
Historiography: The Mauryan And Gupta Periods

History as an academic field and historiography in popular imaginations have both been shaped by the causes and effects of human interactions in the past and have deeply influenced current social identities in the form of entrenched narratives transmitted across space and time.

This is evident in the case of South Asian history between 600 BCE and 600 CE and its consequent study and speculation that have resulted in the glorification of the Mauryan Period (322-187 BCE) and Gupta Period (c.270 - 543 CE) as 'heights' of early Indian civilisation.

This essay aims to provide an analysis of the precise features and characteristics that define Mauryan and Gupta periods as distinct from and superior to other phases of early Indian history, which are observed through the identification of similarities between the two ages in correlation to the various political circumstances that determined their imagery in broad historical narrative.

Firstly, both kingdoms had been centralised in the urban landscape of Magadha and were extended in other directions through subsequent annexations and conquests. The similarity in geographical extent of the two empires is relevant to their status as 'heights' of civilisation of that period because they both had a dominant monarchical set up focused on an urban axis at Magadha, especially at the royal capital of Pataliputra. Pataliputra is said to have had a population of around 150,000 to 400,000 people under the rule of Mauryan emperor Ashoka (Preston, 2009.) The prospect of a city-scape founded upon concentrations of power and wealth was exciting to later historians, as this phase mirrors the Western model of development which was a dominant ideology in the sub-continent during colonial times.

Secondly, both the Mauryan and Gupta monarchs had actively sought to exemplify their legitimacy in conquering and ruling territory. This is reflected in later narratives as being 'justified and authentic' rule in contrast to the subsequent rule by Mughal dynasties and colonisation which are seen as unjust and illegitimate.

The legendary conquest of Magadha by Chandragupta Maurya in 317 BCE (Bhargava, 2014) , and the Puranic bestowment of Janapadas in the Gangetic delta, including Magadha (Mookerji, 1969) to rulers of the Gupta dynasty exemplify the fact that the concentration of political power was largely linked to narratives of legitimacy to rule. In the case of Chandragupta Maurya, the dominant visualisation is that of monarchical prowess in the form of military superiority in combination with intellectual tact derived from his famed mentor and chief advisor, Chanakya (Sihag, 2007) resulting in the successful defeat of the Nandas. The case of Chandragupta I of the Gupta empire shows a narrative of authority based on existing scriptural 'evidence', as well as a culture modelled on earlier Mauryan emphasis on legitimacy through superiority conferred by spiritual derivation, as seen in the case of Ashoka's title of 'Piyadassi', meaning 'Beloved by the Gods'.

Thirdly, there are visible factors of economic growth observed in the Mauryan and Gupta periods that are often viewed as defining parameters of social progress in the widely prevalent Western model of development. This reliance upon the fundamentally Eurocentric conception of development reflects colonial dominance in Indian historiography. Regardless of such bias, the

broad nationalist narrative had based its glorification of these periods on the fact that strides towards economic prosperity had occurred without the involvement of colonialism based on the 'White Man's Burden'.

These claims are supported by the fact that the Mauryan period had seen a rise in agricultural productivity, and combined with the strengthened internal peace and commercial networks, led to a staggering increase in the bulk of trade. The Arthashastra provides accounts of complex state structures intended to regulate and stabilise trade relations across regions. Such growth is seen to have been possible because of Chandragupta Maurya's successful political unification of the vast South Asian territory. (Bhargava, 2014)

Other aspects of 'development' observed in the Mauryan and Gupta periods include the setting up of complex administrative systems. For instance, the Mauryan Empire consisted of centralised authority in Magadha, which controlled provinces based on geographical division into Taxila, Ujjain, Suvarnagiri and Tosali; as well as a comprehensive ideology of the 'Rule of Law'. Meanwhile, the idea of 'protectorates' inbuilt in the Mauryan political system of structural federalism and simultaneous strengthening of Imperial power through creation of extensive trade networks and commerce are features of Colonial schools of thought that created a substantive impression of these 'civilisations' as being more 'Medieval' than 'Ancient'. This had significant implications for South Asian historiography, as it blurred the previously distinct epochs that formed the tripartite distinction between a 'Hindu-Buddhist' Ancient age, 'Muslim' Medieval age, and a 'modern age'.

In the case of the Gupta empire, the terms of "Rashtra" and "Rajya" in the administrative context has trickled down over time and are still in relevant use. For instance, the term "Hindu Rashtra" has been used extensively by members of the "Rashtriya SwayamSevak Sangh" in their claim for religious nationalism, and the upper house of the bicameral parliamentary system in India is called the "Rajya Sabha" or "Council of States".

