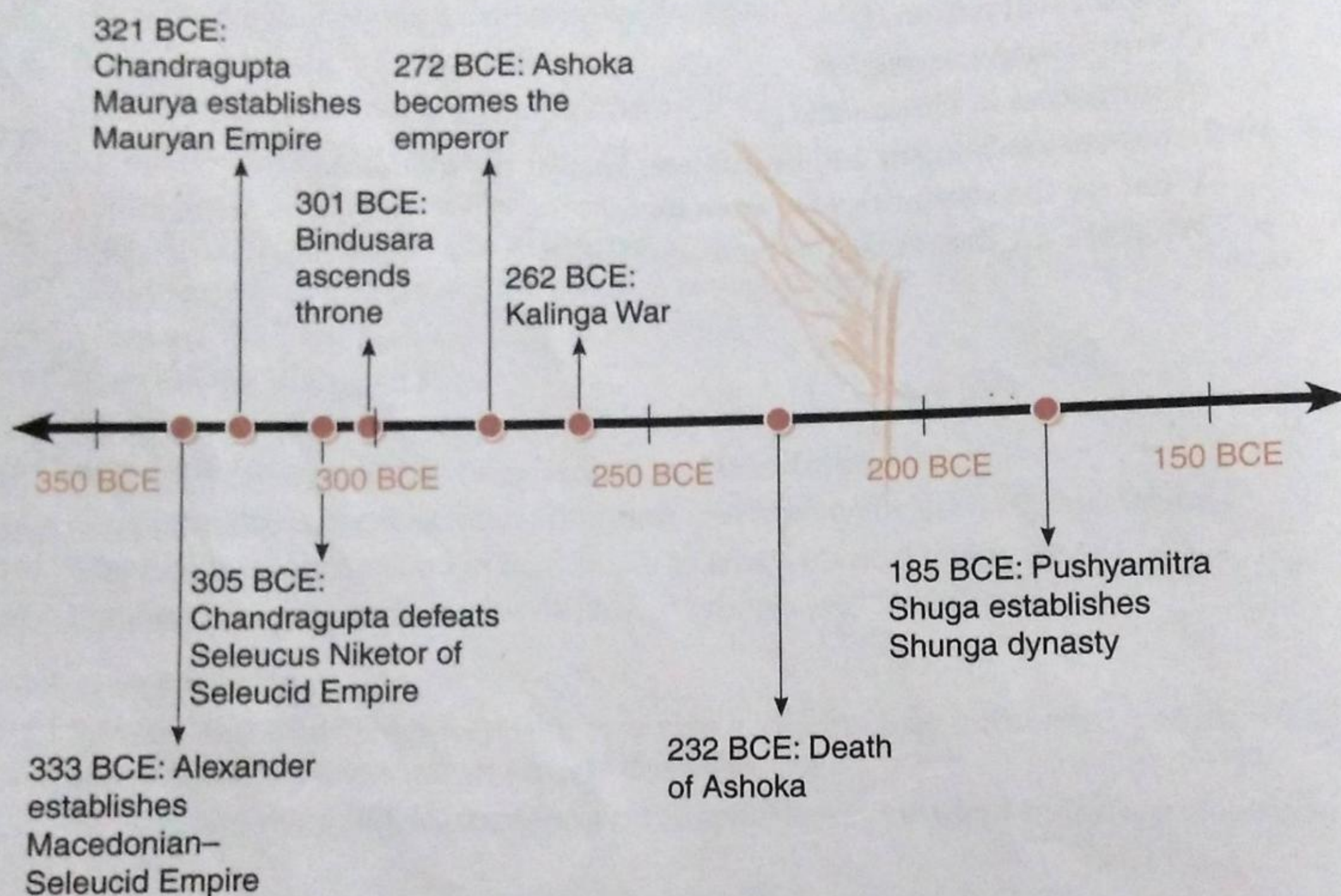


The Mauryan Empire

Scope

- Sources: Literary—*Arthashastra* and *Indica*; Archaeological—Ashokan Edicts, Sanchi Stupa
- A brief study of political history and administration
- Ashoka's *Dhamma*



