

# Mauryan Intervention in the Deccan: A Study of Archaeological Data

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**Abstract – The Mauryan rule which covered the entire subcontinent is considered to be an important development in the history of the subcontinent. Centred around the Magadha, it was the first empire to cover the entire subcontinent. In the current historiography, it has been argued that it encouraged secondary state formation in the new regions like Deccan and Kalinga (Orissa). In this paper, we focus on the Deccan, review the archaeological data for the Mauryan presence, and determine whether it is in consonance with the existing theories or not. Further, we also attempt to suggest some new data that may be correlated with their presence.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Mauryan Empire, founded in 324 BCE by Chandragupta Maurya, was perhaps the first empire to cover the entire subcontinent. It was based in the Magadha mahajanapada which roughly corresponds with the present southern Bihar. The management of the empire has been a matter of debate. If Arthaśāstra is to be believed, the empire was a centralised entity with even the tiniest details managed by the king. However, as rightly pointed out, such a control in a pre-modern state, lacking modern communications is impossible. (Gerard, 1988). A good alternate was suggested by Romila Thapar (Thapar, 1984) who conceived the empire as consisting of three levels: 1) Metropolis: the area that cover the Gangetic plain and was the site of primary state development 2) Core: the areas rich in resources and which later became sites of secondary state formation 3) Periphery: the tribal areas not particularly valued for their sources, but providing the other two areas with forest products. One of the core areas that may be identified is the Deccan, and in the following paragraphs, we attempt to review their presence in the Deccan and understand their impact as seen in the archaeological data.

## 2. THE CONQUEST OF THE DECCAN: WHICH RULER?

There is no doubt that by the time of Asoka, the Deccan was a part of the Mauryan Empire. We know this through the presence of Aśokan edicts in the region. But the exact date of this conquest is not known. Our sources give us a confused understanding. The Jain sources claim that the conquest was mainly carried out by Chandragupta Maurya (Chakrabarti, 1999). Legend has it that the king under the influence of Jain monk Bhadrabahu

abdicated his throne and joined the Jaina sangha. When a famine occurred in Magadha, he along with a group of monks migrated to Sravanabelagola in Karnataka (Mukherjee, 1966). The site is still present today and has several later day inscriptions that make a similar claim. A similar understanding can be seen from the Greco-Roman sources. Plutarch claimed that Sandrocottus (Greek name for Chandragupta) conquered the entire India with an army of 600,000 soldiers. Justin also declared Chandragupta to be in control of India (Singh, 2009). But according to Upinder Singh, it is not clear what these writings denote by India. Also, from Megasthenes Indica, we come to know that Andhras were an independent territory (Smith, 1999). So this might mean that some parts of Deccan were not under his control or that the Andhras were conquered towards the end of his reign. However, the sources give us a strong indication of his control of Karnataka.

But on the other hand, some sources claim that it was Bindusara who conquered this region. In the works of Taranath, a Tibetan monk, we come to know that Chanakya, a minister of Bindusara, destroyed the nobles and kings of 16 towns and made him the master of all the land between the two seas (Singh, 2009). This could be interpreted as either subduing a revolt or a conquest. However, it is not clear.

For long time, the consensus among the scholar community was that Asoka inherited the Deccan. His only conquest was Kalinga as recorded in his inscriptions. His contrition over this war is well known from the major rock edict XIII (Hultzsch, 1991). But this edict along with rock edicts XI and XII were not issued in the Kalinga region or the present-day Orissa (Thapar, 1997). Instead, two separate edicts were issued which instructed the local officials to

provide conciliatory administration. It can be seen as an attempt of the king to win the hearts of the local populace. But in the 1990's a similar set of substitute edicts were discovered at Sannati in Karnataka. This is an anomaly which can be understood in two ways either south was part of Kalinga, or Sannati, hence Karnataka, was reconquered by Asoka (Veluthat, 1999). Thus, the debate on who conquered south is still unresolved.

