
UNIT 8 IRAWATI KARVE *

Structure

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

- outline the biographical details of Irawati Karve;
- discuss her central ideas; and
- list some of her important works.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Irawati Karve was the first woman anthropologist of India and the founder of sociology in Pune university. Her range of work stretched from mapping kinship and caste to surveys on the contemporary status of women. To interpret the inner integration of Hindu society she related Hindu mythologies with modern customs.

The same enterprise was again found in the work ‘Yuganta’ (1967) which was written in Marathi. It won Sahitya Academy Prize as the best book of that year. In the book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Irawati Karve studied the characters and society in Mahabharata. The subject of the book is secular, scientific and anthropological in the widest sense.

We begin this unit with a biographical sketch of Irawati Karve. This will be followed with discussion of some of her central ideas.

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8.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Irawati Karve was an Indian anthropologist. She was born in Mynjan in Burma and educated in Pune, India. Irawati's father sent her from Burma to India. Here she lived with a Brahmin family – the Paranjpyes. The family valued education tremendously. Irawati embraced their values. Later, she married into the Karvés who were educators and social reformers. She did B.A. in Philosophy and M.A. in Sociology (1928) from Bombay University before proceeding to Germany for advanced studies. For an outstanding research in anthropology, the Berlin University conferred on her the D. Phil degree in 1930. This marked the onset of her long and distinguished career of anthropological research. Her professional training was accomplished under the supervision of Eugene Fischer in the University of Berlin. She acquired knowledge of both social and physical anthropology.

Box 8.1 Irawati Karve's Academic Journey

Irawati Karve left India to study abroad as a young woman at a time when this was uncommon. She came to Berlin in a turbulent period, when the city lived in a state of decay following World War I, yet cultivated cultural openness, only to succumb, a few years later, to a dictatorial regime. Karve's dissertation was supervised by the German anthropologist Eugen Fischer, well-known for his studies on "race mixing" in German South West Africa (today Namibia) and later a supporter of the forced sterilization of hundreds of "racially mixed" children in Germany, among other eugenicist policies. Fischer gave Karve the task of proving a correlation between race and skull asymmetry, a physical feature that supposedly accounted for better development of the right side of the brain and thus of intelligence and civilization, a feature that Fischer expected would correlate with European races. Karve undertook measurements on hundreds of skulls, many obtained in German colonial territories. Her conclusion was blunt, and unexpected by her mentor: she proved the racist hypothesis was false....

Karve was a sociologist anthropologist in India who in her rather short life became renowned for her feminist cultural and social commentaries and for her studies on the Indian caste system. Less known are her racial studies of India's castes and "tribes": Employing the same methods and instruments she learned to use in Berlin, she measured and analyzed several anthropometric, racial features of different social groups in India. In this way, she contributed to the racialization of human difference there, continuing a legacy that had begun with colonial British anthropology. Although she was outspoken about women's issues she was silent about caste and religious discrimination, especially in her early work decades (1930s–1950s). She did embrace a multiculturalist rhetoric and antiracist stance in the last decade of her life, but she used racial methods in her research long after World War II, including as late as 1968, two years before her sudden death (Barbosa 2021).

Coming back to motherland in 1939, Karve joined the Deccan College Post-graduate and Research Institute of Pune as Head of the Department of Sociology

and Anthropology. She served as the Head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Deccan College till her retirement. She presided over the Anthropology Section of the Indian Science Congress in 1939. Her academic proficiency as well as topics of general interest brought her in the limelight of fame and public appreciation. She acquired a wide circle of readership.

Irawati Karve also conducted anthropometric studies in Maharashtra (by the financial aid from Emslie Horniman fund) the results of which were published in book-form in 1953. It provided a very useful data to mark a stage in the progress of knowledge about the people in Maharashtra.

She wrote in both Marathi and English on a wide variety of academic subjects as well as topics of general interest. She was the daughter-in-law of Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve. Dinkar Karve, her husband, was an educator. Her daughter, Gauri Deshpande, made a name for herself as a writer. Irawati Karve presided over the Anthropology division of the National Science Congress held in Delhi in 1947. She died in Pune of a heart attack in 1970.

