
UNIT 22 DISINTEGRATION OF THE EMPIRE

Structure

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22.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to explain:

- to what extent Asoka's successors are held responsible for the disintegration of the empire,
- how various other political factors are viewed as contributing to the weakening of the empire,
- how Asoka's policies in general are considered responsible for the decline of the empire,
- the economic problems that the Mauryan empire believed to have faced, and
- the emergence of local polities in both north and south India following the decline of the Mauryan rule.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

Mauryan rule was the first experiment in imperial government in India. Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusara and Asoka were successful in establishing the imperial authority of the Mauryas over a large number of **Janpadas** or Kingdoms, and they were able to introduce a new concept in the governance of a large territory. However, the imperial authority of the Mauryas began to weaken with the death of Asoka (232 B.C.) and finally collapsed in 180 B.C. What brought the disintegration of the Mauryan empire is a very complicated question and it cannot be explained by any single factor. There are more than one factors which led to the disintegration of the Mauryan empire. In this Unit we have first discussed the responsibility of Asoka's successors for the disintegration of the empire. Then we have dealt with Asoka's policies, economic problems of the Mauryan state and the collapse of the administration of the Mauryas. Finally the growth of local polities has also been taken into consideration in explaining the process of disintegration of the Mauryan empire.

22.2 SUCCESSORS OF ASOKA

It is generally believed that Asoka died in 232 B.C. However, the Mauryan rulers continued to rule for about half a century after his death. Several literary texts like the **Puranas**, the **Avdanas** and the Jain accounts give different details of Asoka's successors. The apparent confusion in all these accounts may be due to the fact that these accounts may have been describing conditions of a divided empire. It is suggested

that after the death of Asoka the empire was divided among the surviving sons. Some of the names of Asoka's successors that we find in different texts are: Kunala, Dasharatha, Samprati, Salishuka, Devavarman, Sātadhanvan and Brihadratha. However, it is difficult to ascertain their exact period. But it appears that after Asoka the empire got fragmented and that there was quick succession of rulers.

The quick succession of rulers weakened the imperial control over administration. The early three kings, Chandragupta, Bindusara and Asoka, had organised the administration in such a way that it needed strict supervision. The quick succession of kings made this difficult as none of the rulers could actually settle down and be in the control of things. Linked to this is the fact that dynastic empires depend much on the ability of its rulers. But the successors of Asoka failed in this respect. Each one of them ruled only for a short period of time and therefore could not formulate either new policies of governance or maintain the old ones.

Despite the fact that full details for individual kings and their reigns are difficult to get, we get the picture of post-Asokan Mauryan India as one in which a lasting stability of even political control was impossible to achieve. One can generally say that these successors politically weakened the empire and therefore, lost administrative, economic and military control of it. The partition of the empire is in itself enough to show that the process of disintegration had begun immediately after the death of Asoka.

22.3 OTHER POLITICAL FACTORS FOR DISINTEGRATION

The disorder that emerged in the administrative machinery after the death of Asoka is regarded as one of the important factors for the disintegration of the Mauryan empire. The immediate problem for Asoka's successors was whether to continue his policy of **Dhamma** and its predominance in the government. This had truly been an unconventional way of governance and not a very easy way of comprehending the functioning of government. Asoka had been successful because he had the unique vision of understanding the complex social problems of a society and also he had accepted the importance of the principle of **Dhamma** in all its dimensions. It is not clear whether despite Asoka's personal exhortations his successors attached the same kind of importance to **Dhamma**, as he himself had done.

Another related feature of the political importance of **Dhamma** was the existence of a large body of officials of the State called **Dhammamahamattas**. It has been suggested by some historians that they had become very powerful and oppressive during the latter half of Asoka's reign. Asoka himself in the First Separate Edict to the **Mahamattas**, stationed at Dhauri and Jaugada, asked them to ensure against oppression and to be just and humane. Though there is no doubt that Asoka was in firm control of the administration, this cannot be said of the later kings.

It was not simply the question of the direct contact with the **Dhammamahamattas** to ensure that they did not misuse their powers, but that of controlling the whole of the Mauryan bureaucracy that was at stake. The nature of the Mauryan State necessitated a king of strong abilities. It was a system which required the king to be in direct touch with all aspects of the State's functionaries. Since these functionaries were ultimately held together by a power structure with the king at its centre, once the king became weak, the whole administration naturally weakened. Once the centre became weak, the provinces too started breaking away.

