



## Analysis of Indica by Megasthenes

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Greek diplomat, historian, and ethnographer Megasthenes wrote extensively on Indian customs and provided a window into life among the ancient Indians during Chandragupta Maurya. Despite the fact that his book, the Indica, was lost in the progression of time, it has now been partially recreated utilizing literary works by succeeding authors. Megasthenes is referred to as "the father of Indian history" since he was the first to depict ancient India. Limited information is known about Megasthenes, even though his writings have survived thanks to succeeding authors.

His first appearance in writing was during his stay at the court of Sibyrtius, a satrap (vassal state) of Arachosia (southern Afghanistan in modern times) under the reigns of Antigonos I and Seleucus I. Megasthenes served as an envoy for Seleucus I to capital of Chandragupta Maurya in Pataliputra after the Seleucid-Mauryan War in around 305 BC.

During Chandragupta Maurya's rule, Megasthenes travelled to India, however it is unknown exactly when he arrived or how much he stayed there. The exact date of Megasthenes visit to India is unknown and currently up for debate among academics. While it is known that Megasthenes travelled to the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra, it is unclear where else he went in India. He gives a thorough description of the rivers in this area, suggesting that he may have travelled through the Punjab region in northwest India. He would have then taken the Ganga and Yamuna rivers to get to Pataliputra.

He studied and recorded the customs, daily routine, social system, and other characteristics of the Mauryan Empire's inhabitants while he was living in India. Indica is the title of the current collection of his writings. The parts of Megasthenes' Indica that have been survived as excerpts or paraphrases by later writers can be used to rebuild it. Even though the content has not been directly credited to Megasthenes, the elements that were related to the original text may be distinguished from the subsequent works based on comparable topic, terminology, and phrasing.

In their works, later authors including Arrian, Strabo, Diodorus, and Pliny mention Indica. Arrian is the one of these authors who praises Megasthenes the most; Strabo and Pliny are less kind. Strabo, a Greek author from the first century, accused both Megasthenes as well as his successor Deimachus of lying and claimed that "no faith whatever" can be placed in their works. According to historians, Seleucus I's activities in India were justified by Indica. It argues that Dionysus was capable of conquering India because it was a primitive agricultural civilization before his invasion, while portraying modern-day India as an insurmountable terrain. India becomes a strong, impenetrable nation as a result of Dionysus' urbanization of it.

Megasthenes has been considered by contemporary researchers like E. A. Schwanbeck and B. C. J. Timmer as a generally credible source of Indian history. Only Megasthenes' portrayal of the Indian gods attracts Schwanbeck's criticism. Although Megasthenes only visited a tiny portion of India, Brown adds that he must have depended on other people for his views. While some of his observations appear to be incorrect, others cannot be disregarded by contemporary academics.

Thus, even though he was frequently misled by inaccurate information given by others, some of the later writers continued to rely heavily on his work for knowledge regarding India.

### II. INDICA BY MEGASTHENES

Because it was governed by a set of predetermined ideals, early Indian civilization and its organisational structure were particularly crucial. The ceremonies, rituals, and customary observances that have been continually sailing across the waves of time have had a significant impact on these ideas. The Mauryan society was not an exception. Megasthenes appears to be quite taken by the concept of Mauryan society and thus evaluates it in his

writings. Megasthenes is used by scholars like N.S. Kalota when discussing the social climate of the Mauryan era. Kalota quotes Megasthenes, who describes a flourishing community with a low crime rate and upheld decency in his work.<sup>1</sup>

According to Megasthenes' writings, honesty was the state's distinguishing quality, and it thrived in an environment of abundant morality and sparse brutality. People developed wholesome habits and had happy lives. Vices were occasionally observed, though. Intoxicants like wine were only consumed on special occasions. High levels of life were the outcome of efficient trade and government. Most of the social stratification was determined by an individual's level of competence. Although it was not as prevalent as it was in Greek or other European domains, slavery did exist. 'Indian Dasa', on the other hand, appeared to be acting more voluntarily when granting Megasthenes certain privileges. They might have passed for state personnel in his eyes.

## 2.1 DIVISION OF SOCIETY

Indian Caste system as conceived by Megasthenes consisted of seven different castes.

