The justice of the Indians

Richard Stoneman

Ctesias claims that the Indians are very just people; he also describes their customs and manners. (Ctesias fragment [= F] 45.16)

Ctesias says a great deal about their justice, their goodwill towards their king, and their contempt for death. (Ctesias F45.30)

The Dogheads . . . are just men who enjoy the greatest longevity of any people. (Ctesias F45.43)

Greek accounts

These three passages are almost the only references to the customs of any Indian peoples in what survives of Ctesias’ account of India. Ctesias of Cnidus was a physician who held a post at the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes I, probably from 415 to 398/7 BCE. He wrote an extensive account of Persian history in twenty-three books and a much shorter description of India in one book. His history of Persia is regarded as extremely unreliable, not least where it contradicts his predecessor Herodotus, but it probably contains much that was in oral circulation in Persian court circles. Ctesias’ *Indica* is the first monograph devoted in Greek (or any other language) to India: he did not visit India but recorded what he had learned from merchants, some of them Bactrian, visiting Persia from the Indus

1 F45.23 has a similar report of the Pygmies of India; the Dog-heads are described at length in F45.37–43.
Valley and the ‘Silk Road’. His works are lost, but we possess long excerpts from both of them in the reading diary of the tenth-century Byzantine bishop Photius, as well as scattered quotations in other writers, notably Aelian. Most of the Indian extract is devoted to hydrography, to zoological and botanical marvels – griffins, poisonous birds, manticores – and to bizarre races like the Dog-headed people. By contrast, Megasthenes, who spent time at the court of Chandragupta Maurya in the early third century BCE, wrote a book which included extensive information on manners and customs, including (F27 Schwanbeck = FGrH 715F32) their simplicity and the infrequency of lawsuits among them.

Is this what Ctesias meant by calling the Indians ‘very just’? The question requires some investigation of the meaning of ‘justice’ for Greek writers, in particular in its ethnographic application. Distant (or ‘primitive’) peoples are often described as ‘just’ or something similar by Greek writers, beginning with the ‘blameless Ethiopians’ of Homer. The Augustan writer Nicolaus of Damascus (FGrH 90F103m) also wrote of the Ethiopians that they ἀσκοῦσι δὲ εὐσέβειαν καὶ δικαιοσύνην, ἄθυροι δὲ αὐτῶν αἱ οἰκίαι. Καὶ ἐν τοῖς δῶδοις κειμένοι πολλῶν οὐδὲ εἰς κλέπτει, ‘They practice piety and justice, and their houses have no doors. No one steals any of the many things lying around in the streets.’ They are also said by Stephanus to have been the first people to create laws (s.v. Αἰθίοψ).

Aeschylus, if he is the author of Prometheus Unbound, mentioned the Gabii, Δήμον ἐνδικώτατον <βροτῶν> ἁπάντων καὶ φιλοξενώτατον (F196 Lloyd-Jones), ‘a people of all mortals most just and hospitable’, who need never plough the earth for it brings forth all they need of its own accord. These are no doubt the same as the Abii of Homer (Iliad 13.6). Their justice and hospitality are part of a Golden Age scenario in which nature provides men’s needs without work, like the Garden of Eden, expulsion from which entailed that ‘in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread’.

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3 Karttunen (1989: 97) is of the opinion that Ctesias imposes less interpretation than Megasthenes, who makes India into a Utopia. But is he right? Strabo 2.1.9 rates Megasthenes’ reliability lower than that of Patrocles, but only on geographical matters. Cf. Democritus 68 DK A18 (Taylor 1999: 61 = Strabo 15.1.38): Strabo, discussing the River Sila(s), on which it is said nothing floats, notes that Megasthenes asserts this and that Democritus denies it, and he also refers to Aristotle for the denial.
4 There is probably an implied contrast, in their loyalty to their kings, with the relationship of the Persian Great King to his peoples. See Lenfant 2004: clviii.
5 Stobaeus 44.25 (IV.142). Photius calls Nicolaus’ work παραδόξων ἐθῶν συνεγωγή, which implies a work of paradoxography rather than ethnography; he adds to a number of weird tales collected by Conon (no. 186 in Wilson). See Wilson 1994: 129. Edith Parmentier in her edition of Nicolas de Damascus (2011), xxviii–xxxii follows the geographical order of these ethnographic snippets rather than the Byzantine ‘moral’ order.
Other peoples are described in similar terms. Agatharchides (Periplus of the Red Sea 49) says that the Fish-Eaters of the Red Sea are notable for the absence of greed among them, and for this reason they neither inflict evil on others nor incur it. Strabo (11.4.4) says of the Albanians of the Caucasus that they are ἁπλοῖ, not so much simple as straightforward: they use barter not money and because they are ‘uncivilised’ they do not engage in business. Similar qualities are sometimes attributed also to the Scythians and to the Seres.

