

### **Problems of Dealing with Sources of the Mauryan History**

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A major problem in using the Arthashastra as a source of history are the differences of opinion regarding its date and authorship.<sup>1</sup> The traditional view is that it is a work of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, written by Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta, who became Chandragupta Maurya's chief minister after helping him overthrow the Nandas. This view is supported by two verses in the text. Arthashastra 1.1.19 states that 'this work, easy to learn and understand, precise in doctrine, sense, and word, and free from wordiness, has been composed by Kautilya'. Verse 15.1.73 asserts that 'this shastra has been composed by him, who in resentment, quickly regenerated the shastra and the weapon and the earth that was under the control of the Nanda Kings'. Later works such as Kamandaka's Nitisara, Dandin's Dashakumaracharita, Vishakhadatta's Mudrarakshasa, and Bana Bhatta's Kadambari support the traditional view of the Arthashastra's age and authorship.

It has been pointed out that there is no reference to Kautilya in Patanjali's Mahabhashya (which mentions the Mauryas and the assembly of Chandragupta). Megasthenes, who we know was associated with Chandragupta's court, does not mention Kautilya in his Indica. But the Mahabhashya is a book on grammar and refers to historical personalities and events only incidentally, in order to illustrate grammatical rules. And Megasthenes' Indica survives only in fragments paraphrased in the writings of later authors.

The Arthashastra does not contain any references to the Mauryas, their empire, Chandragupta, or Pataliputra. This could be because it is a theoretical, not a descriptive work. In fact, almost all the objections to the traditional view of the age and authorship of the text can be countered by this one basic point. The Arthashastra is a treatise on statecraft for a king and discusses a potential, not an actual state.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhist chroniclers and long since been drawn to the personality of Asoka. A cycle of legends about this king- the Asokavadana-enjoyed popularity in India, Nepal, Tibet and other countries. The legends were included in the Divya-vadana<sup>3</sup> but they can also be regarded as independent writings.

In the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. the "Asokan cycle (this cycle is often called "A cycle on Asoka and Upagupta" since the tales are presented in form of conversations between Ashoka and Upagupta)" in Pali (Asoka sutta) reached Kausambi, a major centre of Buddhist culture. Then the Pali version reached Mathura, the centre of Bahmanical culture, and was rewritten in Sanskrit. Thus the

Asoka-sutta turned into the Asokavadana. The Pali text brought to Ceylon provided the basis for a number of legends of the southern "Asokan cycle", and the Asokavadana in the 1<sup>st</sup> century made its way from Mathura to North-West India and started the northern "Asokan cycle."

While acknowledging the importance of the Ceylonese chronicles for the study of Mauryan history, it should, however, be borne in mind that they were compiled over a very long period by many Buddhist monks who sometimes distorted the text or introduced their own "corrections."<sup>4</sup> This is directly indicated by the peculiarities of the language, grammar and style, the abundance of repetitions, lack of a uniform plan, etc.

The so-called Extended, or Cambodian Mahavamsa is particularly noteworthy.<sup>5</sup> Its text appeared much later than the Mahavamsa, which was not incorporated in Mahanama's Mahavamsa; this fact makes the text very interesting in some respects. Unfortunately, as has been justly noted by L. Perera, this text has not been duly used by researchers.

In comparison with the basic text, the extended version contains some new data on the Nanda and Mauryan periods: on the region of the Nandas, the rise of Chanakya, the origin of the Mauryas, the first regnal years of Chandragupta, Asoka's struggle for power, his stay at Ujjayini, his conversion to Buddhism, etc. Some of its information is very close to the data of the Mahavamsa-tika or is even identical with them, and apparently both works date back to common older sources.<sup>6</sup>

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Both the Buddhist and Jaina versions of Chanakya-Chandragupta-Katha apparently dated back to a Prakrt version, which originally took shape in Magadha, where the "Asokan cycle" also emerged. The 11<sup>th</sup> Century poets Somadeva and Ksemendra, creating the figures of Chandragupta and Chankya, were guided by a Prakrt writing of Gunadhya (Brhatkaha). It is conceivable that the playwright Visakhadatta (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) made use of one of the versions of Chanakya Chandragupta Katha when writing his play Mudraraksasa.