**The Philosophers** are the most numerous but also the foremost in rank. As much as the monarch at the large public Synod or meeting, their abilities are to be used privately by those who seek to make sacrifices or execute religious ceremonies. When these philosophers are gathered in front the king at the royal gates at the start of a new year, the king shall use their writings to discuss crops, livestock, or any other matter of public importance. The person who has provided false information three times will suffer the repercussions and will be forbidden from speaking for the rest of his life. On the other hand, the person who offers wise counsel will be rewarded with tax exemption.

The second class was made up of **Husbandmen**, who were both more numerous than the others and kinder and gentler in nature. They were excused from serving in the military and allowed to develop their property without danger. They hardly ever participate in any sort of social event held in the towns. These could be dragged into combat when in distress and forced to fight at the cost of their lives. The monarch owned the entire territory, which the husbandmen worked on in exchange for receiving a part of.

The third class was made up of **Herders and Hunters** who were the only ones permitted to hunt, maintain cattle, sell draught animals, or rent out their services. They got a quota of grains from the monarch in exchange for purging the area of wild animals and birds that devour the seeds put in the soil. They were nomads who spent their lives in tents.

The fourth class consisted of **Craftsmen**, who sell goods, engage in manual labour, and work in trades. Some of them made restitution and provided the state with certain required services. But the King, who is the only client for whom the armourers and shipbuilders labour, is the one who pays them.

The **Military fighter men**, who make up a more homogenous group, were included in the fifth class. It is prepared for battle and well-organized. They spend their free time drinking and doing nothing while they are not actively serving. They are kept up at the King's cost and are always prepared to go into action when needed.

The sixth class was made up of **Superiors** who were tasked with keeping an eye on everything and reporting anything suspicious to the king. Some were given responsibility for the municipal inspection, while others had army-related duties. The folks chosen to hold these positions were among the best and most reliable.

**King's Councillors and Assessors** made up the seventh class. They controlled the highest office in government, the courts, and the overall management of public affairs. No one was permitted to marry outside of their caste, change their trade or career, or run more than one company at once.

## 2.2 RELIGION

Megasthenes' perception of Indian religion is dim. He received the offerings made to him by Chandragupta Maurya's courtiers. Megasthenes compares the Indian deities Krishna and Shiva to the Greek deities Heracles and Dionysus.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that there was little knowledge of Megasthenes' Indian ancestry. Dionysus according to Megasthenes, arrived, conquered people, formed towns, established laws, popularized the consumption of wine among Indians, taught them how to plough the soil, and even provided them with seeds. Additionally, he made many Indians farmers by yoking bulls to the plough and provided them the tools for farming.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kalota, N.S., *India as described by Megasthenes*, pp 98-99 (Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Puskas, Ildiko, 'Megasthenes and The Indian Gods Herakles and Dionysos,' *Mediterranean Studies*, Vol.2, Greece & the Mediterranean, 1990, p. 42

<sup>3</sup> Dahlquist, Allan, *Megasthenes and Indian Religion*, Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi, 1977.

### 2.3 GENDER RELATIONS

According to Megasthenes, Indians wed several women in exchange for a pair of oxen. Some people find a spouse with the hopes of having children together, while others marry for passion and pleasure. This demonstrated that polygamy was prevalent during his day. Another reason for getting married was a desire for children. What Megasthenes describes regarding marriage in India may be accurate given the custom at play. Megasthenes' claim that Indians have many children to balance the lack of slaves in their country. Megasthenes also observes women being paid to work in their homes as well as at state-owned spinning and weaving mills.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.4 SLAVERY

In his writings, Megasthenes at the outset refutes the idea that slavery existed in India. He said that Indian civilization was prosperous and that all men lived free and fulfilled lives. Given that slavery did exist and was widely practised in Mauryan culture, it is believed that Megasthenes may have assumed these slaves as state employees due to their willingness to work.<sup>5</sup>

The Indica of Megasthenes has rightfully held a very high place among the authoritative texts of ancient Indian history ever since Indological studies first emerged. The actual book has never been found, thus, German scholar Dr. Schwanbeck did a tremendous service by collecting all the fragments of the lost treatise that have been quoted by later classical authors. All scholars of ancient Indian history are familiar with Dr. Schwanbeck's gathered pieces of Indica thanks to J. W. McCrindle's English translation.

