

Contribution of Ancient Greek and Roman Historians in Indian History – A Study

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Introduction: A Brief Survey of the Topic

The ancient history of India is mostly shrouded in darkness and for its reconstruction we have to face many difficulties. We cannot say that we suffer from meagerness of literature when there is a huge Sanskrit literature at our disposal, but what we do suffer from is the absence of historical literature. Ancient Indians, by nature, were abhorrent of keeping any record of their good deeds, which they considered to be self-praise. Sanskrit literature is mostly religious rather than historical. As a matter of fact, there are many reliable native sources on which we can depend for the reconstruction of the history of our past. According to J.W. Mc. Crindle, "The Indians themselves did not write history. They produced, no doubt, a literature, both voluminous and varied, and containing works which rank as masterpieces in various departments of Philosophy, Poetry and Science, but within its vast range history is conspicuous by its absence". So, we have to depend, to a great extent, upon the contemporaneous works of Panegyrics available to us and upon the records of foreign visitors who came to our country in the days of yore. "The accounts of any country and its people by foreign observers are of a great interest to the historians of the country; for they enable him to know what impressions the country made upon the minds of such observers and to estimate with greater confidence the part played by it in the general history of the world". For the reconstruction of the early history of India, therefore, we turn to Greek accounts.

The knowledge of the Greeks regarding India may be traced back to the days of Homer (about the heroic age), who informs us that the Greeks used articles of Indian merchandise, viz-tin and ivory. But it seems that their conception of India was extremely vague. Their knowledge was mainly confined to Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Sicily and a part of Italy, and beyond that they knew nothing. It is only to subsequent Greek writers that our thanks are due for their valuable informations regarding India.

We shall briefly study the accounts of these writers in order of time as they appeared. It is a matter of

profound regret that, with the exception of the History of Herodotus, all the works of the earlier date have either perished or lost and we get help only from fragments of their accounts cited in the works of later writers. For the sake of convenience, we propose to make a sub-division of the accounts as they appear before or after Alexander's invasion of India in 326 B.C. Before Alexander's invasion we have to depend upon four writers viz-Skylax or Scylax of Caryanda, Hecataeus of Miletus, Herodotus of Helikarnassos and Ktesias.

The first Greek historian who has mentioned about India was **Scylax of Caryanda**. He was an employee of Persian King, Darius Hystaspio, and was sent by the Emperor to explore the Indus region in 509 B.C. The expedition started from Kaspapyros (Kashyappur) down to the sea. His account which dealt with the expedition does not give any real account of India, but it gave a little geographical feature of the Indus valley.

Hecataeus of Miletus (B.C. 549-486) was another Greek writer who gave a vague picture of North-West India in his account named "**Geography**". But his information about India was based on the account of Scylax and Persians, with whom he came into contact during his travels. He mentions the city of Kaspapyros (Kashyapapur), Gandhara region and its river Indus. He also describes some Indian names: Indoi, Indus, Kallatiai, Argante, Gandarii, and Opiai a tribe of Indus valley.

But the first Greek historian who gave some informative account about India was **Herodotus of Halikarnassos**, "The Father of History". He was born in 484 B.C. He wrote the first historical text "**Historica**". In his text, he narrates the histories of various nations. His account of India is preserved mainly in Book III, 97-106, IV 44 and VII, 65, 86 of the text. Although, he speaks much for his critical capacity and diligent enquiry, yet, dependent as he was on second hand sources, he believed it to be true. His account of India is also based on purely oral evidences and contemporary beliefs, which made him exaggerate the information. He had a most vague

