

Q "While using the accounts of foreign writers, historians must distinguish between statements based on hearsay & those grounded in perceptive observations." Elaborate with examples.

From ancient time various traders, travellers, pilgrims, settlers etc. came to India covering vast distances over land & water. Therefore, many references to India are found in foreign texts. The accounts of these foreign writers have become an important source to know about our past. However, many a times these foreign writers used to write things on the basis of hearsay. It is evident from the following examples -

i) Megasthenes in his 'Indica' and other Greek writers like Strabo, Arian etc. wrote that there was no slavery in Mauryan empire. However, this was not the case, presence of slaves is indicated by the Buddhist literary sources & also by the Arthashastra.

ii) Megasthenes mentioned that Indian society during Mauryan period consisted of seven classes - Philosophers, Farmers, Herders, Artisans, Soldiers, Overseers, Councillors. He failed to realise the difference between various varnas & the professions followed by them. Being a foreigner he failed to understand the Mauryan social system.

iii) Faxian in his book 'Gaoseng faxian zhuan' - A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms - says that Buddhism flourished during the Gupta period. But other sources tell us that during this time

Brahmanism was the main religion & Buddhism was not so popular.

iv) Al Biruni in his 'Kitab-ul-Hind' writes about the people in 11th century Indian subcontinent. He says that people were haughty & didn't share their knowledge with others, especially with foreigners. But presence of various universities like Nalanda & Takshila where people came from different parts of the world, negates this point.

v) Indica of Ktesias (4th century BC) is also full of bizarre stories about India, collected by the author while living in Persia as a royal physician. Thus, these were not based on any reliable first-hand experiences.

Thus, while using foreign accounts historians must be very careful and should distinguish between statements based on hearsay and those grounded in personal experience, between perceptive observation & cases where the writer got things completely wrong. But despite these shortcomings the accounts written by these foreign writers prove to be an important source of history as they often describe those things which were considered by native writers as mundane. Being foreigners they wrote about the society & cultural practices with a different point of view which makes the understanding of that period more nuanced.