



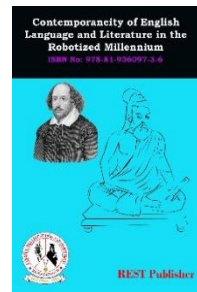
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The Maurya Empire: Administration and Ashoka's Dhamma: A Review

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Abstract: *The Mauryan Empire marks a landmark phase in the political and administrative history of ancient India. It represented the rise of the first large-scale centralized state in the Indian subcontinent. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya in the late 4th century BCE, this empire established a highly organized administrative system based on the principles outlined in Kautilya's Arthashastra. This system combined strong central authority with an efficient bureaucratic structure that extended from the imperial capital down to the provincial, district, and village levels. The Mauryan state regulated revenue, justice, military organization, trade, and public works through specialized officials and rigorous oversight, supported by an extensive espionage network. A significant transformation occurred under Emperor Ashoka. His reign introduced a moral dimension to governance through the principle of Dhamma. Ashoka's Dhamma was not a religious doctrine but rather an ethical framework emphasizing non-violence, tolerance, compassion, and social responsibility. These principles were propagated through inscriptions and implemented administratively through officials such as the Dhamma-Mahamatras. This integration of ethical values with state administration reshaped governance, softened judicial practices, promoted social welfare, and fostered religious harmony. Overall, the Mauryan administrative efficiency and Ashoka's moral governance illustrate a unique system of rule that balanced political power with ethical responsibility, leaving a lasting legacy in Indian and world history.*

Key Words: *The Mauryan Empire, centralized administration, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Ashoka's Dhamma, ethical governance, ancient Indian political system.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mauryan Empire marked a decisive turning point in the political, administrative, and moral history of ancient India. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya in the late fourth century BCE, it was the first empire to bring a vast portion of the Indian subcontinent under a single, centralized authority. Spanning from Afghanistan in the northwest to Bengal in the east, and extending into the heart of the Deccan plateau, the Mauryan Empire required an exceptionally strong and well-organized administrative system. The success and longevity of the empire depended not merely on military victories, but also on efficient governance, a disciplined bureaucracy, economic regulation, and, later under Ashoka, a profound moral vision of rulership. [1] The Mauryan administration stands as an early example of one of the most centralized and bureaucratic state systems in world history. Guided by the political principles laid down by Kautilya in the Arthashastra, the Mauryan rulers established a system in which power flowed from the emperor at the center down to the provincial, district, and village levels. The king was at the apex of the administration, assisted by ministers, officials, and an extensive network of spies. The administration was systematized, regulated, and monitored through strict laws, regular inspections, and continuous surveillance. This administrative efficiency enabled the Marians to maintain control over a large and culturally diverse population, ensuring political stability, economic prosperity, and effective law enforcement. [2] The empire was divided into provinces ruled by princes or trusted officials, who were supported by district and village officials. Revenue administration, judicial functions, military organization, city

management, and public works projects were all placed under specialized departments. The state maintained direct control over key economic resources such as land, mines, forests, and trade routes. This centralization ensured uniformity in administration and reduced the risk of regional fragmentation. At the same time, limited autonomy was granted to local institutions, particularly at the village level, which helped integrate imperial authority with local social structures. [3] During Ashoka's reign, a significant transformation occurred in the Mauryan administration. His rule was a unique blend of political authority and moral responsibility. The Kalinga War proved to be a turning point in Ashoka's life, leading him to abandon aggressive expansionism and embrace a system of moral governance known as Dhamma. Unlike conventional religious doctrines, Ashoka's Dhamma was not tied to any specific religion. It was a practical ethical code aimed at fostering social harmony, compassion, tolerance, and respect among the diverse communities within the empire. Ashoka's Dhamma emphasized values such as non-violence, respect for elders, kindness towards servants and slaves, religious tolerance, and concern for all living beings. These principles were communicated to the public through inscriptions carved on rocks and pillars throughout the empire. By using local languages and erecting edicts in public places, Ashoka ensured that his moral message reached people at all levels of society. [4] Thus, Dhamma became a tool of governance; it shaped the conduct of the people and redefined the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The influence of Dharma permeated deeply into the administration. Ashoka appointed special officers called Dharma Mahamatras to propagate moral values, protect vulnerable groups, and monitor the ethical conduct of officials. Judicial procedures were softened, punishments were humanized, and greater emphasis was placed on justice, fairness, and compassion. The state also assumed responsibility for public welfare by building hospitals, wells, roads, and rest houses, and by protecting animals. Governance was no longer based solely on the fear of punishment but on moral instruction and ethical leadership. Socially, Ashoka's Dharma played a crucial role in reducing religious conflicts and promoting coexistence in a pluralistic society. By discouraging ritualistic violence and promoting mutual respect, Dharma strengthened social cohesion and stability. It also enhanced the legitimacy of the Mauryan state by portraying the ruler as a father figure concerned with the moral and material well-being of his subjects. This integration of ethics with state administration was unprecedented, giving the Mauryan Empire a unique place in world history.[5]

