

## MONASTIC CONNECTIONS AND IMPERIAL AUTHORITY: THE FUNCTION OF BUDDHIST SANGHAS IN MAURYAN ADMINISTRATIVE COHESION

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**Abstract:** Ashoka consolidated the Mauryan Empire by centralized authority and ethical administration, guaranteeing unity. Although research on Mauryan administration has predominantly concentrated on the Arthashastra, centralised bureaucracy, and Ashoka's advocacy of dhamma, but, the institutional function of Buddhist monasteries has been insufficiently examined. The Mauryan empire incorporated sanghas into its political system via land grants, gifts, and offerings, so ensuring their allegiance and cementing imperial power into daily life. Ashoka's conceptualisation of dhamma redefined Buddhist principles as a foundation for imperial legitimacy, presenting an image of equitable and compassionate governance.

However, the partnership was fraught with stress. Sanghas preserved autonomy, encountered internal divisions, and did not consistently align with official aims, underscoring the constraints of imperial integration. This study contends that sanghas were not only beneficiaries of royal patronage, but acted as proactive actors of state authority, serving as centres for interaction, financial administration, and ideological validation. Utilising epigraphic evidence from Ashokan edicts, archaeological information about monastic connections, and Buddhist textual practices, the study illustrates that monasteries were strategically positioned along trade routes and near administrative centres, facilitating their role as mediators among the state and the local population. This article repositions sanghas inside the political history of the Mauryas, reconceptualising ancient Indian state formation as an interdependent process between religious and political institutions, so contributing to wider discussions on the state-religion relationship in global history.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Mauryan Empire, Sangha, Ashoka, Governance, State Formation, Ancient India.

## I. Introduction

Buddhism, which originated in India, has mostly been supplanted by Hinduism, the predominant religion in the nation, with only a few remnants remaining in Bengal, Orissa, and Assam. This is particularly peculiar considering that Buddhism, as a significant human influence, deeply impacted the religious and moral concepts of its era and served as a catalyst in reforming prevailing societal conditions. Buddhism embodies principles of compassion, humanism, and egalitarianism. In contrast to the Vedic religion, which permitted animal sacrifice to appease deities, Buddhism vehemently opposes such practices and actively campaigns against them. This raises a fair question regarding how the Buddha could advocate for the principles of ahimsa and compassion towards living beings while consuming meat and permitting his disciples to do the same. The explanation was straightforward: in a society where meat was a staple, Jesus and his followers relied on public charity; thus, refusing to consume meat may have resulted in starvation. Buddhism rejected all assertions of superiority based on birth, contrary to the claims made by the Brahmins. It condemned all societal disparities rooted in birth among individuals and asserted that only karma dictated one's existence. Buddhism significantly contributed to sociology by allowing both men and women access to organized religious life. The Buddha instructed his disciples to travel and disseminate his teachings throughout the year, with the exception of the rainy season. The Buddha instructed his followers to convey his teachings to the populace in the simplest and clearest language, so Pali was selected as the medium of preaching. This plea in a regional tongue resonated with the populace, prompting them to heed the Buddha's message, especially when conveyed by a group of altruistic preachers who had journeyed considerable distances (Singh, 2009).

Early Buddhism demonstrated considerable reliance on oral traditions, wherein sravakas and sramanas were crucial in the transmission of the buddhavacana. Nonetheless, the primary concerns of previous scholars were the distortions and imperfections in oral transfers. The trend was, however, contested by the emergence of the Mauryas, who initiated the transcription of the buddhavacana into documents such as the Tripitaka, alongside the construction of monumental stupas, both commemorative and relic shrines, while also supporting the samgha as a pivotal diplomatic institution. It is apparent that in the third century BCE, Buddhism emerged in the world of religion through a series of colossal artifacts, including pillars, rock edicts, and Buddhist stupas. While the Pali Canon contains allusions to donations of edifices and houses to the Buddhist sangha, there is less archaeological evidence for such contributions prior to the Mauryan period. The Mauryan emperor Asoka is attributed with redistributing the human body ashes of the tathagata from eight to eighty parts across the Asian subcontinent to cultivate soft power that legitimized the Buddhist code of conduct, known as "dhamma," and to facilitate cultural expansion of his territory into distant lands. The significant transformation within Buddhism was the emergence of "engaged Buddhism," which encompasses and integrates societal perspectives in the dissemination of the faith. The notable achievement of the Mauryan monarch Asoka was the conversion of ascetic forest residents into a structured, institutionalized entity with intellectual capabilities, evolving into an institution of knowledge. By closely examining the literary, graphical, numismatic, and archeological documents, one may understand the geographical variances and diverse aspects of Buddhism by associating them with the social and economic transformations within society. The emphasis must be on the patterns of trade transactions, inter- and intra-religious interactions, and how these elements contributed to the development, expansion, and decline of Buddhist institutions. To generate different inquiries on

