

MUTUAL AGREEMENT OR AUCTION OF BRIDES: ANCIENT INDIAN MARRIAGE IN GREEK ACCOUNTS

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The beginnings of ancient Greek ethnography are found in the great history of Herodotus, written in the middle of the fifth century BC. His is also the first extant Greek account of India. There are some earlier sources (such as Hecataeus), but they are preserved in no more than meagre fragments, and only with Herodotus do we gain some idea of early Greek conceptions. When reading Herodotus' accounts of different peoples living in distant parts of Europe, Asia and Africa we soon note that the customs connected with marriage are one of the most central themes noted in each case.

In an extremely interesting study, Rossellini and Saïd (1978, see further Karttunen 1988) discovered a kind of tripartite schema in the Herodotean ethnographic accounts. They distinguish the civilized peoples living in the middle, the intermediate half-barbarians and the distant savages. In most cases the difference among these three can be shown in the way of occupation, habitation, nourishment, religion and marriage and funeral customs. The central peoples, such as the Greeks, are agriculturalists, bread-eaters and wine-drinkers, living in houses, they have many gods and their marriages and funerals are prescribed, complicated institutions. The intermediate peoples, such as the Scythians, are nomadic pastoralists, meat-eaters and milk-drinkers, living in tents or wagons, have only a few gods and rather simple, but still somehow institutionalized marriage and funeral customs. The savages are cannibals or food gatherers exploiting the richness of nature still prevailing in distant parts of the world. They have no houses and no religion. Instead of funerals they just expose the corpses or, in many cases, practice anthropophagy, and in place of prescribed marriage, they have promiscuity.¹

All this is important to know in a discussion of the Herodotean account of India. In the most remote part of India he described (3100) a people with strange habits. They kill nothing, and do not sow, but live on wild crops and vegetables.

¹ It is interesting to note that similar beliefs are still met in the ideas concerning remote peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries (if not still later). In ancient Indian sources, too, promiscuity was ascribed to a remote paradise, the country of Uttarakuru (Karttunen 1989: 188).

They have no fixed abodes and when someone feels death coming, he or she goes to the desert to die there alone. Many scholars, who know more of India than of Herodotus, have seen in this people the earliest Western account of Indian ascetics. However, as has been repeatedly pointed out by myself and others, they suit too well to the Herodotean schema of primitiveness to allow such an interpretation. They neither sow, like the Greeks do, nor kill animals, like the nomads, and they have neither fixed abodes nor funerals. Their marriage is discussed in the next passage (3.101) and this seems to be the decisive argument against ascetics. Here it is stated that these people are promiscuous and copulate with each other in public.² It is difficult to think of anything more different from Indian ascetics and monks.

The same schema can also be seen in the description of the Indian Cynocephali, or dog-heads, written by Ctesias. These dog-heads have no agriculture, they live on wild fruits, the milk of sheep and the flesh of wild animals. They have no houses, but live in caves. No religion of theirs is mentioned and they are supposed to copulate like dogs. Even if they had a real counterpart in stories told to Ctesias by the Persians who had visited India – and this I have myself claimed on several occasions – it is better not to take such details too seriously.

A turning-point in the Greek knowledge of India was the campaign of Alexander. Several of his officers wrote historical works and these contained the earliest Greek first-hand accounts of India. The rather numerous fragments of these lost works have been eagerly studied since the end of the 18th century in order to cull some information about India. Often scholars have been disappointed as so little seems to correspond to what is known from Sanskrit sources. Often it was not noted that while the Sanskrit sources mainly describe the conditions prevailing in the Ganges country, the Greek accounts were concerned with the Indus valley and the Pañjab. A certain discrepancy is only natural.