2. CENTRALIZED ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE MAURYA EMPIRE



FIGURE 1. Centralized Administrative Structure of the Maurya Empire

The Mauryan Empire represents the first large-scale experiment in centralized administration in ancient India. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya in the late 4th century BCE, this empire spanned a vast territory, necessitating a strong and efficient administrative system. The Mauryan state is generally described as highly centralized, with power concentrated in the hands of the emperor and exercised through a well-organized bureaucratic structure. Literary sources such as Kautilya's Arthashastra, along with inscriptions and accounts from foreign visitors, provide valuable insights into this centralized system. [6] At the apex of the administrative structure was the emperor, who was the supreme authority in matters of governance, justice, military affairs, and revenue. The king was not merely a ceremonial ruler but an active administrator responsible for maintaining law and order and ensuring the welfare of the state. He was assisted by a council of ministers called the Mantri Parishad. This council comprised experienced officials such as Amartya's (high-ranking officials), Samhita (chief revenue officer), Sannidhata (treasury officer), and Senapati (commander-in-chief). While the ministers advised the king, the final decision-making authority rested with

him, reflecting the centralized nature of Mauryan rule. [7] To facilitate administration, the empire was divided regionally into provinces. Each province was governed by royal princes (Kumaras) or governors directly appointed by the central authority. These provincial governors were accountable to the emperor and had limited autonomy, ensuring that power remained centralized. The provinces were further divided into districts, cities, and villages, creating a hierarchical administrative structure. At the village level, officials such as *gracias* (village headmen) acted as agents of the government, maintaining order and collecting revenue. This administrative chain ensured that imperial authority extended from the capital down to the grassroots level. [8] One of the most distinctive features of Mauryan administration was its elaborate system of surveillance and control. As described in the *Arthashastra*, the state maintained a highly sophisticated espionage network. Spies were used to monitor officials, military officers, and even members of the royal family. This constant surveillance minimized corruption and rebellion, strengthening centralized control. The bureaucracy operated under strict discipline, with regular audits and severe punishments for misconduct. Revenue administration was another pillar of centralization in the Mauryan Empire. Land revenue was the primary source of income for the state, supplemented by taxes on trade, crafts, and customs duties. Revenue officials were appointed centrally, and tax collection was regulated by detailed rules. The state also controlled key economic activities such as mining, forests, and irrigation, further strengthening its financial base. [9]

3. ROLE OF OFFICIALS AND SPY SYSTEM IN MAURYAN ADMINISTRATION



FIGURE 2. Role of Officials and Spy System in Mauryan Administration

The efficiency and longevity of the Mauryan Empire were largely a result of its well-organized administrative system and an extensive intelligence network. The Mauryan rulers, particularly Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, governed a vast empire that required rigorous oversight, discipline, and coordination. This was achieved through a hierarchical system of officials and a highly sophisticated espionage network. Both operated under the principles outlined in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and are corroborated by inscriptions and accounts from foreigners [10]. Mauryan officials were appointed based on merit, loyalty, and efficiency. At the central level, high-ranking officials called *Amatyas* assisted the king in administration. These officials headed various departments such as revenue, treasury, agriculture, trade, mines, forests, irrigation, and defense. Each department had clearly defined duties and operated under strict regulations. Officials were paid regularly and subjected to continuous scrutiny to prevent corruption. Kautilya emphasized that even minor negligence by officials could weaken the state, therefore discipline and accountability were strictly enforced. At the provincial and local levels, governors, district officers, and village heads implemented the policies of the central government. Provincial governors were directly accountable to the king and had limited autonomy, ensuring that real power remained centralized. [11] Local officials, such as *Gramikas*, acted as intermediaries between the government and the people, overseeing law and order, revenue collection, and public works. Thus, the officials formed a tight administrative chain connecting the emperor to the smallest village unit. One of the most important features of the Mauryan administration was its extensive espionage system. Kautilya believed that espionage was essential for maintaining political stability and administrative efficiency. Spies, called *Guptapurushas*, were employed in large numbers and operated secretly throughout the empire. They belonged to

various categories, including household spies, wandering ascetics, merchants, artisans, and female spies. Their primary task was to gather information on the conduct of officials, the loyalty of citizens, the activities of enemies, and potential rebellions.[12] This espionage system acted as a constant check on officials, ensuring integrity in the administration. The spies reported directly to the king, which enabled him to take swift action against corrupt or disloyal officials. This surveillance system minimized administrative misconduct and strengthened centralized control. The spy network was also used for diplomatic purposes, military intelligence, and internal security. By gathering accurate and timely information, the Mauryan state was able to anticipate threats and respond effectively. In addition to surveillance, spies played a crucial role in gauging public opinion and assessing the success of royal policies. This helped the rulers understand social conditions and maintain order. Ashoka, despite his more benevolent approach, retained this espionage system to ensure moral order and administrative efficiency within the empire.[13]

4. PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE MAURYS



FIGURE 3. Provincial and Local Administration under the Mauryas

The Mauryan Empire established an efficient provincial and local administrative system to govern its vast and diverse territory. While political power was highly centralized at the imperial level, effective governance depended on a well-organized administrative structure at the provincial, district, and village levels. This system, shaped by the principles outlined in Kautilya's Arthashastra and implemented by rulers like Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, ensured both control and administrative efficiency across the empire [14]. The empire was divided into large administrative divisions called provinces. Important provinces included Taxila in the northwest, Ujjain in the west, Tosali in the east, and Suvarnagiri in the south. Each province was governed by a prince (Kumara) or a trusted high-ranking official appointed by the emperor. These governors represented the authority of the central government and were responsible for maintaining law and order, collecting revenue, and implementing imperial policies. While provincial governors enjoyed a degree of autonomy in day-to-day administration, they were accountable to the central authority, which ensured that the empire remained politically unified [15]. The provinces were further subdivided into districts, which served as a crucial link between the central government and the local communities. District administration was handled by officials such as the Rajukas and Yuktas. The Rajukas were responsible for judicial functions, land surveying, and revenue assessment, while the Yuktas oversaw financial administration and maintained records. These officials played a vital role in ensuring uniform administration throughout the empire, particularly in matters of taxation and justice. Their regular surveys and reporting mechanisms helped the central government maintain control over distant regions

[16]. At the lowest level of administration was the village, which served as the basic unit of governance and economic life. Villages enjoyed a degree of autonomy under village headmen (Gramikas) and councils of elders. These local officials handled minor disputes, oversaw agricultural activities, and ensured the collection of taxes. However, village administration was closely integrated with the state through revenue obligations and judicial oversight. This balance between local autonomy and state control allowed the Mauryan administration to function efficiently without placing an excessive burden on the central bureaucracy [17].

5. ASHOKA'S DHAMMA: ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND MORAL GOVERNANCE

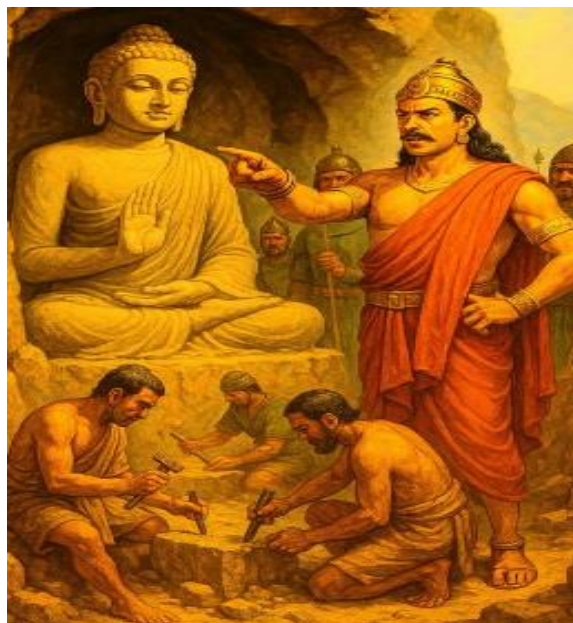


FIGURE 4. Ashoka's Dhamma: Ethical Principles and Moral Governance

Ashoka's policy of Dhamma stands as one of the earliest and most significant attempts in world history to base imperial rule not merely on brute force, but on ethical and moral principles. Following the devastating Kalinga War, Emperor Ashoka underwent a profound transformation that reshaped the very nature of Mauryan rule. As reflected in his edicts, Dhamma was not merely a personal religious belief, but a carefully formulated moral code intended to guide both rulers and subjects towards social harmony, justice, and compassion [18]. The ethical foundation of Ashoka's Dhamma emphasized values such as non-violence, tolerance towards all religious sects, respect for elders, kindness towards servants and slaves, and compassion for all living beings. These principles were deliberately framed in simple and universal terms, making them understandable to people of diverse religions and cultures across the vast Mauryan Empire. Ashoka avoided propagating Buddhism as a sectarian doctrine in his public pronouncements; instead, he presented Dhamma as a shared ethical framework that could unite Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jain, Ajivika, and other communities under a common moral code [19]. Ashoka's morally-based governance was primarily disseminated through his rock edicts and pillar edicts, which served as instruments for ethical instruction and administrative communication. Written in local languages and placed throughout the empire, these inscriptions conveyed messages of moral self-discipline, social responsibility, and humane governance. These inscriptions repeatedly emphasize that true religious practice lies not in rituals, but in ethical conduct such as honesty, generosity, and self-control. In this way, Dhamma functioned as a public moral code that sought to transform the behavior of individuals and officials. A key administrative innovation associated with Dhamma was the appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras. These were special officers tasked with propagating ethical values and ensuring the welfare of various social groups, including prisoners, women, and forest-dwelling tribes [20]. These officers worked alongside the existing bureaucratic structure, thereby extending the reach of morally-based governance to provincial and local administration. Through them, Ashoka sought to integrate ethical oversight into the machinery of the state, thereby humanizing the power of the empire and mitigating oppression by local authorities. Ashoka's reign also reflected a strong commitment to social