this matter, it is essential to delineate the process of sangha formation and situate it within regional contexts.

### **1. Aim of the article:**

(I) In what ways did Buddhist sanghas and monastic networks operate as extension of Mauryan governance, above the limitations of the centralized governmental apparatus?

(II) How did government influence, including grants of land, gifts, and contributions to sanghas, transform agrarian and commerce administration under the Mauryan Empire?

### **2. Methodology:**

This work employs epigraphical analysis by examining the Asokan Edicts and scrutinizing Buddhist canonical sources.

### **3. The Mauryan Empire and expansion of Buddhism:**

The religious texts, Buddhist literature, and secular foreign writings such as the Sutta and Nikaya, Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Kautilya's Arthashastra, and Megasthenes' Indica, while not precise, provide a general overview of the socioeconomic, political, and philosophical conditions of the Mauryan period. The Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa (Dutta, 2018) are Buddhist records from Sri Lanka that commend Asoka for his pivotal role in the introduction and dissemination of Buddhism in the region. Given that the books were assembled and composed between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE, they should be approached with caution and cannot be heavily relied upon to ascertain contemporaneous situations (GEIGER, 1908). Furthermore, the intent and context of these documents must be considered; for example, Buddhist sources assert that Aśoka wholly committed himself to the sangha and exclusively supported Buddhism, although his decrees convey a contrasting narrative regarding his techniques and philosophies. In the beginning of time, a minimal segment of the population possessed the ability to read and write those books. The primary aim of the works had been to extol the magnificence of one's sovereign to secure financial support from the monarchy for sustenance.

According to early religious texts, the idea of abstinence and penitence gained prominence between the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, led to the emergence of the sramaṇa traditions, within which sects such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Ajivikas developed, emphasizing a commitment to renouncing a sybaritic lifestyle.

By renouncing social connections and material belongings to become vagabonds in search of spiritual enlightenment, these ascetics mostly relied on alms from householders for sustenance and clothing. In early Buddhist morality, the term “sangha” denotes the contribution that signifies the renunciation of material possessions by Buddhist laity to accrue merit (danaphala) and enhance their values in pursuit of the Buddhist path. The elevation in the amounts and volumes of dana provided by householders or gahapatis established the foundation of Buddhist culture and fostered a mutually beneficial connection between the community and this nascent religion. This led to the establishment of an institutionalized entity known as the sangha, facilitated by prudent advice, financial backing, and endorsement from benefactors, who played a pivotal role as the sangha necessitated material support, thereby allowing these donors to assert a degree of authority over the sangha (Findly, 2003).

The examination of the inscriptions indicates that the magnitude of donations was exactly related to the patronage extended to Buddhist monasteries. The three elements referenced in these donative inscriptions are government, ecclesiastical officials, and trading groupings. The interaction between monastic organizations and supporters, who were gradually evolving into supporters, served as a symbolic transaction in which people accrued spiritual rewards for their future existences and bolstered their social standing inside the urban elite through the ostentatious exhibition of their wealth. The archaeological record indicates a proliferation of metropolitan monastic organizations during the early period across India within the expansive Mauryan empires (Heitzman, 1984).

