group at least every three years, (almost half time of 5 years). Thus Fussman concludes that there was a general measure (the superintendent’s tours) of which the actual practice varied according to each province. In any case it is not possible to talk of a uniform administrative scheme.71

On the basis of Ashokan inscriptions Fussman claims that various provincial rulers or viceroys did not have identical powers. Their powers varied according to the place, the time and the person. Taxila and Ujjain were permanent residences of important viceroys, often hereditary princes. The viceroy of Kalinga, whose residence was at Tosali /Dhauli, seems to have had much more restricted powers. The local viceroys had the freedom to edit the rock edicts and produce a minor version.

In Kalinga (Dhauli and Jaugarh) rock edicts XI, XII and XIII which talk of the bloody conquest of Kalinga by the Mauryan king Ashoka have been omitted
from the rock. According to Fussman this was due to local initiative. The
governor of the province, having read the text of the edict, had not considered it
prudent to have it inscribed and proclaimed, and had it replaced by the so called
separate edicts, in which the Kalinga war was not mentioned. 72

Pointing to the vastness of the Mauryan empire, Fussman emphasises the
material impossibility of having the orders of the emperor carried out everywhere
in the empire. Therefore, Buddhist legends report that towards the end of his life,
Ashoka could no longer make himself obeyed. The fact that during the Mauryan
period issuance of currency was not the monopoly of the emperor as the Mauryan
currency consisted of both the government coins and coins issued by provinces,
towns or even private banks indicates that the degree of centralisation of the
Mauryan empire is often overrated.

On the basis of Megasthenes’s reporting, Fussman says that there were
tribal populations which accepted the main rules of the empire but they were
autonomous in their internal governance. These tribes existed before the
constitution of the Mauryan empire; they continued to exist even after its
dissolution. In all appearances, they continued to govern themselves according to
their own customs, even when they were under the authority of the Mauryan
sovereign.

The centralisation theory gets support from the Arthashāstra of Kautilya
the authenticity of which is not accepted by Fussman. Thus, he clearly mentions
that the manner in which the Mauryan empire functioned was highly pragmatic.
Like the British Raj, in the Mauryan empire also, there were three types of
entities:

1. Territories directly administered by the crown.
2. Subjugated powers like kings or maharājās.
3. Tribes who were left alone as long as they did not disturb the peace of the
empire.
The freedom allowed to high officials of the provincial administration, the continued existence of powers previous to the Mauryan Conquest, the difficulties of communication — all these constituted centrifugal factors. During this exceptional era when India was unified politically, there never had been a monetary unity, nor even fiscal, administrative, social or linguistic. What one sees under the Mauryas is a Central power trying to bring under the sole authority pre-constituted entities to which it leaves a greater or lesser degree of autonomy according to the place and the circumstances. But in the third century B.C.E history and geography precluded the constitution of a unitarian state, which is not a reality even in the twentieth century. 73

2.7.3 Transition State

J.C. Heesterman doesn’t directly talk of the Mauryan state but his analysis of the Arthashāstra state and kingship indirectly explains the nature of the Mauryan state. According to Heesterman the state described in the Arthashāstra is not a centralised-bureaucratic state but a diffused tribal state trying to acquire a universalistic nature but unsuccessfully. The king was not an absolute ruler but only primus inter pares like a tribal head. Citing various references and examples from the Arthashāstra, Heesterman formulates his view.

According to Heesterman, in ancient India the divinity of kings was accepted. But this sacred or divine king derived his authority not from a transcendent principle but from the community itself. He played a dominant role in the rituals and festivals of the community. Ancient Indian texts describe the king as the “embryo of the vis (or the common people)” which means he derived his authority from the community. Thus he was not more than primus inter pares. It seems that the central issue in the Arthashāstra is to overcome this phenomena but it fails to succeed in this effort.