Such qualities verge on the Utopian. Onesicritus, who travelled with Alexander, described the kingdom of Musicanus on the Lower Indus (FGrH 134F24 = Strabo 15.1.34), ‘lauding it rather at length for things of which some are reported as common also to other Indians, as, for example their length of life . . . their healthfulness, their simple diet . . .’; they do not use gold or silver; there is no slavery (since the young men perform the duties of public servants, like the helots of Sparta [see also F25]); they regard science as wickedness (except for medicine); ‘they have no process at laws except for murder and outrage, for it is not in one’s power to avoid suffering these, whereas the content of contracts is in the power of each man himself’. Much the same is reported of the definitely fabulous people described in the novel of Iambulus: they also live in India (somewhere), are notably long-lived and have no private property.

All this raises the suspicion that Greek writers about India simply foisted on its inhabitants a set of qualities that they associated with what later came to be called the ‘noble savage’. Even Megasthenes, who wrote some fifty years after Alexander’s expedition, has been accused of interpretatio Graeca, with perhaps less justification than most authors. Karttunen in fact states that Ctesias is less prone to this vice than other Greeks, while Ctesias listens to everything ‘with attention and credulity’ (80). Indians were conveniently ‘other’ and could be used as a stick to beat Greeks, as for example in Eratosthenes (Strabo 6.3.7, Dio Chrysostom Orations 69.6).

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6 Strabo 7.3.7, Dio Chrysostom Orations 69.6. Ἁγαθάρχηδης γοῦν οὐδὲν κολύονται οἱ νομάδες μὴ τε οἰκίας ἐχοντες μὴ τε γὴν σπείροντες ή φυτεύοντες δικαίας καὶ κατὰ νόμους πολιτεύεσθαι. ἀνεὰ δὲ νόμου καὶ δικαίου μὴ κακῶς ζῆν ἀνθρώπους καὶ πολὺ τῶν θηρίων ῥίμitez αὐτῶν οὐ δυνατόν, ‘The Scythians, at any rate, nomads who have no houses and do not sow or plant land, are not precluded from living justly and according to laws. It is not possible for men without law and justice not to live a bad life, and one much more savage than that of animals.’

7 Epistula Alexandri ad Aristotelem 22.


9 See Winiarczyk 2011: 190 (Taprobane), 238 (long-livedness), 250 (commonality of property) for these markers of Utopia.

10 Karttunen 1989: 97, who asserts that Herodotus also makes use of interpretatio Graeca, while Ctesias listens to everything ‘with attention and credulity’ (80).

1.4.9) who wrote that ‘not only are many of the Greeks bad, but many of the barbarians refined (ἀστεῖοι)\(^{12}\) – Indians and Arians [from the region of Herat], for example’. Aelian (*Varia Historia* 10.14) says that the Indians and Persians are ‘brave and free’. However, there is also material in the Greek sources that indicates a serious attempt to report on Indian conditions, even before Megasthenes, and I propose to explore some of the connotations of the idea of Indian ‘justice’ through Indian material also.

It is worth noting that in the sixth century CE the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang reported in similar terms on the Indian peoples:

> With respect to the ordinary people, although they are naturally light-minded, yet they are upright and honourable. In money matters they are without craft, and in administering justice they are considerate. . . . They are not deceitful or treacherous in their conduct, and are faithful to their oaths and promises . . . with respect to criminals or rebels, these are few in number, and only occasionally troublesome.\(^{13}\)

Xuan Zang goes on to enumerate the rules of trial and forms of punishment. This may be regarded as independent testimony, from nearly a millennium later, of a general view of the Indians as a law-abiding people.

