

# MAURYAN ARCHITECTURE: INNOVATIONS AND LEGACY

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## **Abstract:**

*This study examines the Innovations in Architecture and Legacy of Maurya Empire. Mauryan architecture, spanning from approximately 322 to 185 BCE, represents a defining era in ancient Indian history, marked by groundbreaking innovations and lasting influences. Originating under the Mauryan Empire, founded by Chandragupta Maurya and flourishing under rulers like Ashoka, this architectural period is renowned for its distinctive advancements and enduring legacy. Key innovations in Mauryan architecture include the use of highly polished sandstone, a technique that enhanced both the aesthetic appeal and durability of structures such as the Ashokan pillars. These monolithic pillars, erected across the empire, feature intricate capitals and inscriptions promoting moral and ethical teachings, showcasing the empire's commitment to governance and Buddhism. Another significant achievement is the development of stupas, notably exemplified by the Great Stupa at Sanchi, which incorporated elaborate architectural features like toranas (gateway arches) and a pradakshina path (circumambulatory path), reflecting the fusion of religious devotion and architectural sophistication.*

*Mauryan contributions also extend to cave architecture, with the Barabar Caves being among the earliest examples of rock-cut structures in India. These caves demonstrate advanced carving techniques and a shift towards durable and functional architectural forms. Additionally, the introduction of pillared halls during this period allowed for the creation of large, open spaces used for administrative and public purposes. The legacy of Mauryan architecture is profound, influencing subsequent Indian architectural styles and contributing to the spread of Buddhism across Asia. The preservation of key structures, such as the Ashokan pillars and stupas, highlights the enduring significance of Mauryan architectural innovations. These elements continue to inspire and inform contemporary architectural practices and cultural heritage, cementing the Mauryan period's pivotal role in the history of Indian architecture.*

**Keywords:** Mauryan, Architecture, Innovations and Legacy.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The Maurya Empire, which flourished from 322 to 185 BCE, stands as one of the most significant and expansive empires in ancient Indian history. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya, the empire emerged from the fragmented political landscape of the Indian subcontinent to unify a vast territory stretching from the northwestern frontier to the southern regions of India. The Mauryan Empire is particularly notable for its administrative sophistication, military prowess, and profound influence on Indian culture and politics.

Chandragupta Maurya, with the help of his advisor Kautilya (also known as Chanakya), established the Mauryan dynasty by overthrowing the Nanda Dynasty. Under Chandragupta's rule, the empire expanded significantly, consolidating control over a diverse and vast territory. His successors, including the famous Emperor Ashoka, further strengthened the empire's political and cultural influence. Ashoka, in particular, is renowned for his embrace of Buddhism and his efforts to spread its teachings across the empire, which significantly impacted the region's cultural and religious landscape.

The Mauryan Empire is distinguished by its advanced administrative system, including a centralized bureaucracy and a sophisticated network of spies and officials. Architecturally, the Mauryan period is celebrated for its monumental constructions, such as the Ashokan pillars and stupas, which symbolize the empire's grandeur and the emperor's commitment to moral and ethical governance. The Mauryan Empire's legacy is evident in its lasting contributions to Indian culture, administration, and architecture.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:**

This study examines the Innovations in Architecture and Legacy of Maurya Empire.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

### **INNOVATIONS IN MAURYAN ARCHITECTURE**

The Mauryan Empire, which flourished from approximately 322 to 185 BCE, represents a pivotal moment in the history of Indian architecture. The architectural achievements of this period reflect not only the artistic and engineering prowess of the Mauryan builders but also their deep engagement with religious and political symbolism. Central to the innovations of Mauryan architecture are the use of polished stone, the erection of Ashokan pillars, the development of stupas, the beginnings of cave architecture, and the introduction of pillared halls. Each of these innovations contributed to the distinctive character of Mauryan architecture and left a lasting impact on subsequent architectural developments in India.

#### **Polished Stone Edifices**

One of the most striking innovations in Mauryan architecture is the use of highly polished sandstone. This technique is particularly evident in the monumental pillars and other significant structures of the period. The polished stone not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal of these edifices but also contributed to their durability. The meticulous craftsmanship involved in achieving a high degree of polish is a testament to the advanced skills of Mauryan architects and artisans. The polished sandstone was used extensively in the construction of the Ashokan pillars, which were erected throughout the empire to convey edicts and proclamations. The smooth surface of the pillars, achieved through fine polishing, gave them a distinctive, gleaming appearance that made

them stand out in the landscape. This technique also had practical benefits, as it helped to protect the stone from weathering and erosion, ensuring the longevity of the inscriptions carved into the pillars.

The use of polished stone was not limited to pillars alone. It was also employed in the construction of various other structures, including the stupa at Sanchi. The ability to achieve such a high level of polish with the technology of the time speaks volumes about the technical expertise and artistic vision of the Mauryan builders. This innovation set a new standard for stone craftsmanship and influenced the architectural practices of subsequent periods.

