

Decline of Mauryan Empire : A Historical Debate

Satyajeet Kumar

M.A. History, Hindu College, Delhi University

The study of Mauryan historiography begins with the imperialist administrator like James Mill and V.A. Smith. They wrote the history of India to serve the interest of British imperialism. In response to the imperialist school, the extremist school of Bankim, Tilak, Dayanand Saraswati, savarkar and K.P. Jayaswal asserted the superiority of Hindu over western culture. The other response from the Indian side was from the Rationalist school of Rajendra Lal Mitra. R.C. Dutt, R.G. Bhandarkar, H.C. Raychaudhury and those who were not intoxicated by the nationalist sentiments, but viewed events more objectively in order to rectify the errors committed by Europeans in respect of Indian history.

The Marxist school started with D.D. Kosambi. In Kosambi's views the history of society, economy and culture was an integral part of the development of the forces and relation of production which can provide a rational basis for periodisation. Later on this tradition was enriched by historians like Romila Thapar, Ram Sharan Sharma and D.N. Jha.

The main historians who wrote about the Mauryas in particular in the pre independence era include the name of V.A.Smith, D.R. Bhandarkar, R.K Mukharjee and H.C. Raychaudhury. In post independence India the main writers on Mauryan history include the name of R.C. Majumdar, A.L. Basham, S. Chattopadhyaya, Budhha Prakash, D.D. Kosambi, Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma, D.N. Jha.

Since the Mauryan empire was the first full fledged sub continental empire, all its aspects have attracted scholarly attention, including the decline. This empire which had been reared by successive was culminating in the conquest of Kalinga, began to disintegrate after the exist of Ashoka in 232 B.C. What brought the disintegration of the mauryan empire is a very complicated question and it can not be explained by any single factor. The first three rulers i.e., Chandragupta Maurya, bindusara and Ashoka, covered the Maximum time period while rest of their successors were perhaps not capable of holding the empire in its entirety because of its vastness.

Generally there are six different views on the decline of Mauryan empire, we will discuss in this article.

- (A) Hariprasad shastri – Religious policy
- (B) H.C. Roychaudhary – Ashoka's pacifist policy
- (C) D.D. Kosambi – Economic problem.
- (D) D.N. Jha – Weak successors
- (E) R.S. Sharma – Administrative, social and economic problem
- (F) Romila Thapar – Loyalty concept, lack of representative institution.

Hariprasad Shastri blames Ashoka for instigating the brahmanical revolution against the forceful anti-brahman policy of Dhamma that resulted into pushyamitra sunga's coup. The ban over animal sacrifice must have also had annoyed the Brahmans whose livelihood was based on performing

sacrifices. However according to Upinder Singh, Shastri has wrongly interpreted the ashokan edicts. In Ashokan edict 'Major edict No. 4' the term 'Dhammaghosa' and 'Bherighosa' have been generally interpreted to mean conquest by dharma rather than conquest by force. The conquest implied here, as shown in sequence, was not of religion but of peoples, and the instrument viz, Dhamma was not Buddhism but a sort of 'code of civilized conduct'. His attempt was to bring the semi barbaric, tribes, tribal people in the for flung boundaries of the empire in the mainstream civilized society. This was to be done through persuasion rather than repression. Thus his theory is not true in its entirety. Ashoka in his inscription repeatedly make a plea to the people for equal respect to brahman sharmans.

H.C. Ray chaudhuri has argued that Ashoka Shuned the policy of 'Iron and Blood' which resulted in the decline of military strength. He says "from the time of Bimbisara to Kalinga was the history of India was the story of the expansion of Magadha from a tiny state in South Bihar to a gigantic empire extending from the foot of Hindukush to the boarder of the Tamil country. After the Kaling was ensued a period of stagnation at the end of which the process is reversed. The empire gradually dwindled down in extent till it sank to the position from which Bimbisara and his successors had raised it."

The explanation focuses on Ashoka's policy of ahimsa or non violence. The harmful effect of this policy is provinces who had become oppressive and ought to have been controlled, citing example from Buddhist stories in the Divyavadana, this argument goes on to show that revolts in the provinces had been taking place.. The above image of Ashoka is far from correct. Just as the theory of Anti-Brahmanical activity under Ashoka's reign has been discounted as a factor for Mauryan decline, so also the impression of an over pacifist Ashoka, lacking in vigour and determination to rule has to be discarded. It is true that Ashoka believed in non-violence as vital to Dhamma. There was however, no extreme stand on this issue. A dislike for killing of animals for food and sacrifice did not in fact terminate the policy of palace to continue killing of animals for food, though on a reduced scale. Also in governance and criminal justice. death penalty should have been done away with but this was not so. Further, we have no evidence of the army having been demobilized, nor, even a hint in the inscriptions to such a policy being intended. The evidence one has is that of only one campaign conducted against Kalinga which had ended in a ruthless defeat of the latter. Had Ashoka been such a pacifist he should have reinstated Kalinga as a independent kingdom but, as a practical ruler he maintained the supremacy of Magadha over it. There are innumerable other indication of Ashoka assertion of his control over the different people of his empire, particularly his warning to the

tribes. He had made it very clear that the misconduct of the tribes living within his empire would be tolerated upto a point only and not beyond that. All these steps were taken by Ashoka to see that the empire was kept secure.