The Mauryan Empire in ancient India was a **massive kingdom with its capital at Pataliputra** (present-day Patna). This empire was one of the greatest to be established in India. **Chandragupta Maurya founded the empire in the fourth century BCE.** He ascended to the throne after dethroning the last Nanda ruler, Dhanananda, at the age of about twenty. He was **supported and trained by the Brahmin, Kautilya, who is also known as Chanakya.**

In 327 BCE, Alexander of Macedonia had conquered a large part of the North-west India. While returning to his land, he left these areas to be ruled by Greek governors known as **satraps**. Chandragupta Maurya not only overthrew the Nandas from Magadh, but also **conquered the satraps left by Alexander.**

Chandragupta Maurya was succeeded by his son Bindusara, followed by his grandson, Ashoka. The Mauryan rulers continued with their conquests and unified the entire

subcontinent, with the southern tip being an exception. Ashoka, the third monarch of the Mauryan Dynasty, is regarded as one of the greatest rulers in history.

Sources

The literary and archaeological sources that helped in the reconstruction of the Mauryan history are discussed here.

Literary sources

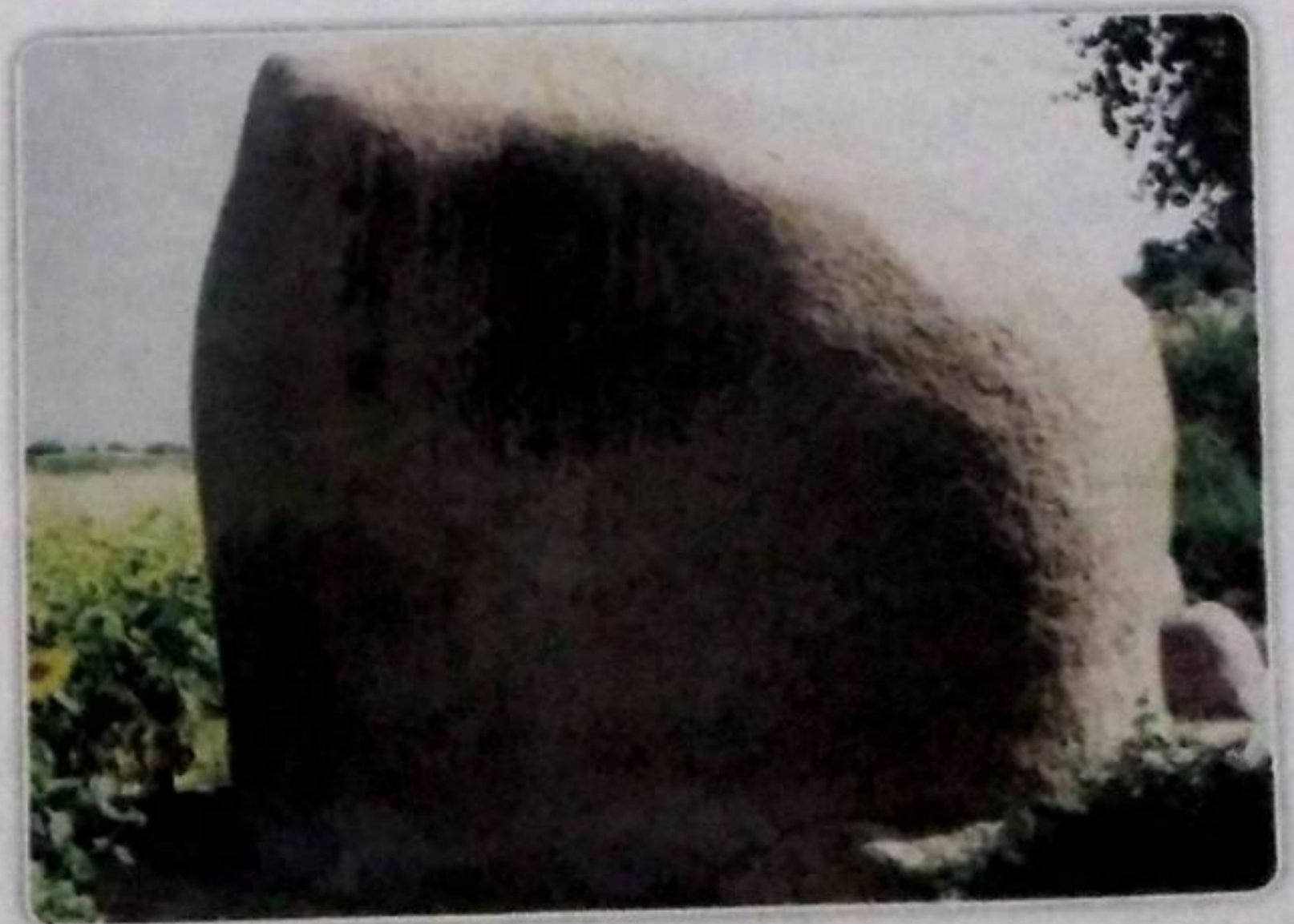
1. **Arthashastra:** Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is the most crucial source of knowledge about the Mauryan Dynasty. Chanakya or Kautilya was the prime minister in the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He gives a detailed description of the contemporary social, political and economic conditions of the kingdom at that time. *Arthashastra* also talks about the duties of a king, his foreign policy and the organisation of spies. The book was discovered in 1909 and was translated to English.
2. **Indica:** Megasthenes was the ambassador of the Greek ruler, Seleucus, in the court of Chandragupta at Pataliputra. He remained in India for fourteen years. In his book *Indica*, he has described the different aspects of Indian life, including the administration of the state, local administration and life of the king. It is one of the most important sources for knowing the details about the Mauryan Dynasty. The original book has been lost. But many excerpts survive in the writings of the later Greek authors such as Arrian, Strabo, Plutarch, Diodorus and Justin.
3. **Other sources:** Buddhist literature such as *Mahavamsa*, *Dipavamsa*, *Divyavadana* provide a lot of information about the Mauryan period.