### **Ashokan Pillars**

Perhaps the most iconic architectural legacy of the Mauryan Empire is the Ashokan pillars. These monolithic structures were erected by Emperor Ashoka across his empire as a means of disseminating his edicts and reinforcing his moral and ethical teachings. The pillars are notable for their grandeur, with their imposing height and finely polished surfaces commanding attention.

The Ashokan pillars were typically made from single pieces of sandstone, a feat of engineering that required advanced quarrying and carving techniques. The inscriptions on the pillars were meticulously executed, conveying a range of messages from administrative directives to moral guidance. The inscriptions are in Brahmi script, which was one of the earliest scripts used in India.

The capitals of the Ashokan pillars are particularly noteworthy for their artistic elaboration. They often feature intricate carvings of animals such as lions, elephants, and bulls, as well as decorative elements like lotuses. The Lion Capital of Ashoka, for example, is an exquisite example of Mauryan artistry, with its four majestic lion heads symbolizing imperial power and protection. This capital later became a symbol of India's sovereignty and is now featured on the national emblem of India.

The Ashokan pillars were strategically placed in important locations, including major towns, religious sites, and crossroads. Their placement was intended to maximize their visibility and impact, ensuring that Ashoka's edicts reached a broad audience. The pillars not only served as vehicles for communication but also as symbols of the emperor's authority and benevolence.

### **Stupas**

Stupas are another significant architectural innovation of the Mauryan period. These dome-shaped structures were primarily used to house relics of the Buddha and serve as places of veneration. The Mauryan contribution to stupa architecture is particularly evident in the Great Stupa at Sanchi, which remains one of the best-preserved examples from the period.

The design of the stupa involves a large dome, which represents the universe and serves as a repository for sacred relics. The stupa is surrounded by a circular path known as the pradakshina path, which devotees use to circumambulate the structure as an act of devotion. The Mauryan period saw the introduction of elaborate

architectural features, including the toranas or gateway arches, which were adorned with intricate carvings depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha and various Jataka tales (stories of the Buddha's previous lives).

The Great Stupa at Sanchi is particularly renowned for its architectural sophistication. Its construction during the Mauryan period represents a significant development in stupa design, with the addition of a lavishly decorated gateway and a finely executed harmika (a railing structure at the top of the stupa). The stupa's dome was originally constructed with bricks, and its surface was covered with a layer of plaster, which was then polished to achieve a smooth finish.

The Mauryan innovations in stupa architecture contributed to the spread of Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent. The grandeur and scale of the stupas, along with their artistic embellishments, made them important centers of pilgrimage and devotion. The architectural principles established during the Mauryan period continued to influence the construction of stupas in later periods, contributing to the development of Buddhist architecture across Asia.

### **Cave Architecture**

The Mauryan period also marks the beginnings of cave architecture in India. This form of architecture involves the carving of structures directly into rock faces, creating spaces that could serve various functions, including religious, monastic, and residential purposes. The Barabar Caves, located in modern-day Bihar, are among the earliest examples of rock-cut architecture in India and provide valuable insights into the architectural practices of the Mauryan period.

The Barabar Caves were created during the reign of Emperor Ashoka and his successors. They are known for their smooth, polished interiors, which were achieved through meticulous carving and finishing techniques. The caves were often used as retreats for ascetics and monks, reflecting the growing influence of Buddhism and Jainism during the Mauryan period.

One of the notable features of the Barabar Caves is their architectural simplicity, which contrasts with the ornate carvings found in later rock-cut structures. The caves are characterized by their plain exteriors and elaborately finished interiors, including features such as chaitya halls (prayer halls) and viharas (monastic cells). The use of rock-cut techniques allowed for the creation of durable and visually striking structures, contributing to the development of cave architecture in India.

The Barabar Caves and other early examples of rock-cut architecture had a profound impact on subsequent architectural developments in India. The techniques and styles developed during the Mauryan period were adopted and expanded upon by later builders, leading to the creation of more complex and artistically elaborate cave temples across the Indian subcontinent.

## Pillared Halls

The introduction of pillared halls is another significant architectural innovation of the Mauryan period. These structures, characterized by their use of columns to support the roof, were used for a variety of purposes, including administrative meetings, public gatherings, and religious ceremonies. The design of the pillared hall reflects an advanced understanding of spatial organization and structural support.

One of the most famous examples of a pillared hall from the Mauryan period is the assembly hall at the site of the ancient city of Pataliputra (modern Patna). This hall was used for the administrative and legislative functions of the Mauryan government, reflecting the empire's sophisticated approach to governance and public affairs.

The use of pillars in Mauryan architecture allowed for the creation of large, open spaces that could accommodate a significant number of people. The architectural design of the pillared halls also provided flexibility in terms of layout and usage, making them suitable for a range of functions. The introduction of pillared halls during the Mauryan period had a lasting influence on Indian architecture, with subsequent periods incorporating and expanding upon this design element in temples, palaces, and other structures.