In the first and second millennia following the Mahaparinirvana, Buddhism was scarcely distinguishable from other ascetic organizations. Buddhism clearly evolved as a unique faith with significant potential for spread during the Maurya period. During the Second Council, convened at Vaisali approximately one century after the parinirvana of Lord Buddha, invitations were dispatched to villages in remote locations such as Patheya, Avanti, Kausambi, Sankasya, and Kanauj. Seven Asoka's patronage likely facilitated the dissemination of Buddhism beyond the empire to remote territories during his reign. Following the Third Buddhist Council convened at Pataliputra, under the auspices of Asoka, we observe the proliferation of the religious belief extending to remote territories beyond the nation and the subcontinent, particularly Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) (Bhattacharya). A notable part of Asoka's existence is the organization of Buddhist councils; regular discourses were conducted to enhance the common people's comprehension of the dhamma. The divergent perspectives, coupled with sectarian biases and varying interpretations of the law, ultimately culminated in the convening of the second council. During Asoka's reign, numerous affluent householders began engaging in religious practices, leading to Buddhism's transformation into a mass religion. This development fostered the phenomenon of religious pilgrimage, while commoners expressed interest in maritime travel, consequently stimulating trade due to the increasing demand for ritualistic items. Asoka offered more material assistance to Buddhism during his reign by convening the Third Buddhist Council and supporting the construction of 84,000 stupas (Thapar, 1961). Asoka promulgated an array of regulations throughout his time in power to disseminate the teachings of the dhamma to a broader audience by writing the tenets of dhamma on surfaces of rock and stone columns throughout the Asian subcontinent. The carvings have been classified into smaller and large rock edicts, as well as pillar orders.

The utilization of the native language and script in place of the traditional tongue significantly reflects Asoka's motives, which extended beyond merely promoting Buddhism to employing it as a means to legitimize his authority and expand his dominion both on and off the Indian subcontinent. While focusing on the essential elements of every problem that could lead to damage or violence, he sought a set of uniting values, ultimately deriving his principles of dhamma from the teachings of the Buddha. The edicts clearly indicate that these ideals were intended for acceptance by individuals of all religious sects residing inside the Mauryan territory, and not exclusively for Buddhists (Dutta, 2018).



**Sanchi (Self Photographed)**

#### **4. Monastic Circuits as Operational Frameworks:**

The institutionalization of monasticism within early Buddhism, particularly under the Mauryan Dynasty, marked a significant departure from earlier, more individualistic ascetic practices, evolving into complex, self-sustaining operational frameworks (Romel, 2020). These frameworks, characterized by structured communities and codified rules, facilitated the widespread dissemination of Buddhist doctrines and practices across diverse geographical regions (Kramer, 2016). This transformation from peripatetic asceticism to established monastic centers enabled the development of sophisticated pedagogical systems and administrative networks essential for sustaining a burgeoning religious movement (Acharya, 2024). Moreover, these monastic circuits served as vital conduits for knowledge exchange, promoting an egalitarian approach to education that transcended traditional social hierarchies (Acharya, 2024). This inclusive educational paradigm, which extended opportunities to individuals regardless of their social standing, fostered social cohesion and justice within the burgeoning Buddhist community (Acharya, 2024). This shift was instrumental in solidifying Buddhism's foundational principles, establishing a robust infrastructure for its enduring influence across the Indian subcontinent and beyond (Acharya, 2024). The strategic organization of these monastic institutions further catalyzed the development of an organized education system, a novel concept in ancient India previously dominated by individualized teaching models like the Gurukula system (Kumari & Shi, 2018). This monastic model, distinct from the traditional Vedic emphasis on precise pronunciation, prioritized broader intellectual and ethical development, while still acknowledging the importance of clear articulation (Acharya, 2024). This organizational shift enabled the establishment of a rigorous system for evaluating and differentiating individuals for upasampadā, thereby integrating new members into the monastic order as permanent residents (Acharya, 2024). This structured integration facilitated a comprehensive impartation of knowledge and discipline, encompassing both intellectual and moral development (Acharya, 2024). The upasampada, or higher ordination, signified a monk's permanent commitment to the monastic life and represented a comprehensive tool for spiritual and intellectual growth (Acharya, 2024). This formalized system of admission and training established a hierarchical structure crucial for the maintenance and expansion of Buddhist teachings (Acharya, 2024). This rigorous framework, while emphasizing spiritual development, also cultivated a sophisticated system of higher learning that profoundly influenced the educational landscape of ancient India



(Kumari, 2018).