### 3. THE IMPACT OF THE MAURYAN RULE

In the current historiography, the Mauryan rule is considered to be an important factor that heralded the early historic phase in south India. Early historic roughly denotes the start of urbanization encouraged by development of agricultural surplus and development of trade facilitated by coins. These are often accompanied by development of complex political entities like state and chiefdom (Roy, 1984). In north, early historic is dated back to 6th century BCE and is considered to be a primary process or a development that took place due to internal factors. Thus, in north saw the rise of sixteen *mahajanpadas*. Of these, the Magadha state was most successful in creating an empire that covered almost the entire subcontinent. While strategic factors might have played a role in this conquest, some scholars argue that the need was to exploit rich resources in the other areas of the subcontinent was also an important factor (Thapar, 1984). To Seneviratne (1981) Magadha, being a primary state, needed resources to pay her for her expanding services, and Gangetic plain resources were not sufficient, hence the expansion (Seneviratne, 1981). The Deccan was known for its precious metals, and diamonds. As a result, it became an attractive region for conquest.

An important consequence of the conquest was aiding the state formation in the region. For exploitation of the resources, the Mauryas needed to organise the relations with the local chiefs. Some form of labour organisation already existed in the area as can be seen from the preceding megalith-building phase. However, this needed to be changed according to imperial requirements (Thapar, 1984). Seneviratne argues that provincial headquarters like Suvarṇagari was under direct Mauryan supervision. However, for supervising the rest of the province, the Mauryas, perhaps established a "chains of command" which involved the local chieftains. This now established a 'better defined ruling elite' in the provinces. Once the Mauryas withdrew, new states led by these elites emerged (Seneviratne, 1981). B.D Chattopadhyaya, on similar lines, argues for secondary urbanisation in the area, after Mauryan intervention. According to him, the urban centres in the Ganga valley were primary urban centres (Chattopadhyaya, 2013). The contact between Gangetic plain and peninsular India through trade led to urbanization in the latter region. R.S Sharma has also credited the Mauryas with the introduction of burnt-bricks, rings wells and other

aspects of material culture of the Gangetic plains to other parts of the subcontinent (Sharma, 1995).

### 4. THE DATA FOR THE PRESENCE OF THE MAURYAS

Since the Mauryan influence is considered to be such an important factor in effecting the transition to the early historic phase in the Deccan, it is important to review the archaeological data associated with their presence. The most direct data for Mauryan presence in the region is the Aśokan inscriptions in the region. The inscriptions in the southern region are of two kinds the Major (RE) and the Minor Rock Edicts (MRE) (Chakrabarti, 1999). REs occur at Erragudi in Kurnool district and Sannati in Karnataka, while MREs occur at Yerragudi and Rajula Mandagiri in Kurnool district; Maski, Gavimath and Palkigundu in Raichur district; Erragudi, Udegolam, Nittur in Bellary; and Brahmagiri, Siddapura, and Jatinga-Ramesvara in Chitradurg. Of this, MRE I occur at Maski, Gavimath and Palkigundu, while at the remaining sites both MRE I and II occur. The MREs according to the edicts were issued at the end of 256 days tour by Aśoka (Hultzsch, 1925).

Other than the inscriptions, it is possible that some of the *stūpas* in the south were built by Aśoka. A legend credits him with building nearly eighty-four thousand *stūpas* (Smith, 1999). Even today, we can see several *stūpas* in the South like at Kesarpalle, Thotlakonda, Bavikonda, Bhattiprolu and many others. While not all the *stūpas* were built by Aśoka, some of them like Amaravati and Salihundam, in Andhra and Sannati-Kanaganahalli in Karnataka can be definitely identified with the Mauryas.