According to Heesterman only a superficial reading of the Arthashāstra will suggest the existence of an impressive and well organised bureaucracy with a
purpose of extraction and pooling of resources. But in reality any serious student of the *Arthashāstra* can easily see that the bureaucracy described in the *Arthashāstra* is more a machinery for the diffusion of resources than for their pooling and husbanding.

The *Arthashāstra* prescribes that all officers should assemble on the full moon day of the month of Āsādha, at the end of the hot season, with sealed accounts and with balances to be paid in the treasury. Fines are prescribed for those coming later or without their account books. *Mahāmātras* or the ministers look into the accounts and decide its genuineness. But *mahāmātras* are strictly instructed to act unanimously. He who puts himself apart (i.e. breaks the unanimity) or talks untruth should pay in full the highest fine.

According to Heesterman this type of meeting is reminiscent of the traditional *panchāyata* and similar gatherings, where we also find this stress on unanimity and consensus as a corollary of the strife and factional characteristic of the little community. Unanimity and consensus have their proper place in the tribal order with its diffusion of power and authority. In the bureaucratic order, where power and authority are clearly articulated and decisions have to be made in a rationalised way, they can only be of marginal importance. This whole process of accounting the role of *mahāmātras* is also noteworthy. They are not told to render their own accounts. Thus the *mahāmātras* on the one hand are the judges in the auditing process and on the other hand do not render their own accounts in any clearly prescribed way which suggests that they are more like a body of co-sharers of authority with the king than regular bureaucrats. The king is only the *primus inter pares*. Thus Heesterman concludes that though Kautilya wants to realise a bureaucratic order but is held back by the tribal order which wrecks his intentions.

Heesterman also gives the example of the game of dice to support his viewpoint. In ancient India, in the game of dice, the king also participated on
equal footing with other players. The stake of the game— a cow or a dish of food (odana) — was to be divided among the players in differential share. According to Heesterman it is a matter of redistribution of resources, diametrically opposed to bureaucratic management.\textsuperscript{76} In this context the king clearly does not transcend the community.

The example of succession also shows the diffused nature of polity and the king’s role only as a \textit{primus inter pares}. Kautilya while dealing with the problem of succession at the death of the king says that in case there is no obvious successor to the king, an \textit{amātya}, a minister or household officer should present a likely candidate to the assembled \textit{mahāmātras}, saying: “this one is a trust with you, consider his father, his quality, and noble birth and that of yourselves; he is but the standard, you are the masters.” Thus it can be concluded that the \textit{mahāmātras} are not far from being \textit{svāmins} or the master of the realm. They closely resemble the \textit{ratnins} in the \textit{Rājasūya}, who are said to be “the givers and takers of kingdom”.\textsuperscript{77}

A well knitted system of espionage mentioned in the \textit{Arthashāstra} suggests that the king was very powerful and controlled the administration effectively through a well developed system of espionage. But according to Heesterman the system of espionage was a means of maintaining checks and balances. It points out to a factional system in which the king represents no more than one faction among many others. The only way to stay on top is for the king to play the factions against each other and to have them keep each other in check. Kautilya recommends that the administrative departments be headed, not by one but by many officers. In the same way he advises that there should be more than one commander in the garrisons so that out of fear for each other they will abstain from entering into deals with the enemy. Under certain specific circumstances this may be a sound policy but it can hardly contribute towards bureaucratic efficiency of government and administration. Thus, in practice the essence of the system remains diffusion of
power and scattering of resources. On the basis of all these examples, Heesterman concludes that Kautilya wants to achieve a universalistic bureaucratic state, but he is forced to work within the context of a particularistic tribal system.

2.7.4 Absence of Uniformity: Centralisation in the Metropolitan but Decentralisation at the Periphery

Romila Thapar in her later writings particularly in *The Mauryas Revisited* argues that a uniform pattern cannot be traced throughout the Mauryan state. The Mauryan state was an empire and we cannot conclude that everywhere it displayed the same trend either of centralisation or of decentralisation. It was organised in the pattern of an empire which lacked uniformity and which was differentially structured.

