

## IRAVATI KARVE

Irawati Karve was India's first woman anthropologist at a time when the discipline was developing. She was an Indian educationist, anthropologist, sociologist and a writer from Maharashtra, India. Irawati Karve was a student of Ghurye. She did doctoral work in anthropology from the University of Berlin, Germany in 1928-30 under the guidance of Eugene Fischer on the Normal Asymmetry of the Human Skull and Bones. She was well versed in both social as well as in physical anthropology. She produced a thesis on Chitpavan Brahmin in 1928. In 1933 she wrote kinship organization in India. Karve was known for her interest in Indology and also the contemporary application of ancient values of India.

Her famous work includes - Kinship Organisation in India (1953), Hindu Society: An Interpretation (1961) Group Relations in Village Community (1963), The Social Dynamics of a Growing Town and Its Surrounding Area (1965) and Yuganta (1967 in Marathi). Her work Yuganta (1967) won the Sahitya Academy Award for that year. Yuganta studies the principal, mythical heroic figures of the Mahabharata from historical, anthropological and secular perspectives.

She gave much importance to the racial composition of the Indian population, the kinship organization in India, the origins of caste and sociological studies of rural and urban communities. She has immensely contributed to social- cultural anthropology. Her contribution can be categorised as:

- Theory of Caste Formation
- Study of Kinship system in India
- Dynamics of Group relations in village
- Social Dynamics of a Growing Town

### **Caste Formation:**

According to Dr. Irawati Karve, main feature of the caste is they are endogamous. Spread of the caste is in the limited geographical area where a single common language is spoken. Every caste has one or two ancestral profession and its status in comparison with other castes can be either higher or lower. The families with which marital ties can be established such group of the families is the caste. Hence the **caste is nothing but expanded group of the relations**. Dr. Karve further states that the caste and tribe has striking similarities, such as limited geographical spread and presence of the caste panchayat (Assembly), hence the castes are formed out of ancient tribes.

She professes that the caste system was prevalent in Indian subcontinent before the arrival of Aryans. The Aryans brought with them the Varna system and which mixed with the caste system of Indian tribes and led to the complex form of caste system.

Thousands of years ago, Indian peoples live[d] in effectively endogamous tribal groups that did not mix, much like tribal groups in other parts of the world today. Political elites then ensconced themselves at the top of the social system (as priests, kings, and merchants), creating a stratified system in which the tribal groups were incorporated into society in the form of labouring groups that remained at the bottom of society as Dalits. The tribal organization was thus fused with the system of social stratification to form early jatis.

Karve uses the word "caste" for what is often called "sub-caste," the commonest Indian term for this unit being jati. For a broad grouping, like Brahmins, she prefers the term "caste-cluster." Her own

opinion is that caste-clusters are made up of groups (such as former tribal units) that have managed to attain the same social rank at different times and places but have remained endogamous and thus retained separate identity. The groups making up a caste-cluster may therefore have no common genetic ancestry and may differ greatly from one another in cultural traditions.

Karve does not subscribe to the notion that the caste system developed from the desire of the ancient Aryans to maintain social distance from the people they conquered. She thinks it more likely that the caste system was already in operation in pre-Aryan times, as in the Indus Valley civilization. Speculation along similar lines has appeared before, for example as far back as Gilbert Slater's *The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture*, 1924. What is new is Karve's special combination of ethnography, anthropometry, and genetics to support her views about caste formation.

In her book **Hindu Society-An Interpretation by Iravati Karve** presents data from a study by Karve and K. C. Malhotra of eight endogamous Brahmin castes in Maharashtra. Various anthropometric measurements and visual observations were made; blood was typed for the ABO, MN, and Rh series, and notations were made on such features as hand-clasping types, color blindness, and hypertrichosis. Although some of the features involved may be of doubtful genetic significance, the findings seem to indicate a good deal of genetic diversity within the caste cluster.

### **Study of Kinship system in India**

Her book *Kinship Organisation in India*, first published in 1953 is considered a renowned work depicting several facets of family structure in India. She basically categorised the country into four different cultural zones in accordance with the marriage practices as: the northern, the central, the southern, and the eastern.

Three concepts namely, **linguistic regions, institution of caste and family organization** are necessary to understand any cultural phenomenon in India. The kinship organization exhibits the linguistic pattern, but in some aspects, deviations are observed. As, though the Maharashtra region belongs to the area of Sanskritic languages but its kinship organization is related to Dravidian or south Indian kinship system. According to Iravati Karve caste is hereditary endogamous group which is restricted to linguistic region. It is an extended kin group. Caste members share a particular occupation and castes are also ranked in a certain order in social stratification.