Archaeological sources

1. **Edicts:** An edict is an official order or proclamation issued by a person in authority or a sovereign. Ashoka's edicts form one of the most important sources of the Mauryan period. The edicts of Ashoka are a collection of 33 inscriptions carved on pillars as well as boulders and cave walls. These are dispersed in different parts of Pakistan, Nepal and India. They provide important information about the extent of his empire, his religious policies and administration. These edicts deal with Ashoka's Dhamma and instructions given to the officials of his kingdom.

The edicts are divided into:

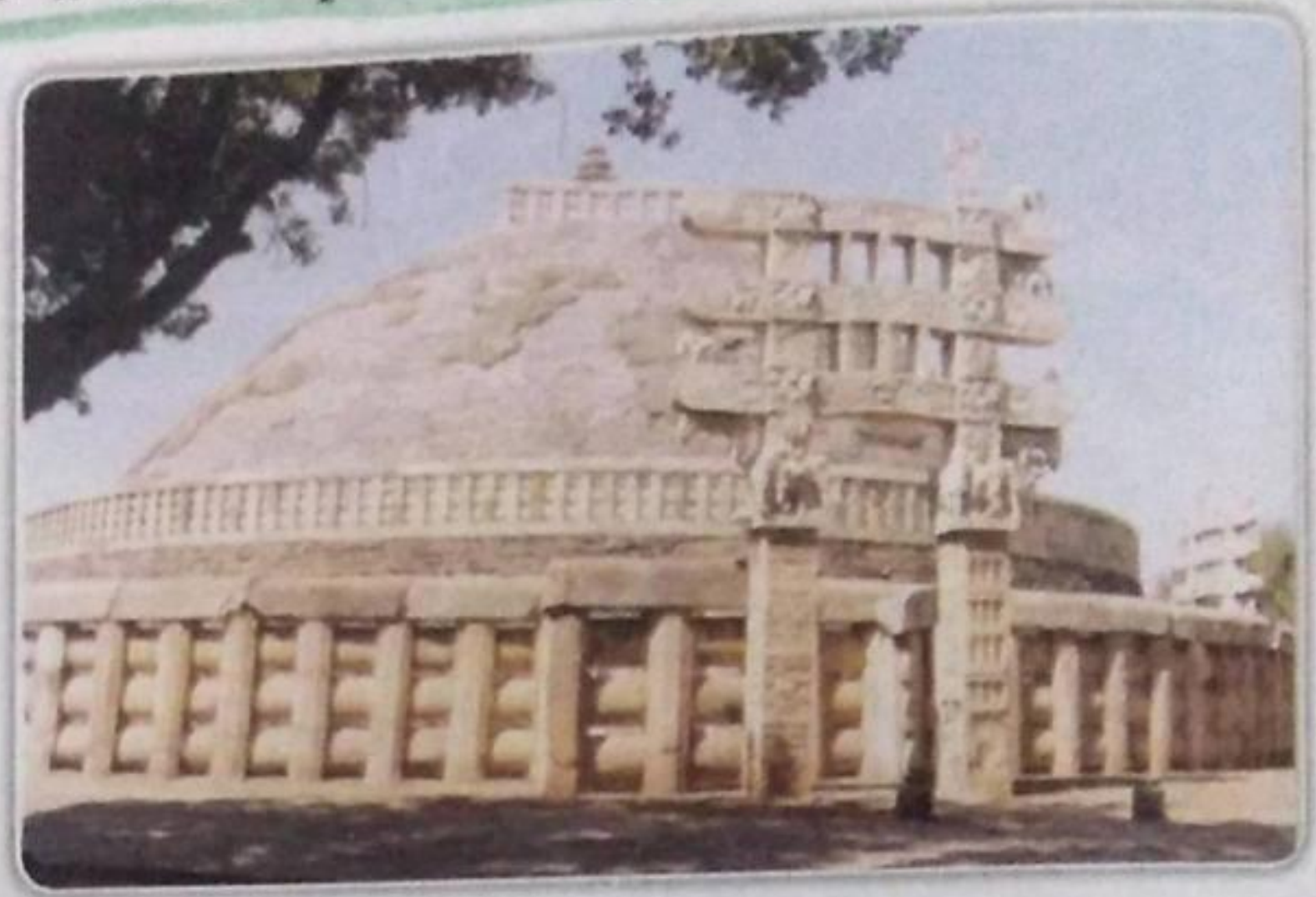
- pillar edicts,
- major rock edicts (fourteen edicts termed first to fourteenth) and
- minor rock edicts.



▲ Ashokan edict

Major rock edict XIII contains description of **Ashoka's victory over Kalinga**. It is among the most important sources of Ashokan history. It states that the Kalinga war took place eight years after he became the king. **A hundred and fifty thousand people were taken prisoners, a hundred thousand were killed and many more perished.** Kalinga was annexed by Ashoka and on conquering it, he felt extreme remorse. He then made a vow not to take up arms. **Bherighosa**, the sound of war drums, was replaced by **dhammaghosa**, the sound of peace. It signified the **conquest through Dhamma instead of war**. Major rock edict I declares prohibition of animal sacrifice and royal hunting.

2. **Stupas:** A *stupa* literally means 'heap'. It is a semi-spherical mound-like structure containing the **Buddha's relics** such as hair, teeth or bones. A casket with these relics is placed at the base of the dome. The **Great Stupa at Sanchi**, in Madhya Pradesh, consists of a circular base supporting a massive solid dome. The *stupa* is encircled by a railing and four gateways in four directions, which are richly decorated with relief sculpture depicting **Jataka tales, events in the life of the Buddha** and other popular mythological figures. The **Buddha is represented by symbols** such as the peepal tree, lotus and wheel.



