



The Mauryan Empire: Administration, governance and welfare policies under Ashoka: A study

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Abstract

One of the most massive and foremost political structures in ancient Indian history was the Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE). The empire was founded by Chandragupta Maurya and expanded to its maximum size under Ashoka, whose rule is notable for its focus on Dhamma ideals, public welfare, and moral administration. A strong monarchy, a centralized bureaucracy, provincial administration, revenue collection, military organization, and a vast network of officials were the hallmarks of the Mauryan administrative system. Under Ashoka, policies aimed at advancing moral behavior, religious tolerance, non-violence, and the welfare of both humans and animals were added to the established imperial government processes. His inscriptions offer important proof of public works projects, medical facilities, roadside amenities, administrative procedures, and the establishment of Dhamma Mahamatras to advance social and moral welfare. This essay looks at Ashoka's welfare policies, the Mauryan Empire's administrative framework, and his governing philosophies. It contends that Ashoka's rule, which combined imperial power with moral obligation and the common good, marks a significant turning point in the development of ancient Indian political philosophy.

Keywords: Mauryan Empire, Ashoka, administration, governance, Dhamma, welfare policies, Mauryan bureaucracy, public welfare, ancient India, inscriptions

Introduction

In ancient India's political and administrative history, the Mauryan Empire holds a significant position. After the fall of the Nanda dynasty, Chandragupta Maurya founded the empire in 322 BCE, and it created a strong political structure throughout most of the Indian subcontinent. Chandragupta established a vast administrative framework that facilitated territory expansion, revenue collection, military organization, and political stability under the traditional supervision of Chanakya, also known as Kautilya. The empire was further strengthened by his successors, Bindusara and Ashoka, with Ashoka's rule standing out for its focus on moral leadership and the common good.

Ashoka came to power in 268 BCE, while different historians had somewhat different dates. His political perspective changed as a result of the Kalinga War, which is generally dated to around 261 BCE. Ashoka was profoundly impacted by the pain and deaths brought about by the conquest, as evidenced by his Major Rock Edict XIII. After that, he placed more emphasis on the Dhamma, a set of moral precepts that promoted temperance, religious tolerance, compassion, respect for elders, humane treatment of subordinates, and concern for all living things.

Ashoka did not give up on the Mauryan state's administrative framework. Rather, he communicated moral values and advanced wellbeing throughout his domains through imperial institutions, royal proclamations, and appointed officials. His inscriptions, which were placed on pillars and rocks all around the empire, offer crucial proof of his administrative goals and political beliefs.

Under Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire saw the growth of an extremely well-functioning bureaucracy. In order to ensure that governance was carried out efficiently and in accordance with Ashoka's reformist principles, this system was created to handle the wide range of demands of the

empire's administration. The division of duties among different officials and departments was a defining feature of the Mauryan Empire's governmental system. Public works, military command, judicial administration, and revenue collection were important positions. Officials in charge of each department were in charge of managing their particular domains and making sure that regulations were carried out efficiently. Since it supplied the funds required for the management and upkeep of the empire, revenue collection was an essential component of the bureaucracy. The systematic taxation system put in place by Ashoka's government was intended to be efficient and equitable. This approach made it possible for the state to sponsor a range of social programs and assisted in the fair distribution of resources. Another crucial element of the Mauryan bureaucracy was judicial administration. Ashoka's edicts emphasized the need for justice and fairness in legal matters. The judicial system was structured to handle disputes and administer justice in accordance with ethical principles. This included provisions for humane treatment of prisoners and the implementation of just punishments.

Mauryan Empire Administration and Governance The King and Central Administration

The top post in the Mauryan government was held by the king. He had control over foreign affairs, the military, taxation, justice, and official appointments. Ministers, advisors, and a network of administrative officers that helped run the empire supported the monarchy.

A crucial description of ancient Indian statecraft, taxation, diplomacy, administration, and security may be found in Kautilya's Arthashastra. It provides important insights into the political concepts related to early Indian royalty, even though its exact relationship to the Mauryan government is still up for controversy.