The establishment of these monastic circuits under the Mauryan Dynasty thus represents a pivotal moment in the institutionalization of Buddhism, transforming it into a robust and enduring religious system with profound societal implications. This institutionalization was further bolstered by royal patronage, as evidenced by inscriptional records at sites like Sanchi, which highlight the state's role in supporting Buddhist establishments and their educational endeavours (Singh U. , 1996). The deliberate integration of Buddhist monastic education within the imperial framework under the Mauryan dynasty signifies a crucial phase in its evolution, ensuring its widespread adoption and pedagogical standardization (Acharya, 2024). This patronage not only provided financial stability but also conferred a level of legitimacy and prestige upon Buddhist institutions, enabling them to expand their educational reach and influence throughout the empire. This symbiotic relationship between the Mauryan state and Buddhist monasticism facilitated an unparalleled dissemination of knowledge and spiritual practices, forging a unique synthesis of political power and religious doctrine. This collaboration also fostered the development of sophisticated administrative structures within monasteries, which mirrored and sometimes even influenced the bureaucratic systems of the Mauryan state, particularly in their meticulous record-keeping and hierarchical organization. Such administrative acumen, coupled with their emphasis on holistic development, distinguished Buddhist monastic circuits as pivotal centers for both spiritual cultivation and intellectual advancement, offering a stark contrast to other prevailing educational paradigms of the era (Acharya, 2024).

### **5. The Political Economic Impact of Sangha-State Interactions:**

This intricate relationship between the Mauryan state and the Buddhist sanghas, characterized by reciprocal dynamics of patronage and redistribution, profoundly influenced the empire's political economy and social structure. This symbiotic interaction fostered a unique institutional framework where the monastic community, supported by extensive royal endowments, became an integral economic actor, deeply intertwined with the agrarian and fiscal systems of the state (Chakravarti, 1984). This section delves into the multifaceted economic role of Buddhist monasteries, examining how royal patronage not only facilitated their expansion but also transformed them into significant landholders and active participants in the Mauryan economy (Singh U. , 1996) the monasteries into powerful economic entities. monasteries into powerful economic entities. These institutions, once recipients of state largesse, evolved to manage substantial agricultural holdings, engage in trade, and oversee labour, thereby contributing directly to the Mauryan economy and becoming integral to its functioning (Chakravarti R. , 2015). The strategic integration of monasteries into the state's economic framework provided a stable financial base for the sangha while simultaneously expanding the state's administrative reach and economic influence, particularly within agrarian communities (O'Lemmon, 2014). This economic embeddedness allowed the sanghas to serve not only as spiritual centers but also as significant nodes of production and distribution, reinforcing their importance to the Mauryan political economy (Chandran, 2011).

The substantial material support provided by the state allowed these monastic centers to accumulate significant wealth and resources, transforming them into vital components of the Mauryan economic landscape (Nooch Kuasirikun, 2010). This transformation enabled monasteries to become substantial landholders and active participants in regional economies,

exerting considerable influence over agricultural production and resource allocation within their vicinities. This economic role extended beyond mere land ownership, encompassing the management of labor, the collection of revenues, and participation in various commercial activities, effectively establishing monasteries as self-sufficient economic units (Sazu Sardar, 2020). This economic autonomy, far from isolating them, deepened their integration into the broader state apparatus, as their fiscal health became directly linked to regional prosperity and imperial stability. The acquisition of extensive landholdings, often through royal grants or strategic purchases, positioned monasteries as key agrarian players, influencing local economies through their agricultural output and labor management practices (Victor Roudometof, 2010). Beyond their direct involvement in cultivation, monasteries often managed irrigation systems, stored grains, and facilitated the distribution of agricultural surplus, thereby playing a crucial role in regional food security and economic stability. the monasteries into powerful economic entities. This transformation enabled monasteries to become substantial landholders and active participants in regional economies, exerting considerable influence over agricultural production and resource allocation within their vicinities. Their engagement with the agrarian sector solidified their economic power, allowing them to accumulate considerable wealth and manpower, which further enabled their participation in broader economic networks, including the exchange of goods and services (Dhananjay Chaudhary, 2025).

