

The Mauryan Empire

Rome was not the only powerful empire during this time. The Han dynasty in China and the Mauryan Empire in India flourished as well. Like Rome's, their longevity and stability were not built on military might alone but on their ability to use law, legend, and religion to organize and control the people.

In northern India, the Greeks, who ruled after Alexander the Great's death in 332 B.C., were driven out by Chandragupta I. As Rome built its republic, Chandragupta united the kingdoms of northern India and became the founder of the Mauryan dynasty, which by 322 B.C. embraced almost the entire subcontinent.

The answer to the Mauryan success story lies in its most famous ruler, Chandragupta's grandson, Ashoka. Ashoka assumed rule in about 269 B.C., after a family power struggle. Some years later, he began to regret the brutality with which he conquered people. He looked for deeper meaning in his life. Not surprisingly, for religion and spirituality come from the ancient roots of India, he found it in Buddhism and made it the official faith of his empire.

Ashoka established laws promoting ancient Hindu and Buddhist ideals: Nonviolence, morality, religious tolerance, and compassion. He had these laws carved on rocks and pillars and placed at crossroads throughout India. For the next eight decades, Ashoka's empire was guided by these beliefs. After the fall of the Mauryan dynasty in 185 B.C., during waves of invasion by outsiders, India's culture-- and thus its unifying social and economic structure-- was not greatly disrupted, principally because it was based on spirituality and religious belief, not the personality of a ruler. Looking even farther east--