**Justice in Greek philosophy**

If we look beyond the ethnographic perspective, it is clear that Justice is a key concept in Greek philosophy, and if I were to summarise Plato’s philosophy in a couple of sentences I could do worse than describe it as an exploration of the nature and conditions of justice. The *Republic* begins from the insight that ‘no man is an island’ and that to live in society entails getting along with one’s fellow-man; the *Laws* is an exploration of the way that a just society might be created in the teeth of man’s natural propensity to injustice and personal advantage. Justice is social justice: but that can be interpreted in different ways. Heraclides Ponticus in his lost work περὶ δικασίας (F50 Wehrli), describing the collapse of the Milesian polis, described it in terms of political strife of rich and poor, perhaps implying that his definition of justice includes a measure of political equality. Much later, Philostratus in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (3.25), has an Indian reprove the philosopher: ‘You seem to think avoidance of

\(^{12}\) The meaning of *asteiOI* here is not perspicuous. Probably ‘refined’, ‘gracious’ is the correct translation, rather than a specific reference to being city-dwellers.

\(^{13}\) Beal 1884: I. 83. Cf. also I. 177 on the bravery and justice of the Kullu people. The first passage is also included in Devahuti 2001: 132. Xuan Zang is also spelled Hsüan Ts’ang, and other variants, in older scholarship. See also Waley 1952, for a lively account of Xuan Zang’s journey.
wrong is the same as Justice’, which implies that social equality, not just the rule of law, is required.

Plato’s society, however, is to be ruled by philosopher kings, embodiments of wisdom, who control both the spirited part of the soul and of society and that dominated by desire. No conception of social equality here. John Ferguson declared without argument that Plato based this idea on the threefold division of Indian society into Brahmins (wisdom), Kshatriyas (temper) and traders (desire), while the Sudras were the equivalent of slaves in Plato’s construction. This idea, Ferguson averred, Plato had got from Pythagoras following the latter’s travels in India where he also picked up the idea of metempsychosis and so on. We need not take this idea very seriously in this form, even while we admit that earlier Greeks had acquired some knowledge of India. Plato’s older contemporary, Democritus, in particular was said to have travelled to India (and practically everywhere else in the known world as well). Both Aelian in the second century and Bishop Hippolytus in the fourth have him visiting India and the ‘naked sages’. He seems to have had views on the origins of civilisation, perhaps based on observation of polities less ‘advanced’ in organisation than that of contemporary Greeks. Most of the anthropogony in Diodorus’ History I. 35–42, which is the reverse of any Golden Age concept, probably derives from Democritus.

Law

Plato believed it was necessary to create a Utopia to ensure a just society, and that justice could only be ensured by extensive and detailed laws. Indian society in the period before and around Alexander is characterised by both Nearchus and Megasthenes as having no written laws, which would qualify it as a natural Utopia. However, if we examine this phrase further, it is clear that these authors are not saying that there are no laws in India. In fact, if there was, as it seems,
no writing, there could be no written laws.\textsuperscript{22} This does not preclude there having been extensive laws. The detailing in these authors of various severe punishments for certain crimes (mutilation for false witness, the loss of a hand for maiming another person, death for causing another to lose a hand or eye)\textsuperscript{23} makes clear that there were laws to be applied. In writing about the absence of slavery Megasthenes (as paraphrased by Diodorus)\textsuperscript{24} states that ‘it is silly to make laws on the basis of equality for all persons, and yet to establish inequalities in social intercourse’.\textsuperscript{25} Though our surviving Indian texts all belong to a later period, the tradition of Indian law-making goes back at least to the sixth century BCE. Romila Thapar writes of the emergence of kingdoms in this period that one of the responsibilities of kings was to maintain the laws (and to collect taxes).\textsuperscript{26} Authority was required to combat the ‘law of the fish’, which is that big fish eat little fish. This took place when the religious forms of Vedic society began to be modified by the rise of kingships, clan-states and republics.\textsuperscript{27} Ctesias, notably, never mentions kings, perhaps reflecting a backward-looking view of Indian society.

Indians, like Plato, recognised that society was impossible without a sense of justice. So the \textit{dharma} was established at the moment of creation, when the gods dismembered the cosmic giant.\textsuperscript{28}

From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born. Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth; cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born. . . . With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws (the \textit{dharmas}, archetypal

\textsuperscript{22} The evidence is somewhat contradictory. Megasthenes says that the Indians ‘have no written laws, but are ignorant of writing’ (Strabo 15.1.53 = Megasthenes F27 Schwanbeck = FGrH 715F32), while Nearchus says that ‘they write missives on linen cloth’ (Strabo 15.1.67 = FGrH 133F23). Modern scholars are equally divided, with Romila Thapar (2002: 163) conceding the existence of writing in the fifth century and Richard Gombrich (2013: 17) adamant that there is no writing before Aśoka. For a fuller discussion see Stoneman (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{23} Megasthenes FGrH 715F32 = Strabo 15.1.54. The delightful tenth-century CE book of travellers’ tales by Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (1928: no. 99, 137f) notes that ‘theft among the Indians is a very serious offence’, and is punishable by death.