The officials of the State were personally selected by the king and owed loyalty only to him. Once weak rulers came, and ruled for short durations of time, it resulted in an overwhelming number of new officials constantly emerging and owing only personal loyalty to their respective kings and not to the State. This norm of personal loyalty had the danger of the officials either forcefully supporting the new king or opposing him. The later Mauryan kings were probably constantly faced with this situation. In fact, it were local rulers and princes that found it easy to emerge with these traditional ties to support them, as important centres of power. The provincial governments under the later Maurayas thus increasingly began to question the Centre's authority.

Though one cannot accept the notion that there were popular uprisings wrecking Mauryan State control, one can strongly suggest that the social basis of the Mauryan bureaucracy was under stress and strain resulting in an inefficient administration unable to maintain social order in general.

Whereas under the first three Mauryas the extremely complex system of spies employed for filtering in information on erring officials had worked efficiently, under the later Mauryas it collapsed. There was thus no means through which the kings could either gauge the public opinion in the empire, or, check on the corruption which had inevitably set in once weak rulers were in power at the centre.

A conscious loosening of military control on behalf of the Mauryan kings has also been suggested by some scholars as a major political reason for their decline. Since this is largely attributed to a conscious decision taken by Asoka on this matter, we shall discuss it below in the next section. At this stage we need to emphatically state that the decline of the Magadhan empire cannot satisfactorily be explained by merely stating that there were weak successors or, that there was military inactivity or, that there were popular uprisings. Each of these was in fact, fundamentally linked to the particular nature of the Mauryan imperial bureaucratic set-up and once this started cracking up the whole political structure was at stake.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Mark which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×):
 - a) The quick succession of rulers led to the weakening of the imperial control. ()
 - b) The Mauryan State was decentralized and therefore easy to control. ()
 - c) The Mauryan officials had been selected on the basis of their personal loyalty to kings. ()
 - d) There were popular uprisings wrecking Mauryan State control. ()
- 2) What were the immediate administrative problems faced by the successors of Asoka. Use three or four lines to write your answer.

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- 3) What in your opinion was the crux of the problem in the administrative system of the Mauryas that caused disintegration under the later kings? Describe in 100 words.

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22.4 ASOKA AND HIS POLICIES

Many scholars have opined that either Asoka's political decisions or the effects of these decisions were responsible for the disintegration of the Mauryan empire. Their arguments generally focus on the drawbacks of Asoka's religious policy. These arguments have two strands:

- i) First, there are those scholars who maintain that Pushyamitra Sunga, who killed the last Mauryan emperor represented a strong Brahmanical reaction against the pro-Buddhist policy of Asoka and the pro-Jain policy of some of his successors. Moreover, the Satavahanas who rose to power in the Deccan after the Mauryas were also said to have been Brahmanas. These scholars list a series of acts done by Asoka himself which may have antagonized the Brahmanas. For example the ban on animal sacrifices is considered one which was especially resented, since this action was taken by a Shudra King (according to the **Purana** accounts the Mauryas are listed as Shudras). They suggest that the **Dhammamahamattas**, as special officers of **Dhamma** appointed by Asoka, destroyed the prestige of the Brahmanas. These officials disallowed Brahmanas to continue their traditional laws of punishment and other **Smriti** injunctions.

However, there are no direct evidences to support the above arguments. These are broad inferences which can be equally questioned. For example, the Asokan inscriptions clearly say that the **Dhammamahamattas** were to respect the Brahmanas and the Sramans alike. It is, however, possible that in the later years these officials may have become unpopular among the people. This can be deduced on the basis of stories in the Buddhist sources. As officials meant for the establishment of **Dhamma** they undoubtedly had special powers and sanctions of the king and were therefore, feared by the people as a whole. Once they began to wield great control, it prevented Asoka's direct contact with the people. But this does not mean that these officials were specifically antagonistic to the Brahmanas. Thus, to argue that the interests of the Brahmanas were harmed by Asoka's policy and that Pushyamitra, a Brahman general engineered a revolt cannot be accepted for the simple reason that if Asoka's policies were so harmful, this should have happened immediately after his death. In fact, Pushyamitra Sunga's action should at best be understood as a palace coup d'état made at an opportune time, having assessed the weak nature of the king's power, rather than looking for any deliberate anti-Brahman policy of either Asoka or his successors.

