

APPSC GROUP-I MAINS — STUDY NOTES

MAURYAN EMPIRE

322–185 BCE | Chandragupta • Ashoka • Arthashastra • Dhamma • Administration

Paper II — History, Culture & Geography | Day 6 (04 Apr 2026)

SECTION 1: SUMMARISED NOTES

1.1 Sources

- **Arthashastra (Kautilya/Chanakya):** Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, governance, economy, espionage, military, and law. The most comprehensive ancient Indian text on governance. Describes the ideal state machinery.
- **Indica (Megasthenes):** Greek ambassador at Chandragupta's court. Describes Pataliputra, society (7 castes), administration, military, and economy. Original lost; fragments survive in later Greek/Roman works.
- **Ashokan Edicts:** Rock edicts (14 Major + 2 separate), Pillar edicts (7), Cave inscriptions. Deciphered by James Prinsep (1837). Written in Brahmi (most), Kharoshthi (NW), Greek and Aramaic (NW frontier). Primary source for Ashoka's Dhamma.
- **Other:** Mudrarakshasa (Vishakhadatta — play about Chandragupta's rise); Buddhist texts (Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa — Sri Lankan chronicles); Jain texts (Chandragupta's Jain conversion); Puranas (dynastic lists); NBPW pottery and punch-marked coins (archaeological).

1.2 Chandragupta Maurya (322–297 BCE)

Founded the Mauryan Empire by overthrowing the last Nanda ruler, Dhanananda, with the guidance of Chanakya (Kautilya/Vishnugupta). First ruler to politically unify most of the Indian subcontinent. Defeated Seleucus Nicator (305 BCE) — Treaty of 303 BCE: Seleucus ceded eastern Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and areas west of the Indus. In return, Chandragupta gave 500 war elephants. Megasthenes was sent as Greek ambassador to Pataliputra.

Administration: Highly centralised. Mantri Parishad (council of ministers). Kautilya's Saptanga Theory — 7 elements of the state: Swami (king), Amatya (ministers), Janapada (territory), Durga (fortified capital), Kosha (treasury), Danda (army), Mitra (allies). Extensive espionage system. Military: According to Pliny — 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 elephants, 800 chariots. Military board of 30 officers in 6 committees (infantry, cavalry, elephants, chariots, navy, transport).

Later life: Chandragupta abdicated the throne and adopted Jainism under Bhadrabahu. Migrated to Shravanabelagola (Karnataka). Died by Sallekhana (Jain ritual fasting). His son Bindusara succeeded him.

1.3 Bindusara (297–273 BCE)

Known as Amitraghata ('Slayer of Enemies') in Sanskrit texts; 'Amitrachates' in Greek accounts. Extended the empire southward into the Deccan (up to Karnataka). Maintained diplomatic relations with Greek kingdoms (Antiochus I of Syria sent ambassador Deimachus). Favoured the Ajivika sect.

The Greek writer Athenaeus mentions that Bindusara requested Antiochus I to send him sweet wine, dried figs, and a Sophist — Antiochus replied that Greeks do not sell philosophers.

1.4 Ashoka the Great (268–232 BCE)

1.4.1 The Kalinga War (261 BCE)

Ashoka conquered Kalinga (modern Odisha) in a devastating war: 100,000 killed, 150,000 deported, many more died of disease and famine (Rock Edict XIII). The carnage profoundly affected Ashoka. He converted to Buddhism (though he had shown interest earlier) and renounced Bherighosha (war drums) in favour of Dhammaghosha (voice of Dhamma). This is the most significant personal transformation of any ruler in world history — from conquest to compassion.

1.4.2 Ashoka's Dhamma

Dhamma was NOT Buddhism but a universal ethical code drawn from multiple traditions. Key principles: Ahimsa (non-violence towards all beings); Daya (compassion); Satya (truthfulness); respect for parents, elders, teachers; tolerance and respect for all religions ('whoever praises his own sect or blames other sects, injures his own sect most severely' — Rock Edict XII); generosity to Brahmins and Sramanas; and concern for welfare of all people ('every human is my child' — Rock Edict V).