Joint family is another important institution to understand cultural phenomenon in India. This family system has been compatible with agrarian background of Indian economy. Joint family is a group of kins of several generations, ruled by a head, in which there is joint residence, hearth and property and whose members are bound with each other by mutual obligations. As stated by Iravati Karve, joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked in one kitchen, who hold property in common, participate in common family worship and are related to one another as some particular type of kindred.

A joint family has vertical as well as horizontal extensions. Its main characteristic feature is the indivisibility and common sharing of property. The eldest male member has the right to manage property and he sees that no member is deprived of its benefits. She stated that every joint family has an ancestral seat or locus which some members may leave for an indefinite period. Thus, the linguistic

region, the caste and the family are the three most important aspects of the culture of any group in India. This is applicable to the primitive tribes of India.

Certain anthropological problems have been addressed by Karve. The family in the majority of regions in India is an autonomous unit with, its own economic organization while caste is a closed autonomous unit which has certain limited contacts with other similar units. The joint family provided economic and social security. The rise of industrial cities and the new opportunities of employment have resulted in disintegration of the bonds of the joint family and of the village community.

The kinship organization described in this book presents different cultural zones with different modes of marriages.

### **North India and Kinship:**

In northern India, we have (a) blood relation (b) affinal relations. There are essential terms for three ages of immediate relations and the terms for single age cannot be exchanged for those people who are from another generation.

The Northern part of India contains Punjabi, Hindi, Sindhi, Assami, Bihari, Bengali, and Nepali. In these parts clan exogamy, caste endogamy and taboos related to sexual relations between primary relations are practiced.

Brahmanas and other upper castes practice the avoidance of fathers, mothers, grandmother and maternal grandmothers gotras in north India. Also known as the rule of Four gotras.

### **Kinship and Central India**

It includes areas like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kathiawad, Chattisgarh, Orissa, Maharashtra their languages being Rajasthani, Gujarati, Kathiawadi, Oriya, and Marathi. Somehow these languages are related to Sanskrit and are placed in the northern area of India.

But there are pockets of Dravidian languages in this zone. There is also some impact of the eastern zone. Tribal people have their unique and somewhat different situation compared to other people in the region.

In regard to the central zone the following points may be noted:

1. Cross-cousin marriages are prevalent which are not witnessed in the north zone.
2. Many castes are divided into exogamous clans like the north zone.
3. In some castes exogamous clans are arranged in a hypergamous hierarchy.

However, none of these features are found all over the zone. In Rajasthan, for example, Jats follow two-gotra exogamy along with village exogamy; Baniyas practise four-gotra rule; and Rajputs have hypergamous clans.

### **Kinship in South India:**

There are five regions in the southern zone consisting of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the regions of mixed languages and people. The southern zone presents a very complicated pattern of kinship system and family organisation. Here, patrilineal and patrilocal systems dominate. However, some sections have matrilineal and matrilineal systems, and they possess features of both types of kinship organisation. Some castes allow polygamy, whereas some have both polygyny and polyandry. In Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and among some castes of Malabar, patrilineal and patrilocal joint family dominates as in the northern zone.

In the southern zone there is the system of caste endogamy and clan exogamy similar to the northern system. In northern zone village exogamy is a widely accepted norm. But, in southern zone, there are inter-marrying clans in the same village.

Preferential marriages with elder sister's daughter, father's sister's daughter, and with mother's brother's daughter are particularly prevalent in the southern zone. The main thrust of such a system of preferential marriages lies in maintaining unity and solidarity of the 'clan' and upholding of the principle of return (exchange) of daughters in the same generation.

#### **Kinship in Eastern India:**

The eastern zone is not compact and geographically it is not contiguous like other zones. Besides northern languages, Mundari and Monkhmer languages are also spoken. The main communities are Korku, Annamese, Saka, Semang and Khasi. The other languages are Mon, Khmer and Chain. The area consists of a number of Austro-Asiatic tribes.

All the people speaking Mundari languages have patrilineal and patrilocal families. The Ho and Santhal have the practice of cross-cousin marriage. All these people are divided into exogamous totemistic clans. A person must marry outside of the clan and also outside of the circle of near relations like first cousins.

The Khasi speaks Monkhmer language, and they are a matrilineal people. The Khasis have joint family with common worship and common graveyard, but the husband and wife live together in a small house of their own. After death the property goes to mother or youngest daughter.

#### **Group Relations in Village Community**

Her book **Group Relations in Village Community** (1963), describes a study conducted by Karve and Damle (1963) in three villages in Maharashtra to examine group relations in village community. They collected both quantitative and qualitative data to test the hypothesis of the structuring of interpersonal and inter-group relations with reference to kinship, caste and locality.

The authors viewed the boundaries of kin and caste that existed in various types of inter-dependence governed by economic relationships. Economic independence did not seem to imply social intercourse. But, the system of social stratification defines and delimits personal and social intercourse.