But there is more than the mere geographical difference of viewpoint. While the Greeks attempted to give an eye-witness account, they were also very much bound by their own literary traditions. A rhetorical device, a philosophical comparison, a moral point was often much more important than accuracy of observation. The historians of Alexander joined the tradition of Greek ethnographical writing, which aimed not so much to give exact descriptions, but to show the difference of customs and habits and even physical characteristics, and to attempt an explanation of this difference. Thus, for instance, the dark skin of the Ethiopians and some Indians led to a lively discussion about its cause, variously ascribed to the influence of the burning tropical sun or to the humidity of the country. The differences in customs led to philosophical speculation about their respective merits and faults and to the idea of the relativity of morals, already known to Herodotus. Quite often we find

² A late echo of this is perhaps found in Jerome's claim that the Persians, Medians, Indians and Aethiopians marry their mothers, grandmothers, daughters and granddaughters (*Adversus Iovianum* 2.7).

marriage included among the subjects discussed. It is also common in Greek ethnographical literature that an account of marriage customs is the only information about women encountered in a long account of a distant people.

In Indian sources most information about marriage as an institution is found in the Dharmasūtras and -śāstras, or the manuals of religious law, of duties and rights of castes and life stages. The ritual manuals (Gṛhyasūtras) give a detailed exposition of the ritual of marriage according to different Vedic schools. Here the most important piece of information is the often repeated statement that in addition to the basic Vedic rites, various customs of different countries and social groups must be observed.³

The dharma authors defined eight different forms of marriage, variously acceptable to different classes. Most often they are quoted from the Mānavadharmasāstra (3.20-42), but they are also found, for instance, in the Yājñavalkyadharmasāstra (1.58-60) and even in the Āśvalāyanagṛhyasūtra (1.6). According to Manu, the first four are permissible to the Brahmans and include the rites of Brahman (*brāhma*), the gods (*daiva*), the ṛṣis (*ārṣa*), and Prajāpati (*prājāpatya*), i.e. giving the daughter to a man learned in the Veda, to an officiating priest, against a formal gift of a cow and bull, and to a suitable bridegroom. The Kṣatriyas are also permitted the rite of the Rākṣasas (*rākṣasa*) or the forcible abduction of the girl and that of the Gandharvas (*gāndharva*) or mutual agreement of the bride and the bridegroom. The rite of the Asuras (*āsura*) or purchase of the bride is hesitatingly allowed to lower classes, while that of the Pīśācas (*paiśāca*) or seduction of the girl during her sleep, intoxication or confusion is proclaimed forbidden. It has been pointed out that the less acceptable sorts of marriage are perhaps included in the system to give the status of married women to the victims of such acts.⁴

This is the classification of the Dharmaśāstra, but even these eight forms are by no means exhaustive. One immediately thinks of the Svayaṃvara, a contest of warriors with the bride's hand as the reward. This seems to be the most common way to arrange Kṣatriya marriages in epic texts⁵ and a comparison with early European sources makes it likely that the practice had Indo-European roots. Returning to the Greek accounts, it must be said that the Indian system allows so many different

³ Āśvalāyanagṛhyasūtra 1.7.1: *atha khalūccāvaca janapadadharmā grāmadharmāś ca tān vivāhe praiyāt.*

⁴ See, however, Hara 1974 for the Rākṣasa marriage explained as a part of the accepted Kṣatriya dharma. A general discussion of the eight forms is found e.g. in Pandey 1969: 159ff. The Milindapañha 2.2.6 (p. 47f. Trenckner) seems to refer to the *āsura* marriage as a normal custom.

⁵ There are in fact two forms of the Svayaṃvara described. Either the bride has the right to freely elect her favourite among the contenders who are just showing their ability, or the winner of the contest also gets the bride whose opinion is not asked. It has been claimed that the Svayaṃvara is a modification of the Gāndharva type, but here the bride's father actually gives his consent, while a Gāndharva marriage is concluded without it.

forms of marriage that in one way or other scholars have been able to connect most Greek accounts with them. Nevertheless, the connection seems very remote, indeed.

So it seems, for instance, that Nearchus was describing a kind of Svayaṃvara.

