

1 'The Nobles of Malabar': foreign images of the Nayars

Centuries before the birth of modern anthropology, the Nayars had provoked astonishment in a succession of visitors to Kerala, the land (also known as the Malabar Coast) which lies in the extreme south-west of India. In Western literature, Pliny is probably the first to mention them; in his *Natural History* (VI, xxiii, 74), written in A.D. 77, he refers to the 'Nareae, who are shut in by the Capitalis range, the highest of all the mountains in India'. Though we cannot be certain, it is probable that this refers to the Western Ghats, the range of mountains in western India cutting Kerala off from Karnataka (Mysore) and Tamilnadu, and that the 'Nareae' are indeed the Nayars. The first useful description dates from the fourteenth century; we owe it to Ibn Batuta, in India between 1325 and 1354, who although he spent most of his time in northern India did visit Kerala as well. The first really detailed accounts appeared in the sixteenth century, from the pens of travellers visiting Kerala in the wake of the Portuguese, who gained effective control of the Arabian Sea and the Kerala spice trade within a few years of Vasco da Gama's landfall at Calicut in 1498.¹

The early visitors, like all those who were to follow them in later centuries, were struck by three particular aspects of Kerala society: the matrilineal, polyandrous kinship and marriage system of the Nayars and the kings; the martial prowess of the Nayars; and the extreme complexity and rigidity of the Kerala caste system. I propose to introduce the reader to the Nayars through the eyes of these foreign travellers, and I shall consider each of these three aspects in turn. That the accounts quoted below tell us not only about the Nayars but also about their authors should not, I trust, need underlining. It would be foolish to expect their comments to have been informed by all our current ideas and values.

It is important to note, as the reader will see later, that most of the travellers' accounts refer to Calicut and Cochin; there is little mention of northern Malabar or the region to the south of Cochin. The reason for this is simple enough: Calicut and Cochin were the two greatest trading ports on the Malabar Coast (Logan 1887: 73-80). According to Yule (1915: 87), the Malabar ports 'appear to have become the entrepôts for commercial exchange between China and the West', although the Chinese seem to have stopped coming there in the fifteenth century. Calicut probably rose to prominence in the eleventh or twelfth century and maintained its predominance until the arrival of the Portuguese who,

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unable to extract from the Zamorin (king) of Calicut the concessions they demanded, undermined its power by destroying its Arab trade. The Portuguese, like the Dutch, the English and Independent India after them, favoured Cochin, which has been from the sixteenth century until the present day the principal port on the coast. Calicut and Cochin remained the two most important kingdoms until the mid-eighteenth century, when their power was destroyed by the rise of Travancore to their south and the Mysorean invaders from the north. The Mysoreans were eventually defeated by the British in 1792; Malabar was then annexed and later incorporated into the Madras Presidency. The kingdoms of Calicut and Cochin, together with the two smaller inland kingdoms of Walluvanad and Palghat, make up the area called by Kathleen Gough 'Central Kerala'. The region to the north of Calicut and the Kora river she terms 'North Kerala'; 'South Kerala' is equivalent to Travancore (Gough 1961: 305).²

Matriliny and polyandry

In the past, the Nayars lived in matrilineal joint families, known as *taravads*. The *taravad* comprised all the matrilineal descendants of a common ancestress and a child, of course, belonged to its mother's *taravad*. A *taravad* might have consisted of a set of sisters, their brothers, their children and their daughters' children, but many *taravads* contained a much wider span of relatives. For instance, it might have included the matrilineal descendants of several sets of sisters, each of these sets being linked through a common mother's mother, or more remote ancestress. A *taravad* might have had twenty, thirty or even more members, all living together in one large house. Each *taravad* was an independent economic unit; its members collectively owned property from which they derived their livelihood. The Nambudiri Brahmans, the highest-ranking caste in Kerala, also lived in joint families, called *illams*. *Illams* were very similar to *taravads*, except in one important respect: they were patrilineal and comprised all the patrilineal descendants of a common ancestor. The relation between the Nayars and the Nambudiris will be a constant theme of this book.