8.3 CENTRAL IDEAS

Karve's central ideas focused on Hindu society and its caste system as well as kinship organization in India. She wrote extensively on the Mahabharata wherein her character studies treat the protagonists of the epic as historical characters and use their attitudes and behaviour to understand the times they lived in. Her research interests were concentrated on the following aspects: racial composition of the Indian population; kinship organization in India; origin of caste; and sociological study of the rural and urban communities.

8.3.1 Hindu Society

Hindu Society – an interpretation (Deccan College, 1961) is a study of Hindu society based on data which Karve had collected in her field trips, and her study of pertinent texts in Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit. In the book, she discussed the pre-Aryan existence of the caste system in Hinduism, and traced its development to its present form.

According to Irawati Karve, 'The Indian caste society is a society made of semi-independent units, each having its own traditional pattern of behaviour. This has resulted in a multiplicity of norms and behaviour. Accordingly, the Hindu religion is intrinsic in the particular stratification found in caste.' Karve begins her book on Hindu society by noting the complex patterns found in it. She calls caste an endogamous kinship group which are distinct from each other. Karve has shown that castes are really caste-clusters composed of smaller endogamous units or Jatis. The number of Jatis in a cluster varies in the different regions of India. Discussing the structural features of caste society, Karve says that it is "loose" and "very elastic". Internally a Jati has its own near-independent organization, each Jati is viable by itself. The absence of standardization and the great tolerance of diversity, in her view are the expression and a consequence of the world view of Hinduism - with its basic notion of unity in diversity. Her views on

caste were based on the anthropometric and blood group surveys which she conducted in her research on caste. She refers to Hindu society as a loose coming together of many separate cultural entities. Her thesis on The Chitpavan Brahmins was based on physical anthropological studies (eye colour measurements) as well as an Indological discussion of caste origins drawn from Puranas and Mahabharata and other mythologies. She viewed Indian society as a patchwork of castes, physically and culturally different from each other.

Karve traced the geneology of sociology and anthropology on Maharashtra to the social writings of Ranade, Tilak, Gokhale, followed by the works of Russell and Hiralal on 'Tribes and castes in Central Provinces'. Her major anthropological works are concerned with the following:

- (i) physical anthropology and archaeology – mainly anthropometric investigations;
- (ii) cultural anthropology – kinship, caste, village community, tribes which combined Indological studies- folk songs, epics, oral traditions;
- (iii) socio-economic surveys – weekly markets, dam displaced, urbanization, pastoralists, spatial organization; and
- (iv) contemporary social comment – women, language, race.

Karve was of the view that the cultural problems before India revolve around region, caste and family. She felt that it was difficult to evolve a common language, uniform civil code and abolish caste. She looked upon the task of welding the sub-continent through uniformity would destroy valuable cultural traits of the old way of life. These valuable traits are described by Karve as tolerance and an awareness of diversity. .

On social issues like language and schooling, Karve retained a strong Marathi nationalism, and she refused to concede Hindi superior status as a national language, or allow English to dominate access to the civil services. She insisted that all primary education must be in one of the regional languages, and there should be no English-medium schools at all.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) In which areas were research interests of Irawati Karve concentrated?

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- 2) What was the topic of the Ph D thesis of Irawati Karve?

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8.3.2 Kinship Organization

Irawati Karve

Karve's work, *Kinship Organization in India* (Deccan College, 1953) is a study of various social institutions in India. Karve mapped kinship patterns in India on to linguistic zones to come up with the following variations:

- (i) Indo-European or Sanskritic organisation in the Northern zone;
- (ii) Dravidian kinship in the southern zone;
- (iii) A central zone of mixed patterns (e.g. found in Maharashtra); and
- (iv) Mundari kinship systems in the east.

Within each linguistic region, there are variations between castes and subcastes. The unity in all this diversity was provided by the Sruti literature (Vedas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads) and the epics, such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which she reads as sociological and psychological studies of the joint family in ancient North India. North Indian Indo-European kinship is analysed through etymological analysis of kinship terms in the Mahabharata, an examination of kinship practices contained in Sanskrit and Pali texts, and a similar collection of contemporary terms for kin in different languages. The kin-ship practices of Muslim, Christian, and other communities do not find a mention at all in this kinship organisation of India.

