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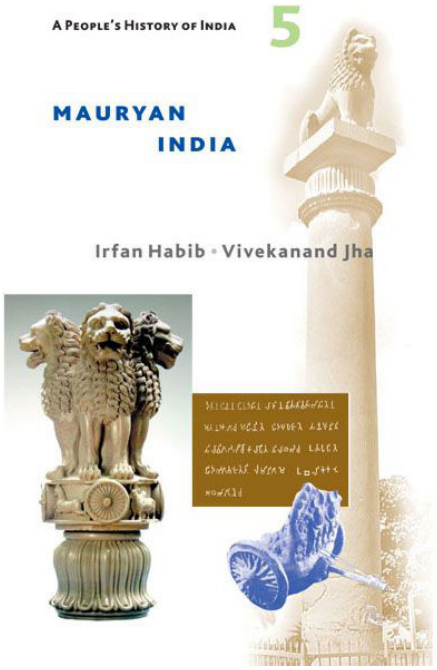
Reviews

Irfan Habib & Vivekanand Jha, *Mauryan India. 9th Edition.* A People's History of India Vol. 5. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019, x + 189p., ISBN 978-93-82381-62-4.

Matthew G. MARSH
Sul Ross State University
mmarsh@sulross.edu



Ancient India was one of the original centres of civilisation, along with Sumer, Egypt, China, and later Mesoamerica. While the Indus or Harappan Civilisation had land and sea connections with Southwest Asia, these had lapsed in the disappearance of that civilisation between 1800 and 1500BCE. The reconnecting of northern India to Southwest Asia would begin with the arrival of the Achaemenid Empire of Iran in the Indus region during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. With the Mauryan period, India would be fully reconnected to the broader Asian and Middle Eastern worlds.

The Mauryan Empire was the first Indian state to encompass nearly all of the Indian sub-continent, plus large portions of Afghanistan, and even parts of Iran. For nearly one-hundred years the Mauryan Empire was the largest richest state in the Eurasian world. However, despite their size and wealth, Mauryan India is far less well known than the Macedonian Empire of Alexander III, the Hellenistic successor kingdoms, or the Roman Republic. Compared to the dozens of new works on the Hellenistic or Roman worlds, there are only a handful of introductory works on Mauryan India available.[1] *Mauryan India*, volume 5 in the series *A People's History of India*, and the only one published in the 21st century, aims to fill that gap.

Originally published in 2004, *Mauryan India* is now in its new 9th edition, once again published by Tulika Books. The first five editions were co-authored by Irfan Habib and Vivkanand Jha, however, after the death of Dr. Jha in 2012, Dr. Habib has continued to make revisions and updates to each subsequent edition. Vivekanand Jha was Director of the Indian Council of Historical Research and edited the *Indian Historical Review* for twenty years. His interest and research lay in the field of Ancient India. Irfan Habib is Professor Emeritus at the Aligarh Muslim University, and for the first forty years of his academic career was a renowned historian of Mughal India.[2] At the turn of the millennium, he took on the general editorship of *A People's History of India*, and since then has authored or co-authored several volumes spanning the whole of Indian history.

Mauryan India has been divided into three broad chapters – "Alexander's Invasion and the Formation of the Mauryan Empire;" "Ashoka and the Later Years of the Mauryan Empire;" "Economy, Society, and Culture." Each chapter is sub-divided into five or six parts and followed by primary source extracts, chapter specific notes, and a bibliographical note. In keeping with the aim of the series, which is addressed to "the general reader and the student," there are no footnotes in this work.[3]

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1 The most recent major English language publication was that of *Mauryan India* in 1985. (BONGARD-LEVIN 1985). Sadly, this book is out-of-print and the publisher, Sterling Publishers Private LTD, have indicated in an e-mail correspondence with the author that they have no plans to reprint this work in the near future.

2 See in particular his seminal work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556–1707* (HABIB 2012), and his synthesis *Medieval India* (HABIB 2007).