What fascinated Kerala's visitors was not joint families themselves so much, but rather the marriage system with which the family organisation was, of course, intimately linked. By far the most accurate and detailed of the accounts written by the earliest travellers is by Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese who learnt Malayalam (the language of Kerala). He returned to Lisbon in about 1518 after spending several years on the Malabar Coast, mainly in the Calicut region. He wrote of the Nambudiris:

They marry only once in our manner, and only the eldest son marries, he is treated like the head of an entailed estate. The other brothers remain single all their lives. These Bramenes keep their wives well guarded, and greatly honoured, so that no other men may sleep with them . . . The brothers who remain bachelors sleep with the Nayre women, they hold it to be a great honour, and as they are Bramenes no women refuses herself

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to them, yet they may not sleep with any woman older than themselves.
 (1921: 34–5)

Barbosa refers here to all the principal features of the Nambudiri marriage system. In order to maintain their patrilineal joint families intact, only the eldest son was permitted to marry a Nambudiri woman. By this means, the number of legitimate heirs was restricted and pressure to partition the estate minimised. All younger sons derived their sexual pleasures from unions with women of the lower matrilineal castes – Nayars and the royal houses. Eldest sons were also allowed to form such liaisons, even though they had Brahman wives as well. Although eldest sons often took several women in marriage (pace Barbosa), it was of course the case that the majority of Nambudiri women died unmarried. They were kept in strict seclusion throughout their lives in order to prevent them entering any illegitimate liaisons which could endanger the purity of the caste.

Turning now to Nayar marriage, we learn from Barbosa that:

These men are not married, their nephews (sisters’ sons) are their heirs. The Nayre women of good birth are very independent, and dispose of themselves as they please with Bramenes, and Nayres, but they do not sleep with men of caste lower than their own under pain of death. When they reach the age of twelve years their mothers hold a great ceremony. (ibid.: 40)

Once again Barbosa’s account, albeit brief, outlines the main features of Nayar marriage. The ‘great ceremony’ referred to is the *tali*-tying ceremony, at which each Nayar girl had a *tali* fastened around her neck. The *tali* is an emblem which, among other South Indian communities, is a sign that a woman is married. Whether this was really its significance among the Nayars will be discussed in chapter 5, but it does not matter for the present. What is important to note is that the *tali* was tied before a Nayar girl reached puberty; after puberty, she began to receive ‘lovers’ from her own and higher castes – but never from lower castes – in a relationship known as *sambandham*. A woman, as we shall see, could take several lovers and it is this feature – polyandry – which has been mainly responsible for the Nayars’ fame.

Barbosa goes on to describe the arrangements whereby a Nayar woman takes her lovers; he says that she may have three or four but ‘the more lovers she has the greater is her honour’ (ibid.: 42). Almost all commentators have disagreed as to whether there was a limit to the number of a woman’s lovers, or if so what this number was, and the matter remains in dispute. Buchanan, in Malabar in the early nineteenth century, agreed with Barbosa: ‘It is no kind of reflection on a women’s character to say, that she has formed the closest intimacy with many persons; on the contrary, the Nair women are proud of reckoning among their favoured lovers many Brahmans, Rajas, or other persons of high birth’ (1807: 411). Others, however, like Hamilton, have indicated that the number was restricted; he gave it as twelve (1727: 310). We shall probably never know what was the

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case, but Gough's tentative conclusion appears acceptable: 'It seems possible . . . that each women had a small number of regular husbands, but that a man might without difficulty gain access to a strange women when he was away from his village on military service' (1952a: 74). Barbosa, like several other writers, implies that the Nayar women received their companions in some sort of pre-arranged rota; others suggest that there were no fixed arrangements. Many accounts refer to a Nayar leaving his arms outside the woman's door when he was with her, thus indicating to others that she was presently unavailable.

