



IRAWATI KARVE: A WOMAN'S INSIGHT INTO CULTURE

* *Mrs. Akshata Shenoy,*

* *Assistant Professor, Department of History, VPM's K.G Joshi College of Arts & N.G Bedekar college of Commerce (Autonomous), Thane*

Abstract:

Successful women in academia, or rather the emergence of women in academia would have been a distant dream had it not been for certain great personalities who have carved out their names in history for their tremendous efforts and contribution in bringing about the emancipation of women. For instance, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Justice M.G Ranade, Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve and many more. One needs to take special note of women like Savitribai Phule, Durgabai Deshmukh, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade, Mahadevi Verma, Chandraprabha Saikiani, Irawati Karve and so on, for they carved out their niche in academia for the future generations to carry the mantle ahead.

The focus of this research paper is on Irawati Karve, who was the first woman anthropologist in India and her contribution to the field of academia through her works, with special reference to - *Kinship Organization in India and Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. The analysis of *Kinship Organization in India* would enable us to understand its importance as the first systematic comparative study of the numerous aspects of kinship behaviour in India. Irawati Karve's other work - *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, stands as a historical retelling of the epic, *Mahabharata* through which Irawati Karve attempted to highlight the political landscape of ancient India. This study aims to show how Irawati Karve became a prominent figure in academia and helped open up new avenues for research, particularly in the areas of women's studies, sociology, and anthropology.

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Introduction:

Irawati Karve became India's first woman anthropologist when anthropology and sociology were still developing as University disciplines. She was also an Indologist, Serologist, Palaeontologist, a collector of folk songs, a translator of feminist poems as well as a reputed Marathi writer and essayist. She did her doctoral work in anthropology at the University of Berlin, Germany in 1928-30 on the 'Normal Asymmetry of the Human Skull and Bones under the guidance of Eugene Fischer. Most importantly, she was a researcher whose enthusiasm for study and research was of unmatched kind.

Some of her famous works include *Kinship Organization in India*, *Hindu Society: An Interpretation*, *Maharashtra: Land and People*, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, *Aamchi Samskruti*, etc. Making her mark especially in a male-dominated discipline, as Divya Godbole mentions in her article, was not at all an easy feat,

but Irawati Karve's prowess in her subject helped her to find her footing.¹ She received her Master's in Arts in Sociology under G.S Ghurye in 1928 at the University of Bombay. This was of great advantage to her as G.S Ghurye proved to be an excellent mentor for her and his academic competence gave Irawati Karve an impetus to the ideology that she developed and worked with as well as the topics she chose to investigate and work on. She later proceeded to Germany for advanced studies wherein she was exposed to the studies of race, human anatomy and genetics. This played a crucial role in shaping her school of thought in the upcoming years.

Literature Review:

- 1) Divya, Godbole, 'Irawati Karve: A Pioneer of Indian Sociology', <https://feminisminindia.com/>, 15th October 2018.

This article focuses on the contribution of Irawati Karve in the field of sociology. She begins her article by describing Karve's journey that shaped her investigative nature and led to her making her career in Sociology and Anthropology. She specifically makes a reference of Irawati

Karve's famous work - *Kinship Organisation in India* and highlights its significance. The article also sheds light on the academic legacy left by Irawati Karve.

- 2) Christoph, Haimendorf, 'Indian Kinship systems', https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1965_17/39/indian_kinship_systems.pdf, accessed on 20th December 2023.

This article reviews Irawati Karve's book on Indian kinship systems. Christoph Haimendorf further elaborates the methodology used by Irawati Karve as well as the varied sources referred by her for the book. He applauds Karve's book as a scholarly work and regards it of great value in understanding the beliefs and concepts associated with family organisation.

- 3) Irawati, Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Orient Longman Private Limited, New Delhi, <https://archive.org/details/Yuganta-TheEndOfAnEpochIrawatiKarve/page/n5/mode/2up>, 1991.