- ii) According to another group of scholars emphasis should be given to Asoka's pacifist policies as a factor for Mauryan decline. They think that this was responsible for undermining the strength of the empire. This explanation focusses on Asoka'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 examples from Buddhist stories in the **Divyavadana**, this argument goes on to could not withstand the Greek invasions. Non-violence on the part of the king also meant that he no longer exerted his control over officials particularly in the provinces who had become oppressive and ought to have been controlled, Citing examples 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 Asoka is far from correct. Just as the theory of anti-Brahmanical activity under Asoka's reign has been discounted as a factor for Mauryan decline, so also the impression of an over pacifist Asoka, lacking in vigour and determination to rule has to be discarded. It is true that Asoka 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 the palace to continue killing 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 Asoka been such a pacifist he should have reinstated Kalinga as an independent kingdom but, as a practical ruler, he maintained the supremacy of Magadha over it. There are innumerable other indications of Asoka's 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 up to a point only and not beyond that. All these steps were taken by Asoka 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 Asoka he is said to have prevented the Greeks from entering Madhyadesa. According to Romila Thapar even

an entire generation of pacificism 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 causes must be sought in other directions as well."

22.5 ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

D.D. Kosambi stressed on the economic problems that the Mauryas faced. These contributed substantially to the decline of the Mauryan empire. His arguments centre around two themes indicating that there were financial constraints on the Mauryan economy:

- a) that the State took excessive measures to increase the taxes on a variety of things, and
- b) that the punch-marked coins of this period show evidence of debasement of the currency.

The latter argument is based on his statistical analysis of the punch-marked coins of the period.

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:

- i) 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 Magadha 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 Magadha 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.
- ii) The other point which is stressed is that expansion in cultivation, extensive use of forestwood and deforestation in general may have led to floods and famines. 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 years of famine, the state was expected to provide relief on a substantial scale.

In a centralized administrative system, the problem of not having enough revenues created many other acute difficulties. To enhance the revenues, the **Arthashastra** suggested that taxes should be imposed even on actors, prostitutes and so on. The tendency to tax everything that could be taxed, emerged out of the necessity of the treasury needing more funds or, the currency having become debased due to inflation. The **Arthashastra** measures to be adopted in times of emergency are interpreted in this light. Further, the decreasing silver content of the punch-marked coins attributed to the later Maurya rulers indicate that debasement had actually taken place to meet the needs of a depleted treasury. The burden of expenditure had also increased. This can be seen in the large amounts of money spent under Asoka for public works. Also his tours and those of his officials meant using up the surplus wherever it was available. The earlier stringent measures of the State's control on its finances had thus begun to change even during Asoka's reign.

Romila Thapar has further commented on these issues. According to her 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. In positive terms she argues that for many parts of the Indian sub-continent the general picture of the economy on the basis of the material evidence in fact indicates an improvement. This is particularly seen in the use of better quality materials which indicates a technical advance. There may have been debasement of coinage but in her opinion it was not because of a decline in material standards, but rather, because of extreme political confusion, particularly in the Ganges Valley. This must have led to hoarding of money by merchant classes and debasement of coinage. However, she concludes : "There is no doubt of the economic prosperity that prevailed with the political decline of the Mauryan empire."

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Mark which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×):
 - a) Asoka was successful in providing conditions for a Brahmanical revolt. ()
 - b) None of Asoka's policies advocated pacifism. ()
 - c) The silver content of the later Mauryan punch-marked coins had increased. ()
 - d) Hoarding of coins under the later Mauryas must have led to their debasement. ()

- 2) Which one of the following was **not** a cause for the decline of the Mauryas? Tick (✓) the right answer.
 - a) Deforestation in the Ganges Valley led to the incidence of floods.
 - b) Ban of animal sacrifices led to popular uprisings.
 - c) Certain powerful officials could not be controlled by the later Mauryas.
 - d) Increased expenditure of various sorts was a strain on the imperial treasury.

- 3) List the views of those scholars that advocate Asoka's policies being responsible for Mauryan decline in about six lines.

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- 4) Would you agree with Kosambi that the major factor for Mauryan decline were the economic problems that the empire faced. Give reasons for your answer in 100 words.

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22.6 GROWTH OF LOCAL POLITIES

If the material and technical advance of the country was not hampered by the political decline of the Mauryas, it can then be said that the material basis of many of the local polities/kingdoms was strong enough for them to emerge with renewed strength in the, post-Mauryan period. The Mauryas in fact, had directly governed only the major and vital areas of the empire the centre of which was **Magadha**. It is most probable that its governors/officials administering the core areas were selected from amongst the local peoples. These officials were often very powerful and acted as a check on the Viceroy or representative of the kings. As mentioned earlier, the political loyalty of these officials was crucial for the imperial structure to continue. A change of king meant a re-alignment of these loyalties. If this happened often, as it did in the post-Asokan period, fundamental weaknesses would begin to inevitably creep in and prove the system unsuccessful.