That these liaisons could be formed and broken off again with ease is attested to by almost all reports; from Barbosa once more:

If any of them wishes to leave her, he leaves her, and takes another, and she also if she is weary of a man, she tells him to go, and he does so, or makes terms with her. Any children they may have stay with the mother who has to bring them up, for they hold them not to be the children of any man, even if they bear his likeness, and they do not consider them their children, nor are they heirs to their estates, for as I have already stated their heirs are their nephews, sons of their sisters (1921: 42)

The sexual freedom permitted not only to the men but to the women as well was, unsurprisingly, remarked upon by virtually every visitor to Kerala. The most frequent cause for comment was the apparent absence of jealousy amongst the men or of objections by the women. Shaikh Zain al-Din compared the polyandrous system with its polygynous converse amongst Muslims and went on to say that 'it is seldom that any hostility or disagreement takes place between the men, in consequence of this their possession in common of the same female' (1833: 65). Two hundred years later, Forbes remarked: 'Their marriages are very extraordinary, and directly contrary to the usual system of polygamy adopted in Asia. . . . These marriages are attended with fewer disputes, and disagreeable consequences than might be imagined . . .' (1813: 385).

Some were not only surprised but shocked as well; for instance, Sir Thomas Herbert said: 'they commonly exchange their Wives one for another, nor seeme the Women angry at it; Polygamy is sufferable; but in this they differ from other libidinous Lawgivers; as the men have many wives, so one woman may have many husbands . . .' (1638: 303). Francis Day also proclaimed his views clearly enough: 'Until a change in this system occurs, this portion of India can hardly be said to be advancing in civilization' (1863: 318). And Tippu Sultan, the Muslim king of Mysore who continued his father Haider Ali's attempt to subjugate Malabar in the eighteenth century, backed his objections with a threat his soldiers were only too willing to execute. The following is part of a proclamation he is said to have addressed to the people of Malabar in 1789:

and since it is a practice with you for one woman to associate with ten men, and you leave your mother and sisters unconstrained in their obscene practices, and are thence all born in adultery, and are more shameless in

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your connexions than the beasts of the field: I hereby require you to forsake these sinful practices, and live like the rest of mankind. And if you are disobedient to these commands, I have made repeated vows to honor the whole of you with Islam. (qu. by Logan 1887: 455)

However, the majority opinion of Kerala’s visitors appears to have been in agreement with the Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoens, who was in India and the East between 1556 and 1567; taking a dig at religious laws at the same time, he wrote:

They* kill no living thing, and highly blame
 All flesh to eat, with wondrous abstinence:
 But other flesh their Law doth not forbid,
 Yet They as prone thereto as if it did.

Their Wives are common: but are so to none
 Save those who of their Husbands’ Kindred† are.
 (O blessed lot, blest Generation,
 On whom fierce jealousie doth wage no war!)

(*Lusiad* 1940: canto VII, verses 40, 41; Richard Fanshawe’s translation.
 * i.e. the Nambudiri Brahmins; † caste.)

Many writers, of course, noted that succession and inheritance were matrilineal, but most of them explained this custom, somewhat tautologically, as a simple consequence of polyandry: for example, Buchanan, who wrote that: ‘In consequence of this strange manner of propagating the species, no Nair knows his father; and every man looks upon his sisters’ children as his heirs’ (1807: 412). Barbosa, however, realised that there was more to it than mere ignorance of paternity: ‘the kings of the Nayres instituted it [matriliny] in order that the Nayres should not be held back from their service by the burden and labour of rearing children’ (1921: 42–5). Montesquieu, whose source was Pyrrard de Laval, came to a similar conclusion about polyandry, though he found it necessary to invoke a certain amount of climatological determinism as well:

The origin of this custom [polyandry] is not I believe difficult to discover. The Naires . . . are the soldiers of all those nations. In Europe, soldiers are forbidden to marry; in Malabar, where the climate requires greater indulgence, they are satisfied with rendering marriage as little burdensome to them as possible: they give one wife amongst many men, which consequently diminishes the attachment to a family, and the cares of house-keeping, and leaves them in the free possession of a military spirit. (*The Spirit of the Laws* 1952: bk. XVI, ch. 5)

In their conclusions, Barbosa and Montesquieu anticipated by several centuries the results of modern anthropological research, and the connection between the Nayars’ military organisation and their matrilineal, polyandrous system will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

The system of matriliny and polyandry, which I have tried to describe through the various travellers’ writings, came under increasing attack during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today it has vanished.