They marry without giving or receiving anything; all girls at the marriageable age are brought out by their fathers and exposed to the public choice of victors in wrestling, boxing or running, or anyone distinguished for any other manly quality. (Nearchus F 11 in Arrianus, *Indica* 17, quoted from Brunt's translation.)

It is not too unlikely to find Kṣatriya customs among the warlike tribes of the Pañjab, but in the second version of the passage it is expressly stated that the contest is arranged in order to avoid the dowry and that it is found only among one particular tribe (Nearchus F 23 in Strabo 15.1.66). The passage is also briefly discussed by Bhardwaj (1990: 227f.) who compared the custom to modern accounts of customs among the Bhils, in Orissa and in Kerala.

A fragment of Aristobulus (F 42 in Strabo 15.1.62) gives an account of some strange customs seen in Taxila. That the Taxilans are polygamous and know the practice of suttee⁶ can well be accepted as Indian, but the fourth custom, leaving the dead to be devoured by birds of prey, seems more Iranian. Exposure of bodies was not unknown in India, especially among non-Vedic people, but burning was the usual practice (see Karttunen 1989: 223ff.). For the present theme, the most important part of the account, the third custom, states that those who were too poor to afford a dowry brought their daughters to the market-place where the girls were then presented as marriageable to all interested. It is somehow unclear, how the actual wedding was arranged, but it seems likely that the girls were sold. A sort of Āsura marriage, perhaps, but hardly the same as meant in Indian sources. If it was some kind of auction of girls, then a similar custom had been earlier recounted by Herodotus (1.196) as being practised in Mesopotamia. Bhardwaj (1990: 229f., also Pandey 1969: 165), explains this as the Āsura type of marriage and mentions a modern parallel from the Western Himalayas (cf. Karttunen 1989: 223).

At the same time, there are also similarities between the accounts of Nearchus and Aristobulus. In both cases fathers bring out their daughters and expose them to the public in order to have their marriages arranged without dowry. In modern times somewhat similar custom of an exhibition of would-be brides has been reported from the Simla region of the Western Himalayas.

Onesicritus, an officer of Alexander and a Cynic philosopher, was noted for his free use of accuracy. In his description of the country of Sopheithes in the lower Indus country, he claimed that in this country physical beauty was one of the most appreciated features. Ugly and deformed children were not allowed to live, and the most handsome of all was elected their king. For modern Westerners it is perhaps not so strange that in this country marriages, too, were arranged on the same basis

⁶ There are other accounts of suttee in Greek literature. See Karttunen 1997: 66f.

without considering the wealth or rank of family (Diodorus 17.91.6, and Curtius 9.1.26, both probably going back to Onesicritus though not naming him as their source. See also Bhardwaj 1990: 230f.). In other versions of the passage it is simply stated that the bride and bridegroom settled their union by mutual agreement without asking their parents' opinion. For a Greek observer, this type of Gāndharva marriage was something very unusual.⁷ The same kind of marriage was also described with marked disapproval by Diodorus, who claimed that it was ancient law in India.⁸

The sources make it quite clear that these are only some examples noted because of their peculiarity. There is no full account of Indian marriage customs in the Greek sources. As some were explained as ways of getting girls married without dowry, it seems justified to suppose that marriage with dowry was quite common in ancient Northwest India. It is impossible to say whether it was, even in ancient times, such a curse as in the 20th century; the Indian sources remain rather silent about it.

Megasthenes was the envoy of Seleucus Nicator to the court of Candragupta Maurya in the early third century BC and wrote a long account of his mission. For centuries this work was among the most important Greek sources on India, but in the early Middle Ages it became lost, like so many important works, and only about three dozen fragments remain, mainly preserved by Strabo, Arrianus and Aelianus. Unlike Alexander and his men, Megasthenes had been in the heart of India, not only in the distant Northwest, and thus had an exceptional opportunity to make first-hand observations of the country.