Under Ashoka, royal authority continued to be centralised, but the king increasingly emphasised the moral responsibilities of government. His inscriptions describe his concern for the welfare of his subjects and his desire to remain accessible to officials and the public. In Rock Edict VI, Ashoka stresses the importance of receiving reports about public affairs and attending to the welfare of the people.

Council of Ministers and Administrative Officials

Ministers, advisors, and specialized bureaucrats were essential to the Mauryan government. While several officers oversaw income, trade, agriculture, security, and other areas, the council of ministers supported the king in administrative and political concerns.

The Amatyas, or administrative officers, and different superintendents in charge of specific departments were significant groups of officials. Although it is unclear to what degree any institution functioned precisely as specified during the Mauryan period, the Arthashastra outlines a comprehensive structure of departmental supervision.

Yuktas, Rajjukas, and Pradesikas were officials who held significant administrative positions under Ashoka. His inscriptions make reference to their duties in carrying out royal directives, overseeing regional affairs, and disseminating Dhamma precepts. The emperor was able to exercise control over far-off lands thanks to this administrative network.

Provincial Administration

With regard to the dimensions of the Mauryan Empire, political cohesion depended on provincial administration. Taxila in the northwest, Ujjain in the west, Tosali in the east, and Suvarnagiri in the south were significant provincial hubs. Over time, these centers' exact administrative standing changed.

Important provinces could be governed by princes or other high-ranking officials, while local communities and districts were ruled by lower-level officers. The management of the provinces made it easier to collect taxes, keep the peace, carry out royal directives, and communicate with regional and central officials.

Additionally, Ashoka's inscriptions mention officials passing through their domains to oversee operations and convey moral directives. These actions show an attempt to keep the populace and the central authority in communication.

Revenue and Economic Administration

The Mauryan Empire's main economic pillar was agriculture. Thus, one of the main sources of governmental revenue was land revenue. Trade, customs, minerals, forests, and state-run businesses might all generate more income.

To sustain the army, bureaucrats, roads, public works, and the royal establishment, the administration needed significant money. As a result, the state's economic oversight and revenue collection became crucial duties.

The Arthashastra addresses commerce regulation, irrigation, taxation, agricultural productivity, and resource management. It shows the significance of economic organization and state revenue in modern political theory, even though it should not be regarded as a comprehensive account of actual Mauryan practice.

The imperial government was supported by a steady revenue stream. However, Ashoka's focus on the welfare of the populace implies that the duties of kingship were not limited to income collection and upholding military might.

Military and Judicial Administration

To secure its territorial integrity, maintain internal order, and safeguard its possessions, the Mauryan Empire kept a sizable army. Elephants, chariots, infantry, and cavalry were all part of the military organization, which was backed by officers and logistical plans. Although exact estimates of Mauryan army numbers are still unknown, evidence regarding Mauryan military might may be found in Greek narratives and Indian literary traditions. Another crucial element of government was the judicial system. In accordance with applicable laws and royal authority, officials handled disputes and offenses and administered justice. The Arthashastra talks about courts, legal processes, punishments, and judges' responsibilities. Ashoka aimed to make the administration of justice more humane. His inscriptions discuss the responsibilities of judges, the value of objectivity, and policies meant to give inmates chances for reconsideration or relief. His attempts to strike a balance between the power of the state and moral constraint were evident in these endeavors.

Ashoka's Principles of Governance

Ashoka's focus on the Dhamma set his administration apart. Dhamma was more than just an imposition of Buddhist philosophy or a program of religious conversion. It mainly articulated moral values meant to enhance behavior and interpersonal connections throughout the empire. His inscriptions promoted compassionate treatment of servants, moderation, honesty, respect for many religious traditions, generosity toward Brahmanas and ascetics, and reverence for parents and elders. Ashoka also advised individuals to refrain from needless confrontation and to speak with moderation. Ashoka tried to convey these ideas to his subjects through official trips, royal inscriptions, and administrative appointments. Therefore, he united political power with a clear concern for moral behavior and social harmony in his concept of administration.