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Later, I shall discuss in more detail how and why the system changed. I should, perhaps, remark again that the system as described above was probably confined to Central Kerala; it never, apparently, had this form in North Kerala or southern Travancore, while in northern Travancore a somewhat less exotic version seems to have prevailed. As I shall argue at greater length in chapter 6, the traditional kinship systems of the various Nayar communities altered, not solely as a consequence of objective factors, but also because they were out of keeping with the spirit of the times around the turn of the century. That spirit is now changing rapidly and the position of women has become a central issue in our society. It cannot be argued that Nayar women were ever completely equal to Nayar men; they were not – the head of the joint family, for instance, was a man. But they were much less subjugated than was, or is, the case in the overwhelming majority of the world's communities. Fawcett was one observer who regarded the system highly:

Equality of the sexes in all sexual matters, the man and the woman being on terms of equality, having equal freedom, is certainly an uncommon merit in the [matrilineal] system. Either party may terminate the union – even after one night of hymeneal bliss; and those who are unsuited to each other sexually, or in the way of temperament, in fact in any way, may put an end to their union and turn towards other partners. (1901: 236–7)

And though some may not forgive what they will see as a faux pas in the following statement by the Cochin Census Commissioner in 1901, M. Sankara Menon (a Nayar), others may agree with his general thesis:

The condition of women under this complicated system requires to be specially noticed. The two sexes are nearly on a par as to inheritance of property. Again, conjugal freedom also being not all on one side, the relations of the sexes appear to be more rational than amongst most other communities, as man does not enjoy any exclusive privilege of asserting or abusing his natural superiority. Further, the women is free to enjoy the pleasures of social life, as it seldom falls to her lot to be worried with the miseries of domestic seclusion. (Census 1901, Cochin: 100)

The military role of the Nayars

Honour and gallantry! Love and battle! My sword and my mistress! These were their devices, and they were ticklish sticklers for the point of honour. (Unknown origin, qu. in Census 1901, Cochin: 150)

The traditional occupation of the Nayars was soldiering. This does not mean that all Nayars were soldiers, for they were not. There is evidence that only Nayars belonging to certain sections of the caste bore arms, and of course only fit males were recruited into the armies. Nonetheless, the great majority of Nayars probably spent some time under arms. The armies were raised by the kings and chiefs, and were mostly engaged in fighting each other, rather than external enemies, although naturally this had to change

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when foreign interlopers became more aggressive. Although there probably was a minority of non-Nayars in many of the armies, it has always been the Nayars who have been most closely identified with the military life, and few visitors to Kerala did not feel moved to comment on the Nayars' martial prowess.

In Giovanni Maffei's description of Calicut, there appears one of the fullest accounts of the Nayars' military training and performance (1588: 25–6).³ From the age of seven or so, he says, Nayar boys began their physical training, taking part in many exercises and massaging their limbs with sesame oil – all under the guidance of 'highly skilled wrestling masters'. By virtue of this training, continues Maffei, they can twist and turn 'as if they had no bones'. They are expert wrestlers, but are still more proficient in the use of weapons.

At one time, their weapons were the spear, arrows, the sword [and] the shield; but after these inventions of men, modern devices and machines, had been introduced there, they understood so well the entire business of casting, burnishing and aiming, that they employ all cannons and firearms, large and small, with consummate skill; nowadays, the Indian muskets, whether of iron or bronze [?], and gunpowder far surpass those of the Portuguese. Naked, with only their private parts covered, do they go into battle, wearing neither breastplates nor helmets; hence in combat our soldiers [i.e. Europeans] are much steadier – their weight and that of their armour press harder on the enemy. Moreover, their [i.e. the Nayars'] greatest protection is in flight itself.

Maffei describes how the Nayar soldiers flee and then reappear in a flash and, somewhat implausibly, states that 'what is perhaps deadliest of all' is that 'they hurl their javelins scarcely less accurately backwards than forwards'. But, he continues, 'if either necessity compels or the occasion demands that they engage in hand to hand combat, they do most of the killing'.