Traditionally historians have pointed out two distinctive features of an empire:

a) Extensive territorial control over a vast territory
b) Domination of people who are culturally different usually called other nations.

Though not rejecting these two features which makes an empire Romila Thapar focuses on a third feature which is more important than the first two features. That is the relationship between the metropolitan and other areas which is always exploitative. An empire would require that revenue, labour and resources from other areas should enrich the metropolitan state and its relation to the other areas is, therefore, exploitative. On the basis of application of this principle to the Mauryan empire we can clearly see that it was neither centralised nor decentralised everywhere. Both the trends of centralisation and decentralisation prevailed in the different parts of the empire.

According to Romila Thapar there are three component units of an empire:

i) The metropolitan state
ii) The core areas and

iii) A large number of peripheral areas.

The metropolitan state which historically evolves from a small kingdom and becomes the nucleus of the empire is ultimately a highly developed state. It spreads its hegemony over other areas initially through conquest. In the Mauryan empire Magadha occupied this central place.

Core regions were either existing states which are incorporated into the empire (like Gandhara in the Mauryan empire) or regions of incipient state formation (such as Kalinga and Saurastra) or existing centres of exchange (such as Ujjain, or Amaravati). Core areas are in a sense sub-metropolitan and on the disintegration of the empire can develop into metropolitan areas. The peripheral regions are those areas which have not known a state system. They range from hunting and gathering to producing societies.

In this scheme of imperial organization surplus was appropriated and transferred from periphery and core to the metropolitan. Metropolitan controlled the other areas. But the form of control varied according to the resources being tapped. Hence we cannot think of a uniform pattern of centralisation or decentralisation throughout the empire. Relations between the metropolitan state and each area varied. The primary interest of the metropolitan was dominance and exploitation which took place primarily in the form of revenue collection and appropriation of resources. If the resources could be easily tapped without too much interference with the existing channels then the areas would be left relatively untampered with. The other areas were economically restructured in such a manner that the appropriation of the resources could take place smoothly.\textsuperscript{78}

Magadha had the potential to emerge as a metropolitan state due to various reasons. It was located in the fertile Gangetic plain. It was agriculturally rich with a relatively high population density to work the land. It controlled the trade on the rivers of the Gangetic system. From Ajatashatru to Nandas it had a series of
ambitious and strong rulers. Hence it developed as the metropolitan and formed the empire.

Romila Thapar also points out that there were officers like samāhartā (the chief revenue assessor and collector) who controlled the overall revenue collection of the empire. This suggests that the higher officers came from the metropolitan state or the core regions. But the actual collectors at the level of village and town might have been local appointees. In the peripheral areas some of these were likely to have been clan chiefs. On the basis of this Romila Thapar concludes that “if such a system prevailed there would be a greater uniformity of administration at the upper levels and local administration would be more decentralised. The administrative organisation when seen from the upper levels would suggest a centralised uniform administration geared to the requirements and functions of the metropolitan. But when seen from the lower levels it would be far less uniform.”79

Regarding all these viewpoints one may say that the centralisation theory of R.S. Sharma and diffusion theory of Heesterman cannot be accepted to be true because they are largely based on a literary source i.e. the Arthashāstra. We know that sometimes literary sources may confuse and misguide and they may be prejudiced. Therefore, they must be cross checked by other evidences mainly the archaeological sources. Fussman’s view which emphasises the decentralised nature of the Mauryan state is based on the archaeological sources, i.e. the inscriptions of Ashoka. But it completely rejects the validity of the chief literary source, the Arthashāstra. As a sociologist who did not refer to archaeological sources Heesterman’s conclusions are also hypothetical to a large extent.

In fact, we cannot talk of a uniform pattern in any of the empires and the Mauryan empire cannot be the exception. In the Mauryan empire a sufficient degree of centralisation can be seen in the metropolitan but it was less in the core and least in the periphery. The peripheral areas were autonomous in many respects. Both the literary and archaeological sources suggest this conclusion.
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