Thus, to conclude, the policy of ahimsa in no way weakened the army and administrative machinery of the Mauryan empire. Pushyamitra Sunga was after all a general of the Mauryan army and even half a century after Ashoka he is said to have prevented the Greeks from entering Madhyadesha. According to Romila Thapar even an entire generation of pacifism cannot weaken an empire and lead to its disintegration, battles and territorial acquisition are not alone responsible for the creation and destruction of empires. The cause must be sought in other direction as well".

D.D. Kosambi, the author of 'Introduction to the study of Indian history' and 'The culture and civilisation of Ancient India in historical outline' accepted the Marxist formulations of Asiatic mode of production to explain Mauryan history. According to Kosambi the Mauryan government flourished on a powerful cash economy and a vast salaried bureaucracy including a police system for coercion. But Ashoka must have softened the coercive power of the Mauryan state by introducing serious changes in the administration. His argument is broadly based on two themes, one that the state took excessive measures to increase the taxes on a variety of things and second, that the punch-marked coins of this period show evidence of debasement of currency.

Some of Kosambi's views which have now generally been accepted as crucial factors in bringing about major changes in the Magadhan empire and thereby its ultimate decline are briefly as follows – first, it is suggested that gradually the state monopoly of metals was being lost. The demands on iron, so crucial for the expanding agrarian economy, could no longer be met by Magadh alone. In fact, there were attempts to locate and develop new sources of it in the Deccan. Though such pockets of iron ore were found in Andhra and Karnataka, the Magadh state found it a costly operation to tap these pockets of the many problems they faced in this connection was also the protection of the mining areas from intrusion by the local chiefs.

Secondly, the other points which are stressed are that expansion in cultivation, extensive use of forest wood and deforestation in general may have led to floods and famine. There is in fact evidence of a big famine in north Bengal in the Mauryan period. Thus many factors may have combined to bring down drastically the amount of the state revenue. In year of famine, the state was expected to provide relief on a substantial scale.

The decreasing silver content of the punch marked coins attributed to the later Mauryan rulers indicate that debasement had actually taken place to meet the need of a depleted treasury. The burden of expenditure had also increased. This can be seen in the large amount of money spent under Ashoka for public works. Also his tours and those of his officials meant using up the surplus wherever it was available.

According to Romila Thapar the debasement of coins need not necessarily have meant a pressure on the general economy. In fact it is difficult to say precisely when and where the debasement of coinage took place.

R.S. Sharma deals with the administrative social and economic problems of ancient India and particularly the Mauryan era in his aspects of political ideas and institutions in

ancient India, Shudras in ancient India, Perspectives in social and economic History of early India and his numerous research papers. He conceptualised the rise of Magadha as a natural outcome of the expansion of material culture in the Gangetic plains. According to Sharma a distinguishing feature of the Mauryan economy was the state control of agriculture, industry and trade and the levy of all varieties of taxes on the people.

He states that the certain basic material advantages which Magadha had, had become the cause of its expansion. Once the knowledge of the use of these elements of culture spread to central India, the Deccan and Kalinga as a result of the expansion of Mauryan empire the Gangetic basin lost its special advantage. Thus the regular use of iron tools and weapons in the peripheral provinces coincided with the decline and fall of Mauryan empire. Financial weakness has also been one of the cause of Mauryan decline.

The maintenance of a huge army and a vast bureaucratic setup needed a large amount of fund. R.S. Sharma has argued that, it seemed that Ashoka made large donation to the Buddhist monk which left the royal treasury empty. He further states that towards the end in order to meet expenses they were obliged to melt gold images.

Romila Thapar argues about the loyalty concept to be a cause of decline. According to her in a monarchical government the important bureaucratic officials were directly appointed by the ruler and so they happen to be loyal to him not the throne, but once the king changed loyalty was either realigned or officials were replaced. This system must have created confusion and anger among the officials and hence insufficiency in the governing, thus leading to revolts and decline.

Romila Thapar represents the newly emerging Marxist approach to ancient Indian historiography. Her famous study, 'Ashoka and the decline of the Mauryas' published from Oxford in 1961 raised Mauryan historiography to a new level. She attempts to place Ashoka in historical perspective against the background of the third century B.C.E. India and to distinguish as far as possible between Ashoka the man and Ashoka the monarch. Prof. Romila Thapar is of the view: "The machinery of the Mauryan administrative system was so centralized that an able ruler could use it both to his own advantage and that of his people to the same degree it could become harmful to both under a weak ruler who would lose its central control and allow forces of decay to disintegrate and wreck it. The weakening of the central control under the later Mauryas led automatically to a weakening of the administration. The division of the Mauryan empire after the death of Ashoka must have given further blow to the centralised Mauryan administration under the weak later Mauryan ruler, leading to the decline and disintegration of the Mauryan empire.

Upinder Singh argues that the Mauryan empire was so vast, diverse and difficult to hold together, let alone weld together. But to attribute its decline to the fact that the Mauryans were unable to restructure the economies of the core and peripheral areas, as Romila Thapar has argued, amounts to directing attention to the absence of strategies and interventions that are characteristics of Modern nation state.

Conclusion – There are different views of historians on decline of Mauryan empire so quickly after Ashoka. Not single cause are responsible for that. There have been few other explanations of the Mauryan decline such as absence of

Nationalism and lack of popular representative institutions etc. Which do not hold much importance as far as the causes of decline are concerned looking at the variety of causes shown for decline we can only try and take a general view that an empire survive on some mechanism such as administration,

military and ideology. When these mechanism start eroding due to various socio-politico economic circumstances, the empire decline and it happened similarly to Mauryan empire as well.

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