Karve notes that in the north women are separated from their families at an early age and sent-off to live with unknown in-laws far away, whereas in the south, a girl is among her relatives even after marriage. The kinship organization in the central zone shows greater internal variation than the north with some castes allowing cross-cousin marriage in one direction (to the mother's brother's daughter) as in the south. In almost all castes in the northern zone, according to Karve (1953) the marriage between cousins is prohibited. According to Irawati Karve, 'A joint family is a group of people who live under one roof, eat food cooked at one hearth, hold property in common, who participate in common worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred.' Karve thus provides an understanding of the structure of Indian society and its range of social arrangements in her study of kinship organization. Uberoi has described Karve as pioneer of an indigenous 'feminist' perspective on the Indian family. She also evaluated modern changes in family life from their possible effects on women's life. Her empathy for women could be noted from her essay on the projected status of Indian women in 1975, in which she examines the long term trends on women's employment or education. Irawati Karve's (1953) paper *The Kinship Map of India* highlights the customs of marrying close kin in South India in contrast to the principle of extended exchange in North India that enables women to frequent their natal families, thereby reducing the stress faced by married women. Sundar notes that Karve does not seem to have wanted to identify herself as a feminist because she was not radical in her views. For instance, Karve supported the joint family system as an essential part of life with all its problems and joys and questions about patriarchy and oppression do not figure.

On caste, Karve predominantly addressed two themes, namely, the origin of caste and the unit of analysis, and secondly that the smallest endogamous unit or jati, was a product of the breaking up of a larger group caused by occupational diversification. Karve differs from Ghurye who had argued that caste in India is a Brahminical product of Indo-Aryan culture, spread by diffusion to other parts of India. Karve, on the other collected anthropometric measurements such as blood samples, eye colour, etc to argue that it was the sub-caste, such as the Chitpavan Brahman which should be treated as the 'caste', while the overall category, Maharastrian Brahman should be treated as a 'caste-cluster'. Her reasons are that Chitpavan, Karhadas, Saraswats, Deshasthas, Rigvedis and Madhyandin Brahmins did not intermarry but they had different marriage regulations and were ethnically different from each other. For Karve, a caste is a group which practices endogamy, has a particular area of spread or dispersion (generally within one linguistic region), may have one or more traditional occupations, has a more or less determinate or flexible position in a hierarchical scale and has traditionally defined modes of behaviour towards other castes.

Karve has made significant contributions in the form of socio-economic surveys or policy studies. Her later works are largely descriptive and packed with tables. Her first survey was on the Bhils of West Khandesh. She argued that tribals are not different from other parts of the Indian population and that it would be wrong to create an entirely new entity based on 'primitiveness'. Her view was that tribals should be helped to advance and assimilate and no external codes should be imposed on them.

Karve observed that kinship organization is influenced and strengthened by the caste system and both these conform to certain patterns found in different linguistic regions. She states that one has to find out the degree of tolerance which a social structure possesses for deviations and aberrations. The rigidity or elasticity of a social structure may depend either on the nature of the particular social structure or on the whole cultural fabric of a society.

Divorce is not tolerated by the Brahminical law books and does not have the sanction of the priests. She wrote that divorce is a firmly established social institution all over India in all castes except a few which consider themselves the top castes eg Brahmins, Kshatriyas etc. The refusal to accept the existence of divorce has very far reaching effects on kinship and caste organizations. She noted that there may be a type of social structure which is more tolerant of deviations than another. Outside factors such as cultural contacts may lead to numerous deviations.

The family in the majority of regions in India is an autonomous unit with its own observances. The caste in its turn is also a closed autonomous unit which has certain limited contacts with other similar units and which controls the behaviour of families in certain respects. Different castes living in the same locality have different rules as regards marriage, have different hereditary occupations and different Gods. A family and a caste are social groups of a kind where the individuals are conscious of belonging to the group. The joint family provided

economic and social security. The village where people spent all their lives was also the ultimate support of all residents. The rise of industrial cities and employment opportunities have resulted in a loosening of the bonds of joint family and of the village community.

8.3.3 Yuganta

Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*, a retelling of *The Mahabharata* is a literary and sociological text blending history, culture and philosophy of the ancient times. This work is remarkable as a literary piece, as a sociological study, as an anthropological and cultural document and serves as a mirror reflecting human needs and responses that are alike, both in the past and in contemporary times.