\textsuperscript{24} Diod. 2.39 = Megasthenes FGrH 715F4.39.

\textsuperscript{25} ‘Social intercourse’ translates the conjecture \textit{συνουσίας} (Capps); the mss. have \textit{οὐσίας} (‘properties’). The existence of judges is also mentioned at FGrH 715F4.42.

\textsuperscript{26} Thapar 2002: 153.

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Avari 2007: 86ff. Gore Vidal also shows awareness of this social development in his novel about Xerxes, \textit{Creation} (1981: 214, 219–20), in which Jains and Buddhists pose a threat to society by their rejection of caste rigidities.

\textsuperscript{28} Doniger 1981: 31.
patterns of behaviour). These very powers reached the sky where dwell the Sadhyas, the ancient gods. (RV 10.90.9–16)

Righteousness is the first need of all: ‘What is needful? Righteousness, and sacred learning and teaching’ (TU 1.9). This is then followed by Truth, Meditation, Self-control, Peace, Ritual and Humanity. Another statement about justice in the Upaniṣads comes in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad: ‘in my kingdom there are no thieves, no misers, no one who drinks; no one without learning or a sacred fire, no lecher, much less a whore!’ (ChU 5.11.5).29 Again, theft ranks high among the blemishes on a just or righteous society. However, dharma varies according to caste and status,30 and the duty of Krishna expressed in the Bhagavad Gītā is not necessarily the same as that of non-heroic mortals. It also progresses through a historical development.

Can dharma be the concept that the Greeks had in mind when they extolled Indian dikaiosyne? When the British ruled India they took dharma to be the equivalent of Law and attempted to introduce the Laws of Manu as a law-code for India.31 However dubious this enterprise, the Laws of Manu and its predecessor texts, the Dharmasūtras, are a repository of information about laws that may go back at least to the sixth century BCE. They are both descriptive and prescriptive.32 The earliest of the Dharmasūtras have sometimes been attributed to the sixth century.33 That of Gautama has sometimes been regarded as the earliest, but its references to Yaunas (Greeks) may preclude its being earlier than the middle of the third century.34 Patrick Olivelle35 regards that of Apastamba as being somewhat earlier than this, while Doniger36 is of the opinion that the earliest of the Dharmasūtras belong to the fourth century BCE. Most of the provisions in Apastamba’s work relate to ritual rather than social interaction, though from 2.10 onwards there are discussions of class, marriage and inheritance. From 2.25 the duties of the king include taxes, crime and punishment and judicial process. It is the king’s rod (danda) that symbolises authority and the power of coercion.

These basics are much more developed in the Laws of Manu, which certainly belongs to a later period, but the range of topics is similar. Book 7 (12–18) begins from a consideration of justice, emblematised in the rod, as a duty of kings in

29 The passage is discussed by Agrawala 1953: 485–7.
30 Thapar 2013: 339.
31 Doniger and Smith 1991: lx.
32 Doniger and Smith 1991: x and lvi.
33 Olivelle 1999: xxxi.
34 Indians may have known of Greeks as subjects of the Achaemenid empire before they encountered the army of Alexander.
order to avoid social collapse. Book 8 includes discussion of such matters as interest (140–3), contracts (163), the necessity of impartial judgement (174), deception (224), livestock, boundaries, irreligion (310), theft (314), assault (345), adultery (352).

It is interesting to examine how far such topics, which are not specified in the earliest Dharmasūtras, are nevertheless reflected in the reports of Greek writers. The Greeks might thus prove to be witnesses for adherence to law and social customs from the sixth century, prior to their encoding in the written law codes. Let us take some examples.

