

Megasthenes

Megasthenes was a Greek Diplomat, Historian and ethnographer whose extensive writings about the cultures of India gave an insight into the lives of ancient Indians during the rule of Chandragupta Maurya.

Although his book, the *Indica* was lost in the currents of time, it has been reconstructed to a certain extent using literary sources from later authors.

Megasthenes was the first person to describe ancient India, and for that reason he has been called "the father of Indian history"

This article will further give details about Megasthenes within the context of the Civil Service Examination.

Brief Background of Megasthenes

Although Megasthenes' work did survive due to later authors, little is known about him. The first record of his existence was when he spent time at the court of Sibyrtius, who was a satrap (vassal state) of Arachosia (modern-day southern Afghanistan) under Antigonus I and then Seleucus I.

Following the Seleucid-Mauryan War around 305 BC, Megasthenes became an ambassador for Seleucus I to the court of Chandragupta Marya in Pataliputra.

Tenure of Megasthenes as Ambassador

Megasthenes visited India during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, but when he came to India or how long he stayed in the country is uncertain. Date of Megasthenese's visit or visits to Indian is uncertain and still disputed among scholars.

Megasthenes visited the Mauryan capital Pataliputra, but it is not certain which other parts of India he visited. He appears to have passed through the Punjab region in north-western India, as he provides a detailed account of the rivers in this area. He must have then traveled to Pataliputra along the Yamuna and the Ganga rivers.

During his tenure in India he observed and noted the culture, daily routine, social structure etc of the people of the Mauryan Empire. The compilation of his works today is known as *Indica*.

Brief Overview of Megasthenes Indica

Megasthenes' Indica can be reconstructed using the portions preserved by later writers as direct quotations or paraphrases. The parts that belonged to the original text can be identified from the later works based on similar content, vocabulary and phrasing, even when the content has not been explicitly attributed to Megasthenes.

Later writers such as Arrian, Strabo, Diodorus, and Pliny refer to Indika in their works. Of these writers, Arrian speaks most highly of Megasthenes, while Strabo and Pliny treat him with less respect.

The first century Greek writer Strabo called both Megasthenes and his succeeding ambassador Deimachus liars, and stated that "no faith whatever" could be placed in their writings.

As per historians, Indica served a legitimizing purpose for Seleucus I and his actions in India. It depicts contemporary India as an unconquerable territory, arguing that Dionysus was able to conquer India, because before his invasion, India was a primitive rural society. Dionysus' urbanization of India makes India a powerful, impregnable nation.

Legacy of Megasthenes

Modern scholars such as E. A. Schwanbeck, B. C. J. Timmerhave characterized Megasthenes as a generally reliable source of Indian history. Schwanbeck finds faults only with Megasthenes's description of the gods worshipped in India.

Brown is more critical of Megasthenes, but notes that Megasthenes visited only a small part of India, and must have relied on others for his observations: some of these observations seem to be erroneous, but others cannot be ignored by modern researchers.

Thus, although he was often misled by the erroneous information provided by others, his work remained the principal source of information about India to some of the subsequent writers.