3 HABIB/JHA 2019, ix-x

With Chapter One, "Alexander's Invasion and the Formation of the Mauryan Empire," H&J begin with a brief examination of the geopolitical situation in India just prior to the arrival of Alexander III of Macedon. H&J emphasise that agriculture and trade were sufficiently developed for India to support an urban economy, though towns more than large cities dominated. They also note that by the 330's BCE, there did not appear to be any remnant of the Achaemenid Empire of Iran in north-eastern India, despite their conquest of the area in the late 6th century BCE. From there H&J provide an overview of political developments in Greece and the invasion of Alexander into the Achaemenid Empire of Iran. Beginning with the development of Macedonia as a power north of a politically fragmented Greece in the 4th century BCE, they emphasise the effectiveness of Macedonian military and their importance in allowing both Phillip II to master Greece, and Alexander to conquer the Achaemenid Empire. Before looking at Alexander's Indian campaign, H&J make the important note that the language and rhetoric of Alexander changed as he moved from being the avenger of the Greeks to the "Great King" of the majority of the Levant and Near East. A concise overview of Alexander's invasion of India follows, looking in-depth at the Battle of Hydaspes against Porus, as well as the whirlwind attacks on polities along the Indus River that ultimately disrupted or destroyed much of the independent powers of the Indian North-west. When Alexander withdrew his army from India in 325BCE, he left behind a power vacuum that would be filled by Chandragupta Maurya. H&J, while noting that plunder was Alexander's main object, point out the unintended cultural consequence of the invasion was the cross-cultural exchange between India and Southwestern Asia that resulted.

From Alexander and the Macedonians H&J turn to the Ganga River valley and the Nanda dynasty that briefly came to dominate the kingdom of Magadha. While an unpopular dynasty, possibly due to high taxation and military demands, the Nanda dominated northern India with a large army of over two hundred thousand troops, including three to four thousand elephant troops. Throughout this section H&J make note of the varying Buddhist, Jain, and Greek sources that historians must navigate to provide a historical synthesis of the period. From the Nanda H&J turn to Chandragupta Maurya and his efforts to overthrow the Nanda, and the establishment of the Mauryan empire in its place. They note the key role assigned by every major Indian tradition to the great statesman Chanakya or Kautilya in mentoring Chandragupta, as well as in achieving his geo-political goals. H&J highlight the effect that the wars of the Diadochi had in removing most of the remaining Macedonian military presence in India to fight on behalf of one of the successor generals. The pull of the satrapal forces away from India allowed Chandragupta to take control of the Indian northwest after he finally defeated the Nanda. By the time Seleukos I Nikator made his grand eastern expedition in 305BCE, Chandragupta was firmly in control of the Indus river territories. The two rulers concluded a treaty between them that allowed Seleukos to gracefully pull-out of Paropamisadae, Arachosia, and Gedrosia in exchange for five hundred war elephants, and a marriage alliance. H&J then discuss the limited historical traditions about Chandragupta after the treaty with Seleukos, noting that in Jain traditions not only was Chanakya (Kautilya) a Jain, but Chandragupta himself converted to Jainism, became an ascetic following a twelve-year famine before dying of suicide around 298BCE.

Due to the extreme paucity of information about the next Mauryan emperor, Bindesura, H&J move quickly to look at the early years of Ashoka Maurya, emphasising the use of Ashoka's own inscriptions in understanding the events of the period. They note that due to Ashoka's war with the state of Kalinga in eastern India, the Mauryan Empire reached to maximum area of control over India. The possible extant of Ashoka's empire is deduced from the Ashokan rock and pillar edicts, carved or erected, over a wide space of territory in India. Using the Ashokan inscriptions H&J are able to piece together some of the governmental functions of the Mauryan central government. The family of the emperor held a central place in the control of the empire, as one of Ashoka's edicts notes their placement in the capital and in outlying towns, apparently supervising provinces as viceroy's or governors. A council known as a *parisa* assisted the emperor in carrying out his orders. Government officials known in the inscriptions as *pulisas* were divided into low, mid, and high-level ranks corresponding to their responsibilities. In looking at the Mauryan armed forces, H&J note that Ashoka's inscriptions do not provide much information, instead historians must turn to the extant literary sources, such as the *Arthashastra* attributed to Kautilya, as well as Greco-Roman sources such as Megasthenes or Diodorus. From these sources a picture emerges of an army divided into four divisions – infantry, horse, chariot, and elephants. Ashoka's inscriptions, specifically the language in which they were inscribed, also enable historians to roughly map the territorial limits of the Mauryan empire's provinces, as well as through references to specific officials provide an idea of how the provincial administration was staffed. Due to the size of the Mauryan empire communications was definitely an issue that concerned its rulers. The Ashokan inscriptions reference road improvements, while the *Arthashastra* provides information on the width of different types of roads, and fines if one encroached on the lands assigned to roads. Finally, H&J turn to the fiscal system of the empire, one in which taxes are collected not only in kind, but also through coin, as evidenced by 'punch-marked silver coins' dated to the Mauryan period.