▲ Sanchi stupa

(The dome is covered by a **masonry exterior** and topped by a squared-off platform (*harmika*) that encloses a royal umbrella (*chattrā*) with a mast (*yasti*) at the top.) The dome is placed atop an elevated platform with stairs leading clockwise from the ground level up to a circular walkway where the worshipper may **circumambulate** the dome. (The whole *stupa* is enclosed by a railing (*vedika*) and elaborate gates (*torana*) that are built in front of each of the four cardinal points.



▲ Illustration of the Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali



▲ Lion capital

3. **Pillars:** The pillars are a series of columns, found throughout North Indian subcontinent, erected by King Ashoka. All the **pillars were placed at important sites in the life of the Buddha and places of pilgrimage**. Some of the columns carry inscriptions addressed to the monks and nuns. Some were erected to **commemorate** visits by Ashoka. **At the top of**

the pillars are the capitals containing sculpture of lions. The capitals are monolithic. One of the finest specimens of Ashokan pillars is at Vaishali in Bihar.

Mauryan Empire

Chandragupta Maurya

Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire, deposed the last ruler of the Nanda Dynasty to ascend to the throne. The legends say that Dhanananda was strongly disliked by the people of his kingdom due to his greed and ill-treatment of his subjects. Chandragupta was assisted by Kautilya, who was also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta. The young man came to the attention of Chanakya, who bore a grudge against the Nandas. Chanakya began to groom Chandragupta to conquer and rule in the place of the Nanda emperor. He helped young Chandragupta to raise an army and taught him the tactics of warfare. Initially, Chandragupta's army suffered a setback but after a long series of battles, his army captured the Nanda capital, Pataliputra. **In 322 BCE, the capital fell and Chandragupta Maurya established his own dynasty—the Mauryan Dynasty.**

Chandragupta then set out to conquer one kingdom after the other. He became the master of West Punjab and Sindh (now in Pakistan) and controlled most of the northern India as far as the Indus. In around 305 BCE, Chandragupta attempted to win over the territories being governed by Seleucus, one of the commanders of Alexander, the Great. The events of the war between Seleucus and Chandragupta are obscure. It is believed that Seleucus crossed the Indus and may have advanced towards the Ganga. When the war ended, the situation was in Chandragupta's favour. Seleucus lost his claim over East of the Indus. They signed a treaty and Seleucus gave Kabul, Herat and Kandahar to Chandragupta. The treaty also ratified a marriage alliance and Seleucus gave his daughter, Helen, in marriage to Chandragupta. In return, he was given 500 war elephants which played a major role during the Battle of Ipsus in 302 BCE.

Review

1. What does Ashoka's pillar rock edict I tell us?
2. What do *Jataka* tales talk about?
3. Name two Buddhist texts of the period.

Points to Remember

- Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Megasthenes' *Indica* are the two chief literary sources.
- The archaeological sources include Ashokan edicts, stupas and pillars.
- The Kalinga war is one of the most significant wars of India.
- We get a lot of information about the Mauryan administration from Chanakya's *Arthashastra*.
- *Dhamma* was an ethical code of conduct introduced by Ashoka.

Chandragupta then turned his attention towards the South and almost conquered the Indian subcontinent except Kalinga (now Odisha) on the East coast and the southern kingdoms ruled by the Cheras, Pandyas and Cholas. After ruling for 24 years, Chandragupta handed over the kingdom to his son, Bindusara and adopted the life of a Jain ascetic. (He migrated towards the South to present-day Karnataka and spent his remaining life in a small cave.)

Bindusara

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son, Bindusara. To the Greeks, Bindusara was known as Amitrochates, perhaps the Greek translation of the Sanskrit name 'Amitraghata' meaning 'the destroyer of foes'. Bindusara sent a campaign to the Deccan, extending the Mauryan Empire in the peninsula to as far as Mysore. He is said to have conquered 'the land between the two seas', presumably the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

At the time of Bindusara's death around 272 BCE, practically the entire subcontinent had come under Mauryan suzerainty. The extreme South was ready to submit, thus, eliminating the need for military conquest. Yet one area alone remained hostile and unconquered, which was Kalinga on the East coast. This was left to Bindusara's son Ashoka, who campaigned successfully against Kalinga.