Mauryan history was reflected also in the Pali chronicles of Ceylon-Dipavamsa<sup>10</sup> and Mahavamsa, research has proved that the Dipavamsa was not written by one author; its different parts were composed at different times and some of them are very old. The Mahavamsa, also based on many local documents, was compiled somewhat later. The authorship of the Mahavamsa is attributed to the monk Mahanama.

As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C., Ceylon became an important centre of Buddhist culture. According to tradition, in 80 B.C. under king Vattagamani, there was recorded in the Island a Pali canon whose parts had been known there much earlier. It would be logical to presume that the Buddhist tradition born after the emergence of Buddhism in Ceylon was not interrupted. This tradition, which conditioned the spread of Buddhism in the Island with Asoka and his son Mahainda (Mahendra), was reflected in numerous sources (including the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa). Ceylonese Buddhist writings understandably gave much attention to Asoka, the events of the third Council in Pataliputra and to the sending out of Buddhist missions.<sup>11</sup>

Minor Rock Edicts – which are usually subdivided into Northern and Southern versions – are regarded by most scholars as the earliest known Asokan inscriptions and are dated from the 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> years after his coronation.<sup>12</sup>

The Rock Edicts group includes the so-called Kalinga edicts found in the territory of ancient Kalinga. Scholars believe that they were composed in the Mauryan king's eleventh regnal year<sup>12</sup>. The I-IV Major Rock inscriptions are dated from the 12<sup>th</sup> year, and the V-XIV from the 13<sup>th</sup> year after the coronation. So far there have been discovered 14 Major Rock Edicts, and they have reached us in several versions. The evidence of all these documents concerns the most varied aspects of the state and provincial administration, the foreign and domestic policies of the Mauryas, Asoka's religious policy, the principles of Dharma, etc.

The three Cave Inscriptions record the donations made to the sect of the Ajivikas. Two of them were engraved in Asoka's 13<sup>th</sup> regnal year, and one in the 20<sup>th</sup> regnal year. In the same year the Lumbini

inscription was engraved on a pillar. It records the King's pilgrimage to the birth-place of the Buddha. It is also of interest for the study of the taxation system. The Nigalisagar Pillar Inscription, which tells of the enlargement of the stupa in honour of the Buddha Konakamana, is apparently dated in the same year. The Major Pillar Edicts were engraved in the 25<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> year after Asoka's coronation. They provide data regarding the state administration, the functions of various officials, and the relationship between the king and members of different religious schools and sects. All in all, over 150 Asokan inscriptions have been found so far. This rich epigraphic collection provides scholars with extremely valuable material on various aspects of the state system of the Mauryan Empire, the nature of contemporary social structure, and the development of ideology and culture.

In comparison with Asoka's period, the history of the early Mauryas is less investigated owing to the absence of dated sources. The only document datable to the early Maurya period is the preserved fragments of the *Indika* by Megasthenes,<sup>13</sup> a Seleucid ambassador at the court of Chandragupta. According to Arrian (*Anab. V. 6.2*), Megasthenes had been previously on the staff of Sibyritios, satrap of Arachosia, and then, as recorded in the classical sources, was sent by Seleucus Nikator<sup>16</sup> to the first ruler of the Maurya dynasty. It would be natural to assume that this happened after the conclusion of peace with Chandragupta.