In Chapter Two, "Ashoka and the Later Years of the Mauryan Empire," H&J begin by looking at the variety of inscriptions left by Ashoka, such as the Major/Minor Rock edicts, the Pillar Edicts, and the Greco-Aramaean inscriptions from Arachosia. For each type of inscription, they note the extent of where they were used by Ashoka, as well as possible reasons for Ashoka to have placed inscriptions where they have been found. H&J also note the fact that, outside of the still untranslated Harappan/Indus civilisation glyphs, Ashoka's inscriptions provide the earliest evidence of writing in India. From this overview of the Ashokan inscriptions H&J move to an examination of Ashoka's concept of *dhamma*, one of the primary reasons behind Ashoka's erection of the various forms of inscriptions. H&J note that Ashoka's use of the Prakrit word, even though it linguistically corresponds to the Sanskrit word *dharma*, does not confirm to earlier

usages of the word in either Buddhism or the Vedic religion. Instead, Ashoka seems to have used *dhamma* to refer to a set of "desired forms of conduct and attitudes of mind," which H&J note from the inscriptions comprised some seventeen different practises.[4] H&J then provide an examination of the major practises that Ashoka's inscriptions touch upon, such as compassion to all beings, obedience to parents and to elders, as well as how the *dhamma* edicts touched on religion. They also point out that while Ashoka's conception of *dhamma* is clearly influenced by Buddhism, it is not something that is simply cut and pasted over. Instead Ashoka took a concept that was, at that time, on the periphery of Buddhist teachings and made it the central component of his administration after the Kalinga War. After this examination of Ashoka's inscriptions, *dhamma*, and Ashoka's aims through the propagation of *dhamma*, H&J look at the remainder of Ashoka's reign. They make the important note – the inscriptions of Ashoka provide essentially the only reliable sources for his reign. While Theravada Buddhist sources from Sri Lanka, as well as Mahayana literature from North India preserve information on Ashoka's reign, in many cases the information is so distorted by myth and legend that it has to be compared to Ashoka's inscriptions for corroboration. Using his inscriptions, H&J look at Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, as well as the impact, or lack thereof, that Buddhism had on his tolerance towards other religious sects. From there they turn to the practical aspects of how Ashoka would have attempted to put his conception of *dhamma* into practical application in the Mauryan Empire, through his inscriptions as well as oral instruction by Ashoka's officials. Ashoka, it should be noted, attempted to practise what he asked of the Mauryan populace. From the inscriptions H&J look at the measures taken to aid public welfare, such as medical assistance for his citizenry, relief and comfort for travellers on the Imperial roads, as well as irrigation works. The dispensation of justice was a major component of the Mauryan administration, especially since Ashoka took a paternalistic view of his citizenry, and, in his inscriptions, Ashoka called for justice to be equitable in both judgement and punishment.