## III. APPRAISAL OF 'INDICA' BY MEGASTHENES

Through the pieces cited by subsequent Greek and Roman authors, the Indica of Megasthenes has come to us. It is unclear how much of Megasthenes' version these snippets provide. There had been four books in Indica, according to their records, but sadly none of them have survived. It served as the primary literature through which India was comprehended in the Graeco-Roman world. Diodoros, Strabon, Arrianos, and Plinius were the most notable classical authors to quote Megasthenes.

Diodoros of Sicily, a compilation of historical events from diverse sources, organised his work, the Bibliotheca, into forty volumes, covering the period from antiquity through 59 B.C., or the year of Julius Caesar's initial consulship. Such an explanation must include a tale about India, which appears in volumes II and XIII. The second book of Megasthenes' Indica, which provides a basic overview of the geographical background and social lifestyle of the Indians, is regarded as its pinnacle.

The writing of Diodoros is treated less seriously than that of Strabon and Arrianos. "His explanation of Megasthenes is typical of his cursory summaries; the original has been greatly condensed, with most of its neglect and excerpting mistake removed. Diodoros only contains the bare bones of Megasthenes' tale as a result."

J. Strabon was the first to criticise Megasthenes' description of India and call him a liar, even though he primarily relied on him. His geography is not merely a technical treatise such as Eratostheues' or a list of harbours like Periplus of Erythraen-Sea, but rather a comprehensive geography that also featured intriguing details about the ancient "inhabited world's" customs, history, and trade. The 15th volume, which is regarded as one of the most intriguing portions of his work, is where he spends the most of his time describing India and the Indians. Only sometimes does Megasthenes appear in his work as one of several authorities.

It appears that Hekataios' Aegyptiaka's approach, shape, and content served as a model for Megasthenes Indica. The standard used by the classical writers had evaluated India was Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

To surpass the scholars in Egypt, the classical writers in India frequently assert India's supremacy over Egypt. The Hellenistic era's more prevalent use of the motif *aboriente lux* led some to stress Egypt's superiority while others focused on India. India was improved by Alexander's companions because of its healthier climate. Shortly after that, Megasthenes composed Indica as a direct rebuttal to Aegyptiaka of Hekataios of Abdera, that was openly political and intellectual work of Ptolemaic Egypt propaganda. The Indica seems to have been created to demonstrate that all civilizations originate in India and that it is even a finer country than Hekataios Egypt, the platonic ideal kingdom with philosophers on top.

When it comes to Megasthenes' sources, we know that he spent a sizable amount of time in Chandragupta Maurya's court in India. He either described what he witnessed personally or what his informants told him. He was also impacted by his biases towards Greeks, as seen by the fact that he "freely employed Graeco-Roman interpretation, drawing much from his predecessors' Greek sources and adapting Indian reality as he understood

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<sup>4</sup> Dikshitar, V.R.R., Mauryan Polity, Madras, pp.340-341.

<sup>5</sup> Saran, K.M., *Labour in Ancient India*, pp 66-67 (Vora Publication, Bombay, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *Classical Accounts of India* (Calcutta, 1960).

it to his political and literary requirements." He did so without intending to, but he did so by incorporating his knowledge of India into a Greek ideology and projecting a Greek paradise onto India."<sup>7</sup>

Megasthenes borrowed much from his Greek forebears. He went so far as to transplant even Greek tradition myths on Indian soil. Megasthenes carried on the fascination with wonders that had been present in ancient tales of India right from the beginning. He was not persuaded to doubt the legendary stories of his forebears by his time in India. In Megasthenes, Monommatoi and Enotokoitai, races of Monophthalmoi with one eye, large-eared Otolikoines, and Enotikobes, respectively, emerge as Skylax.<sup>8</sup>

Megasthenes also brought up Herodotus parable of the gold-digging ants. Herodotus managed to track down the Indians who had acquired the ant-gold in northern India. Megasthenes established their site in Derdae as well-known gold traders in both ancient and modern times. Although his description of the exclusiveness of craft and endogamy is clearly a characteristic of the rigorous caste system, Megasthenes' sevenfold division of Indian society has nothing in common with the four regular castes or a significant portion of the mixed castes of India.