and meager knowledge of India. He knew that it was one of the remotest provinces of the Persian Empire towards the east, but of its extent and exact position he had no proper conception. His work contains the first notice of the famous gold digging ants, whose labours yielded the vast tribute in gold which India in the days of Darius paid to the Persian crown. The treatise on India, called the *Indika*, written by **Ktesias the Knidian** (about 400 B.C.), contains wonderful stories about India. He was employed as a physician in 416 B.C. in the royal court of Persian Emperor Artaxerxes Mnemon and his successor Xenophon. He continued in that post from 416 B.C. to 398 B.C. There was the best opportunity for him to acquire knowledge about India through Persian officials who visited India, but he was the first Greek writer who came into contact with those Indians who visited the Persian court. He refers that he saw seven Indians in the Persian court, two women and five men, who were white in colour. They were merchants or envoys bringing presents and tributes from the ruler of North-West India. He also wrote "*Indika*". But this text, like his great work on the "*History of Persia*", has been abridged by **Photios**, while several fragments of it have been preserved in the pages of other writers, such as, Aelian. It and the boundaries of his empire were extended up to parts of Afghanistan. He tried to capture again the territories up to Punjab which were formerly won by his master, Alexander. But now the scenario of the Indian political condition had been changed. With the help of Chanakya, a Brahman, Chandragupta Maurya, established such a vast empire as was never before. Seleukos attacked India sometimes in 305 B.C., but was defeated by Chandragupta. He handed over the whole area of Heart, Kabul, Kandhar and Baluchistan to Chandragupta under a treaty. Matrimonial relations were also established between them in the shape of marriage of Seleukos's daughter, Helen, with Chandergupta. Under the shadow of this friendship, the Syrian emperor sent his ambassador Megasthenes, to the royal court of Mauryan capital, Patliputra. He stayed in the court from 302 BC to 298 BC. **Megasthenes** was the first Greek who had the privilege of going into the interior of the country and staying at the imperial court for a period of four years during which he tried much to learn about Indian culture and civilization and also about India. He became the first Greek historian to communicate to the world wider conceptions on many important topics like India and its boundary, physical features, the society, the polity, the economic life etc and such other subjects concerning the Indian people. He entitled his memoir with the name **Indika**. But, unfortunately, *Indika* has been lost, though its fragments are preserved by the later Greek historians specially those of Strabo and Arrian. These fragments were collected and edited by Dr. E. A. Schwanbeck and published in 1846 in Bonn. Its English translation was published by Mr. J. W. Mc. Crindle in 1891. Megasthenes has described India in all its aspects, but the fact that he did not touch linguistic and religious aspects at greater length was no fault of his nor did he omit to mention these aspects. Since the later historians have preserved only a few fragments, it is just possible that

they omitted his accounts concerning these matters. On the other hand, he has been charged with coining the fables concerning men with ears large enough to sleep in, men without any mouth, with one eye, without noses, with spiders' legs and with fingers bent backward. Strabo also charged Megasthenes with giving untrue and spurious accounts. He says that „the men who have written on the affairs of India were a set of liars. Deimachus holds the first place in the list; Megasthenes comes next, while Onesikritus and Nearchus, with others of the same class manage to stammer out a few words of truth. But, in fact, despite the charge the later historians have levied against Megasthenes, the same writers filled their account at greater length with the contents of his „*Indika*". It is not true that his entire text was filled with false details, but his fault lay in giving an account of the fabulous races and the invasion of Herakles and Dionysius for which he was not responsible as he depicted what he had heard from the Brahmins with whom he came in contact during his stay at the Imperial court.

According to Smith "Although often misled by erroneous information received from others, Megasthenes is a veracious and trustworthy witness concerning matter which came under his personal observation, and his vivid account of Chandragupta's civil and military administration may be accepted without hesitation as true and accurate". "His long stay in the very heart of India might probably have given his work great authority in topographical matters also; but unluckily for us, it exists only in fragments preserved as quotations. In the existing fragments we can only find out his idea of the shape of India, names of some mountains and an important, but doubtful catalog of Indian races and tribes", says Cunningham was contained in a single book. Although he has been accused of medacity and falsification for making his accounts a tissue of fables of absurd perversions and exaggerations of truth, yet the evolution in our knowledge of Ancient India has led us to believe that they were not Ktesias on inventions or creations, but current beliefs of the time which he failed to avoid due to his desire of maintaining current stories in his work as relating to the Indians. But it has been regarded the only systematic account of India the Greek possessed till the time of Alexander's invasion.

Alexander's invasion of India opened the door between the two civilizations, Greek and Indian. Some Greek historians accompanied him during this invasion and they wrote their account. Though their work has been lost, but some fragments of their account are still preserved or referred to in later writings, especially those of Strabo, Pliny and Arrian. Among these historians, **Aristobolus**, a native of Kassandreia. **Nearchus** of Crete and **Onesikritus**, a native of Aegina, were noteworthy. **Aristobolus's** account "**History of the War**" was the principal source used by Arrian in the composition of his text „*Anabasis*" and later by Plutarch in his text "**Life of Alexander**" **Nearchus**, who also accompanied Alexander as „Admiral of Fleet", wrote his memoirs which have been preserved later by Strabo and Arrian

in their account. Like Nearchus, **Onesikritus** was the „Pilot of the Fleet“ in Alexander’s army. His text **“Life of Alexander”**, though undervalued by the historians because of facts being intermingled with fictions, gives much information to the later Greek historians who referred to him on several occasions in their writings.

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Deimachus, was another ambassador who was sent by the Syrian Emperor in the royal court of Mauryan Emperor Bindusara, son of Chandragupta Maurya. He wrote his memoirs. Though his work is lost, but some fragments of his account are still to be found in the writings of Strabo.

