

Legacy Of Iravati Karve: A Pioneer In Anthropological Studies

Pramila Dasture

PhD Research Scholar

Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune

Abstract:

This paper delves into the pioneering contributions of Iravati Karve, a distinguished Indian anthropologist and sociologist whose interdisciplinary approach profoundly influenced the study of kinship, caste, culture, and social organization in India.

Iravati Karve¹ gained international recognition for her groundbreaking anthropological research, earning the esteemed title of the "Mother of Indian Sociology." As India's first woman anthropologist and a trailblazer in the field, she established the Anthropology Department at Poona University (now Savitribai Phule Pune University). Her contributions significantly advanced the study of kinship, culture, village communities, markets, and the evolving social dynamics of urbanization and the Indian caste system.

Iravati Karve's impact reached far beyond her academic achievements—she was a staunch advocate for social justice, boldly challenging societal norms that constrained women's roles and opportunities. This paper explores her remarkable work and enduring legacy, highlighting how she surpassed her contemporaries in groundbreaking ways, becoming an inspiration for generations of activists and scholars.

Keywords: anthropology, sociology, kinship, culture, societal norms

Early Beginnings

In the early 1900s, while most Indian girls were being groomed for domestic life, one young girl was quietly forging her path to rewrite history. Named after the Irrawaddy River in Burma where her father G.H. Karmarkar worked.

The only daughter among six siblings, she was cherished by her family and raised in comfort. However, her journey took unexpected turns, shaping her into the remarkable individual she would become. Alongside strong women, Iravati also encountered empathetic and progressive men who encouraged her to break barriers and stood by her as she did.

At the age of seven, she was sent to Huzurpaga boarding school in Pune—an uncommon opportunity granted by her father at a time when most girls were steered toward marriage. In Pune, she crossed paths with RP Paranjpye, known as Wrangler Paranjpye, a distinguished educationist whose family informally adopted her and nurtured her as one of their own. Through him, Iravati discovered the captivating world of social sciences and its profound influence on society².

Within the Paranjpye household, she was immersed in an environment that championed critical thinking and ethical living, even when it meant challenging societal norms. Paranjpye, whom Iravati affectionately called "Appa" or her "second father," was a visionary far ahead of his time.

She received her B.A. in Philosophy from Fergusson College in 1926, post which she did her Masters in Sociology from the Bombay University carrying out an ethnic study on the Chitpavan Brahmins

¹Patwardhan, S. (1970). Iravati Karve. *Sociological Bulletin*, 19(2), 156–159. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42864683>

² Kalkar, N. G. (1970). IRAVATI KARVE. *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 31/32(1/2), 1–4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42930880>

with famous sociologist G.S. Ghurye. Post her marriage to Dinakar Dhondo Karve³ the son of the well-known social reformer Maharshi Karve.

In 1928, defying conventions, Iravati Karve embarked on an courageous journey to Berlin to pursue a doctorate in anthropology. At a time when India remained under colonial rule and women were expected to remain restrained in both voice and presence, Karve transcended borders, traditions, and societal expectations. She stepped into the revered yet ominous halls of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, studying under Eugen Fischer—a scholar whose racial theories would later serve as ideological groundwork for Nazi propaganda. Germany was still grappling with the aftermath of World War I, and Hitler had yet to rise to power. However, the shadow of anti-Semitism had already begun to creep in. Iravati Karve confronted this grim reality firsthand when she learned that a Jewish student in her building had been murdered.

Her guide, Fischer expected a research which would prove and confirm the shape of the skull influenced the intelligence of an individual and that white Europeans were innately advanced and superior. Karve instead methodically examined 149 skulls and analysed flawed assumptions, demolishing the very theory she was meant to reinforce. With quiet boldness and thorough analysis, she affirmed: intellect is not dictated by race but fuelled by the human spirit. Fischer theorized that white Europeans possessed asymmetrical skulls to accommodate larger right frontal lobes, which he claimed signified higher intelligence⁴. However, Iravati Karve's research found no link between race and skull asymmetry, directly challenging not only Fischer's hypothesis but also the prevailing theories of the institute and the broader academic consensus of the time, which would not long from then witness the worst racial discrimination.

Back In India

Throughout her life, Iravati Karve embodied a rare blend of bold determination and deep empathy, particularly in her interactions with women. At a time when it was nearly unheard of for a woman to venture far from home, she defied convention by traveling to remote Indian villages after returning to the country. Whether accompanied by male colleagues, students, or even her own children, she immersed herself in the lives of tribal communities, studying their customs and social structures. She participated in archaeological expeditions, unearthing 15,000-year-old bones and forging connections between the past and present. These demanding journeys took her through dense forests and rugged landscapes for weeks or months at a time, often forcing her to sleep in barns or truck beds and endure long stretches with little food.