Karve's another famous work - *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, is an attempt by the author to have a glimpse into the great epic of Mahabharata from a historical stance. It also gives an insight into one of the greatest epics that became an integral part of our culture. As W. Norman Brown mentions in his foreword to this book, Irawati Karve does not look at the myths in the Mahabharata but studies the humanity of the characters in Mahabharata, making this a book a different interpretation of the epic, which perhaps connects it with realism. Further, Karve throws a light on the different social groups and the genealogy referred to in the epic.

- 4) Biswajeet, Ghosh, 'Study of Indian Society and Culture: Methods and Perspectives', https://www.academia.edu/41558176/Study_of_Indian_Society_and_Culture_Methods_and_Perspectives, December 2019.

Biswajeet Ghosh's article stands useful as it signifies the beginning of the study of Indology, use of the Indological approach to study and understand our Indian tradition and culture. He refers to how the study of

¹ Divya, Godbole, 'Irawati Karve: A Pioneer of Indian Sociology', <https://feminisminindia.com/>, 15th October, 2018.

Indian sociology and anthropology began and how our pioneers in these areas persevered to establish Indian Sociology based on the study of our own culture and traditions, thereby separating it from the Western approach. The article explores the work, methodology and contribution of scholars like B. N Sarkar, Louis Dumont, G. S Ghurye, Iravati Karve etc. to the study of Hindu social institutions through the analysis of religious texts and contemporary practices.

Research Problem:

This study aims to show how Iravati Karve became a prominent figure in academia and helped open up new avenues for research, particularly in the areas of women's studies, sociology, and anthropology.

Research Methodology:

The researcher has used the subjective interpretation method for this study. The primary sources used by the researcher are the two books authored by Iravati Karve - *Kinship Organization in India* and *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. These two works have been briefly analysed to understand Iravati Karve's contribution to academia.

The secondary sources referred by the researcher includes books and articles that offer an insight and reviews Karve's famous works and her scholarly personality.

Iravati Karve's contribution to academia through her works:

G.S. Ghurye, Louis Dumont, K.M. Kapadia, P.H. Prabhu and Irawati Karve tried to explore and study the Hindu social institutions and practices, either concerning religious texts or through the analysis of contemporary practices. Ghurye did not confine himself to the use of sacred texts only.² Instead he used primary and secondary sources produced by other sociologists and anthropologists. Many of Ghurye's students, especially Kapadia and Karve, followed his footsteps. Irawati Karve mad use of the Sanskrit texts to explore the question of human origins in India.

Ghurye's influence is visible in much of Irawati Karve's work. Both of them shared a common belief in the importance of family, kinship, caste and religion as the basis of Indian society.³ She tried to understand the differences in Indian social strata and among the different castes in terms of physical types, blood groups and

² The pioneers of Indian Sociology relied on varied and multiple sources and approaches for their arguments, thereby making it difficult to label them with one particular approach. For instance, B. K Sarkar who had emphasized on the difference between the East and the West. It was only after 1910 that he began emphasizing that the East was similar to the West. Another example is of Radhakumud Mukherji who relied on Dharmashastras to elaborate the Indian spirit of religious tolerance but also used sources like Buddhism, Taoism etc. His approach which also stressed on use of historical and comparative methods, remained transdisciplinary. D.P Mukherjee, G.S Ghurye and even Iravati Karve relied on many different sources for their further works.

Biswajeet, Ghosh, 'Study of Indian Society and Culture: Methods and Perspectives', https://www.academia.edu/41558176/Study_of_Indian_Society_and_Culture_Methods_and_Perspectives, December 2019, pp. 16-17.

³ Biswajeet, Ghosh, 'Study of Indian Society and Culture: Methods and Perspectives', *ibid*, p.17. ⁴ Sachchidananda, 'Sketch of Irawati Karve's (1905-1970) Life and Work', *Anthropos*, Vol. 66 no. ¾, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40457688?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents, 1971, p.555.