Welfare Policies under Ashoka

Dhamma and Public Welfare

Ashoka's welfare-focused government was based on the Dhamma. Ashoka stressed moral behavior, compassion, and moderation after the Kalinga War and voiced concern about the misery brought on by conquering. He considers the effects of the Kalinga campaign on people and argues that Dhamma is a better option than military conquest in Major Rock Edict XIII. This does not imply that the Mauryan state gave up its military or administrative operations right away. Instead, Ashoka emphasized the wellbeing of his citizens and moral persuasion as crucial duties of monarchy. His strategy was to promote moral behavior among people and amicable interactions between various socioeconomic and religious groupings. In this way, the Dhamma functioned as a public code of ethics for the administration of a multicultural empire.

Appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras

Ashoka's inscriptions, especially Major Rock Edict V, detail the appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras as one of his

major administrative undertakings. Promoting Dhamma and taking care of public welfare were the responsibilities of these officials. Their responsibilities included communicating the king's moral directives and showing care for various religious communities and marginalized populations. According to the inscriptions, Ashoka wanted these administrators to carry out the government's moral obligations in addition to regular tax collection and political management. Ashoka included moral goals into the imperial administrative framework, as demonstrated by the appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras. It also shows that organized organizations, rather than just royal proclamations, were the foundation of his social initiatives.

Medical Facilities for Humans and Animals

Ashoka's Major Rock Edict II outlines plans for both human and animal medical care. It also refers to initiatives to gather and cultivate therapeutic herbs as well as to supply beneficial plants and roots where they are required. The inscription shows concern for the welfare of living things and portrays healthcare as the government's duty. Ashoka's method was noteworthy for incorporating animal compassion into the vocabulary of human society. It is unclear how precisely these medical arrangements are organized and scaled. However, the inscription offers concrete proof that Ashoka's purported welfare program included medical care and supplies.

Roads, Wells, Trees, and Resting Places

The practical implications measures mentioned in Ashoka's inscriptions are meant to facilitate daily living and travel. The provision of wells and the planting of trees alongside highways are mentioned in Major Rock Edict II. Additionally, Pillar Edict VII documents welfare-oriented actions related to wells, trees, and traveler amenities. Traders, tourists, bureaucrats, pilgrims, and local people could all profit from such activities. Wells enhanced access to water, and trees offered shade. Additionally, these actions facilitated communication and mobility within the empire. Not every route or village acquired these amenities, according to the inscriptions. Nonetheless, they show that Ashoka openly acknowledged basic amenities and infrastructure as essential royal administration priorities.

Protection of Animals and Regulation of Animal Slaughter

Ashoka's welfare policies included measures to reduce animal suffering. In several inscriptions, he restricted or prohibited the killing of particular animals and sought to limit unnecessary slaughter. Pillar Edict V lists protected animals and specifies restrictions on killing or injuring them in particular circumstances. Major Rock Edict I also addresses animal sacrifice and the slaughter of animals associated with the royal establishment. These measures reflected Ashoka's emphasis on compassion and non-violence. They should not be interpreted as a complete prohibition of all animal killing throughout the empire, but they demonstrate a deliberate effort to regulate practices that caused unnecessary harm.

Religious Tolerance and Social Harmony

The Mauryan Empire was significantly impacted by Ashoka's cultural and religious policies, which were a distinguishing aspect of his rule. His advocacy of religious

tolerance and support for Buddhism demonstrated his dedication to building a peaceful and welcoming community. A key component of Ashoka's cultural and religious policies was his acceptance of Buddhism. Following his conversion to Buddhism, Ashoka aggressively promoted the dissemination of Buddhist ideas and teachings across the empire. Buddhist practitioners used stupas, monasteries, and other religious structures as places of worship and meditation. Buddhism was promoted with more than just financial assistance. In order to propagate Buddhism, Ashoka also dispatched missionaries to numerous areas both inside and outside of his kingdom. The spread of Buddhist concepts and the development of Buddhism as a significant religious and philosophical tradition in India and beyond were greatly aided by this missionary activity. Ashoka's religious policy was distinguished by its emphasis on tolerance and respect for all religious traditions, in addition to its promotion of Buddhism.