Dhamma-Mahamatras: Special officers appointed to spread Dhamma across the empire. Ashoka sent missionaries abroad: Mahinda and Sanghamitta (his son and daughter) to Sri Lanka; missionaries to Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Cyrene, and Epirus (Rock Edict XIII). He built 84,000 stupas (tradition), hospitals for humans and animals, planted trees along roads, dug wells, and established rest houses for travellers.

1.4.3 Administration under Ashoka

Empire divided into 5 provinces: (1) Uttarapatha (capital: Taxila), (2) Avantipatha (capital: Ujjain), (3) Dakshinapatha (capital: Suvarnagiri), (4) Kalinga (capital: Tosali/Dhauri), (5) Central province (capital: Pataliputra — directly administered by the emperor). Provinces were divided into districts (Aharas/Vishayas), further into groups of villages. Officials: Rajukas (district magistrates), Pradeshikas (provincial judges), Yuktas (lower officials), Gopas (village-level accountants), Sthanikas (tax collectors).

1.5 Mauryan Administration — Key Features

- **Centralised Bureaucracy:** ~24 departments headed by Adhyakshas (superintendents). Covered agriculture, trade, mining, weights and measures, textiles, arms, forest, gambling, liquor, shipping, cattle, horses, elephants.
- **Revenue System:** Land tax (Bhaga) = 1/6th to 1/4th of produce. Other taxes: Pranaya (emergency tax), Kara (tax on artisans), Hiranya (cash payment). Sita lands = crown lands directly cultivated by state.
- **Espionage:** Arthashastra describes an elaborate spy network. Spies (Gudhapurushas) included: Sanstha (settled spies), Sanchara (wandering spies), and various agents disguised as monks, merchants, students, and even poisoners. Essential for maintaining control over the vast empire.
- **Judicial System:** King as supreme judge. Two types of courts: Dharmasthiya (civil, based on Dharma) and Kantakasodhana (criminal, 'removing thorns'). Punishments included fines, imprisonment, and corporal punishment.

- **City Administration:** Megasthenes describes Pataliputra's city administration: 6 committees of 5 members each, overseeing: (1) industry/artisans, (2) foreigners, (3) births/deaths, (4) trade/commerce, (5) manufactured goods, (6) collection of sales tax.
- **Economy:** Agriculture = primary sector. State-controlled Sita lands. Trade flourished — both internal (via road networks) and external (with Greek kingdoms, SE Asia). Punch-marked silver and copper coins. Sudarshana Lake (Girnar, Gujarat) = major irrigation project.

1.6 Mauryan Art & Architecture

- **Ashokan Pillars:** Polished sandstone monolithic pillars. Sarnath Lion Capital (4 lions back-to-back on abacus with Dharma Chakra) = National Emblem of India. Lauriya Nandangarh (single lion). Allahabad Pillar (Kaushambi — later inscribed by Samudragupta).
- **Stupas:** Hemispherical brick/stone mounds containing relics. Great Stupa at Sanchi (originally built by Ashoka, enlarged by Satavahanas). Bharhut, Amaravati (AP), Nagarjunakonda (AP).
- **Rock-Cut Caves:** Barabar Caves (Bihar) — dedicated to Ajivika monks. Lomus Rishi Cave with its arch-shaped entrance. Mirror-polished interior walls.
- **Pataliputra Palace:** Wooden pillared hall (80 pillars) inspired by Persian Achaemenid architecture. Described by Megasthenes as rivalling Persian palaces.