## LEGACY OF MAURYAN ARCHITECTURE

The architectural innovations of the Mauryan period have had a profound and lasting impact on the history of Indian architecture. The legacy of Mauryan architecture is evident in various aspects of later architectural developments, including the influence on subsequent architectural styles, the cultural symbolism of key structures, the preservation of architectural heritage, and the evolution of architectural techniques.

### Influence on Later Indian Architecture

The architectural innovations of the Mauryan period set a new standard for subsequent architectural practices in India. The use of polished stone, monolithic pillars, and the development of stupas had a lasting influence on the architectural styles of later Indian dynasties. The techniques and design principles established during the Mauryan period were adopted and adapted by subsequent builders, contributing to the evolution of Indian architecture.

For example, the use of polished sandstone, first perfected by the Mauryans, continued to be a key feature in the construction of temples and other monumental structures in later periods. The Ashokan pillars, with their impressive height and intricate capitals, served as a model for similar structures in later dynasties, including the Shungas and the Guptas.

The development of stupa architecture during the Mauryan period also had a significant impact on the spread of Buddhism across Asia. The design elements introduced during this period, such as the toranas and the pradakshina path, were incorporated into stupa construction in other regions, including Southeast Asia and Central Asia. This diffusion of architectural ideas contributed to the development of a shared Buddhist architectural tradition across the continent.

## Cultural Symbolism

The architectural achievements of the Mauryan period, particularly the Ashokan pillars and stupas, have become powerful symbols of cultural and historical significance. The Ashokan pillars, with their inscriptions and decorative capitals, are emblematic of Emperor Ashoka's commitment to promoting moral and ethical values. They represent a fusion of political authority and religious dedication, reflecting the emperor's efforts to integrate Buddhist principles into his governance. The stupas, as repositories of sacred relics and centers of pilgrimage, symbolize the centrality of Buddhism in Mauryan society. The architectural grandeur of the stupas, along with their artistic embellishments, serves as a testament to the importance of religious devotion in Mauryan culture. The stupas continue to be revered as important cultural and religious landmarks, and their design elements are celebrated in various forms of art and architecture.

The Lion Capital of Ashoka, in particular, has achieved iconic status as a symbol of India's sovereignty and heritage. It features prominently on the national emblem of India, serving as a reminder of the country's rich historical and cultural legacy. The continued reverence for the Ashokan pillars and stupas underscores the enduring significance of Mauryan architectural achievements.

## Preservation of Heritage

The preservation of Mauryan architectural sites has played a crucial role in maintaining the connection to India's ancient past. Sites such as the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the Barabar Caves, and the Ashokan pillars have been preserved and studied extensively, providing valuable insights into the art, culture, and religious practices of the Mauryan period.

The preservation of these sites is essential for understanding the historical context of Mauryan architecture and its influence on later developments. Conservation efforts have ensured that these structures remain accessible to scholars, historians, and visitors, allowing for ongoing research and appreciation of their historical significance. The preservation of Mauryan architectural heritage also contributes to the broader understanding of Indian architectural history. By studying the architectural techniques, design principles, and artistic styles of the Mauryan period, researchers can gain insights into the evolution of Indian architecture and its impact on subsequent periods.

## Evolution of Architectural Techniques

The architectural techniques developed during the Mauryan period laid the groundwork for subsequent advancements in Indian architecture. The use of polished stone, rock-cut architecture, and pillared halls provided a foundation for the development of more complex and elaborate architectural forms in later periods. The innovations introduced by the Mauryans, such as the refinement of stone polishing techniques and the design of rock-cut caves, were expanded upon by later builders. The evolution of these techniques contributed to the creation of more intricate and diverse architectural styles, including the development of temple architecture, palace design, and urban planning. The Mauryan period's influence on architectural techniques is evident in the continued use and adaptation of these methods in later periods. The legacy of Mauryan

architecture can be seen in the continued appreciation for polished stone, the elaboration of stupa design, and the evolution of rock-cut architecture, all of which reflect the enduring impact of the Mauryan period on the history of Indian architecture.

## CONCLUSION:

Mauryan architecture, with its groundbreaking innovations and enduring legacy, stands as a cornerstone of ancient Indian architectural history. The era, marked by advancements such as polished sandstone construction, the Ashokan pillars, and the development of stupas, reflects the Mauryan Empire's sophisticated approach to art and engineering. These innovations not only enhanced the aesthetic and functional qualities of architectural forms but also served to reinforce the empire's political and religious ideologies. The Mauryan period's architectural achievements, including the intricate carvings of the Ashokan pillars and the elaborate design of stupas like the Great Stupa at Sanchi, set new standards for monumental construction. The introduction of cave architecture and pillared halls further showcases the era's ingenuity and versatility.

The legacy of Mauryan architecture extends far beyond its time, influencing subsequent architectural styles and contributing to the spread of Buddhism across Asia. The preservation of these architectural marvels ensures their continued relevance, offering valuable insights into the Mauryan Empire's cultural and historical significance. In sum, Mauryan architecture remains a testament to the empire's artistic and engineering prowess, leaving an indelible mark on the history of Indian architecture.

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