waves of migration. Karve didn't just stop there, she joined pre-historic explorations out of her interest in the history of Early Man. This mere interest developed into a zeal to find the traces of Stone Age man when in 1943, she found a small human bone in Professor Sankalia's excavations in Langhnaj, sixty miles north of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Moreover, she excavated as many as thirteen skeletons from the sands of Gujarat with extreme care, a great deal of patience and skill.⁴ It was this very excavation that gave Irawati Karve an international reputation. Though one sees that Irawati Karve used mostly textual sources to build up her arguments related to the Hindu Kinship system, she along with K.M Kapadia abundantly used ethnological and anthropological research findings in the process. This showcases that she did not just rely on the texts. She questioned Ghurye's contention that the caste and varna system were the products of Indo-Aryan culture and it got diffused to different parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Irawati Karve's research thesis titled 'The Chitpavan Brahmans – An Ethnic Study' while pursuing her M.A. degree in Sociology at the University of Bombay, demonstrated the lens through which she viewed Indian society. Irawati Karve's views in her M.A thesis (also quoted by Abhijit Guha in his article) are as follows:

“Separating and living in isolation seems to be the genius of India. It is easier for the communities to split and live apart for centuries than to unite, but in the present instance, the cause of holding off from each other seems to be rooted in the temperament of the two people

(Deshastha and Chitpavan Brahmans)..... In addition to these temperamental peculiarities, popular opinion recognizes some physical differences between these two communities.”⁴

Her view was that society was a patchwork of castes, physically and culturally differentiated but never fundamentally changed. This view was developed by her somewhat differently in her work 'Hindu Society'. It is eventually realised that there has been the absence of questions of political economy, class, of modes of production as the motive force of history in her writings, which were being developed at that time by fellow Indologist D.D Kosambi. To further understand the anthropologist, sociologist and researcher in her, an analysis of two of her popular works: “Kinship Organisation in India” and “Yuganta: The End of an Epoch”. has been done here.

Analysis of Kinship Organization in India:

Irawati Karve had written the first draft of the book ' Kinship Organization in India' during her stay in England in 1951-52. This has been considered to be her greatest work. Her study tried to showcase that there are three factors necessary for the understanding of any cultural phenomenon in India. These are – the configuration of the linguistic regions, the institution of caste and family organization. All three are interlinked with each other and together they give meaning and provide a basis for all the other aspects of Indian culture.⁵

⁴ Irawati Karve's M.A. thesis is a classic example of physical anthropology combined with an Indological discussion of caste origins in the form of the Parshurama myth drawn from the popular versions and the Puranas.

Guha, Abhijit, 'In the Cause of Anthropology: The Life and Work of Irawati Karve by Nandini Sundar', https://www.academia.edu/53334622/Irawati_karve_biography_by_Nandini_Sundar, 2010., p. 378.

⁵ Puja, Mundal, 'Biography of Irawati Karve and her contribution towards Sociology', <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/>, accessed on 9th March 2020.

Karve has presented her study by dividing the country into four different cultural zones ie Northern, Central, Eastern and Southern Zones, and attempted their comparison. She has put together in this book a considerable amount of new materials as well as long lists of kinship terms in the main Indian languages. Under 'configuration of linguistic regions' comes the study of language areas wherein several languages belonging to one language family are spoken. For instance, Karve analyses that the Northern and Central zones comprise the language area of Sanskritic or Indo-European languages, the Southern zone comprises of Dravidian language area whereas the Eastern zone includes those areas speaking Austric or Mundari languages.⁶

Karve states that language areas further divided into various linguistic regions possess a certain homogeneity of culture and kinship organization. Regarding how language plays a role in kinship organization, Irawati Karve answers that the common language not only makes communication easy but also moves a step ahead sets the limits of marital connections and thus confines kinship mostly within the linguistic region.⁷ However, one needs to understand that though kinship organization follows linguistic patterns, in some cases this does not happen. To give an example on this basis, the Maharashtra region belongs to the area of Sanskritic languages and yet its kinship organization is largely seen to be modelled on that of the Southern Dravidian zone.