Through the third century B.C., Megasthenes likely conflated the castes with vocations or occupations that he could observe around him in Pataliputra.<sup>9</sup> When we find Megasthenes rejecting the incursions of non-Greek monarchs on India, including historical reality of Persian dominance, while remembering the incursions of Makedonien Greeks as well as acknowledging as true even the incursions of Greek mythological figures like Dionysos and Herakles, we can see that he has a bias against the Greeks. Megasthenes' knowledge of India came through Ktesias' *Indica*, which was a key source.

Whenever Greek writers before Megasthenes have described any region of India, Megasthenes inclined to accept that description and settles for small alterations, but when he had no prior writing to use as a guide and was forced to augment his own observations by speaking with Indians, his account is reliable. For instance, he appears to have been somewhat familiar with the subject when he was required to come up with a depiction of the Ganga as well as its tributaries without any prior work to serve as his guide. But outside of the area of India he is familiar with, he is only as trustworthy as the source he chooses, and we cannot be certain he is choosing the best source.

#### IV. CRITICISM OF WRITINGS BY MEGASTHENES

Megasthenes was the most prominent Greek writer in India. He had spent more time and seen more of India than any previous Greek tourist. He, like Alexander's comrades, was not obligated to take notes "on the go," and thus could be a patient observer. Despite being in this fortunate position, he did not take use of his prospects, and many of his utterances are negative in nature.

Even ancient readers found his report untrustworthy, since authors such as Strabo and Pliny had heavily criticised his reports. Megasthenes went so far as to transplant Homer and Pindar stories to Indian soil in his account of India. He chose India as the setting for Homer's tale of the battle of the Pygmies against the Cranes and Partridges, bolstered by the fact that Cranes had been discovered afterwards, with the points of small weapons still imbedded in their innards. Megasthenes also moved the Hyperboreans of Pindar to India.

Megasthenes' representation of "the tribes who cohabited with their women in public and ate the bodies of their dead relatives" was based on Herodotus. His classification of Indians into seven classes, namely "philosophers or sophists, farmers, herdsman and hunters, artisans, labourers, and tradesmen, warriors, overseers, superintendents, and council members", corresponds with Herodotus' classification of Egypt.

Because Megasthenes' classification of Indian society differs from Indian sources, it suggests that he developed his own seven classes while keeping Herodotus' seven classes of Egypt in mind. From the time of the Alexander voyage, Greek authors had consistently drawn parallels between Egypt and India.<sup>11</sup> In addition to Herodotus, Ktesias, whose depiction of the fantastic Indian tribes piqued Megasthenes' attention, was highlighted. Skylax, the very first Greek explorer and author on India, who might have written more on his experience descending the Indus, was more interested in surprising his audience with spicy material even if it is fictional most. Megasthenes, believing on these sources, asserted in the reality of one-footed men, one-eyed men, men with huge ears in India.

Megasthenes for his benefit is said to reject many truths which would prove to be against Alexander and Persia. Among Alexander's comrades, the narrative of Onesicritus had the most influence on Megasthenes. and it is seen that he has incorporated many notions of Onesicritus, in his writings without much research. however, it can be said that Onesicritus had a sense of combining his observation about India with imagination which was lacking in Megasthenes.

<sup>7</sup> K. Karttunen, *India in Early Greek Literature*, p. 97, (Studia Orientalia, Helsinki, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature* (Westminster, 1901); pp. 62-63, n. 4.

<sup>9</sup> R. K. Mookerjee, *Age of Imperial Unity* (ed. by R. C. Majumdar & Others, Bombay, 1951).

Weary of their era's crass materialism, economic insecurity, and imperial aspirations, these Greeks imagined their ideal home in faraway regions like Egypt and India, or in imaginary kingdoms like Atlantis and Panchaea. This can be seen in the way Megasthenes provides an idealistic picture of India and other writings that can be found about the civilization in Egypt.

Some of the elements related to India in Megasthenes' writings appear to have been imported from elsewhere in the globe. Thus, the assertion that the ruler owned all of India was most likely derived from Ptolemaic Egypt. The foreign effects can be easily identified in the nomenclature used in state administration.

