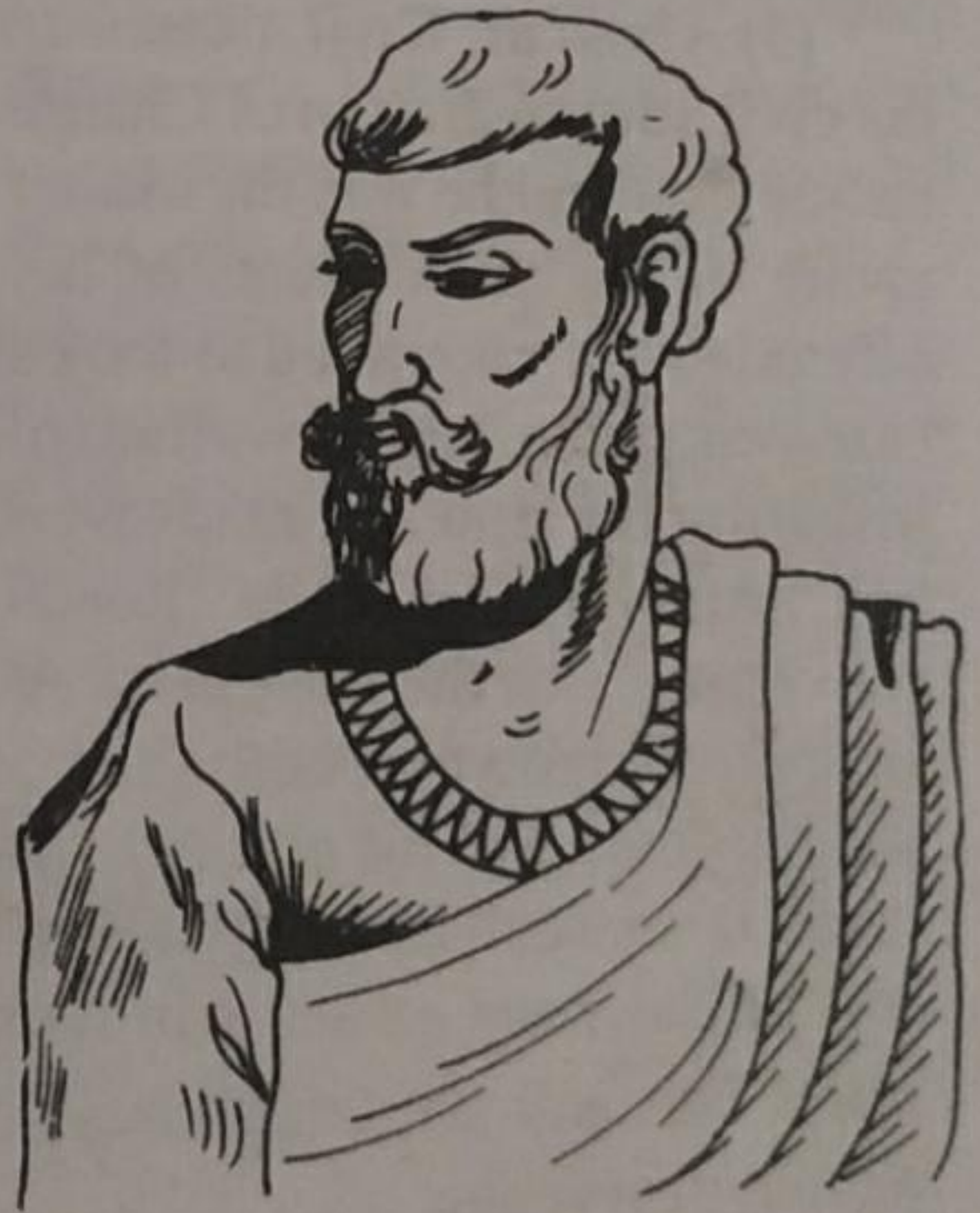


## Megasthenes and His Account of India

1. **Megasthenes** – Megasthenes was a Greek historian who came to this country in the fourth century B.C. as a representative or ambassador of Seleukus Nicator. He lived in the court of Chandragupta Maurya for about five years (302-298 B.C.). He has written an account of India and also that of Chandragupta's reign in his book entitled 'INDIKA'. This book is not at present available but most of its passages are found in the form of quotations in the writings of various Greek and Roman authors (like Strabo, Arrian and Justin). From these passages we come to know that Megasthenes had tried to write about everything that he had seen in India – its geography, government, religion and society. Most of the scholars attach a great importance to the information



*Megasthenes*

received from Megasthenes. For instance, **Dr. V.A. Smith** remarks, "*Megasthenes is a thoroughly trustworthy witness concerning matters which came under his own observation.*" He has written in detail about Chandragupta Maurya's administration as well as the Indian society in the Mauryan period.

2. **Megasthenes about Mauryan or Chandragupta Maurya's Administration** – Megasthenes has given us the following useful information regarding the Mauryan administration :



(1) *About the King* – Megasthenes gives a detailed description of the personal life of Chandragupta Maurya. He led a very splendid life and his palace was unique in its beauty. The king did not sleep in one room for two continuous days. He did not favour meeting the people too much. He left his palace only on four occasions – (i) to accompany his armies in the battle-field, (ii) to administer justice, (iii) to perform sacrifices, and (iv) to go on hunting expeditions. Special spies had been appointed for the safety of the ruler. A great number of these spies were women. From Megasthenes we come to know that Chandragupta Maurya showed a great respect to his Chief Minister Chanakya (or Kautilya) who lived in a small hut near the royal palace.