The *Indika* survived only in the form of fragments in texts by Greek and Roman authors, who often quoted from Megasthenes. However, we are not always sure that they give the exact version of his words. From their records, it is known that there had existed four books of the *Indika*. Strabo considered Megasthenes a liar although he made wide use of the Seleucid ambassador's records. On the other hand, Arrian, Pliny regarded Megasthenes' information as trustworthy. The works of Athenaeus, Clemens and others contain references to the second, third and fourth books of Megasthenes' *Indika*.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore we cannot even visualize what the original scope of that work was. Judging by the extensive use of its contents, it can be presumed that the *Indika* was extremely popular in the classical world. It was referred to in their descriptions of India by Strabo, Diodorus, Arrian, Pliny, Solinus, Athenaeus, Clements Alexandrinus and others. Unfortunately, we are not always able to distinguish clearly the authentic evidence of Megasthenes from what survived in the versions of classical writers, i.e., which was subject to later revisions. Greek and Roman authors sought to write only about events and facts which would appeal to the imagination of the general reader. To verify and evaluate Megasthenes' information, researchers have compared his account with Indian sources, and first of all, with the ancient political treatise *Arthashastra*, which is generally associated with the Mauryan period. At the same time, scholars

have tried to solve the problem of dating the treatise attributed to Kautilya. In this respect the work of O. Stein, Megasthenes and Kautilya,<sup>15</sup> became widely known. Comparing these two sources, the author arrived at the conclusion that there is considerable difference between them in respect of the data they present. Since the comparison of the information contained in the Indika with that of the Arthashastra is of great interest not only for source-study but also for a general study of Mauryan India, these arguments deserve special examination. It would seem more logical to compare the data of Megasthenes with those of Asokan epigraphs which are closer in time, that is, with the Asokan edicts. Both sources are the only dated evidence of the Mauryan period. Such a comparison shows that Megasthenes gave a correct description of some administrative and social institutions of Mauryan India and some aspects of spiritual life as they actually existed.<sup>16</sup> From the time the manuscript was discovered by the Indian scholar R. Shama Sastri early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this work has up to the present time been the centre of attention for students of ancient India. It contains data on the state system, methods of administration, the king's policies, the judiciary system, aspects of economy, culture, etc.

Advocates of this viewpoint usually refer to the Indian tradition concerning the victory of Chandragupta and Canakya (the latter is identified with Kautilya) over the Nandas, to the closeness of the numismatic data contained in the Arthashastra to the relevant evidence by Panini, to the use by the author of the Kamasutra of the information in the treatise, and to the similarity between some of its terms and those of the Asokan inscriptions and of Megasthenes' Indika. They also refer to the Arthashastra as one of the sources of the Laws of Manu<sup>17</sup> and other sastras. T. Trautmann have recently produced new evidence in favour of a later date for the compilation of the treatise. Comparison of the date of the Arthashastra with the evidence of the dated sources made previously (Asoka's edicts and fragments of Megasthenes' work) has enabled scholars to suggest that it would be legitimate to distinguish between ancient and later parts in the treatise. Thus they supposed that the second book was one of the earliest, since the data provided by this book are comparable with Megasthenes' evidence.<sup>18</sup> The statistical analysis of the text recently made by T. Trautmann confirmed this view. It showed that the second and third books has been written before the various parts were compiled into a single treatise on politics. There are data which also show that some parts (for example, the second part) existed as independent works even after the Arthashastra had assumed its final shape.

It is specially stressed in the Arthashastra that it has been compiled "by bringing together as many treatises on the Science of politics as have been written by ancient teachers" (1.1). It quotes representatives of five political schools and fifteen writers. In the graphic expression of T. Trautmann, "the true 'author' of the Arthashastra is its predecessors,"<sup>19</sup> although the merit of bringing the texts together belongs probably to

one person, who was apparently prominent expert in the field of political theory and practices of state administration.

Since the treatise has preserved many ancient concepts and ideas, it can serve as an important source for studying the Mauryan period. It would also seem justifiable to use its data to confirm and illustrate events described in the dated documents of the same period, above all in epigraphy. According to Nilakanta Sastri, "doubts regarding the age and genuineness of the work had not been allowed to hinder the free use of the book in studies on Mauryan administration and society." (emphasis added by the author).<sup>20</sup>

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