

Chandragupta Maurya

Founder of the Mauryan Empire in 320 B.C.

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Chandragupta Maurya was an Indian emperor around 320 B.C. who founded the Maurya Empire. That empire rapidly expanded across much of India into modern-day [Pakistan](#), in an effort to restore India's unity after Alexander the Great of Macedonia invaded in 326 B.C.

Fortunately, hampered by the high Hindu-Kush Mountains, Alexander's army lost its will to conquer India at the Battle of Jhelum, or Hydaspes River. Although the Macedonians made it through the Khyber Pass and defeated [Raja Puru \(King Poros\)](#) near modern-day Bhera, Pakistan, the fighting was almost too much for Alexander's troops.

When the victorious Macedonians heard that their next target--the Nanda Empire--could muster 6,000 war elephants, the soldiers revolted. Alexander the Great would not conquer the far side of the Ganges.

Although the world's greatest tactician could not convince his troops to take on the Nanda Empire, five years after Alexander turned away, a 20-year-old Chandragupta Maurya would accomplish that feat, and go on to unite almost all of what is now [India](#). The young Indian emperor would also take on Alexander's successors, and win.

Chandragupta Maurya's Birth and Ancestry

Chandragupta Maurya was reportedly born in Patna (in the modern-day Bihar state of India) sometime around 340 B.C. and scholars are uncertain of some details about his life. For example, some texts claim that both of Chandragupta's parents were of the Kshatriya (warrior or prince) [caste](#), while others state that his father was a king and his mother a maid from the lowly Shudra--or servant--caste.

It seems likely that his father was Prince Sarvarthasiddhi of the Nanda Kingdom. Chandragupta's grandson, [Ashoka the Great](#), later claimed a blood relationship to [Siddhartha Gautama](#), the Buddha, but this claim is unsubstantiated.

We know almost nothing about Chandragupta Maurya's childhood and youth before he took on the Nanda Empire, which supports the hypothesis that he was of humble origin as no records about him exist until he founded the Mauryan Empire.

Overthrowing the Nanda and Establishing the Mauryan Empire

Chandragupta was brave and charismatic--a born leader. The young man came to the attention of a famous [Brahmin](#) scholar, Chanakya, who bore a grudge against the Nanda. Chanakya began to groom Chandragupta to conquer and rule in the place of the Nanda Emperor by teaching him tactics through different Hindu sutras and helping him raise an army.

Chandragupta allied himself to the king of a mountain kingdom--perhaps the same Puru who had been defeated but spared by Alexander--and set out to conquer the Nanda. Initially, the upstart's army was rebuffed, but after a long series of battles Chandragupta's forces laid siege to the Nanda capital at Pataliputra. In 321 B.C. the capital fell, and 20-year-old Chandragupta Maurya started his own dynasty--the Mauryan Empire.

Chandragupta's new empire stretched from what is now [Afghanistan](#) in the west, to [Myanmar](#) (Burma) in the east, and from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to the Deccan Plateau in the south. Chanakya served as the equivalent of a "prime minister" in the fledgling government.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his generals divided up his empire into [satrapies](#) so that each of them would have a territory to rule, but by about 316, Chandragupta Maurya was able to defeat and incorporate all of the satraps in the mountains of [Central Asia](#), extending his empire to the edge of what is now [Iran](#), [Tajikistan](#), and Kyrgyzstan.

Some sources allege that Chandragupta Maurya may have arranged for the assassination of two of the Macedonian satraps: Philip son of Machatas, and Nicanor of Parthia. If so, it was a very precocious act even for Chandragupta--Philip was assassinated in 326 when the future ruler of the Mauryan Empire was still an anonymous teenager.

Conflicts with Southern India and Persia

In 305, Chandragupta decided to expand his empire into eastern Persia. At the time, Persia was ruled by Seleucus I Nicator, founder of the Seleucid Empire, and a former general under Alexander. Chandragupta seized a large area in eastern Persia. In the peace treaty that ended this war, Chandragupta got control of that land as well as the hand of one of Seleucus's daughters in marriage. In exchange, Seleucus got 500 war elephants, which he put to good use at the Battle of Ipsus in 301.

With as much territory as he could comfortably rule to the north and west, Chandragupta Maurya next turned his attention south. With an army of 400,000 (according to Strabo) or 600,000 (according to Pliny the Elder), Chandragupta conquered all of the Indian subcontinent except for Kalinga (now Orissa) on the east coast and the [Tamil](#) kingdom at the farthest southern tip of the landmass.

By the end of his reign, Chandragupta Maurya had unified almost all of the [Indian subcontinent](#) under his rule. His grandson, Ashoka, would go on to add Kalinga and the Tamils to the empire.

Family Life

The only one of Chandragupta's queens or consorts for whom we have a name is Durdhara, the mother of his first son, Bindusara. However, it is likely that Chandragupta had many more consorts.

According to legend, Prime Minister Chanakya was concerned that Chandragupta might be poisoned by his enemies, and therefore started introducing small amounts of poison into the emperor's food in order to build up a tolerance. Chandragupta was unaware of this plan and shared some of his food with his wife Durdhara when she was pregnant with their first son. Durdhara died, but Chanakya rushed in and performed an emergency operation to remove the full-term baby. The infant Bindusara survived, but a bit of his mother's poisoned blood touched his forehead, leaving a blue bindu--the spot that inspired his name.

Little is known about Chandragupta's other wives and children and his son, Bindusara, is likely remembered more because of his son than for his own reign. He was the father of one of India's greatest monarchs: Ashoka the Great.

Death and Legacy

When he was in his fifties, Chandragupta became fascinated with Jainism, an extremely ascetic belief system. His guru was the Jain saint Bhadrabahu. In 298 B.C., the emperor renounced his rule, handing over power to his son Bindusara. He then traveled south to a cave at Shravanabelogola, now in Karnataka. There, Chandragupta meditated without eating or drinking for five weeks, until he died of starvation in a practice called *sallekhana* or *santhara*.

The dynasty that Chandragupta founded would rule over India and the south of Central Asia until 185 B.C. and his grandson Ashoka would follow in Chandragupta's footsteps in several ways--conquering territory as a young man, but then becoming devoutly religious as he aged. In fact, Ashoka's reign in India may be the purest expression of Buddhism in any government in history.

Today, Chandragupta is remembered as the unifier of India, like [Qin Shihuangdi](#) in China, but far less blood-thirsty. Despite the paucity of records, Chandragupta's life story has inspired movies such as the 1958 "Samrat Chandragupt" novels, and even a 2011 Hindi-language TV series.

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