(2) *About Military Administration* – Chandragupta Maurya had maintained a huge army which was about seven lakhs in number. It comprised 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, about 1,000 elephants and 8,000 chariots, each chariot having three men in it. Megasthenes writes that the whole administration of the army was in the hands of Army Department consisting of 30 members. This department was further divided into six boards of five members each. These boards were incharge of (i) Infantry, (ii) Cavalry, (iii) Fleet, including ships and boats, (iv) War-chariots, (v) War-Elephants, and (vi) Transport and Supplies. (For details see Mauryan administration).

(3) *About the Civil Administration* – Megasthenes has written a lot about the civil administration of Chandragupta Maurya. He writes that the king was an autocrat and he was the master of unlimited powers. He kept himself fully aware of the main events of his empire through his spies. Several trained officials were appointed to look after the work of civil administration. Every care was taken for the welfare of the public. Many canals had been dug for irrigating the land and roads were made for the convenience of the travellers and promotion of trade. Roads were provided with mile-stones for the convenience of the travellers. At short distances *Sarais* were also built and shady trees grown on both sides of the roads. Because of these measures trade and commerce of the country was also on the increase. The public had to pay many taxes such as land-tax, customs, fines, excise duties. There was some sort of Sales-tax existing in those days, which was about 10% of the sale price. The land-tax, which was normally  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the total produce, was the main source of revenue.

Megasthenes writes that the laws were very severe and for ordinary offences hands and feet were generally cut off. Law courts were established throughout the length and breadth of the empire and the king himself took a great interest in the administration of justice. The country was divided into provinces, and very able officers were posted there who looked after the welfare of the people and maintained law and order. The provinces were divided into districts and each district had many villages in it. The incharge of the district was known as '*Sthanik*' while that of a village was called '*Gopa*'.



(4) *About the Administration of Pataliputra* – Megasthenes has thrown a good deal of light on the Municipal administration of the Mauryan capital, i.e. Pataliputra. It was a magnificent city and was situated on the confluence of the Ganges and the Son. It was encircled on all sides by a strong wooden wall. A special moat about 600 feet broad and thirty feet deep was surrounding the whole city to make it more secure from any attack from any quarter whatsoever. This channel was always filled with water from the Son river. The royal palace was made of wood and was unique in its beauty and magnificence. It was provided with beautiful parks, artificial lakes and every means of enjoyment. To manage the affairs of Pataliputra a special committee of 30 members had been organised. This committee was divided into six boards of five members each. Each board was assigned special duties and they were incharge of : (i) arts and crafts; (ii) comforts of the foreigners and strangers; (iii) registration of births and deaths; (iv) checking of weights and measures for the promotion of trade; (v) manufactured goods and their sale; and (vi) collection of Municipal taxes.

**3. About the Indian Society** – Besides dealing with the Mauryan administration Megasthenes has provided us very valuable information regarding the Indian society in the Mauryan period.

(1) *Division of the Indian Society* – According to Megasthenes the Indian society was divided into seven classes or 'castes': (i) The first class was that of the *Philosophers* who were though small in number, the most honoured members of the society. (ii) The second class was composed of the king's *councillors* who were incharge of the various departments and gave consultation to the ruler when asked for. (iii) The *soldiers* constituted the third class and were represented by the Kshatriyas. (iv) The fourth class was of the *minor officers* who helped the King and the Governors in the discharge of their duties. (v) The fifth class was that of the *cultivators* who constituted the bulk of the population. (vi) The sixth class was composed of the merchants, traders, artisans and boatmen who controlled the trade and commerce of the country. (vii) The seventh class comprised the hunters and such other men who made their living by hunting and keeping cattle.

(2) *About the General Life of the People* – According to Megasthenes the Indians were very truthful people. Theft was very rare. They had faith on each other and litigation was not so common. The Brahmans occupied a high place in the society and they were respected everywhere. The people were happy and prosperous. They led a very simple life and did not lock their houses. The slave system was not then known in India. But he writes that the people had no fixed hours of meals, and they went on eating all the time. They took wine very rarely, and that too on certain occasions and sacrifices. Megasthenes was much impressed by the sugarcane "*reeds that produce honey without bees*" and cotton, which he described as the "*vegetable wool*".

(3) *Strange Description about the Indian Society* – Megasthenes has



written some strange things about the Indian society. He writes, "*There are some people who had one eye in the middle of their fore-head and there are others who had no nostrils. There are some tribes in India who had ears reaching down to their feet so much so that they could sleep in them. There are to be found in India dog-headed men.*" It appears that Megasthenes had written these things on hearsay. There are mere fables and cannot be believed. It is because of such accounts that *Strabo* regards Megasthenes a liar and his account full of fables. Again according to **Dr. V.A. Smith**, "*His work has sometimes discredited unfairly because he permitted himself to embellish his text by the insertion of certain incredible marvels on hearsay testimony.*"

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. **Megasthenes.** Representative of Seleukus Nicator, author of 'Indika' gives full account of India, especially those of the Mauryan administration, and Indian society.
2. **About Mauryan (or Chandragupta Maurya's) Administration.** About the king; military administration; civil administration and administration of Pataliputra.
3. **About the Indian Society.** Division of the Indian Society; general life of the people; and some strange description about the Indian society.