Ashoka

Ashoka is known as the greatest emperor of the Mauryan Dynasty. He ruled from about 268 BCE until his death in 232 BCE. He was given the titles Devanampriya (beloved of the gods) and Priyadarshi (the beautiful one) when he became the emperor. Legends say that Ashoka grew up to be a bold young man. He was extremely fond of hunting. His other half-brothers feared Ashoka and convinced his father to post him as a general in the distant frontiers of the Mauryan Empire. Ashoka proved himself to be a competent general putting down a rebellion in Taxila. Aware that his brothers viewed him as a rival for the throne, Ashoka went into exile for two years. Bindusara called his son back after two years to help suppress a revolt in Ujjain. Ashoka succeeded in it. When Bindusara died around 272 BCE, a two year-long war for the succession continued between Ashoka and his half-brothers. Ashoka was victorious and became the third ruler of the Mauryan Empire.

The Kalinga war: The Kalinga war is one of the most significant wars in the history of India. Since its commencement, the Mauryan Empire was on a path of territorial expansion. Kalinga used to be under Magadh's rule during the time of the Nandas. But it gained its independence during the Mauryan reign. This was a matter of political prestige for the Mauryans. Ashoka faced tough resistance in the battle. According to the archaeological sources (Ashokan edicts), hundred and fifty thousand people were imprisoned, a hundred thousand were killed and suffering was extreme for the survivors. **Ashoka won the war and captured Kalinga**. However, he felt extreme remorse for the death and destruction caused by the war.

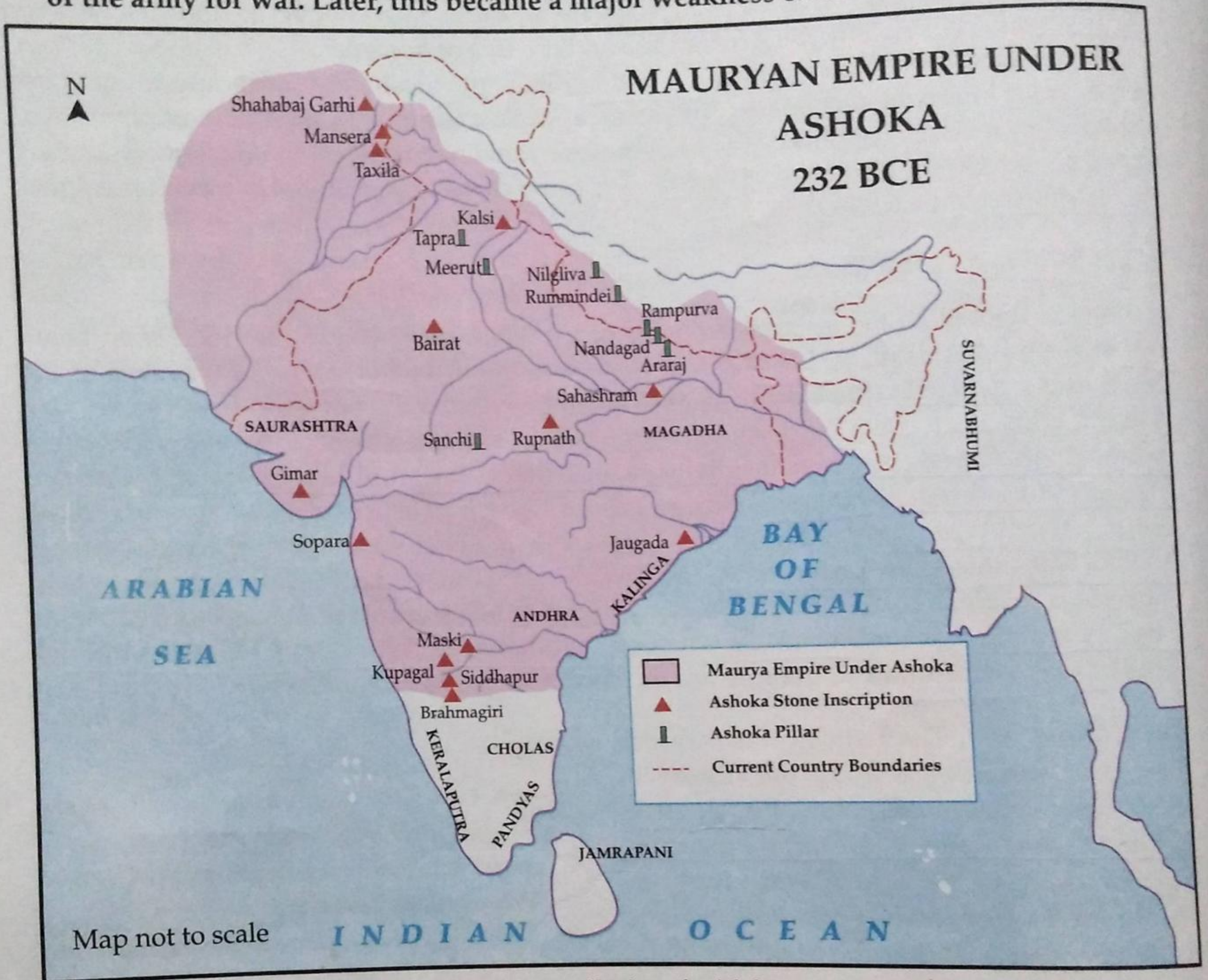
It brought about a great change in the personal and political life of Ashoka. As a result of the war:

- ✓ Ashoka realised that the real conquest was not by sword but conquest of the heart. He came to believe that the victory by dharma was the only victory.

Review

1. What did Chandragupta Maurya do after 24 years of ruling the empire?
2. What was Bindusara called by the Greeks? What did the name mean?
3. How did Ashoka come to the throne after his father's death?

- ✓ he vowed to give up the path of war and embrace the path of peace. He stopped hunting and eating meat.
- ✓ **Buddhism** was declared as the religion of the state.
- it is believed that the adoption of the policy of peace led to a decline in the preparedness of the army for war. Later, this became a major weakness of the Mauryan Empire.



The empire saw the transformation of Ashoka from *Chandasoka* (Ashoka, the wicked) to *Dhammasoka* (Ashoka, the righteous one).

Whole Pan-Indian character of Mauryan Empire

The Mauryan Empire, with Chandragupta Maurya coming to power, was not only vast but exhibited Pan-Indian character. The empire rose to power after defeating the foreign invaders who were driven out of the country by Chandragupta Maurya. The empire of Ashoka extended from the Brahmaputra in the East to the Hindukush mountains in the

North-west and the Arabian Sea in the West. It extended from the Himalayas in the North to the Pennar river in the South. Some parts of Nepal and Kashmir were under Ashoka's empire too. Outside India, it covered the provinces of Kabul, Herat and Kandahar.

The chief advantages of this Pan-Indian character were that:

- ✓ it ended smaller independent states.
- ✓ it established trade links with foreign countries. it made India a power to reckon with and helped the Mauryan emperors face foreign aggression successfully.
- ✓ after Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga, there was an end to wars. It helped the Mauryan emperors to devote more energy and resources to the social and economic betterment of the people.

Hence, there was an all-round prosperity.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING:

1. Explain the literary sources that help us to reconstruct the Mauryan history.
2. What are the archaeological sources of the Mauryan Empire?
3. Give briefly the conquests of Chandragupta Maurya.
4. Give a description of Kalinga War and its consequences.
5. Give the advantages of Pan-Indian character under the Mauryan rulers.