

## Decline and Fall of the Maurya Empire II a

The vast empire of the Mauryas that comprised practically the whole of the Indian Sub-Continent and beyond, and reared on the political theories of Kautilya, reached its tragic end with the assassination of the last of the imperial Mauryas, Brihadratha, at the hands

of the traitor regicide Pushyamitra, Commander-in-Chief. The end came within barely fifty years of Asoka's death. That within half a century from the time when Asoka had to assure his frontagers that they had nothing to fear from him, the empire became extinct, has given cause to scholars to identify the factors that speeded up the decline and fall of the Maurya empire.

(According to one school of thought, Asoka's religious policy mainly accounts for the debacle. The Chief exponent of this school of thought is Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Sastri who is of the opinion that the reaction prompted by the Brahmanas against Asoka's policy of patronising Buddhism and deliberately humiliating the Brahmanas led to this reaction. He and others of his way of thinking see the hands of the Brahmanas in the revolution headed by Pushyamitra.) Haraprasad Sastri thinks that Asoka's edicts were directed against the Brahmanas and these were specially offensive as these were promulgated by a Sudra. Asoka's prohibition of animal sacrifice enjoined by Brahmanical religion, his appointing of *Dhamma Mahamatras* as superintends of morals among the Brahmanas thereby infringing the privilege of the Brahmanas, his introduction of *Vyavasharasamata* and *Danda-samata* i.e., equality in treatment as well as punishment of the Brahmanas with all other castes infringing the special consideration always shown to the Brahmanas have been enumerated as the causes prompting the Brahmanical reaction.)

(Dr. H. C. Raichaudhuri argues at length that prohibition of animal sacrifice was not specially directed to the Brahmanas, for long before Asoka, non-violence had been recommended in *Srutis*. Further it has been proved beyond doubt that Asoka's Grand-father, Chandragupta was not of *Sudra* extraction, but was a *Kshatriya* of the village Mayuraposaka in Pippalivana.) (Further, the *Dhamma-mahamatras* were no more superintendents of morals. They were entrusted with the duties of the promotion of welfare also of the Brahmanas and the establishment of the Law of Piety which included liberality to the Brahmanas. Again, there is nothing to show that *Dhamma-mahamatras* were all appointed from the non-Brahmanas.) (It has also been pointed out by Dr. Raichaudhuri that Brahmanas were not immune from principle of equality before Law and in punishment. In *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* it is clearly laid down that a priest, i.e., Purohita (Brahmana) might be punished with death for treachery towards his master. Pandit Sastri's contention that as soon as the strong arm of Asoka was withdrawn the Brahmanas revolted against his successors. This is not borne out by history.) In *Rajatarangini* we come across definite evidence that Jalauka and the Brahmanical Hindus of Kashmir were on most friendly terms.

(About Pushyamitra's revolt it cannot be said that he being a

Brahmana his revolt was an expression of Brahmanical reaction. We must not forget that his revolt can be better accounted for his hold over the army rather than his leadership of a band of discontented Brahmanas.

According to another school of writers the root cause of the fall of the Maurya empire was Asoka's policy of non-violence which he had adopted as state policy and which totally sapped the martial ardour of imperial Magadha. He gave up the aggressive militarism of his forefathers and disabanded his army. He not only eschewed all wars but also enjoined upon his sons and grandsons to do so. All this had the natural effect of impairing martial spirit and military efficiency of the empire. But it was not, by itself, the only cause of the downfall of the empire. We must seek for other causes as well.

The Maurya empire was ruled by a central authority, and it is no wonder that such a vast empire could not be kept together from the centre, particularly when weaker rulers succeeded to the throne. Empires rose and fell not only in India but also in other parts of the world and nearly one and half centuries that the Mauryas empire endured cannot be considered too small a span of time. The Maurya empire had certain natural causes, also traceable in the factors of the downfall of other empires. These were the spirit of autonomy, oppressive nature of rule by the royal officials, rebellious disposition of the governors of outlying provinces, official treachery, palace intrigues and difficult communication with distant parts of the empire.

Taxila was in repeated revolt. The oppressive rule of the local officials led to the revolt of Taxila once under Bindusara when Asoka had to be sent to put it down. Even under Asoka it once revolted. This attempt at repeated revolts was symptomatic of what were happening elsewhere of the empire. Even if there were no open revolts the willingness was definitely there. The Kalinga Edicts show that oppression by his officials was very much known to him and he did not hide his displeasure in this regard. If even under Asoka there was cause for anxiety at the neglect of duty, one can simply imagine what happened under Asoka's weak successors. That there were intrigues and treachery in the imperial court is evident from the treacherous conduct of Pushyamitra. Such treacherous conduct could not be the result of momentary impulse or short-time preparation.

There are also grounds to believe that the Maurya Court after the death of Asoka was gradually divided into two factions one headed by Pushyamitra, the Commander-in-Chief, and other by the minister. The minister managed to place his son as governor at Vidarbha and the Commander-in-Chief his son as governor at Vidisa.

To the above weaknesses should be added the invasion of the Bactrian Greeks from the north-west. From Syria to whole of Western

Asia upto the borders of Hindukush were under Seleukos. ( About 250 B.C. two provinces of Bactria and Parthia revolted against the Selencidan dynasty and became independent. Attempt to reconquer them by Antiochos III, King of Syria, failed and in 208 B.C. independence of Bactria and Parthia was recognised. ) Soon afterwards, the Bactrian and Parthian Kings turned their eyes towards India. About 190 B.C. Demetrius invaded India, when Brihadratha was the Maurya emperor and wrested considerable portion of his empire in the north-west. The revolt of the Andhras, success of the raid of the Bactrian Greeks and loss of north-western part of the empire dealt a severe blow to the prestige of the empire and confusion reigned supreme in the country. Obviously, Pushyamitra, the Commander-in-Chief of the Maurya army, took advantage of the situation and killed his master Brihadratha while he was reviewing his army and thus put an end to 137-year old dynasty founded by Chandragupta Maurya.)

Yet, there need be no regret, for empire of Asoka would have gone the way of many more mighty empires of the world even if he had pursued the policy of aggressive militarism; it would be only a question of time. But the moral ascendancy of the Indian culture over a large part of the civilised world which Asoka's policy had brought about has not vanished even today, after a lapse of two milleniums.