Fourthly, the ideological, philosophical and religious developments of the Mauryan and Gupta periods are heavily emphasised upon in the works of historians involved in the Indian movement for Independence, often in the tones of nostalgic reminiscence and romanticised pride in one's historical past. The philological mechanism that supports this idea is articulated Romila Thapar's preface to "India: Historical beginnings and concept of the Aryan" as follows -

" However, as happens in the interpretation of the past in periods of intense nationalism, there are also attempts to interpret the past in a manner that assists in supporting ideologies of identity in present times."

Thus, the depiction of Mauryan and Gupta periods as "Golden" epochs in the period of nationalist mobilisation in India can be seen as an attempt to define India's past in ways that combat Western notions of 'Oriental Despotism' and colonial bias.

The Mauryan period under the rule of Ashoka witnessed a distinct Secular shift, away from stringent impositions of Vedic Brahminism in the regions. The legacy of Ashoka's supposed spiritual transformation and conversion to Buddhism, enticed by the idea of non-violence, after the gruesome battle for Kalinga is a tale that was often used as rhetoric in the characterisation and development of the idea of "Ahimsa", ie, non-violence in the Indian Nationalist Movement. It is also seen in the seventh pillar edict of Ashoka that there existed four primary religious

groups in his empire - the Buddhist Sangha, the Brahmanas, the Nirgranthas (followers of Jainism) and the Ajivikas. (Bhargava, 2014). This ethos of secularism had resonated with Western historians, influenced by the Enlightenment movement.

The historian A.K Narain explains that Gupta monarchs were primarily Vaishnavites who were tolerant, and in many cases, supportive of heterodox religious movements outside the Hindu religious doctrines. This is also corroborated by the historian Radhamukund Mookerji in his book, "The Gupta Empire".

Fifthly, there is an observed similarity between the Mauryan and Gupta periods in that they were both preceded and succeeded by phases termed as 'Dark Ages', characterised by apparent stagnation in political and economic development, dismantled central power structures and a return to 'rural' ways of life in contrast to the highly urban nature of administration in the respective kingdoms. These circumstances may have created a high contrast between the period in which these Kingdoms existed and the periods of time surrounding them, thus creating space for bias in favour of exaggeration of the eminence of Mauryan and Gupta periods.

This idea is analysed by the historian Daud Ali as follows -

"Among these was a tendency to construct, drawing on earlier Orientalist scholarship, a 'glorious' age which acted as an originary moment in historical narratives. While there were differences among writers as to what empire or sub-period should hold this honour (typically the Mauryan or Gupta empires), an inevitable corollary of this idea required a subsequent period of political, economic or cultural decline."

There existed numerous tribal republics around the northern periphery of the Mauryan kingdom, predominantly in the hilly regions. They are viewed as having had a more primitive form of social organisation as compared to that of the later Mauryan empire. The period between the decline of Mauryan rule and the beginning of Gupta ascent to central power has been regarded in the majority of related historiography, as a period of isolated rural life marked in almost binary contrast to the active urban and cosmopolitan nature of life under the Mauryan rule. The Gupta period, in all its glory, had begun its decline from power as early as c.530 CE. This decline culminated in the 'Dark Ages' - a period of inactivity that lost all momentum that the rapid political and economic developments that the previous period had witnessed. The period immediately following the decline of the Gupta dynasty is regarded as a grey area, marking the slow transition between the 'Ancient' and 'Medieval'.

Finally, there is a correlation between the visions of grandeur and wealth that were admired by Western historians that were also observed in the Mauryan and Gupta periods. For instance, the glorification of 'Gupta Classical pattern' (Stein, 2008) is in direct relation to the rise of Neoclassicism in cultural, intellectual and aesthetic cognition, as part of the broader Enlightenment movement that deeply influenced Western scholars of South Asian history. The further intellectual, philosophical and academic developments by scholars such as the poet Kalidasa and scientist Aryabhatta in the Gupta period are greatly renowned.

In conclusion the comprehension of the Mauryan and Gupta periods as heights of early Indian civilisation in both Western and Indian historiography is based upon the aspects of 'modernisation' in the political, economic and religious spheres that are common to both empires. These include geographical extent, legacies of legitimacy, economic growth,

philosophical and ideological innovation, contrast with preceding and subsequent periods and correlation to Western cultural norms such as Neoclassicism.

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