1.7 Decline of the Mauryan Empire

- **Weak Successors:** After Ashoka's death (232 BCE), weak kings could not hold the vast empire together. Last ruler: Brihadratha.
- **Financial Strain:** Maintaining huge army + bureaucracy + welfare measures + Dhamma missions strained the treasury.
- **Brahmanical Reaction:** Ashoka's Dhamma-Mahamatras may have undermined Brahmanical authority. The Shunga dynasty (founded by Pushyamitra Shunga, a Brahmin general) represented a Brahmanical restoration.
- **Over-Centralisation:** Provincial governors became too powerful as central control weakened. Kalinga and Deccan provinces became virtually independent.
- **Pushyamitra Shunga:** Assassinated the last Maurya king Brihadratha during a military parade (185 BCE). Established the Shunga dynasty.

SECTION 2: KEY DIMENSIONS TO COVER

Examiner angles.

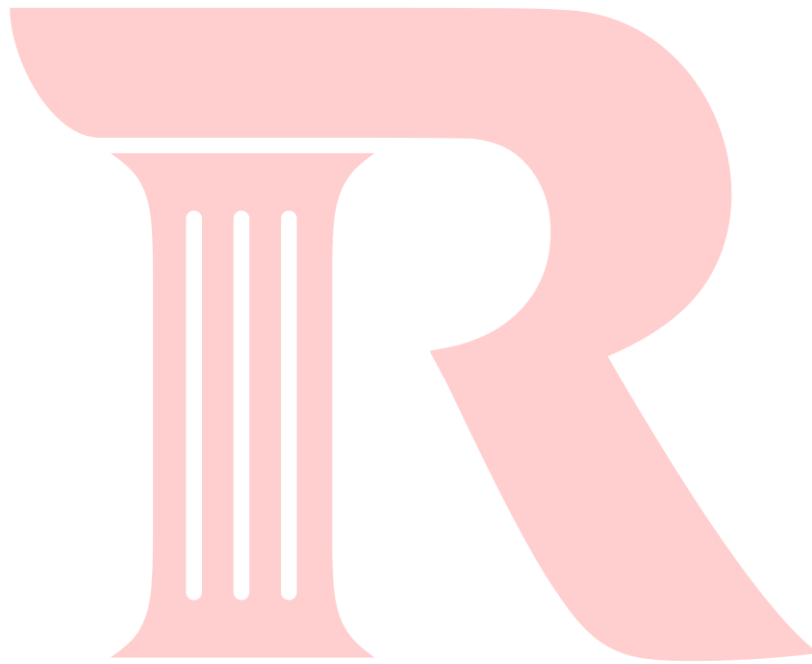
1. **Sources:** Arthashastra (governance), Indica (society), Ashokan Edicts (Dhamma), Mudrarakshasa (political drama), Buddhist/Jain texts. Know author + content for each.
2. **Chandragupta:** Defeated Nandas + Seleucus. Treaty of 303 BCE (elephants for territory). Chanakya as mentor. Saptanga theory. Jain conversion. Shravanabelagola.
3. **Ashoka's Dhamma:** NOT Buddhism. Universal ethics: Ahimsa, Daya, Satya, religious tolerance. Dhamma-Mahamatras. Missionaries to Sri Lanka (Mahinda/Sanghamitta) and 5 Greek kingdoms.
4. **Kalinga War:** 261 BCE. 100,000 killed. Ashoka's transformation. Rock Edict XIII. Bherighosha → Dhammaghosha. Single most asked Mains question.
5. **Administration:** 5 provinces (Taxila, Ujjain, Suvarnagiri, Tosali, Pataliputra). Adhyakshas. Revenue (1/6th Bhaga). Espionage. Judicial system. City committees.
6. **Art:** Pillars (Sarnath = National Emblem). Stupas (Sanchi, Amaravati). Rock-cut caves (Barabar). Pataliputra palace.
7. **Decline:** Weak successors, financial strain, Brahmanical reaction, over-centralisation, Pushyamitra assassination (185 BCE).
8. **AP Connection:** Suvarnagiri province (Deccan capital). Erragudi (AP — Major Rock Edict site). Amaravati stupa (Ashokan foundation). Ashoka's edicts in AP.