Karve further relates caste with kinship organization. Caste, being an endogamous group with very few exceptions, can be called as an extended kin group simply because endogamy and distribution over a definite area make the members of the caste related to each other by blood ties or in another case by marriage. Hereditary occupation also comes up as a characteristic of caste. Talking about the family organization, Karve states that the inclusion of family (and by 'family' she intends to speak about 'joint family' here) as one of the factors in understanding the cultural phenomenon is due to the reason that the concept of joint family in India has had been in existence from the time since the records exist. Karve, who studied the epic poem 'Mahabharata', mentions how during the period of the Mahabharata war the joint family existed in a more or less similar way to that in the modern period. Having undertaken extensive research and field study, Karve cites her reference to ten or twelve houses of joint families acknowledging common descent and also capable of showcasing the relationship through lineage. She thus, uses the term 'family' to denote many different types of kin groups like lineage and clan.

Irawati Karve also mentions in detail the marriage regulations among the castes living in various zones as well as certain aspects of joint family. When investigating the kinship organization of the various castes of the Marathi-speaking cultural zones, she discovered that the kinship terminology here is of purely Sanskritic origin like that of Northern India and the marriage-and-kinship rules linking the people of Maharashtra with the

⁶ Puja, Mundal, 'Biography of Irawati Karve and her contribution towards Sociology', *ibid.*

⁷ While elaborating how common language eases the communication between people and confines the kinship mostly within the language region, Irawati Karve states that common folksongs and folk literature also characterize such an area. This became inevitable when most of the people remained illiterate and literary traditions get transmitted orally. Karve cites the examples of the Ramayana of Tulsidas as well as poems of the Marathi saints to explain how most of the devotional literature of medieval India developed in the above- mentioned way.

Irawati, Karve, *Kinship Organisation in India*, Second Edition, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1965, p.4.

Dravidian population of Southern India shared disparity. Having excellent command of Sanskrit sources proved advantageous to Karve for it enabled her to extend the investigations diachronically to the earliest periods of recorded Indian history. Christoph Haimendorf credits Irawati Karve for demonstrating the extraordinary continuity of Indian family organization and kinship behaviour throughout the subcontinent's long and varied history.⁸

Karve's book 'Kinship Organization in India' attracted a lot of attention from scholars all over the world being the only book of its kind. Nonetheless, one may find that she was criticized for using the vaguer term 'kinship organization' instead of a more clear, defined term like 'kinship system'.⁹ Moreover, she treated the literary evidence on par with the empirical evidence which was too much for modern social anthropologists to swallow. Yet, one should not ignore the efforts the researcher took for this honest attempt to write on kinship. To unravel the mysteries of kinship behaviour, she studied and referred to different literary texts and folklore.¹⁰ The whole study of kinship is based on personal inquiry supported by readings in Sanskrit, Pali, Ardhamagadhi, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and Maithili. Karve even sought to read Tamil too for this purpose. Lastly, anthropologists and sociologists realized its importance as the first systematic comparative study of the numerous aspects of kinship behaviour in India.

Analysis of *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*:

Irawati Karve studies the humanity of the Mahabharata's great figures with all their virtues and their equally numerous flaws in her work *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. Both Karve and Devdutt Pattanaik, who is known for his prolific writing on sacred lore, legends, folklore, fables etc., tried to present truth objectively as found in the source texts. They presented contemporary society as existent during the period of their works (Karve's *Yuganta* and Pattanaik's *Jaya* – both based on Mahabharata).¹¹

In the introduction of the book, Karve raises doubt over the division of the epic, Mahabharata into eighteen 'parvas'. She questions whether these divisions were there from the beginning or they were later interpolations; ie added by the later scholars who came upon this epic. Irawati Karve begins this question by asking how the very title of the epic changed from 'Jaya' to 'Mahabharata', she then answers that perhaps the 'Maha' in the changed title here itself denotes the additions done to the original work.

⁸ Christoph, Haimendorf, 'Indian Kinship systems', https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1965_17/39/indian_kinship_systems.pdf, accessed on 20th December 2023, p.1473.

⁹ Sachchidananda, 'Sketch of Irawati Karve's (1905-1970) Life and Work', op.cit, p.556.