The half a dozen kings that had succeeded Asoka had made no basic change in the policy of governance adopted by the first three Mauryas. It has also been suggested that some of these kings probably ruled more or less concurrently over several parts of the empire. This indicates a segmentation of the empire even under the Mauryas.

22.6.1 Major Kingdoms

The disintegration of the Mauryan empire was followed by the rise of a number of kingdoms in different parts of India. Immediately after the Mauryas Pushyamitra established the Sunga dynasty and the Sungas were able to control only a part of the erstwhile Mauryan empire. The Sunga family had held the Viceroyship at Ujjain in western Malwa or the neighbouring region of Vidisha in eastern Malwa under the Mauryas. The Sungas tried to revive Vedic practices and sacrifices which may have perhaps been necessary to face the new invaders, namely the Greeks and to establish their strength after their first king had usurped the throne. The Sungas were followed by the short-lived rule of the Kanvas. The Greeks, however, in due course of time became exceedingly successful in most parts of north-west India. Their rule could only be terminated by the Sakas who had settled along the Indus. The Parthian or Pahlavas also made inroads in north-western India. But, the most successful foreign intrusions were made from the first half of the first century A.D. with the establishment of the Kushana empire.

In the Ganga valley, Rajasthan, eastern India and the Deccan many ruling families came to power. It is clear that under the Mauryas the maximum settlements of villages had been in the Ganges Valley. The hills and plains of Assam and Bengal still remained to be opened up. Similarly, the south and south-east of India had contact with the Magadhan empire but a large scale agrarian economy had yet to come up in these regions. After the decline of Mauryan rule many local rulers started ruling in regions like Vidarbha, eastern Deccan, Karnataka and western Maharashtra. Gradually, the family of the Satavahanas built up an empire in the Deccan by bringing together many local centres (you will read the details in Unit 27, Block-7).

At about the same time when the early Satavahanas were establishing themselves, Kharavela of Kalinga emerged as a powerful king in the Mahanadi region. In an inscription written during his reign and found at the Hathigumpha cave of Udayagiri hill near Bhubaneswar, Kharvela claims that he was the third ruler of the Mahameghavana family of Kalinga; that this family was a branch of the ancient Chedi family. He is said to have raided a major part of the country including Magadha and the Satavahana and Pandya countries. He was an ardent follower of Jainism.

In the extreme South the three important chiefdoms that continued to be prominent from the Maurya period were the Cheras who controlled the Malabar area, the Cholas who held sway on the south-eastern coast and the Kaveri Valley and the Pandyas whose power centre lay around the tip of the Peninsula. The Sangam texts of this period give us a considerable amount of information on the society, ecology, polity and economy of the region these three kingdoms ruled.

The above outline briefly discusses the geographical areas and the political complexion of the major foreign and indigenous kingdoms which became powerful for varied periods of time in the immediately post-Mauryan period.

22.6.2 Local Kingdoms

Numerous local or sub-regional powers also grew in this period either under the stimulus of the advancing agrarian economy or, in some regions under the stimulus of trade. Various Indian literary sources, like the **Puranas**, mention of such tribal names as Naga, Gardabhila and Abhira during this period. They were being ruled by their kings. Thus four Naga kings, seven Gardabhila kings, thirteen Pusyamitras, ten Abhira kings of the post-Mauryan period are listed. The Gardabhilas probably emerged from the large Bhila tribe (the Bhils) of the forests of central and western India. Some of the Abhiras are known to have developed into Ahir castes, some of them famous as pastoralists. Along with these we have other tribes who underwent change during this period and are known through the coins they minted in their own names or with names of their **janapadas**. The **Yaudheyas** were famous even in the time of Panini as professional warriors and during this period were said to have been suppressed by Rudradaman, the Saka king. Their territory is said to have comprised

the land between the Sutlej and the Yamuna. Similarly, to the south-east of Mathura, the Arjunaya had established their autonomy towards the end of the Sunga rule.

In the Punjab, occupying the land between the Ravi and the Beas we have mention of the Audumbaras. The Kunindas are said to have become prominent between the Beas and the Yamuna around the foothills of Sivalik hills. Other tribal republics, as they are popularly known, for this period are those of the Sibis, Malavas, Trigartas and so on. These **janapadas** interspersed the region of northern and north-western India and at the same time independent principalities like Ayodhya, Kaushambi, Mathura and Ahichchhatra also re-asserted their power having earlier succumbed to the Mauryas.