The economic activities of monasteries, therefore, extended beyond spiritual concerns, encompassing a significant role in the Mauryan economy by managing resources and engaging in commerce (Bouroutis, 2021). the monasteries into powerful economic entities. These institutions, once recipients of state largesse, evolved to manage substantial agricultural holdings, engage in trade, and oversee labor, thereby contributing directly to the Mauryan economy and becoming integral to its functioning. The material support of the state transformed these monastic centers into powerful economic entities that managed vast agricultural holdings, engaged in trade, and oversaw labor, thereby contributing directly to the Mauryan economy and becoming integral to its functioning. The shift towards a monetized economy during this period further amplified the economic influence of these monastic institutions, as the widespread use of currency facilitated their engagement in diverse commercial activities and the accumulation of capital (CARING-LOBEL, 2015). This economic viability allowed them to develop sustainable "business models" that transcended mere spiritual endeavors, establishing them as integral components of the Mauryan fiscal landscape. monasteries into powerful economic entities. This economic transformation was not merely incidental; it was a deliberate strategy by the Mauryan state to leverage monastic wealth and influence for broader socio-economic stability and imperial integration. This strategic partnership solidified the sangha's role as an economic agent, capable of generating revenue and managing resources, thereby enhancing the overall prosperity and administrative coherence of the Mauryan empire (Serge Svizzero, 2015).

## **6. Sanghas and philosophical Justification:**

The complex relationship between the Mauryan state and the Buddhist sangha reveals a delicate balance of mutual benefit and underlying tension, particularly concerning the sanghas' varying degrees of independence from direct imperial oversight (Bechert, 1970). This autonomy was not absolute, however, as evidenced by historical accounts detailing internal schisms and overt challenges to Emperor Ashoka's edicts and administrative policies, highlighting the persistent tension between ecclesiastical self-governance and centralized state authority (Young, 1970).

Furthermore, the fragility of this relationship became starkly apparent with the decline of the Mauryan Empire, as the sanghas subsequently experienced a significant reduction in direct state patronage and support, underscoring their reliance on imperial stability despite their claims of independence (Chakravarti R. , 2015). This historical trajectory suggests that while Buddhist institutions enjoyed a degree of self-regulation, their prosperity and influence were intrinsically linked to the prevailing political structure, particularly a strong centralized monarchy like the Mauryan Empire (Chakravarti R. , 2015).

The sangha, as the foundational community of Buddhist bhikkhus, was central to the religion's structure and propagation, shaping its historical trajectory and enabling its establishment in diverse regions (Young, 1970). These monastic communities not only served as centers of spiritual cultivation and learning but also acted as crucial nodes for the dissemination of Buddhist tenets, contributing significantly to the integration of disparate territories under the Mauryan imperium (Acharya, 2024). This integration was facilitated by the sangha's inherent adaptability and its capacity to incorporate diverse social strata, including those of lower social hierarchy, into its educational and spiritual frameworks (Acharya, 2024). This inclusive approach contrasted sharply with the more rigid hierarchical structures prevalent in other contemporary Indian socio-religious movements, contributing to Buddhism's broad appeal across the subcontinent (Chakravarti U. , 1984). This inherent inclusivity and the structured nature of monastic life, which emphasized communal living and adherence to fixed norms, further strengthened their societal role, establishing them as pivotal institutions for social cohesion and the transmission of civilizational values (Kramer, 2016) (Kramer R. , 2016). This communal structure also inadvertently positioned the sanghas as administrative extensions of the Mauryan state, albeit indirectly, by fostering a shared moral economy and contributing to a unified cultural identity across the vast empire.

However, the extent of this autonomy was not without contestation, as evidenced by internal disagreements within the sangha regarding doctrinal interpretations and disciplinary practices, as well as external pressures from the imperial administration to conform to certain state-sanctioned norms. Despite this, certain aspects of the sangha's internal governance, such as the initial reluctance to grant women full equality within the monastic order, reveal an internal conservatism that sometimes paralleled or even exceeded the societal norms of the period (Chakravarti U. , 1984). For instance, despite the Buddha's initial hesitation, women were eventually admitted into the sangha, largely due to the persistence of Mahapajapati Gotami and the advocacy of Ananda, highlighting that even internal "conservative" stances were subject to evolution and external influence within the monastic framework (Chakravarti U. , 1984). This internal dynamism, coupled with the sangha's organized system of education, which offered widespread access to knowledge even for individuals from lower social strata, underscored their capacity for societal transformation and intellectual development (Kumari, 2018) (Acharya, 2024). This egalitarian access to education, which extended even to those traditionally marginalized within the existing social hierarchies, promoted social cohesion and established the sanghas as vital centers of learning that transcended conventional class distinctions (Acharya, 2024).