Piety

As was made clear above, the moment of creation was marked by the establishment of the rule of sacrifice and reverence towards the gods. Aelian writes:

Who could fail to admire the wisdom of the barbarians? None of them has lapsed into atheism, and none argue about the gods – whether they exist or do not exist, and whether they have any concern for us or not . . . neither the Indian, nor the Celt, nor the Egyptian. The barbarians I have just mentioned say that gods exist, that they provide for us, that they indicate the future by omens and signs, by entrails and by other forms of instruction and teachings. (Varia Historia 2.31)

Aelian contrasts the barbarians in this matter with the sophisticated Greek intellectuals such as Euhemerus and Epicurus who deny the gods. While Aelian does not refer exclusively to Indians, and not all his characteristics belong to Indian religion (e.g. divination by entrails), he certainly makes them a prominent example. It is probable that this passage, like many of Aelian’s unattributed snippets of information about India, derives ultimately from Ctesias. In fact, religious dissent and scepticism are found as early as the sixth century, when shramanas begin to reject animal sacrifice and other Vedic practices; their attitudes may have influenced Pyrrhonian scepticism in the generation after Alexander.37

Honesty

If we turn now to matters of human interaction, there are a number of traits reported by Greeks that exemplify justice. A long excerpt from Megasthenes preserved by Strabo begins by observing the frugality of the Indians, and goes on:

The justice of the Indians

Theft is of very rare occurrence. Megasthenes says that those who were in the camp of Sandrokottos, wherein lay 400,000 men, found that the thefts reported on any one day did not exceed the value of two hundred drachmae, and this among a people who have no written laws, but are ignorant of writing, and must therefore in all the business of life trust to memory.38

Below, he writes ‘Their houses and property they generally leave unguarded.’ This description of Indian manners recalls the behaviour of the idealised Ethiopians mentioned by Nicolaus (above, note 5), who are able to leave property lying about in public places. However, an identification of Nicolaus’ Ethiopians with Indians seems precluded by the fact that he has another passage specifically about Indians (F103y), in which he writes:

Among the Indians, if anyone is deprived of money he has lent or deposited, there is no trial, but the creditor accuses him personally. He who deprives an artisan of the use of his hand or his eye is punished by death. By order of the king, the greatest offenders have their heads shaved, since this is the extremity of shame among them.

This may be set alongside a passage just following in Strabo’s report of Megasthenes: ‘The simplicity of their laws and their contracts is proved by the fact that they seldom go to law. They have no suits about pledges or deposits, nor do they require either seals or witnesses, but make their deposits and confide in each other.’ All these passages bear witness to the honesty of Indians, the unusualness of theft and their reluctance to go to law.

Elsewhere Aelian (Varia Historia 10.14) quotes Socrates (!) as saying that Indians are ‘brave and free but idle in commerce’, a description which recalls that of Heraclides Ponticus (F55 Wehrli) who says that Indians don’t work, because they are given over to tryphe. Both passages may perhaps be taken to imply a kind of negative honesty, in the sense that these alleged Indians are too lazy to rob or cheat you.

The mention of pledges and deposits prompts consideration of usury and rates of interest. Aelian (Varia Historia 45.1) writes: ‘The Indians do not lend money, nor do they have any notion of accepting a loan. For an Indian it is not right (Themis) to commit an injustice or to be the victim of one. Hence they make no written contracts or deposits’ (οὐδὲ ποιοῦνται συγγραφὴν ἢ καταθήκην, a difficult clause to translate). The second sentence seems vapid, though perhaps suggesting a religious underpinning of their honest behaviour, but the key point, that Indians do not or should not lend at interest, is a topos of the Vedic texts.39 Usury is also condemned in the Jatakas, though money-lending is accepted as an honest trade, though not one to be engaged in by Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

38 F27 = FGrH 715F32 = Strabo 15.1.53–6.
39 Jain 1929: 3.
A rate of 15 per cent is commonly mentioned. The *Arthashastra* (3.11.1–9)\(^{40}\) devotes a substantial section to loans, termed ‘debt’, *rina*, specifying a rate of 15 per cent on ‘normal’ transactions, but much more for commercial transactions (5% per month, i.e. 60% p.a.), and even more for risky travel by sea or through forests. The *Laws of Manu* also devoted a substantial section (8.140–62) to debt, interest and contract.

