

Empires of India

India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world, with a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Today, we'll learn about two ancient kingdoms that played an instrumental role in shaping the country into what it is today: the Maurya and Gupta empires.

In 327 BCE, Alexander the Great, ruler of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedonia, attempted to conquer the Indian subcontinent. He made it as far as the northwest region of Punjab, but when his own soldiers refused to continue on, he was forced to abandon the campaign. Just four years later, Alexander died, leaving a major power vacuum in the area. It was the perfect opportunity for a man like Chandragupta Maurya to consolidate power.

As you may have guessed from his name, Chandragupta Maurya was the first leader of the Maurya Empire. Under his rule, the fragmented communities of northern and central India were united into a single state, with a common currency, local governance structures, and a centralized tax collection system. The relative stability of the Maurya Empire helped trade networks flourish, with the kingdom exporting goods like silk, spices, and textiles. But not everything was perfect. Toward the end of Chandragupta's reign, his spiritual adviser predicted that the kingdom would be struck by famine. When the prophecy came true, Chandragupta turned to Jainism, a religion whose core tenets include nonviolence, asceticism, and rebirth. He eventually died after a long period of fasting.

This wasn't the end of the empire, however. In 268 BCE, the most famous Mauryan king, Ashoka, assumed the throne. The grandson of Chandragupta, Ashoka was renowned for his deadly conquests—that is, until a particularly brutal war caused him to renounce killing. He, too, turned to religion, this time Buddhism. For the rest of his reign, Ashoka dedicated himself to promoting Buddhist thought. He commissioned the construction of pillars inscribed with the teachings of the Buddha, many of which are still standing today. After Ashoka's death in 232 BCE, the Maurya Empire was unable to recover. Local rulers conquered the empire's territory, creating dynasties from which the leaders of the future Gupta Empire would later emerge.

Fast forward a few centuries, to 320 CE. Through military prowess, strategic marriages, and political alliances, another man named Chandragupta managed to turn a small family kingdom into a powerful domain. Like the Mauryans, the Gupta kings created a centralized government. They constructed an extensive network of roads, which made it much easier for merchants to transport their goods. The Gupta kings also oversaw unprecedented artistic and scientific development—from explaining the concept of infinity to the writing of the Mahabharata, the longest epic poem ever written.

In the 400s, the peace and prosperity that the Gupta Empire had long enjoyed began to dissipate. Unable to withstand repeated invasions by groups from Central Asia, the empire was eventually broken down into many smaller kingdoms. It wasn't until the 16th century that another empire would take control of the Indian subcontinent.

Day-to-day life in both the Maurya and Gupta empires was heavily influenced by a strict Hindu class structure known as caste. An individual's place in the hierarchy was inherited and unchangeable, with their caste determining the jobs they could hold, the people they could marry, and whether they could attend school or own land. At the top were the Brahmin, who made up the majority of political and religious leaders. Below them were the Kshatriya, or warriors. Business owners, farmers, and craftspeople made up the next caste, called the Vaishya, and the caste below them, the Sudra, were mostly servants and farmhands. At the very bottom were the Dalit, also known as "the untouchables." Existing outside of the formal caste system, the Dalit held the worst jobs in society and were expected to have no contact with anyone above them. Though discrimination based on caste has since been outlawed in India, its legacy persists through social and economic inequality.

Today, it's been more than 1,500 years since these mighty ancient kingdoms ruled the Indian subcontinent. Still, the cultural, economic, and religious developments that occurred under the Maurya and Gupta empires continue to shape the nation to this day.