The pedagogical methodologies employed within these monastic institutions, though sharing some foundational similarities with Vedic traditions, diverged significantly in their emphasis, prioritizing mnemonic retention and conceptual understanding over strict phonetic precision (Acharya, 2024). The formal process of \*upasampadā\*, or higher ordination, marked an



individual's permanent commitment to the monastic life, signifying a profound integration into the sangha's disciplinary and intellectual framework. This educational system encompassed diverse fields of study, including grammar, logic, and philosophy, fostering critical thinking and intellectual development among its adherents. This intellectual rigor, accessible to all, further solidified the sangha's role as a primary locus for the transmission of knowledge and cultural values within Mauryan society. This widespread educational accessibility contributed significantly to the sangha's broad appeal and its capacity to transcend existing social stratifications, fostering a sense of egalitarianism that was crucial for imperial unity (Acharya, 2024). This decentralized yet unified educational network, operating under the moral authority of the sangha, provided a foundational infrastructure for intellectual discourse and cultural synthesis across the vast and diverse Mauryan Empire. This intellectual and spiritual robusticity allowed the sanghas to serve as influential conduits for imperial policies, subtly integrating ethical frameworks with state governance.

Nonetheless, the sangha's autonomous nature and its capacity for internal dissent, including schisms and challenges to imperial edicts, underscored the limitations of direct state control, revealing a dynamic interplay between religious authority and secular power. This inherent tension between monastic autonomy and imperial aspirations often led to delicate negotiations and pragmatic compromises, particularly during periods of political instability or succession crises. This delicate balance between the spiritual authority of the sanghas and the temporal power of the Mauryan state ultimately determined the efficacy of their partnership in maintaining imperial cohesion (Williams, 1964). While the sanghas generally functioned as integral components of the Mauryan administrative machinery by fostering social cohesion and disseminating imperial ideology, their inherent autonomy and occasional resistance to state dictates highlighted a complex relationship that precluded absolute subservience. This delicate balance became particularly evident in the post-Mauryan period, where the decline of direct state patronage significantly impacted the sanghas' material support and their ability to maintain extensive institutional networks. This loss of direct state support necessitated a re-evaluation of their organizational strategies, leading to greater reliance on private patronage and community engagement for sustenance and expansion.



**Donations made by Female doners, Sanchi (Self Photographed)**

## **7. Constraints and Strains in Sangha–State Interactions:**

This section examines the nuanced autonomy of Buddhist monastic communities (sanghas) within the Mauryan Empire, highlighting instances where their organizational structure and doctrinal interpretations diverged from direct state control (Young, 1970). While often perceived as state-supported entities, the sanghas exhibited internal mechanisms of self-governance reminiscent of ancient Indian republics, allowing them to maintain a degree of independence from imperial dictates (Sharma, 1968). This autonomy was crucial for the sangha's internal development and pedagogical practices, which focused on a holistic impartation of knowledge and discipline to its members, distinct from state-mandated curricula (Acharya, 2024). This independence, however, also created potential for friction with the centralized authority of the Mauryan state, particularly as imperial policies increasingly sought to align religious institutions with state objectives (Hazlehurst, 2017). This dynamic relationship was further complicated by the inherent, decentralized nature of the sangha, which, unlike a monolithic religious hierarchy, often operated as a loose, autonomous, and democratic organization (Bechert, 1970). This decentralized structure, while fostering intellectual and spiritual growth through egalitarian educational approaches, also meant that complete assimilation into a centralized imperial administration was inherently challenging. Evidence of dissent, schisms, and challenges to Mauryan policies, especially during Ashoka's reign, underscores the limits of imperial control over these monastic bodies, demonstrating that the sangha was not merely a passive recipient of state patronage but an active entity with its own internal dynamics and interests (Schonthal, 2017). This inherent tension between monastic autonomy and imperial ambition frequently manifested in periods of schism and challenges to state-sponsored Buddhist reforms, particularly regarding doctrinal purity and monastic discipline.