The majority families wanted their sons to follow the traditional occupation. The majority belonged to the farming castes, the next were servicemen and artisans. However, where change was desired, it was in favour of the white-collared occupation. In most of the villages, the landlord and tenant belonged to the same caste. Among those who borrowed money, the majority had to go outside their own caste to borrow money.

The study reveals that the traditional values about the caste system basically continued to define the status system. Formal education seems to have some impact on behaviour, attitudes and opinions. Help like agricultural operations was generally received from people of one's own caste. There were few occasions of help outside the caste. Also, help during sickness and involving personal attendance was confined mostly to kin and sometimes to caste but medicines were given freely by other than the caste members. Help was given and received at the time of funeral in the traditional pattern.

Most of the villagers said that they would not like to leave the village, even if their children settled elsewhere due to their long association in the village. As regards factions and quarrels, involving inheritance, field boundaries, etc., were among kin. There were other quarrels about leadership, personal differences and trespassing. These, however, involved different castes.

Scheduled Castes (SCs) did not have a place in the rural economy; and it was very difficult to uplift them. Thus, the authors find that most of the intercourse of an individual was confined to kin groups. And, the inter-group intercourse was regulated by the caste code. The attitudes and opinions confirm the behavioural pattern in terms of social distance and nearness dictated by the caste system.

### **The Social Dynamics of a Growing Town and Its Surrounding Area**

Karve and Ranadive (1965) conducted a study on the social dynamics of a growing town and its surrounding area in the town of Phaltan of Satara district and 23 villages around Phaltan within a radius of less than seven miles in Maharashtra.

The data was collected during the year 1961-62 and processed by the end of 1962. The type of survey which is presented here has two aspects, i.e., a theoretical one of trying to find out what is and a practical one of suggesting certain actions based on the findings.

As regards the first part of the work, it had set out to find what a small town is like and what its relationships are with the villages surrounding it. **This was necessary to study because anthropologists have been working on the basis of two societies – an urban and a rural – of two cultural traditions – the great and small – as if there was nothing in between the two.**

According to one of the authors, the small town in India seemed to play a role between the crowded and sophisticated city and the extremely isolated society of the village. The town with its weekly market was the bridge between the city and the village. To the city inhabitants, a small town is a backward place without economic, social or cultural opportunities. To the village people, it offers excellent economic and social opportunities. Also, the city with its congestion and distances offers less and less amenities to a certain class, who may be attracted to a small town which might become the future city. The authors tried to examine this small town keeping in light of the above points. The authors attempted to understand the thought and behavioural pattern of the small town and the villages with reference to education, religion and economic activities. The difference in the behavioural pattern of the town and village sometimes seems to be due to education. Thus, schools and colleges, the dispensaries, the market yard, the weekly market, the tea shop, the cinema theatre, the cycle shop and the sugar factory in the town represent cultural amenities which had a significant place in the life of the village.

The town had not attracted people from places more than a hundred miles away but it was definitely a centre of attraction for the surrounding areas. The town had both the rural and urban character. The difference between town and village was due to accepting new lifestyle that transformed the earlier socio-cultural institutions. This was revealed by the list of goods possessed by the sample families, by modes of dress, by modes using certain things and spending leisure hours.

In the second part of the work, what the authors have seen in Phaltan and the surrounding villages suggested a model for building up of communities to which maximum cultural amenities can be

provided by the government. This is necessary as the village is becoming a mere agricultural settlement.

There is a need to form social engineering skills for the planning of a different sort. The first consideration will be how big such an area should be physically and in terms of population. The second consideration will again be a physical one of connecting the various villages with the town in the middle through all-weather roads.

The third consideration would be to remodel, if possible, the existing habitation area so as to connect them easily through a sample design of roads with one another and with the centre. Also, at the centre itself should be concentrated services for education, medicine, recreation of many types and facilities for marketing and banking, etc. Lastly, the authority which would be set up to administer the existing amenities and to enhance the comforts and social intercourse should be made up equally by the town people and the village people.

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

Yuganta studies the principal, mythical heroic figures of the Mahabharata from historical, anthropological and secular perspectives. The usually venerated characters of this ancient Indian epic are here subjected to a rational enquiry that **places them in context, unravels their hopes and fears, and imbues them with wholly human motives, thereby making their stories relevant and astonishing to contemporary readers.**

She is attracted to it because it depicts a long roster of characters with all their virtues and their equally numerous faults, openly, objectively, even more, mercilessly displayed, especially when sought out by an inquirer like her, whose view of life is secular, scientific, anthropological in the widest sense, yet also appreciative of literary values, social problems of the past and present alike, and human needs and responses in her own time and in antiquity as she identifies them.

#### **Contribution to Physical Anthropology and prehistoric archaeology**

She partnered with HD Sankalia in excavation of Langhnaj, Mesolithic site in Gujarat.