One of the most famous passages among his fragments, preserved in three different versions, is the account of Indian classes, seven in number. As in Indian sources the number of classes is nearly always stated as four (actually meaning five as the Caṇḍālas are always left unmentioned), these seven are difficult to explain and remain somewhat obscure in spite of many attempts (see e.g. Karttunen 1997: 82ff.). Fortunately, there is no need to explain or identify them now, the only important part being the note that these classes are endogamous (Megasthenes F 19a in Arrianus, *Indica* 12.8; F 19b in Strabo 15.1.49; also F 4 in Diodorus 2.41.5). This certainly was also the case with Indian classes (*varṇa*) and with the later castes (*jāti*) (on endogamy see Pandey 1969: 176ff.).

In another fragment Megasthenes explained that the Indians are polygamous and purchase their wives from their parents in exchange for a yoke of oxen. Long ago it has been pointed out by Feer (1885: 495) that it seems to be an echo of the Ārṣa type of marriage.⁹ When Megasthenes further claimed that Indian wives

⁷ Onesicritus F 21 in Strabo 15.1.30. See also Bhardwaj (1990: 230), who gives some modern parallels, too.

⁸ Diodorus 19.30, in the account of the suttee attempted by the two wives of the Indian general Ceteus. A late echo of this is found in Jerome, *Adversus Iovianum* 1.44.

⁹ Also in the Mahābhārata (1.96.9ab): *prayacchanty apare kanyāṃ mithunena gavām api*.

would readily prostitute themselves, if not strictly watched by their husbands, he could almost be quoting some Indian source (Megasthenes F 32 in Strabo 15.1.54; see also Bhardwaj 1990: 228). The supposed readiness for adultery by Indian wives and the danger that they may be led to poison their husbands has been given as the supposed reason behind forced suttee by several Greek authors.

Megasthenes also gave an account of Indian mythical history, though in such a graecized form, with Dionysus and Heracles as the principal heroes, that no details can be identified.¹⁰ According to Megasthenes (F 12), Dionysus was a cultural hero who turned Indians from nomads or savages in the Herodotean sense, a people with no fixed abodes, agriculture or institutionalized religion, into a civilized people with cities, agri- and viticulture and many gods and temples. Of Heracles it is stated that he, being unable of finding a suitor worthy of his daughter, married her himself when the girl was only seven. After this all girls of their country, southernmost India, were married at the age of seven. This has been sometimes connected with the later Indian custom of child marriages, but actually Megasthenes claimed that girls there became mature at seven and died at forty (F 13a in Arrianus, *Indica* 9; cf. Karttunen 1997: 124).

It is well known that Megasthenes was not only a reporter of ancient India; he was also very much a Greek author writing for a Greek audience. This explains why he included some accounts of fabulous peoples, which clearly were borrowed from Ctesias, and many other passages from the Alexander historians. We are reminded of Herodotus in the description of the savages inhabiting the Caucasus (i.e. Hindukush), who have intercourse in public and eat the bodies of their kinsmen (Megasthenes F 27b in Strabo 15.1.56).

The literature after Megasthenes was mainly content with references to Megasthenes and the historians of Alexander. Only merchants with no literary ambitions went to India and ethnographical literature was now more interested in other nations such as the Gauls and Germans. I have not found a fresh account of Indian marriage before the fourth century AD, in the work wrongly ascribed to Bishop Palladius of Helenopolis. In a long and partly fantastic description of Indian Brahmans, here understood as a tribe, it is stated that the wives and husbands lived on different sides of the Ganges and met only once a year. This is explained as a method of birth control, every couple being allowed to beget only two children (Derrett 1962: 29). Such an idea seems to be typical Greek speculation and therefore it is difficult to say whether there was any real information behind it.

¹⁰ The genealogical account incorporated into the legends of Dionysius and Heracles has, however, a close typological affinity to Purāṇa accounts, although few details (Budyas : Budha) can actually be connected to existing accounts. This points to the conclusion that at least part of his account was founded on real Indian (perhaps oral) sources.

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