Religious tolerance was an important aspect of Ashoka's conception of Dhamma. His inscriptions refer to Brahmanas, ascetics, and different religious communities, emphasising restraint in speech and respect for the beliefs of others. Rock Edict XII is especially significant because it encourages respect among religious traditions and warns against praising one's own sect while unfairly criticising others. Ashoka argued that mutual respect could strengthen both individual moral development and social harmony. This policy was important in an empire containing diverse communities and religious traditions. Rather than insisting on uniformity, Ashoka encouraged ethical conduct and peaceful coexistence.

Welfare of Prisoners and Humane Justice

Ashoka has voiced concerns about the way justice is administered and how inmates are treated. The duties of Rajjukas and the use of judicial power are covered in Pillar Edict IV. Prisoners and records Regulations related to the release or relief of specific types of detainees are referred to as Pillar Edict V.

Ashoka emphasizes moral behavior and the alleviation of pain as crucial components of good governance in Rock Edict IV and other inscriptions. These actions imply that he tried to use humanitarian ideals to lessen the severity of governmental authority. Nonetheless, the evidence does not indicate that sanctions or incarceration were eliminated, and the Mauryan Empire continued to be a monarchy with repressive institutions. It is more accurate to interpret Ashoka's actions as an effort to make the current imperial justice system more compassionate and restrained.

Welfare and Communication through Royal Inscriptions

Ashoka used inscriptions on rocks and pillars to communicate royal policies to people across different regions. These inscriptions were composed in languages and scripts suited to particular areas, including Prakrit written in Brahmi and, in the northwest, other linguistic and script traditions. The inscriptions announced ethical principles, administrative expectations, and welfare measures. They also communicated the king's concern for his subjects and his desire that officials act responsibly. This use of public inscriptions was an important instrument of governance. It enabled Ashoka to communicate beyond the royal court and gave his welfare programme a visible presence across parts of the empire.

Conclusion

A pivotal centuries in the Mauryan Empire's history, Ashoka the Great's reign is notable for his innovative administrative practices and strong dedication to moral leadership. His efficient administration of the empire's large lands and intricate administrative requirements was made possible by his concentration of power and well-organized bureaucracy. By incorporating the virtues of justice, compassion, and non-violence into the administrative structure, Ashoka's adoption of the Dhamma, which is based on Buddhist precepts, reshaped the moral basis of administration. His legal reforms, which prioritized justice and compassion, reflected this moral philosophy. Furthermore, Ashoka's emphasis on social welfare—which was seen in the construction of infrastructure, hospitals, and rest homes—showed a dedication to raising his subjects' standard of living. His peace-oriented diplomatic strategies promoted cordial and stable ties with neighboring nations. His concept of Dhamma encouraged compassion, religious tolerance, respect for elders, humane treatment of servants, and concern for living beings. His inscriptions record initiatives relating to medical treatment, medicinal plants, wells, roadside trees, animal protection, and the humane administration of justice. The appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras further demonstrated his intention to integrate moral responsibilities into government. Although the precise implementation and geographical reach of these policies remain uncertain, Ashoka's inscriptions provide valuable evidence of the principles he sought to promote. His reign illustrates an important relationship between political authority and public responsibility in ancient Indian history. The Mauryan administrative system provided the institutional foundations for imperial governance, while Ashoka's policies gave particular prominence to ethical conduct and welfare. His legacy remains important for understanding ancient Indian political thought and the historical development of public welfare as a responsibility of the state.

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