With Chapter Three, "Economy, Society, and Culture," H&J look at the non-political or miliary historical aspects of the period. Focusing first on the economy of Mauryan India, they make the important distinction that the land of the period was much more forested than it is today. From his inscriptions they note that the forests were an important part of the economic resources of the Mauryan state through the use of timber for building and construction materials, as well as its use in the production of manufactured goods and weapons. Proving that modern day problems were sometimes ancient problems as well H&J highlight that Ashoka specifically forbids burning of forests, presumably targeting slash-and-burn cultivation and/or burning down portions of forests to drive out wild animals for hunting. Like all pre-modern states, the Mauryan Empire was primarily funded and dependent on agricultural production. The Mauryan period saw the expansion of iron in agricultural tools, such as the plough and the sickle, that would have helped expand not only agricultural production, but also the subsidiary industries that serviced agricultural implements. Water lifting and state-built waterworks, such canals and dams, begin to appear in some of the sources during this period also, though H&J do note that the area affected by these constructions was relatively small. The *Arthashastra* provides the most complete listing of crops being grown in the Mauryan period, as well as the corresponding season (rainy-*kharif* or winter-*rabi*) in which they are gathered.[5] H&J highlight the fact that there is a balance between cereals (wheat, rice, and barley) with millets and pulses (peas, beans, etc.) being produced in each season to presumably try to raise enough food to not cause a lack of availability in any particular season. They also note that while agriculture and commerce increased in importance in the Mauryan period, the pastoral economy with the raising of cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs was still important. Non-agricultural industry also expanded during the Mauryan period as Northern Black Polished (NBP) pottery, which required the technology to fire the pottery at high temperatures, displaced earlier pottery found in Vedic and Later-Vedic India. Based on the archaeological and literary record, mining was a large concern for the Mauryans as gold mine workings have been found, as well as silver and lead. Iron was the most worked metal of the period, as India has extensive iron ore sources that lie close to the surface, being employed in a wide variety of household, industrial, and military usages. As is often the case with a well-organised state, the Mauryan rulers built on a massive scale fortifying towns, constructing buildings, and raising the pillars on which a number of the Ashokan inscriptions are carved. While not as urbanised as India today, Mauryan India contained a number of towns ranging in size from the imperial capital Pataliputra with its 140,000 inhabitants (living on an estimated 340 hectares of land), to Kapilavastu in the northeastern Uttar Pradesh with a population perhaps 6,000-12,000 (living on an estimated 16-30 hectares of land) with indications that the urban portion of the population was of considerable size.[6] In addition to the expansion of towns, the Mauryan period saw the growth of international trade between India and the Hellenistic world, as well as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and China. Long-Distance trade between towns in different regions of India also increased, aided by the construction of highways and roads by the Mauryan state, possibly inspired by the road system of the Achaemenid Empire of Iran.

Moving from economy to society, H&J note that a strong imperial ruling class had established itself in Mauryan India that had access to the economic surplus of the Mauryan Empire. Supporting this ruling class were the gentry and ruling clans that comprised the imperial bureaucracy. H&J take pain to highlight that this ruling class was made of diverse elements of Indian society at the time. They emphasise that Mauryan ruling class dominated a society in which the three basic components of the caste system (hierarchy fixed by birth, hereditary occupations, and

4 HABIB/JHA 2019, 63-64.

5 HABIB/JHA 2019, 115.

6 For those on the Imperial system 1 hectare = approximately 2.47 acres. So, Pataliputra's land area would be approximately 840 acres and Kapilavastu's 39.5-74 acres.

endogamy or marriage within a prescribed social group) had taken deep root in Indian society. While the Vedic division of society into four *varnas* (Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras) continued, thanks to the literary evidence from Greek and Indian sources we can see the expansion of castes that cannot be specifically slotted into any existing *varna*. H&J also note the fact that social mobility between these *varna* and castes has become very limited, with legal punishments for those who attempted to exceed their status, be that in terms of occupation or in terms of marriage. The issue of slavery is also touched upon, highlighting the conflicting literary evidence as Megasthenes asserts there was no slavery, while the *Arthashastra* has discrete references to slavery in it. While some protections for slaves are found, they are specific to an 'Arya' man or woman of a specific *varna*. For those who fell outside the existing *varna* no such protections existed. As well, there do not seem to have been any legal protections or limitations on how slaves could be treated by their masters. H&J briefly examine the position of women in Mauryan society, highlighting that it was essentially a patriarchal society where the value of women was based on their childbearing abilities. They also note that only two types of property could be owned by women – means of subsistence and ornaments, and daughters had no claim on any property from their parents.