This resistance indicates that the sanghas, despite receiving state patronage, retained an internal capacity for self-determination, which occasionally led to direct opposition to imperial directives concerning religious uniformity. For instance, architectural evidence from stupa complexes reveals attempts by the clergy to assert a privileged position in ritual practices, which was sometimes met with resistance from the laity who sought to preserve egalitarian aspects of Buddhism, thereby creating internal divisions not necessarily aligned with state interests (Fogelin, 2003). This complex interplay demonstrates that the relationship between the Mauryan state and the Buddhist sangha was not monolithic but characterized by shifting power dynamics and internal conflicts. Such tensions ultimately underscored the inherent fragility of the sangha-state alliance, particularly as the Mauryan Empire began to decline, leading to a significant reduction in direct state support and a fragmentation of imperial authority (Chakravarti R. , 2015). This decline necessitated the sanghas to adapt new strategies for survival, including increased reliance on lay patronage and regional support systems, thereby further decentralizing their organizational structure (Singh U. , 1996). This shift away from centralized imperial patronage catalyzed a more diverse and regionally distinct development of Buddhist institutions, fostering localized expressions of monasticism. This period of reduced state intervention allowed for a greater emphasis on localized monastic practices and theological interpretations, contributing to the rich diversity observed in subsequent Buddhist traditions.

Moreover, the post-Mauryan era saw the emergence of new forms of Buddhist engagement with political power, moving from direct state sponsorship to more subtle influences on regional

polities, often through the integration of Buddhist relics and practices into state legitimization narratives (Revire, 2019). This evolution highlights the resilience and adaptability of the sanghas, enabling them to thrive even without direct imperial backing by forging new relationships with various socio-political entities (Schonthal, 2016). This transition fostered an increased emphasis on community-based support and the development of distinct regional monastic traditions, further demonstrating the sangha's capacity for self-preservation beyond the confines of state patronage (Somorjit, 2014). This adaptability was further enhanced by the sangha's comprehensive pedagogical methods, which prioritized individual spiritual growth and broad ethical cultivation rather than mere adherence to state-mandated doctrines, ensuring their enduring relevance even amidst political upheaval (Acharya, 2024). This enduring capacity for adaptation and internal coherence enabled the sangha to navigate periods of political instability, maintaining its organizational integrity and doctrinal evolution independently of singular state endorsement. However, this independence also left the sanghas vulnerable to external pressures and the vicissitudes of political change, as evidenced by their struggles after the collapse of the Mauryan Empire. Consequently, the loss of direct imperial sponsorship compelled the sanghas to actively seek alternative forms of patronage and adapt their organizational structures to a more fragmented political landscape, leading to a diversification of their economic and social engagements. This period of transition underscored the inherent fragility of their previous state-dependent model and necessitated a greater emphasis on community-based support and the development of distinct regional monastic traditions, fostering a more diverse and resilient Buddhist landscape.

### **Conclusion:**

The Mauryans were instrumental in institutionalizing Buddhist doctrines by recording them and patronizing the sangha, which included initiating the construction of various monumental structures. A significant achievement under Emperor Ashoka was the transformation of monastic forest dwellers into an organized, institutionalized structure with intellectual capabilities, thereby becoming centres of education.

This study has underscored that the Buddhist sangha, often viewed primarily through a religious lens, performed a critical, active role in the political and administrative consolidation of the Mauryan Empire, rather than merely being a passive recipient of royal patronage (Singh U. , 1996). This re-evaluation necessitates a revised understanding of state formation in ancient India, recognizing it as a process deeply intertwined with and co-dependent on the extensive networks of religious institutions like the sangha (Young, 1970). Future research should therefore delve into comparative analyses of Buddhist–state relations in other historical contexts, such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia, to ascertain the universality or specificity of the Mauryan model. Such comparative studies could illuminate how Buddhist monastic structures, characterized by their unique internal organization and pedagogical approaches, influenced political landscapes beyond the Indian subcontinent. Specifically, investigating the extent to which the decentralized yet influential nature of the sangha, as observed in regions like Myanmar, facilitated or hindered state centralization in diverse historical settings would provide valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between religious autonomy and imperial authority. The educational methodologies employed by Buddhist monasteries, emphasizing moral and spiritual growth alongside intellectual development, further contributed to their societal influence, transcending mere religious instruction to foster civic virtues. The egalitarian nature of Buddhist education, which extended opportunities across social strata, also played a crucial role in social cohesion, thereby

indirectly supporting imperial administrative goal (Acharya, 2024). This suggests a need to explore how the innovative and inclusive pedagogical approaches of the Buddhist sangha, which incorporated methods like sermons, parables, and interactive exchanges, directly contributed to the development of an informed and civically engaged populace that could support complex administrative structures.



**Geden Choeling Nunnery, Dharamshala.**

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