For the Deccan we have some information mainly derived from coins of many minor local rulers and ruling families over whom the Satavahanas were able to establish their superamacy. For example, the families of Maharathis, Kuras and Anardas are known from Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra. Besides, many local chiefs of the Deccan who issued coins emerged during this period. For the extreme south we know that the chiefs of the three main chiefdoms (Cheras, Cholas, Pandyas) were constantly at war with the minor chiefs of the less developed regions. The Velir chieftains, for instance, were famous as they controlled important outlets to the Roman trade on the south-east coast.

Though attempts were made in the post-Mauryan period by various dynasties to build empires, there were several instances of each of them contending the other. Further sub-regional powers could not totally be suppressed. Whereas, on the one hand, the political decline of the Mauryas created a situation for many of these local powers to arise, on the other, the economic expansion witnessed in the Mauryan period continued unabated. The crisis in the Magadhan empire under the Mauryas was thus one of organisation and control of its resources and not a lack of them.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Mark which of the following statments are right (✓) or wrong (×).
 - a) Pushyamitra Sunga was probably a governor at Ujjain under the Mauryas. ()
 - b) The Satavahanas succeeded the Mauryas in the extreme south. ()
 - c) The Sangam texts tell us about the three kingdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas. ()
 - d) The tribal kingdoms in the post-Mauryan period were able to drive out Cheras and Pandyas. ()
 - e) Ayodhya, Kausambi, Mathura, Ahichchhatra were tribal republics. ()

- 2) Outline the major political changes in north and south India in the post-Mauryan period in about 100 words.

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- 3) Using the code given below identify three of the most important factors for Mauryan decline: .

- 1) Rebellion of the Brahmanas
- 2) Weakening of State Control

- 3) Increase in imperial expenditure
- 4) Invasions by foreign powers
- 5) Inability to create effective resources base
- 6) Inactivity of the army

Code

- a) 1, 6, 4
- b) 2, 3, 4
- c) 2, 3, 5
- d) 1, 5, 6

22.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have analysed the various factors for the disintegration of the Mauryan empire and the rise of local polities in its wake. The successors of Asoka failed to maintain the integrity of the empire which they inherited from Asoka. The partition of the empire after Asoka and quick succession of rulers no doubt weakened the basis of the empire. But more important is the fact that the inherent contradictions in the Mauryan imperial set up accentuated the crisis. The highly centralised bureaucracy with its loyalty to the king and not to the state made the administration completely individual based. And the change of king meant the change of officials and this had a very adverse effect on administration after Asoka.

We have seen that how some of the views of the earlier scholars that hold Asoka and his policies responsible for the decline of the Mauryas are not acceptable in the light of the contemporary evidence. The attempt by some scholars to explain the disintegration of the Mauryan empire in terms of economic problems has also been taken into consideration. Finally, we have also highlighted the growth of local polities both in the North and South which accelerated the process of disintegration of the Mauryan Empire.

22.8 KEY WORDS

Bureaucracy: System of government by officials responsible to an authority.

Coup d'etat: A violent or unconstitutional change in government.

Erring: Those staying away from the right path.

Exploitation: An act of using for selfish purposes at the expense of others.

Local: Pertaining to a particular place or area.

Pacifist: Opposed to war or one who believes all war is wrong.

Polities: Forms of political organisation — some could be monarchical, or republican or tribal.

Regional: Characterized in a particular way referring to a tract of country or area or district.

22.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) ✓
b) ×
c) ✓
d) ×
- 2) You have to write about the problem in the continuation of Asoka's policy of Dhamma and controlling the Dhammamahattas. See Sec. 22.3

- 3) Your answer should include the following points; centralised administration, officials' loyalty to the king not to the state, nature of bureaucracy, etc.
See Sec. 22.3

Check Your Progress 2

- a) ×
b) ✓
c) ×
d) ✓
- 2) (b)
- 3) Your answer should include : pro-Buddhist policy of Asoka, pacifist policies of Asoka and the reaction of the Brahmanas to this. Sec. 22.4.
- 4) Read Sec. 22.5 and write the answer giving your own argument.

Check Your Progress 3

- a) ✓
b) ✓
c) ✓
d) ×
e) ×
- 2) You have to write about the emergence of major indigenous and foreign kingdoms as well as the tribal kingdoms following the disintegration of the Mauryan empire.
See Sub-Secs. 22.6.1. and 22.6.2.
- 3) (b)

SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCK

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Thapar, Romila, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Delhi, 1960.