Quite how skilled they were as soldiers is not entirely clear. Pyrard de Laval thought them 'the best soldiers in the world' (1887: 380) and exceptionally agile, while Baldaeus states that they were 'the best Wrestlers in the World' and that he had seen them 'give a Salvo with the same order and dexterity as our best disciplin'd troops in Europe' (1704: 644). But in most European eyes, their military discipline seems to have left something to be desired; according to Dellon: 'They go to war in disorder, that is to say they neither form ranks nor march in step...' (1699: 149). Mahé de la Bourdonnais, who captured Mahé (near Tellicherry) for the French in 1725 and had some experience in the field against them, confirms Dellon's description but insists on their qualities: 'They have no calling but the military, and would be excellent soldiers were they disciplined: but their fighting is disorganised, they take flight as soon as they are subjected to the least pressure; nevertheless, if they are heavily pressed and believe themselves in danger, they return to the offensive and never surrender' (qu. in Logan 1887: 137). Sir Hector Munro, the only prominent British

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general to have fought the Nayars, in 1761 said this of them: 'One may as well look for a needle in a Bottle of Hay as any of them in the daytime, they being lurking behind sand-banks and bushes except when we are marching towards the Fort, and then they appear like bees out in the month of June. Besides which, they point their guns well and fire them well also' (qu. in idem.). Logan's conclusion (idem.) that although they were excellent in 'skirmishing', they were too disorganised to defeat a well-disciplined army is probably correct. No doubt, they would have had more success had they fought as guerrillas.

Baldaeus asserts that they went into battle drugged with opium 'to intoxicate their Brains' (1704: 622) and Nieuhof makes a similar claim: 'When they are to Attack an Enemy, they take a good Quantity of it; which makes them fall on like enraged wild Beasts, and the Virtue of the Amfion [opium] being gone, they don't remember what has past, which shews that it is very obnoxious to the Memory' (1704: 271). Their opiated minds, according to Nieuhof, often led Malayalis to forget agreements; he recommended to them that they take wine instead. Quite how widespread the use of opium was is difficult to tell. However, a representative of the English East India Company, writing in 1666, was moved to complain about the way in which the Dutch had cornered the Kerala pepper market by supplying opium in exchange, 'for the natives of those parts [especially Cochin] not being able to live without opium, which now they cannot have but from the Dutch, who have already brought it into such esteeme among them, that they have all the pepper which is the growth of those parts in truck for it' (qu. in Foster 1925: 101). This suggests a considerable consumption of opium in Kerala at that time, although I have not found any certain evidence that soldiers were particularly partial to the drug.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese, war in Kerala was quite different from war in Europe. It was, albeit murderous, 'a game governed by an elaborate set of rules, the violation of any one of which involved dishonour worse than death'. War engaged only the actual participants; 'The labourer in the field could go on with his work unmolested while a fierce struggle was going on in his immediate neighbourhood' (Menon 1911: 56). Fighting took place only in daylight; in the morning, the opposing forces bathed together and chatted and joked, exchanging betel, until the battle was heralded by drums. The armies then formed up: a vanguard of swordsmen, a middle rank of archers and men armed with clubs, with lancers bringing up the rear. There was no cavalry. The armies advanced slowly, intermittently retreating. When ranks finally broke, a general bloody mêlée developed, inevitably resulting in many deaths and woundings. When sunset approached, the drums sounded the battle's end; it ceased at once. The antagonists again mingled together as they had done in the morning. Menon does not say what happened to the dead or wounded. A victorious army never annexed territory, although it might exact tribute or depose a defeated chief or king.

According to Baldaeus: 'The Power of the Kings of Malabar is generally

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esteemed by the number of Nairns under their Jurisdiction’ (1704: 644). Barretto states that the Zamorin could field 160000 men and the Cochin raja 140000. He also provides a brief description of the politico-military organisation: ‘The custom in Malabar is to divide the kingdom into several provinces, which are given to chiefs, responsible for raising a body of soldiers and holding them ready at all times; this is how these kings are able to call upon huge armies at short notice’ (1646: 194). Barbosa describes how Nayars entered the king’s service and says that they never lost their commissions, even when old (1921: 45–51). It would appear from his account that the Nayars were well treated by their rulers:

When the kings go to war they pay all the Nayres who serve therein, even though they be in the service of other Lords, their daily wages . . . The King is obliged to maintain the mother and the nephews of Nayres who fall in battle, and forthwith assigns them a pension. If they are wounded the King orders them to be well cured, as well as giving them their customary pay. (ibid.: 52–3)