Plato regarded usury and lending at interest as undesirable and forbade them in his ideal society in *Laws* (742c). While the idea in Plato is a Utopian one, it may nonetheless recall what was believed to be the case in an actually existing society which Greeks regarded as in some ways ideal, namely India. But the writers either confused ideal with reality, taking a prohibition on such practice for members of higher castes as a general rule, or were misled by their idealisation of the barbarian. A third possibility is that they are describing old-fashioned Vedic-age ideas rather than the situation in the more complex societies they (presumably) actually encountered. Ctesias, reporting what he heard from visitors to Persia\(^{41}\) may be telling what those people thought ought to be the case, as it had been in the good old days. If Aelian is using Ctesias, then he too reflects practices from those good old days before Ctesias’ activity at the very end of the fifth century BCE and in the early fourth.

**Violence and non-violence**

Non-violence, that most iconic of Indian practices\(^{42}\) (though non-Vedic, and associated with asceticism), is enshrined in numerous places in the *Laws of Manu* (e.g. 6.75) but is largely absent from the ethnographer Megasthenes. However, Onesicritus, in his account of his interview with the Naked Philosophers (F17a, Strabo 15.1.64), writes that Dandamis/Mandanis described Alexander as ‘the only philosopher in arms that he ever saw, and that it was the most useful thing in the world if those men were wise who have the power of persuading the willing, and forcing the unwilling, to learn self-control’. The two men go on to discuss vegetarianism, Onesicritus explaining to Mandanis that this is also a Pythagorean custom (because of the transmigration of souls). These hints are expanded in the *Alexander Romance*, which may be the earliest surviving Alexander text, when (3.6) the philosophers reply to Alexander’s question ‘What is the wickedest of creatures?’, that the answer is ‘Man . . . Learn from yourself the answer to that. You are a wild beast, and see how many other wild beasts you have with you,

\(^{40}\) Rangarajan 1992: 425.

\(^{41}\) F45.6 and 45h; see above, note 2.

\(^{42}\) Chapple 1993.
to help you tear away the lives of other beasts.’ Later they ask Alexander ‘Since you are a mortal, why do you make so many wars?’

This passage is developed in the somewhat later Cynic diatribe, the Geneva papyrus,43 into an attack on meat-eating, and this in turn in the much later Life of the Brahmans44 by the fifth century CE author Palladius45 into an attack on the wild beast shows of the Roman Empire. These authors were well aware of Indian non-violence, and its specific manifestation as vegetarianism, as well as making it part of their own philosophical approach to life. It seems that this motif would not have developed if they had not found it expressed in the earliest Greek writers about India, even though the fragments we have are silent on the matter. The Alexander Romance appears to reflect more up-to-date information than Megasthenes, who describes Vedic vegetarianism.

Drunkenness also forms part of the diatribe in Palladius, and is a major crime for Manu (9.235).

Marriage

Aristobulus (who travelled with Alexander) described how in Taxila the unmarried daughters of poor families were shown in the market place to find husbands for them.46 A related tale is that of Nearchus who describes how brides may be won in fist-fights.47 Some historians have supposed that this is a reference to sale of brides, a practice explicitly forbidden by Manu (3.31), in which case Aristobulus would be either wrong, or evidence for a custom at odds with later Indian law-making. However, as Karttunen points out, ‘it seems to have been customary somewhere as there was the need to grant a wife’s status to women married in this way’, as the passage of Manu makes clear. He goes on to state that the custom is still alive, and quotes Sir John Marshall for the practice in parts of the Himalayas. However, Aristobulus does not actually say that the brides were purchased, unlike Herodotus in his comparable account of bride-sale in Babylon (1.196).

Under the heading of marriage, adultery is naturally an important issue for Manu (8.352), though it is unmentioned in the Greek writers except for a line in

43 Martin 1959.
44 The naked philosophers are not actually Brahmins. Megasthenes understood this. See Stoneman 1995; the reference is to p. 102.
46 Aristobulus FGrH 139F42. See Karttunen 1989: 223.
47 Nearchus FGrH 133F23 = Strabo 15.1.66.
Megasthenes\textsuperscript{48} stating that ‘the wives prostitute themselves unless they are compelled to be chaste’. Widow-burning is however mentioned by Onesicritus (F21), who attributes it to a people called the Cathaeans, located between the rivers Hydaspes (Jhelum) and Acesines (Chenab). The same practice is attributed more generally to ‘the Indians’ by Aelian (\textit{Varia Historia} 7.18).