The other indicators for their presence can be the North Black Polished Ware (NBPW) and punch marked coins. NBPW pottery is an early historic ware that occurs in north India from the time of sixth century, although few scholars want to take it back to 800 BCE (Chakrabarti, 2008). It is possible that this pottery spread outside the Gangetic plain with the Mauryas (Wheeler, 1959). Some sites where it has been reported are Amaravati, Kesarpalle (Sarkar, 1966). Chebrolu (IAR, 1960) and Vaddamānu (Sastri, et. al., 1992). In Amaravati, the excavations of 1973-74 (IAR, 1973) revealed period I, sub-divided into IA and IB. IB had large quantity of NBPW, BRW and black polished ware. This level also had granite uprights or pillars with typical Mauryan polish. These were possibly a part of the stupa entrance. A fragmentary Aśokan pillar edict too was discovered at the same level. Thus, the main stupa was built during the time of Aśoka. Further, the *stūpa* was a part of Dharnikota city. Here too the NBPW was recovered (Ghosh, 1989). It is important to note that the site saw the building of a huge wharf on the right bank of the Krishna. The implication for this shall be discussed later. From Amaravati, we also recovered a hoard of Mauryan punch-marked coins in 1953 (Reddy, 2014). Salihundam (R. Subrahmanyam 1964) located in Srikakulam district is a site of another Buddhist *stūpa*. The excavation revealed three phases

(Subrahmanyam, 1964). The first phase has given evidence of megalithic pottery, similar to the one noticed at Brahmagiri, along with a solitary punch-marked coin. It has a solar, animal with beaks and some other marks around the plan and two marks on the reverse. On the basis of this, the site is dated between 3<sup>rd</sup> century - 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Ghosh, 1989). The structural activity of the period is marked by a few brick platforms and some irregular isolated lines of brick. According to the excavator, the builders of this phase took an advantage of the natural outcrop of the rock and its contours and built their constructions on the ridges of the hill.

Besides this, we also get data for two forts that may belong to the Mauryan rule. One is located at Dhullikatta in Karimnagar district (Parasher-Sen, 1993). This site is about 18 hectares with two brick-built gateways and a deep moat outside the fort. While the main fort certainly belongs to the Satavahana era, there is evidence that the fortification preceded them (Parasher-Sen, 1993). It is possible that the earliest level of the site is coeval with the Buddhist *stūpa* found there. The *stūpa* is dated to the last quarter of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE (Parasher-Sen, 1993). It is possible it was a Mauryan level *stūpa*, although there is no evidence of any punch-marked coins or NBPW in the layer.

In Karnataka, perhaps the most famous site associated with the Mauryas is the recent excavated Sannati and Kanaganahalli sites. From Kanaganahalli (Pooncha, 2011) we even recovered a stone portrait of Aśoka. At Sannati, we discovered the data for fortification and a citadel going back to the Mauryas (Howell, et. al., 1995). The fort area locally is known as Seturajakatte. It encloses an area of 86 hectares. The wall of the fort survives and stands up to a height of 4 m (Howell, 1995). There are several breeches along its length, which may correspond to the ancient gateways. The excavator also postulates the presence of bastions and square watchtowers on the wall. This is because in some areas the wall is thicker which may indicate support to the structures above (Howell, 1995). The fort was also used by Satavahana as one can see the usage of large Satavahana-style bricks (Howell, 1995). Two other finds confirm the Mauryan presence in the region, one a single silver punch-marked coin discovered at the site, and second, the presence of Aśokan edicts.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This in brief is the data that can be identified with the Mauryas. However, from this data we can see their limited presence of the Mauryas. At first, we may conclude that the data is in inverse proportion to their proposed impact. But in reality, it is in conformity with the theory of limited involvement of the Mauryan state