SECTION 3: PRELIMS MUST-REMEMBER FACTS

Crisp factual points.

1. Mauryan Empire: 322–185 BCE. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya with Chanakya's guidance. Capital: Pataliputra (modern Patna).
2. Sources: Arthashastra (Kautilya), Indica (Megasthenes), Ashokan Edicts (Brahmi/Kharoshthi, deciphered James Prinsep 1837), Mudrarakshasa (Vishakhadatta).
3. Chandragupta: Overthrew Dhanananda (last Nanda). Treaty with Seleucus (303 BCE): 500 elephants for Afghanistan/Baluchistan. Megasthenes = Greek ambassador.
4. Saptanga Theory (Kautilya): 7 elements = Swami, Amatya, Janapada, Durga, Kosha, Danda, Mitra.
5. Military (Pliny): 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 elephants, 800 chariots. Board of 30 in 6 committees.
6. Chandragupta → Jainism → Shravanabelagola → Sallekhana (death by fasting).
7. Bindusara: 'Amitraghata' (Slayer of Enemies). Expanded south. Ajivika patron. Deimachus = Greek ambassador.
8. Ashoka: 268–232 BCE. Kalinga War 261 BCE. 100,000 killed (Rock Edict XIII). Converted to Buddhism.
9. Dhamma: NOT Buddhism. Ahimsa, Daya, Satya, religious tolerance. Dhamma-Mahamatras = special officers.
10. Missionaries: Mahinda + Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka. Missions to 5 Greek kingdoms (Rock Edict XIII).
11. 5 Provinces: Uttarapatha (Taxila), Avantipatha (Ujjain), Dakshinapatha (Suvarnagiri), Kalinga (Tosali), Central (Pataliputra).
12. Revenue: Bhaga = 1/6th to 1/4th of produce. Sita = crown lands. Pranaya = emergency tax.
13. Pataliputra city: 6 committees of 5 members each (Megasthenes). Industry, foreigners, births/deaths, trade, goods, tax.
14. Sarnath Lion Capital = National Emblem of India. 4 lions on abacus with Dharma Chakra. Bull, horse, elephant, lion on abacus.
15. Sanchi Stupa: Originally built by Ashoka. Enlarged by Satavahanas. UNESCO World Heritage. Toranas = gateways.
16. Barabar Caves: Bihar. Ashoka dedicated to Ajivika monks. Lomus Rishi Cave. Mirror-polished interior.
17. Sudarshana Lake: Girnar (Gujarat). Chandragupta's viceroy Pushyagupta built it. Repaired by Rudradaman I (150 CE).
18. Decline: Weak successors after Ashoka. Pushyamitra Shunga assassinated Brihadratha (185 BCE). Shunga dynasty began.
19. AP: Erragudi (Kurnool) = Major Rock Edict site. Suvarnagiri = Deccan provincial capital. Amaravati Stupa = Ashokan foundation.
20. Rock Edict XII: Religious tolerance ('whoever praises his sect or blames others, injures his own sect'). Most quoted.
21. Rock Edict V: 'Every human is my child.' Appointed Dhamma-Mahamatras for welfare.