True, Megasthenes reiterated many of his predecessors' comments without acknowledging or inquiring about them, but he also refuted them at times. For example, Megasthenes stated that the Indians wore coloured embroidered clothes, while Strabo drew our attention to historians who stated that Indians wore white linen or cotton clothing in general. Nearchus saw elephants as the possession of many wealthy persons, while Megasthenes observed that no private individual in India was permitted to have elephants. It is probable that the region Megasthenes saw was representing some things that were contrary to the stories of Alexander's friends, and hence Megasthenes brings our attention to it. Given that Megasthenes work has not quite directly reached us, these discrepancies were most likely the result of copyists' mistakes.

Another example of the same is Megasthenes idea on slavery in India. If Megasthenes' claim that there was no slavery in India was correct, it could have been a notable feature. However, the Smritis and other Indian writings contain so many mentions of the slave system that it is impossible to argue for its disappearance. Megasthenes appears to have extrapolated Onesicritus' assertion for the inhabitants idealising Indians.

Given the vast amount of literature that predated Megasthenes' arrival, it is astonishing that he claimed that the Indians had no use for writing and operated only by memory. It is also important to note that he frequently refers to writing in his other statements. Here, it may be claimed that because Megasthenes' claim that Indians lack literacy in writing is made in the context of unwritten laws, the truth seems to be restricted to legal proceedings. Ancient Indian legal texts known as Smriti literature were used to memorise the laws. As a result, Megasthenes' assertion may have indicated that Indians did not use written laws since judges knew the law by heart.

Megasthenes may have misunderstood foreign travellers in several instances when his observations seem to conflict with Indian literature. Within the brief time of his visit, Megasthenes found it difficult to understand the intricate aspects of Indian politics. He must also have been constrained in his depiction of Indian culture by the linguistic barrier as well.

Thus, we see that while the Greek envoy had ample opportunity, so far as we know, to give a fair picture of what he saw, there are many circumstances that would tend to obscure this picture.

## **V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

Megasthenes visited India under Chandragupta Maurya's administration. It is uncertain and subject to disagreement among scholars what day specifically he visited India. While he was residing in India, he researched and documented the social structure, daily routine, and other traits of the Mauryan Empire. Diodorus, Strabo, Arrian, and Pliny are some later authors that reference Indica. Historians assert that Indica provided justification for Seleucus I's actions in India. Academics cannot ignore some of his observations, even though some of them seem to be erroneous. Some of the following authors kept turning to his writing for information on India. Since the beginning of Indological research, The Indica of Megasthenes has rightly occupied a very high position among the canonical works of ancient Indian history. The real book has never been discovered, thus German researcher Dr. Schwanbeck rendered a great service by compiling all the passages from the misplaced treatise that later classical authors have used. The English translation of J. W. McCrindle has made Dr. Schwanbeck's collected portions of Indica accessible to all specialists in ancient Indian history.

Whatever the case, Megasthenes' Indica is a very erudite and discrete piece of writing. Although not to be accepted at face value, it gives us a wealth of knowledge about modern society. We are the ones who attempt to extract the historical vocabulary and narrative from his writing, but we are not aware of the true motivation behind Megasthenes' creation of the genuine Indica. Historians respect and hold Megasthenes in high esteem as a writer who accurately captured his era via his writing. However, there will be less opposition to the fact the time has surely come when historians and scholars must make a re-assessment of the nature and value of the Indica of Megasthenes as a source of our knowledge regarding ancient Indian history and culture. We should consider the conditions surrounding their transmission to us before blaming the reports Megasthenes made. Only a few bits and epitomes of his work have made it to us after being destroyed by time. So, instead of reading his actual book, we are just reading a second-hand work that has undergone several scribal edits. The Indica of Megasthenes is among the strongest literary sources for ancient Indian history, despite the unreliability of some of its parts. The Arthashastra's date is questionable, hence Megasthenes' Indica fragments are our sole certain and direct reference for the Mauryan Empire's founder. Because of how much of his work overshadowed the subsequent Graeco-Roman writing on India, we know relatively little about the other Hellenistic writers.

Megasthenes' appraisal demonstrates that he borrowed heavily from earlier Greek writers for his account of India. His biases towards Greeks were quite strong. Therefore, it is essential that Indologists likewise study Megasthenes' classical background to corroborate his narrative alongside the Indian evidence. This is true for all Indian classical writers. Their classical upbringing has not yet been well studied. Successful outcomes can only be attained through the considering both the Indian and classical data.