in the administration of the Deccan and their interest in appropriating the rich resources of the area. As seen above, the contention of Thapar and Seneviratne has been that the Mauryan state was mostly interested in the rich sources of the area (Thapar, 1984). South was an attractive region for conquest is known from the archaeological data. Most of the megalithic sites were located near the gold mines and the diamond mines in the region (Ray, 1987). Allchins have reported a date of 800 BCE for the Hatti gold mines (Allchin, 1981). In Tamil Nadu, pearls at Korkai are known from the level dated to 805 BCE. Many Iron Age sites like Serupalle (Subrahmanyam, 1997), Chagatur (IAR, 1977-78), Veerapuram (Sastri, et. al., 1984), Peddamarur (IAR, 1977-78), Watgal (Devaraj, et. al., 1995), Maski (Thapar, 1957), Brahmagiri (Wheeler, 1948), and Banahalli (IAR, 1983-84), have reported terracotta or whorl beads. Fuller (2007) has dated the cotton plant at Hallur to 900 BCE (Fuller, et. al., 2007). Thus, articles like gold, pearls, textiles, have known to exist as early as 900-800 BCE. But because Mauryan state was mostly interested in exploiting these resources, we see they were involved in a limited way. As Seneviratne argued, the Mauryans might have established a chain of commands with the elite to control the resources. This might have further improved the position of the elite in the area and led to secondary state formation (Seneviratne, 1981). This is supported by later day inscriptions in the area, which record emergence of several local rulers like *Rano Gobhadra*, *Rano Narana*, *Rano Kamvayasiri*, and *Rano Samagopa* in Northern Telangana (Subrahmanyam, 2005); *Raja Kuberaka* in south-east Andhra (Subrahmanyam, 2005) and several others. These possibly came up after the decline of the Mauryas.

In addition, we suggest two more kinds of archaeological data to be identified with the Mauryas. In *Arthaśāstra*, it is mentioned that the northern route or *Uttarapatha* traded in horses, while the southern route traded in gold, pearls, textiles, and shells. In the archaeological data, we already know that these things were produced as early as 900-800 BCE, but we do not get any data for trading. It is possible they were mainly used for local needs. Further, the regular warfare, as seen in the proliferation of weaponry in the Iron Age phase, may have led to destruction of any potential for such a trade. Thus, it is possible that the Mauryan hegemony established peace in the region and encouraged the trade between the north and the south India.

This contention is supported by existence of wharf at Dharanikota with NBPW level discussed above and availability of punch marked coins. As a result, one may identify certain megaliths with horse bones as belonging to this phase. For instance, the megalith at Pochampad has given data for sacrifice of a horse

(Krishnasastry, 1983). At Chinnamarur, an incision of a horse with rider was seen on the capstone of megalith IX (Subrahmanyam, 1997). In north Karnataka, the presence of horse is known through depiction in rock-arts of the period in the region (Sundara, 1975). It is possible that these megaliths belonged to important local personages and was an elite symbol. Another object that was possibly traded was lapis lazuli, another Central Asian product. Thapar, in fact, has identified lapis lazuli layer at Maski with the Mauryas (Thapar, 1984).

Secondly, the shift can be seen in the few megaliths that give us the data for calcined bones. This is seen at Peddamarur (Subrahmanyam, 1997), where a megalith had charred and calcined bones in an urn or a sarcophagus. This is megalithic I, a transepted cist divided into three chambers. Similar evidence is found at Serupalle (Subrahmanyam, 1997) megalithic II and Agripalli (IAR, 1976-77) megalithic I. The calcined bones might mean cremation. This was a rare practice as most the megaliths have given data for either secondary or primary burials. The calcined bones were possibly new development, and it may have occurred due to the influence of north Indian religions and culture.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The limited data in archaeology is in consonant with secondary state formation theory proposed by Thapar and Seneviratne. The Mauryan state's interest in the region is mainly in the resources which explain their limited presence in the archaeological data. To me the Mauryan state helped in state formation can be seen in an indirect way. In the former Iron Age phase, we have huge data for iron weaponry about show the presence of weaponry. This shows warfare to be an important part of the society. The Mauryan hegemony possibly stopped this warfare and ended up establishing peace in the region. This encouraged the growth of commerce and hence we have the data for coins in the region. And as the state declined, we have the rise of new local elites as seen in the inscriptions, and later on the rise of the Satavahanas.

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