welfare. The establishment of medical facilities for humans and animals, the construction of wells, roads, and rest houses, and the protection of wildlife are mentioned in his inscriptions. These welfare measures were not merely acts of charity; they were expressions of a moral governance in which the ruler was seen as a guardian responsible for the physical and moral well-being of his subjects. This approach strengthened the legitimacy of the empire by presenting the state not as a coercive force, but as a benevolent and ethically-minded institution [21].

6. IMPACT OF ASHOKA'S DHAMMA ON ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIETY

Ashoka's policy of Dhamma had a profound and lasting impact on both the administrative structure and social life of the Mauryan Empire. Unlike previous rulers who relied primarily on military power and coercion, Ashoka sought to transform governance by embedding ethical values into state policy. Dhamma served as a moral framework that reshaped the relationship between the ruler, officials, and citizens, thereby redefining the nature of imperial administration and social order [22]. In administration, Dhamma introduced a significant shift from punitive governance to moral regulation. Ashoka emphasized humane administration, urging officials to act with compassion, fairness, and patience. His edicts repeatedly instruct governors and judges to avoid harsh punishments and ensure justice tempered with mercy. This moralization of administration reduced the arbitrary exercise of power by officials and strengthened ethical accountability. The creation of the Dhamma-Mahamatras institutionalized this ethical oversight, ensuring that administrative authority was exercised according to moral principles rather than mere legal authority [23]. Ashoka's Dhamma, while humanizing administration, also strengthened central control. By issuing edicts throughout the empire, the emperor communicated directly with his subjects, bypassing local elites when necessary. This not only improved administrative transparency but also projected the image of a morally responsible ruler concerned with the welfare of the people. The emphasis on ethical conduct among officials reduced corruption and abuse, thereby increasing administrative efficiency and public trust in state institutions. Consequently, governance was viewed not as an instrument of domination but as a moral responsibility of the state [24]. Socially, Dhamma played a crucial role in fostering harmony within a diverse empire, both culturally and religiously. Ashoka's emphasis on religious tolerance helped mitigate religious conflicts and fostered peaceful coexistence among Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jain, and other communities. By discouraging ritual violence and animal sacrifices, Dhamma promoted compassion and respect for life. These principles reshaped social values and norms, influencing daily conduct and interpersonal relationships throughout the empire. Dhamma also contributed to social welfare and inclusion. Ashoka's policies emphasized care for prisoners, slaves, servants, women, and forest tribes, integrating marginalized groups into the state's moral framework. Welfare initiatives such as medical facilities, rest houses, wells, and roads were not merely administrative projects but expressions of ethical governance. These efforts enhanced social stability and strengthened loyalty to the state, reinforcing the legitimacy of Mauryan rule through benevolence rather than coercion [25].

7. CONCLUSION

The Mauryan Empire stands as a pioneering example of efficient imperial governance in ancient India. It combined administrative sophistication with political centralization. Through a structured hierarchical system of officials, provinces, districts, and villages, the Mauryan rulers ensured uniform administration across a vast and diverse territory. The principles outlined in Kautilya's Arthashastra provided a theoretical foundation for this system, emphasizing discipline, efficiency, accountability, and state control over key economic and administrative functions. The extensive use of officials and spies strengthened central authority, minimized corruption, and maintained internal stability, allowing the empire to function as a cohesive political unit. Ashoka's reign marked a significant shift from purely power-based rule by introducing ethical values into state administration through the policy of Dhamma. His emphasis on moral conduct, tolerance, non-violence, and compassion transformed the nature of kingship and governance. By integrating Dhamma into administrative practice through edicts, welfare measures, and the appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras, Ashoka redefined the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Governance became not merely a matter of political dominance but a moral responsibility aimed at social harmony. The impact of Ashoka's Dhamma extended beyond administration into society, fostering religious harmony, social welfare, and ethical awareness among the people. This confluence of administrative efficiency and moral governance secured the Mauryan Empire a unique place in history. In short, the Mauryan model demonstrates that political stability and efficient governance can be

strengthened when power is balanced with ethical responsibility. The legacy of Mauryan administration and Ashoka's Dhamma continue to offer valuable insights into leadership, governance, and the pursuit of social justice.

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