\textit{Suicide}

Suicide by fire may be mentioned here since Onesicritus (F17, end) states that this is normal among Brahmins who feel their end approaching, as in the case of the renegade Calanus who accompanied Alexander to Babylon. Philo\textsuperscript{49} regards this as the normal view of philosophers. Megasthenes however denies this. He seems right to do so, but, as I wrote in 1994, it looks as if this conflict in the sources reflects a genuine controversy in ancient India about suicide by fire:

\begin{quote}
Such suicide was practised by some Indian ascetics, but orthodox Hinduism [I would now write mainstream Brahmin opinion] would be opposed to it, and this is the view that Megasthenes reflects. That there were accounts of Calanus with a different tendency is clear from the account in Philo which has Calanus praise suicide without any hint of controversiality.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Megasthenes reflects an older state of affairs, perhaps because he talked to Brahmins and had his attention drawn to the \textit{Ṛgveda}.

Basham (1951) makes it possible to be more precise about the nature of this controversy. Though Jains, for example, disapproved of suicide, a break-away group known as the Ajivikas practised voluntary death and went so far as to detail forty-eight different ways of seeking death. Ajivikas were known for their skill in fortune-telling. Though both Jains and Ajivikas were known as \textit{ekadandin} (‘carrying a single staff’), a word which recalls the name of the leader of the Naked Philosophers in the \textit{Alexander Romance}, Dandamis, Ajivikas were regarded as ‘bad’ ascetics, because hypocritical in both diet and sexual matters. Much of our information about the Ajivikas comes from the Buddhist text, the \textit{Samannapala Sutta}, which is hostile to both ascetics and Brahmins (not as good as Buddhists), and details the numerous forms of Ajivika hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{51} The conclusion to be drawn is that the Naked Philosophers may be Jains, or something very like them, expressing their hostility to the

\textsuperscript{48} F27 Schwanbeck = FGrH 715F32 = Strabo 15.1.54.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Quod omnis probus liber} 96.
\textsuperscript{50} Stoneman 1994: 505.
\textsuperscript{51} See e.g. Ling 1981: 18–22 (paras 46–61 of the \textit{Samannapala Sutta}). The classic study of the Ajivikas (Basham 1951: 124) details their misdemeanours (as a Buddhist/Jain saw them).
Ajivika Calanus, who breaks away from them to accompany Alexander (telling his fortune and enjoying his food) and ultimately to commit suicide in spectacular fashion.

Slavery

Megasthenes says that slavery is unknown among the Indians, while Onesicritus states that it is peculiar to the Indians in the kingdom of Muscanus, and is just one aspect of the excellent government of this country. Manu however regards the existence of slavery as a datum, and at 8.415 specifies the seven ways in which slaves can be made: through warfare, out of poverty, through being born in a household, by purchase, by gift, by inheritance, or as a punishment. It looks as if Megasthenes’ information here is simply wrong. Romila Thapar writes:

Slavery was a recognized institution . . . Megasthenes may have been confused by the caste status cutting across the economic stratification. Technically, there was no large-scale slavery for production. Greek society made a sharp distinction between the freeman and the slave, which distinction was not apparent in Indian society. A slave in India could buy back his freedom or be voluntarily released by his master . . . What was immutable in Indian society was not freedom or slavery, but caste.

In this case, therefore, the Greek writer seems to be imposing an idealising view of India on the facts, partly through misunderstanding.

Conclusion

The picture that has emerged is a complex one. Greeks regarded India as a particularly just society. In part this was due to an idealising tendency that made the distant people an example of Utopia, and reinforced this by finding examples of social equality in Indian conditions. However, the Greek writers do also provide evidence of legal practices and social customs resembling those described by the later Indian law codes, and thus have the right to be regarded as genuine witnesses for Indian society in the period before Alexander. Paradoxically, information in the Alexander Romance and Onesicritus seems to be more up-to-date than that in either Ctesias (who preceded them but relied on non-Indian informants) or Megasthenes (who was a generation later but seems to have derived his

52 A Utopian motif: Winiarczyk 2011: 255
53 F22, 24 and 25, Strabo 15.1.54.
54 A similar account is in Rangarajan 1992: 453. See also Ray 2000: 265–6 (non vidi).
55 Thapar 2002: 77.
information mainly from conservative Brahmin intellectuals). The evidence of all these authors must be treated critically and with caution, but is not to be dismissed as mere idealisation. The Justice of the Indians was a reality in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.