¹⁰ Irawati Karve showed a strong interest in folklore which is evident from the fact that one of her earliest articles in the Bulletin of the Deccan College is entitled "Some Folksongs of Maharashtra". Her passion for folklore persisted, and she wrote "The Cultural Significance of Folksongs" which was one of her final papers for the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Simla's seminar on a Source book of Ancient Indian and Asian Civilization. Sachchidananda, 'Sketch of Irawati Karve's (1905-1970) Life and Work', op.cit, p.555.

¹¹ Kirti, Nakhare, 'An Inquiry into our Collective Past: A Comparative Analysis of Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya*', <https://www.scribd.com/>, March 2014.

Through *Yuganta*, Irawati Karve tells us how every character has his or her shades of grey and that no one is perfect. *Yuganta* is a collection of essays that studies the principal characters of the Mahabharata from historical, anthropological and secular perspectives. These characters are placed forth to a rational enquiry without any bias, thereby unravelling their hopes and fears and instilling in them wholly human motives. The characters here are viewed by the author as just ordinary human beings with complex human characteristics and emotions.¹²

She has allotted different chapters for each of the principal characters. Out of the ten chapters of this book, the initial ones deal with Gandhari and Kunti; the former lost all her sons in the war while the latter could see her sons alive and victorious. Karve analyses that this may be the difference but both these women faced more or less the same amount of adversities in their lives. Yet the responses of both of them to their respective situations were different. Irawati Karve also points out the different outcomes faced by them and thus allows the readers to think whether they had any choices then or rather what choices were available to these ‘royal ladies’...

A chapter dealing with Bhishma asks about the real reason or motive behind his 'selflessly maintaining the law and order in the kingdom when the kings he placed on the thrones were utterly unworthy. The author questions his persistence to stop the war, she resonates with it by saying that it could be either a selfless motive or the unquenching thirst of forever being the supreme authority without even bearing the direct responsibilities, that is, without even sitting on the throne.¹³

There is a chapter on Draupadi wherein one finds the author doing a comparative analysis of Draupadi and Sita, who are the female protagonists of the two great Indian epics. The author mentions that both the leading ladies went through similar circumstances, the lives of both of them for one reason or the other were frustrated. Yet the entire content and style of the two books are opposed. There is a detailed account of over three generations of people bound by a whole web of kinship. So the background of many individual lives like brothers, step-brothers, uncles, nephews, older and younger generations etc give different dimensions to Draupadi's character. The war in Mahabharata was a 'real war' in the sense it brought tremendous grief to both the victor and vanquished with the loss of innumerable lives.¹⁴ Draupadi's torment and experiences were described realistically and not embellished by any flowery language. The Mahabharata ended with the end of that Yuga, and Draupadi suffered each agony in her person.

In the end, one realises that Irawati Karve succeeds in interpreting the 'longest epic poem written' in the form of a collection of essays. These essays are scientific in spirit and Karve challenges the familiar interpretations of the epic through her refreshingly new interpretations. She wrote sensitively from a woman's perspective of what women like Kunti and Draupadi must have felt in the epic Mahabharata. Thus, one gets to see a totally different and perhaps realistic view of the epic which is otherwise looked at from the mere mythological point of view. Her book 'Yuganta' won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1968.

¹² Anand, Kumar, 'Yuganta by Irawati Karve', <http://indiafacts.org/>, 17th February, 2018.

¹³ Anand, Kumar, 'Yuganta by Irawati Karve', *ibid*.

¹⁴ Irawati, Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Reissue, Disha Books (an imprint of Orient Longman Private Limited), New Delhi, https://archive.org/details/isbn_9788125014249/page/n5/mode/2up, 1991, p.91.

Conclusion:

Irawati Karve truly created her own identity and became a researcher of international repute having supremacy in the fields of sociology, cultural and physical anthropology. So in a way, she built a legacy by herself becoming a fine example of women's liberation.

Irawati Karve widened our understanding of the relation between the present and the past. It is through her works that one realises what being a researcher means, the devotion one must have towards one's work and most importantly, she also serves as another role model for women with the message that even the sky does not remain the limit for aspirations. Indeed, her pioneering work on kinship and family laid the foundation for future research in several other areas - especially in the field of women's studies. Therefore, Irawati Karve rightfully has earned her place as one of the successful women in academia.

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