22. Ashoka called himself 'Devanampiya Piyadasi' (Beloved of the Gods, He Who Looks on with Affection) in edicts.

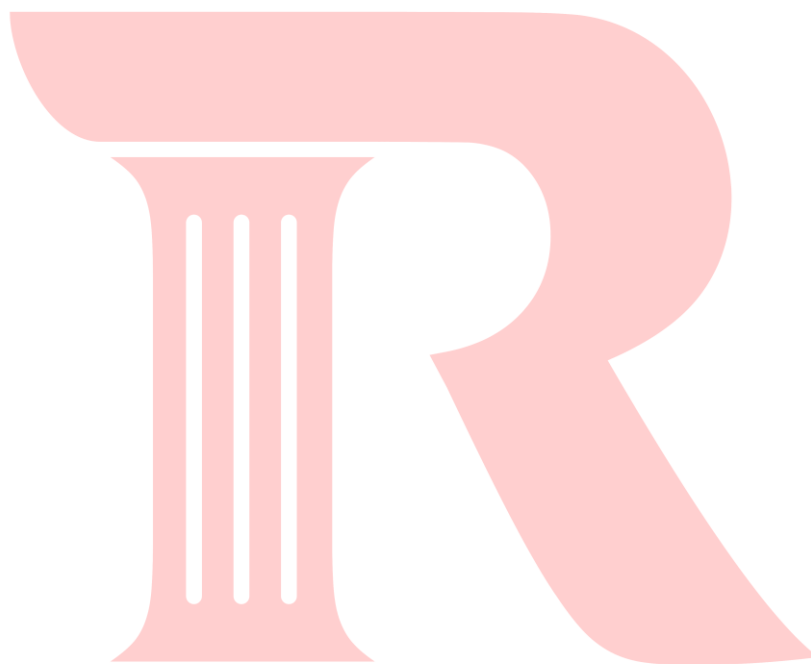


SECTION 4: MAINS MUST-WRITE POINTS

Each can form a paragraph.

- 1. India's First Pan-Indian State:** The Mauryan Empire was the first political entity to unite most of the Indian subcontinent under a single administration — from Afghanistan to Karnataka, from Gujarat to Bengal. This was unprecedented: the 16 Mahajanapadas were regional; the Nandas controlled Magadha and its surroundings. Chandragupta, guided by Chanakya's strategic genius, built a centralised state with professional bureaucracy, standardised taxation, espionage networks, and a massive standing army. The Arthashastra's Saptanga theory provided the theoretical framework for statecraft that influenced Indian governance for centuries.
- 2. The Kalinga Transformation — When a Conqueror Became a Humanitarian:** The Kalinga War (261 BCE) is the single most transformative event in ancient Indian history. Rock Edict XIII's description of the carnage — 100,000 killed, 150,000 deported — followed by Ashoka's renunciation of war is unparalleled in the annals of any ancient empire. No Roman emperor, no Chinese sovereign, no Persian king publicly repudiated conquest after victory. Ashoka's Dhamma replaced military expansion with moral governance, sending missionaries instead of armies. This transformation has been cited by modern thinkers (including Nehru, Einstein, and H.G. Wells) as one of history's most noble acts of statesmanship.
- 3. Dhamma — Ancient India's Secularism:** Ashoka's Dhamma was NOT Buddhism — it was a universal ethical code promoting tolerance, compassion, and non-violence across all religions. Rock Edict XII's warning that 'whoever praises his own sect while blaming others injures his own sect most severely' is perhaps the world's earliest articulation of religious pluralism. Ashoka patronised Buddhist Sangha but also supported Brahmins, Ajivikas, and Jains. This inclusive approach anticipates the Preamble's 'secular' ideal by 2,200 years. India's constitutional secularism ('principled equidistance' rather than strict separation) has deeper roots in Ashokan Dhamma than in Western Enlightenment.
- 4. Arthashastra — The World's First Governance Textbook:** Kautilya's Arthashastra is the world's most comprehensive ancient treatise on governance. It covers: statecraft (Saptanga theory), taxation (detailed revenue sources), military strategy, espionage (types of spies, poison girls, assassins), foreign policy (Mandala theory of inter-state relations), judicial administration, economic regulation (27 Adhyakshas for different sectors), and even municipal government. While the text has been reinterpreted by modern scholarship (some attributions are contested), its influence on Indian political thought is unmatched. Max Weber called Kautilya's pragmatism comparable to Machiavelli — but the Arthashastra predates The Prince by 1,800 years.
- 5. Mauryan Art — Imperial Aesthetic:** Mauryan art represents India's first imperial artistic tradition. The polished sandstone Ashokan pillars (with their distinctive lustrous finish that defied replication for centuries), the Lion Capital at Sarnath (now India's National Emblem), and the Dharma Chakra (now on the national flag) are the most enduring visual symbols of Indian civilisation. The Barabar Caves (with mirror-polished interiors) show Persian Achaemenid influence, reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of the Mauryan court. The stupa tradition (Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati) that Ashoka initiated became the dominant Buddhist architectural form across Asia.