Finally, H&J turn to religion in Mauryan India. Using Ashoka's inscriptions they note that Mauryan India was a period (as today) of multiple religions contending/competing with each other. In Ashoka's time this was an apparently novel linguistic situation as the word he uses to describe them, *pasamda,* is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning "heresy, false doctrine or a follower thereof." While Brahmanism rooted in the Vedic religion was still the most widespread religion found in India, after the religion revolution in the fifth century BCE it faced significant challenges from Buddhism and Jainism. The Mauryan period apparently saw the decline of the extensive ritual sacrifices, culminating with Ashoka banning not only ritual offerings (*pajohitava*) but also the religious gatherings (*samaja*) where these offerings were made to the Gods or Goddess. It appears too, that the Mauryan period is when the concept of *ahimsa*, non-injury of living things, began to make significant inroads into Brahmanical philosophy and thought. H&J note that the reign of Ashoka marks the beginning of a roughly five-hundred-year ascendency of Buddhism within India. Ashoka is remembered in all the Buddhist traditions for his patronage of Buddhism, though Ashoka's own edicts are silent on the extant of this patronage. The Mauryan period also saw the Third Council of Buddhism held at Pataliputra, the compilation of the *Tipitaka,* and the first international expansion of Buddhism as Ashoka sent envoys to carry the message of *dhamma* abroad to the Greek world, the Himalayas, Southeast Asia, and Sri Lanka. H&J proceed to look at the arrival of writing in India, since the reign of Ashoka seems to mark the first widespread use of writing in India since the Harappan period over fifteen centuries earlier. While H&J discuss the scholarly controversy on how and when the Brahmi and Kharoshthi scripts arose in India, they note that however writing arrived, it diffused throughout India rapidly. Multiple languages found themselves being written in the Mauryan Period, though the most widespread seems to have been four different dialects of Ashokan Prakrit found in the Punjab, Ganga, and Deccan regions. Greek and Aramaic were common in the Northwestern provinces of the Empire. From here H&J briefly look at the different texts available on medicine, mathematics, and astronomy before touching on the art & architecture of the period.

Mauryan India contains numerous pedagogical aids for the reader with a number of tables of information, multiple maps of the entire empire or specific regions, and many illustrations – frequently of archaeological and inscriptional visual evidence that enhance the text. Each chapter contains primary source extracts from the Indian or non-Indian sources, one or two detailed endnotes on specific aspects of the chapter, and bibliographical note to aid in further study. While there are only three chapters, the reader is aided by a detailed table of contents and a sizable index.

It is important to note the fact that Drs. Habib and Jha have managed to synthesise as massive amount of material from a wide range of literary and archaeological sources to write this volume. However, the volume could have been improved. The structure of the volume is odd, grouping part of Ashoka's reign in one chapter, and the rest in chapter two where the Ashokan edicts have pride of place, while the bulk of the information on the economy and society are in their own chapter. While we do not have the extensive detail possible in later periods, from a teaching perspective it would have been helpful to have the socio-economic aspects of Mauryan society more closely tied in with the political and administrative developments. It should also be noted that sometimes H&J lose sight of the forest for the trees, particularly in the discussion of Mauryan administration, where they focus on which source or edict specific administrative officials can be found without then truly providing the reader an understanding of how they think the Mauryan administration worked. Greater discussion on the growth of towns and how they related to the Mauryan state would have been helpful. While the Ashokan edicts give historians an idea of the religious condition in Ashoka's reign, is there sufficient evidence to discuss religion under the reign of Chandragupta, who, according to the Jain tradition, converted to Jainism, becoming an ascetic in the last years of his reign? Also, while H&J do touch on the Mauryan Empire's relationship with the Hellenistic world, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia to an extent; it would be helpful, from a teaching perspective, for the reader to be better able to place Mauryan India in the broader Eurasian world in which it existed. On the pedagogical side, a glossary of terms would aid students with no prior knowledge of the languages of the period. Also, while the bibliographical notes are quite helpful to an extent, the latest reference to a secondary work is to the year 2000. It would be helpful, considering the not immoderate number of publications on the Mauryan period, to have suggestions for additional reading and research that reach up to at least 2015 and help the reader/student navigate which books are best for further study. Finally, while this is the ninth edition of *Mauryan India*, there is no real indication of what Dr. Habib has revised for this edition. The only authors note is to the sixth edition where Dr. Habib notes the death of Dr. Jha, and that he has made corrections

and updated information. Again, no information is provided as to what areas have been revised, or the scope and depth of the revisions.

Regardless of the above critiques, this is an excellent introduction to the study of the Mauryan Empire and the world in which it existed. Highly recommended as one of primary or supplemental textbooks for an Ancient History or World History I college course. Students sitting for the civil service exams will find that this book aids with study for the ancient history portion of the history alternate exam.

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