Irawati Karve says the central figures of *the Mahabharata* are neither wholly good, nor wholly bad, but a blend of both. She examines each one of the characters and unravels the working of a wide range of human emotions- both positive and negative. In her presentation she adopts a matter of fact tone without commenting on the virtues and vices of the characters. She makes a parallel study of the literary text and the cultural, historical and civilizational aspects of the society.

The poem was orally sung by wandering minstrels, known as *Sutas*. Dealing with the mode of narration, Karve looks at the structure as consisting of stories within stories, originating externally and internally. The thread of the main story is never forgotten. The story of *the Mahabharata* has many narrators and the happenings of the 18 days war are narrated to Dhritarashtra by Sanjaya, the Suta narrator.

From the different versions of different *Sutas*, the poem was knitted into a coherent text. *The Mahabharata* had its appeal to different sects in India – to the Buddhists, its excellent moral code, to the Jains and to the Marathis, the story of Krishna, while the Bhagavad Gita is the most read book both in and outside of India. The story also became popular among the tribals who saw in Bhima a prototype of the Powerful man of the folklore. *The Mahabharata* thus has meaning and relevance to its readers in varying degrees.

Irawati Karve as a sociologist recognizes that today's generation lacks knowledge of this great epic and therefore retells this story to make the young people recognize that their problems are the same as faced by the epic characters. *The Mahabharata* deals with issues that are essentially human. The principal theme of the Mahabharata is a familiar story- of feud over property. Here the quarrel is between the Kauravas and the Pandavas princes, the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu for the throne of Hastinapura.

Irawati presents different characters and their actions not subjectively through a moral prism but objectively through the events that impacted and shaped the destiny of different people. Thus the characters are in the grey area of good and evil and their actions lead to a tragic end. Irawati Karve's *The Mahabharata*, describes "the difficulty of being good" (Gurcharan Das). Bhishma's whole life has been one of fruitless sacrifice. Karve says "however justifiable his actions

may have been in the realm of politics, they are certainly blameworthy from the human point of view". She questions the rightness of many of his actions. Irawati's approach to *the Mahabharata* is far from a blind veneration of values like honour, sacrifice, self-centred addiction to one's own goodness. Her narration of the story encompasses humanistic vision beyond that of the individuals which results often in disastrous effect on fellow beings. Similarly Yudhishtira's faithful practice of dharma and his weakness for the dice and Karna's generosity result in tragedy with its colossal waste of the human potential'.

Irawati as a sociologist makes a study of human social behaviour. As an anthropologist, she makes an insightful study of the physical, social, and cultural development of humans.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Name the kinship patterns mentioned in Karve's book *Kinship Organization in India*.

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- 2) Outline the way caste influences kinship organization with reference to the view of Irawati Karve.

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8.4 IMPORTANT WORKS

Some of Irawati Karve's important works are:

Kinship Organization in India (1953)

Hindu Society: An Interpretation (1961)

Maharashtra: Land and its People (1968)

Yuganta: The End of an Epoch (1969)

8.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we learnt about the life and work of Irawati Karve. We began with developing an understanding of the social and academic environment in which her ideas were born. Then we discussed her central ideas. We found that she integrated anthropological insights with her expertise in indology. This distinguished her work from those of others. Her work presents holistic and profound understanding of society of that time.

8.6 REFERENCES

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8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Chief research interests of Irawati Karve were concentrated on the following aspects: racial composition of the Indian population; kinship organization in India; origin of caste; and sociological study of the rural and urban communities.
- 2) Irawati Karve's Ph D thesis on The Chitpavan Brahmins was based on physical anthropological studies (eye colour measurements) as well as an Indological discussion of caste origins drawn from Puranas and Mahabharata and other mythologies.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Kinship patterns identified by Karve in the book, *Kinship Organization in India* are:
 - a) Indo-European or Sanskritic organisation in the Northern zone;
 - b) Dravidian kinship in the southern zone;
 - c) A central zone of mixed patterns (e.g. found in Maharashtra); and
 - d) Mundari kinship systems in the east.
- 2) Karve observed that kinship organization is influenced and strengthened by the caste system and both these conform to certain patterns found in different linguistic regions.