6. **AP Connection — Suvarnagiri and Erragudi:** AP was directly part of the Mauryan administrative system. Suvarnagiri (possibly in the Kurnool-Raichur region) served as the capital of the Dakshinapatha province. Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts at Erragudi (Kurnool district) and the Amaravati stupa (originally an Ashokan foundation, later expanded by Satavahanas and Ikshvakus) demonstrate that the Deccan was not a peripheral territory but an integral administrative unit. This Mauryan presence in AP laid the groundwork for the subsequent Satavahana state formation.



SECTION 5: VALUE ADDITION

4 topic-specific dimensions for Mauryan Empire.

Case Studies & Key Examples

- **Treaty with Seleucus (303 BCE):** India's first recorded international treaty. Diplomacy + military power. 500 elephants for vast territory. Megasthenes as ambassador. Model of ancient diplomatic statecraft.
- **Sudarshana Lake (Girnar):** Built by Chandragupta's governor Pushyagupta. Repaired by Ashoka's governor Yavanaraja Tushaspha. Again repaired by Rudradaman I (150 CE). Shows continuity of public infrastructure across dynasties for 500 years.
- **Ashoka's Rock Edict XIII (Kalinga):** The ONLY ancient royal inscription in the world where a king expresses remorse for war. 'This is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty.' Unique in world history.
- **Sanchi Stupa's Survival:** While Nalanda was destroyed (1193 CE), Sanchi survived because it was hidden by forest. Rediscovered in 1818 by General Taylor. Now UNESCO World Heritage. Demonstrates preservation of Ashokan legacy through geographical accident.

Interlinkages

- **Mahajanapadas → Maurya:** Day 4 (Vedic/Mahajanapadas) directly connects. Magadha's rise (iron, fertile soil, strategic location, strong rulers) culminated in Nanda and then Maurya rule. The Mauryas converted Magadha's regional dominance into subcontinental empire.
- **Buddhism → Ashoka → Global Spread:** Day 5 (Jainism & Buddhism) connects. Ashoka's conversion and missionary activity transformed Buddhism from an Indian sect into a world religion. Without Ashoka, Buddhism might not have reached Sri Lanka, SE Asia, China, or Japan.
- **Mauryan Administration → Modern Governance:** Kautilya's principles resonate today: centralised yet devolved governance, espionage for security, infrastructure as state duty, welfare measures, and diplomatic pragmatism. NITI Aayog's policy advisory role echoes the Mantri Parishad concept.
- **Ashokan Symbols → National Identity:** Lion Capital = National Emblem. Dharma Chakra = Flag. 'Satyameva Jayate' (from Mundaka Upanishad, inscribed on Ashoka's edicts) = National Motto. India's national identity is literally Mauryan.
- **Maurya Decline → Post-Mauryan Period:** Shunga dynasty, Satavahana rise (AP connection), Indo-Greek kingdoms, Kushan empire all emerge from the Mauryan vacuum. The post-Mauryan cultural flourishing (Gandhara art, Mathura school) built on Mauryan foundations.

Current Affairs

- **Nalanda University Revival (2024):** New campus inaugurated in Rajgir. India-ASEAN collaboration. Directly connects to Mauryan-era educational institutions. Pataliputra-Nalanda-Vikramashila were the world's first university system.