Patrokles was the next Greek writer after Deimachus. He was a government officer in the eastern province of the Syrian Empire under Seleukos Niketor and Antiochus- I (B.C. 281-261). He wrote a work on **Eastern Geography** which included a general description of India. He was often referred to by Strabo for his truthfulness.

Polybius was another Greek writer who wrote valuable account about India and its connection with the Syrian Empire. His account is also lost but only one note is published by Mc. Crindle in his book titled **“India as described in classical literature”**. This note deals with Antiochus meeting Demetrius, son of Euthydemus, for a peace treaty, thus ending the wars between the two powers, the Syrians and the Bactrians. After the treaty, Antiochus met Sophagasenus (Subhagasena) the Indian ruler. Thus this account refers to sufficient information regarding the political condition of Northern India in the third century B.C. Ashoka has mentioned the Antiochus as his contemporary in his Rock Edict III (Girnar) and XIII (Shahbajgarhi).

Artemidorus, a Greek traveller and Geographer, was a native of Ephesus who lived in about 100 B.C. He wrote a text on Geography named **“Periplus of the External Sea Both Eastern and Western and of the largest islands in it”**. It is a lost account, but its fragments were preserved by Marcianus in the fifth century. The same has been translated by Dr. Wilfred H. Schoff of Philadelphia. It throws light on the geographical features of India. After the advent of Christian Era, a great historian **Strabo** of Amasia was born. The exact dates of his birth and death are uncertain, but he lived in the reign of Augustus Caesar and Tiberius in 21 A.D. He was a great traveller who wrote seventeen texts. His descriptions in „Geography“ embody the results of his personal observations. His text **“Geography”** is not confined merely to the physical Geography alone, but it is a wider one embracing many topics of social, economic and political nature.

The next Greek writer, **Pliny**, also wrote on India. His text **“The Natural History”** is an encyclopedia of the ancient people. This text is divided into thirty seven books and the sixth one dealing with India is based on the Indika of Megasthenes.

During the second century A.D. a Greco-Roman historian, **Arrian**, wrote a good description of India and also gave a detailed account of the **“Anabasis of Alexander the Great”**. His works are based on the accounts of Alexander’s historian, Megasthenes and Deimachus. The work named Indica, is a description of India, and was usually united in manuscripts with the Anabasis, as the eighth book. It gives a general description of India based mainly on the accounts of Megasthenes. The second deals with the voyage of Nearchus, which is entirely based on the accounts of Nearchus himself while the third part mainly describes the southern parts of the world which is uninhabitable because of excessive heat.

Aelian was born during 2nd century A.D. He wrote two books. The first is **A Collection of**

Miscellaneous History", and the second is **"On the Peculiarity of Animals"**. The second book is about India and it throws light on the fauna of ancient India. His book on animals became popular and was regarded as a standard book on zoology. He has noticed not a few of the animals of India. In his first text, „A Collection of Miscellaneous History, he often mentions some information about ancient Indian history and culture.

Philostratos was born at Lemnos, probably in 172 A.D. He rose to the height of fame as a rhetorician and was in high favour of the Empress Julia Domna, wife of Severus. At her request he composed the famous biography of Apollonius of Tyana titled **"Philosophical Romance"**, who is said to have visited India about the middle of the first century of our Era. It describes the observations made by the hero of the work during the course of his travels through North-West India taking place during 43-44 A.D. The excavation at Taxila confirmed his descriptions about the monuments at Taxila during the first century.

The dates as to when **Justinus** survived is not known, but from the extracts relating to India we gather more information about Chandragupta Maurya, than we do from any other writer after Megasthenes.

Plutarch, who is supposed to have been born towards the middle of the first century A.D. made very scant contribution. He wrote **"Parallel lives of the famous men of Greece and Rome"** in which he describes forty six heroes of Greece and Rome. But his accounts are devoid of historical accuracy. But his account of Alexander's battle with Porus is very beautiful.

Curtious Rufus, whose period is fixed at about 100 A.D, wrote his account originally in ten books. Two of these books are completely lost, while certain portions are omitted from the rest. The materials of his narrative were drawn on „History of Alexander" chiefly from Ptolemy who accompanied Alexander to India, from Kleitarchos their contemporary, and from Timagenes, who flourished in the reign of Augustus, and wrote an excellent history of Alexander and his successors. While the sources whence he derived his information were thus good on the whole, he himself was deficient in the knowledge of military tactics, geography, chronology, astronomy and especially in historical criticism, and he is, therefore, as a historical authority, far inferior to Arrian.