The Nayars, so it appears, always bore their arms, usually a sword and a shield. Herbert remarks that: ‘they goe no whither but are as well armed as if friends and enemies had no difference’ (1638: 301); as a result of which, according to him, they are involved in endless violent altercations. Buchanan took rather the same view: ‘Their chief delight is in parading up and down fully armed. Each man has a firelock, and at least one sword; but all those who wish to be thought men of extraordinary courage carry two sabres’ (1807: 388). And, he says later: ‘they are more inclined to use them for assassination, or surprise, than in the open field’ (ibid.: 410). How just these comments are is impossible to tell. But many Nayars, even in peacetime, would be carrying weapons in the course of duty, for they acted as guards to travellers in Kerala – a custom commented on by many foreign visitors to the country who employed Nayars in this role. It was even reported in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (XXII, 2: 152), that they are ‘so loyal that they kill themselves, should he whom they are conducting be killed on the road’.

The Nayar armies were disbanded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see chapters 2 and 6). Travancore and Cochin did maintain Nayar brigades until 1947, but they were, of course, modelled on modern European armies. Many later observers, no doubt with more romanticism than accuracy, seem to have felt that demobilisation had enfeebled and corrupted the Nayar caste. Logan (1887: 138) was one such, but his feeling was shared by Indians too; for instance, Anantakrishna Iyer (a Tamil Brahman) said: ‘the Nayars have almost lost their warlike characteristics, through successive generations of peace and have now become attached to the land. Even writing in 1855 [?], Captain Drury [1858: 204] contrasts the Nayar’s effeminate disposition with the martial valour of his forefathers . . . He now prefers a quiet swing in the verandah or a lounge under a tree, chewing betel’ (1912: 7).

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The Kerala caste system

Many readers will have some knowledge of the Indian caste system, but for the rest a brief description may be desirable. An attempt to define 'caste' is, in my opinion, inevitably defeated by insuperable analytical difficulties. But this does not mean that a general outline of the caste system cannot be given, so long as the reader remains aware that such an outline cannot take account of theoretical problems and must necessarily be subject to innumerable qualifications. Every Indian belongs to one and only one caste. He or she is born into this one caste and dies in it; in other words, no mobility between castes is possible. In general – though the Nayars are an exception to this – castes are endogamous and thus legitimate children belong to the same caste as their parents. When husband and wife do not belong to the same caste, the husband's caste is invariably ranked higher than his wife's. Each caste usually has a traditional occupational specialisation, although the significance of this is both problematic and easily exaggerated, and it is certainly true that many Indians are not engaged in their own caste-occupation. In theory, the castes in any one region can all be ranked with respect to each other to form a hierarchy, the principle on which they are ranked being that of relative purity. The concept of purity is central in Hindu society, but the criteria which define one caste as purer than another need not be discussed here. All that we need note here is that if one caste is purer than another, it is equivalent to saying that the first caste is ranked higher than the second. There may be thirty or more castes in any one Indian village, but in theory they can all be arranged in order of rank. I say 'in theory' because although the villagers will agree that it *ought* to be possible to construct such a hierarchy, they are very unlikely to agree about which castes rank above which others. The main exceptions to this are at the top and the bottom: Brahmins are always ranked highest and Harijans (or, as they used to be called, Untouchables) are always ranked lowest. Any Hindu's purity is at risk if he comes into too close contact with a member of a lower caste. In daily life, this is perhaps predominantly a question of food and water, and so high-caste members often refuse to eat with, or take food and water from, low-caste members. If they did so, they would suffer pollution, which they would then have to remove by an appropriate ritual act. The simplest of these, to remove mild pollution, is bathing; more severe pollution could demand more complicated rituals. Some acts, such as sexual relations with a lower-caste man, are so polluting to a woman that she would be outcasted – ejected from her caste and denied all contact with her former caste fellows. This paragraph is mainly descriptive of the 'traditional' caste system. In modern India, the system has 'weakened'; it no longer circumscribes behaviour with the force or rigidity it used to. But this is a problem too large to tackle here. This description of caste, albeit brief, will hopefully suffice for the present.

Virtually every foreign visitor to India, since Megasthenes in the fourth to third centuries B.C., has remarked on the caste system. Arguably, how-