- **Pataliputra Excavations:** Ongoing ASI excavations at Kumrahar (Patna) continue to reveal Mauryan-era remains. 80-pillar hall fragments discovered. Efforts to get UNESCO World Heritage status.
- **Ashoka's Dhamma & Modern Diplomacy:** India's 'neighbourhood first' policy and Buddhist diplomacy (with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Japan) invokes Ashoka's missionary tradition. PM's gifting of Ashoka replicas to world leaders symbolises this continuity.
- **UPSC Trend:** Ashoka's Rock Edict XII (religious tolerance) was directly quoted in UPSC CSE 2020 Prelims. Administration, Dhamma, and art are perennial favourites.

AP Archaeological Heritage

- **Erragudi (Kurnool):** One of 14 Major Rock Edict sites. Contains all 14 Major Rock Edicts + 2 Separate Edicts. Proves direct Mauryan administration in Rayalaseema.
- **Amaravati Stupa:** Originally Ashokan foundation (3rd century BCE). Enlarged by Satavahanas and Ikshvakus. One of the largest ancient stupas. Exquisite marble narrative sculptures. Many now in British Museum and Chennai Government Museum.
- **Suvarnagiri:** Deccan provincial capital. Various locations in Kurnool/Raichur area. Ashoka's Minor Rock Edicts found near this region. Governed by royal princes.
- **Nagarjunakonda:** While primarily Ikshvaku period (3rd-4th century CE), the site's Buddhist tradition connects to Mauryan-era Buddhism's spread into the Deccan. Named after Nagarjuna (Mahayana philosopher).

SECTION 6: QUICK REVISION BOX

Last-minute glance.

▶ Maurya: 322–185 BCE; Pataliputra; 1st pan-Indian empire	▶ Chandragupta + Chanakya overthrew Nandas
▶ Seleucus Treaty 303 BCE: 500 elephants for territory	▶ Megasthenes = Greek ambassador; wrote Indica
▶ Arthashastra: Saptanga Theory; 7 elements of state	▶ Military: 600K infantry, 30K cavalry, 9K elephants
▶ Ashoka: 268–232 BCE; Kalinga War 261 BCE	▶ Rock Edict XIII: 100,000 killed; Ashoka's remorse
▶ Dhamma: NOT Buddhism; universal ethics; tolerance	▶ Dhamma-Mahamatras; Mahinda/Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka
▶ 5 provinces: Taxila, Ujjain, Suvarnagiri, Tosali, Pataliputra	▶ Revenue: Bhaga 1/6th; Sita = crown lands
▶ Sarnath Lion Capital = National Emblem	▶ Dharma Chakra = National Flag; Satyameva Jayate
▶ Barabar Caves: Ajivika monks; mirror-polished	▶ Sanchi Stupa: Ashoka + Satavahana; UNESCO
▶ Decline: Weak successors; Pushyamitra Shunga 185 BCE	▶ AP: Erragudi edicts; Suvarnagiri; Amaravati stupa
▶ Devanampiya Piyadasi = Ashoka's title in edicts	▶ James Prinsep (1837): Deciphered Brahmi script

SECTION 7: RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Refer to these.

Source	What to Read	Why
NCERT Class XII — Themes in Indian History	Ch. 2: Kings, Farmers and Towns	Mauryan state, Ashoka's edicts, economy
R.S. Sharma — India's Ancient Past	Ch. 17–21: Mauryan Empire	Exam-oriented; administration, Dhamma, art
Upinder Singh — Ancient & Early Medieval India	Ch. 10–12: Mauryas	Academic depth; archaeological + literary analysis
Romila Thapar — Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas	Complete text	The definitive study of Ashoka's reign

Source	What to Read	Why
NCERT Class XI — An Introduction to Indian Art	Mauryan art chapter	<i>Pillars, stupas, caves; Persian influence</i>
Kautilya's Arthashastra (R.P. Kangle translation)	Selected chapters	<i>Reading key sections enriches Mains answers immensely</i>