Diodorus, who was a native of Agyrium in Sicily, wrote his **"Universal History"** about 100 B.C. to 100 A.D. He was a contemporary of Julius Caesar and the Emperor. Augustus Caesar. He had a great ambition of his life to write an Universal History, and having this in view, he travelled over a large part of Europe and Asia acquiring more accurate knowledge of countries and nations than could be obtained from merely reading books. From his texts we get a general description of India and Alexander's Indian campaign.

In the first instance, we are indebted to the unknown author of the **"Periplus of the Erythrean Sea"**, for invaluable treatise about seats of commerce on the western sea-boards. The work throws floodlight on trade carried on between the western countries and India.

The Greek account of India, though not exhaustive, is like a drop in the sea. But still that drop does not lose its significance and the account throws sufficient light on Indian culture and civilization in its various aspects. The account starts with the evolution of knowledge about India and we find a little addition to the account of the previous writers. But the accounts of ancient Greeks, taken as a whole, show that it covered all the aspects relating to Indian culture. The earlier writers like Scylax, Hecataeus, Herodotus and Ktesias relied on some second hand sources. That is why they assumed that the Indians were barbarians. But even that assumption they applied only to those non Aryan tribes who were really of that type. The later accounts of Megasthenes, Strabo, Arrian etc. assume Indian civilization to be of a high degree.

According to Greeks, India distinguished herself from the rest of the world as an indisputable geographical unit. Her political ideas did not fail to attract Greek attention. They found monarchical and republican forms of government here. The Indians went further to assume a confederate spirit with a view to considering India as a political unit. Thus politically India was much developed in the eyes of the Greek writers.

The Indian social order was originally based according to the Hindu texts, but Greek accounts mention that with the development of the economic life, there was a further elaboration and division, and the society was divided into seven classes i.e. Brahmin and Philosophers, Husbandmen, Herdsman and Hunters, Traders and Bodily Laboures, Warriors, Overseers, Councilors and Assessors as pointed out by Megasthenes.

The Greek accounts also throw light on the other social aspects of the Indian society, especially on Marriage system, Sati system, Dress and Ornaments, Food, Slavery and Funeral system etc. Alexander's historians, as well as Megasthenes mentioned non-existence of slavery in ancient India. But the existence of slavery in ancient India is found in Sanskrit literature.

The Greek accounts confirm that the Indian people enjoyed an advanced economic life. Their life was not confined only to agriculture, but it embraced multifarious forms of human endeavors such as trade and industries. This highly developed economic life manifested itself through the process of production, consumption, distribution and exchange of wealth. Even money and credit was in use, which shows that it was a full-fledged and developed economic life. Arrian has mentioned the construction of dock yards, and supply by the cars and transportaion of vessels,

which were built by them. This confirms that ship building in India was a regular industry. Nearchus quoted fine webs of cotton being made from the wool, and the

Macedonians used it for stuffing mattress, and paddling saddles. Similarly, Megasthenes mentioned regular manufacturers of military implements, and ship builders. Other profession like dyers and weavers, wheel manufacturing from wood are mentioned in Greek accounts.

Megasthenes and Strabo have mentioned Indian Brahmins and Sophists and have also discussed their views about Death, Birth and *Karma*. Greek writers like Strabo mentioned a few Indian deities, the chief among them being Dionysius (Siva) and Heracles (Krishna). But Megasthenes garbed these Indian deities with Greek mythology and historical traditions. According to Arrian, Heracles (Krishna) was worshipped especially by the Soursenoi (Surasenas), and independent people who possessed two great cities, Methora (Mathura) and Cleisbora (Krishnapur probably Vrindavan) and navigable river Jobanes (Jamuna) flowed through their county. Strabo mentions the other Indian Gods worshipped by the Indians were Zensombrious, the Ganges and the indigenous deities of the county. Zensombrious must be god Indra. But it is a matter of great surprise that the Greek writers failed to notice the distinction between Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. Although Herodotus was the first to mention a class of people who neither killed anything that had life, nor sow anything, nor did they have houses. They seem to be Jains.

After the death of Alexander in Babylonia during 332 B.C, his empire was divided among his Generals. Seleukos Niketor became the ruler of Syria Thus ancient India, as described by the Greek historians, was auspicious and glorious, particularly because of her institutions and ideas that remain unsurpassed in the history of humanity.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

In this research project, all the available Literary accounts written by Greek and Roman writers would be collected and examined which are important for the reconstruction of Indian history. In this study historical, comparative and critical methods would be used. Multi-disciplinary approach and scientific method would be used to securitize the fact of historical importance. In this present study, the facts would be collected from the primary or original sources, secondary source, modern books related to the topic, journals etc. Contemporary Indian literature would also be studied to know the information based on facts.

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