Karve fearlessly confronted societal and personal biases as she engaged with people from all walks of life. She rode scooters, wore swimsuits, and balanced academia with motherhood, teaching sociology while cradling babies and carrying clipboards. She trekked through India's most isolated villages, documenting tribal cultures, tracing human migration patterns, and embracing the raw realities of life. In a striking act of respect, she even accepted half-cooked meat from tribal elders—an unthinkable gesture for a woman from her Brahmin background.

A Niche In Academics

Karve held the role of administrator at SNDT Women's University in Bombay from 1931 to 1936, where she also contributed to postgraduate teaching. In 1939, she moved to Pune's Deccan College as a Reader in sociology, a position she maintained throughout her career.

Recognized as India's first female anthropologist, Karve⁵ worked in a discipline that, during her lifetime, was closely intertwined with sociology. Her academic pursuits spanned a wide array of

³ Dinakar Dhondo Karve (1963). *The New Brahmins: Five Maharashtrian Families*. University of California Press. p. 93.

⁴ Karve-Corvinus, G. (1971). Iravati Karve (1905–1970). *Anthropologischer Anzeiger*, 33(1), 83–84.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29538504>

⁵ H. Acharya. (1970). Iravati Karve. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5(34), 1405–1405.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4360352>

fields, including anthropology, anthropometry, serology, Indology, and palaeontology. She also had a deep appreciation for cultural expression, collecting folk songs and translating feminist poetry. A diffusionist by approach, she drew inspiration from multiple intellectual traditions, incorporating methodologies akin to those of W. H. R. Rivers. Her influences ranged from classical Indology and British Raj-era ethnology to German eugenics-based physical anthropology⁶. Fieldwork was central to her research, and she remained committed to mapping social groups, such as subcastes, using anthropometric and what was then termed "genetic" data, including blood group analysis, color vision studies, hand-clasping patterns, and hypertrichosis.

Karve established the Department of Anthropology at Poona University (now Savitribai Phule Pune University) and led the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Deccan College for many years. In 1947, she presided over the Anthropology Division of the National Science Congress in New Delhi.

For The Love Of Anthropology

For Karve, anthropology was more than a profession—it was a mission to connect, comprehend, and illuminate stories long overlooked.

Whether unearthing ancient remains or preserving folk traditions, she wasn't merely documenting human existence—she was honoring it. Her career flourished quietly yet profoundly, as she led academic departments, authored influential works, translated feminist poetry, and even explored genetics and serology. More than just a scholar, she was a movement unto herself. Her pioneering studies on caste and culture have become integral to Indian curricula, yet her name remains a whisper in the margins of history.

Karve navigated both the sacred and the scientific, questioning temple rituals while invoking Hindu philosophy, and occasionally visiting shrines with her atheist husband—not out of belief, but tradition. Her life was a quiet yet resolute defiance of categorization.

Pioneering Research on Indian Kinship: Irawati Karve's landmark study, **Kinship Organization in India** (1958), remains a foundational text in the exploration of Indian kinship systems. Her in-depth analysis of family structures, relationships, and kinship patterns provided profound insights into the intricate social fabric of India.

Methodology and Ethnographic Studies: Karve's research was distinguished by its meticulous ethnographic approach. She immersed herself in diverse communities, closely observing their customs, traditions, and familial interactions. This hands-on methodology enriched her findings and set a high standard for future sociologists.

Critique of Existing Theories: In addition to her pioneering work on kinship, Karve was known for her sharp critique of prevailing sociological theories. She boldly challenged conventional perspectives, offering fresh interpretations that deepened the understanding of India's social structures.

Contributions to Anthropology: Karve's influence extended beyond sociology into anthropology, where she played a crucial role in bridging the two disciplines. Her interdisciplinary approach fostered a more comprehensive study of human societies, reinforcing the interconnectedness of cultural and social dynamics.

⁶Department of Anthropology and Sociology. (1971). *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 30, 120–140. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42930867>

⁷Sundar, Nandini (2007), "In the cause of anthropology: the life and work of Irawati Karve", in Uberoi, Patricia; Sundar, Nandini; Deshpande, Satish (eds.), *Anthropology in the East: The founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, [ISBN 978-1-90542-277-7](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781905422777)

A Prolific Writer

Iravati Karve put pen to paper and came up with some path breaking literary works contributing extensively in both Marathi and English⁸.

- Kinship Organization in India (Deccan College, 1953), a study of various social institutions in India.
- Hindu Society — an interpretation (Deccan College, 1961), 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 caste system and traced its development to its present form.
- Maharashtra — Land and People (1968) – describes various social institutions and rituals in [Maharashtra](#).
- [Yuganta: The End of an Epoch](#), a study of the main characters of the [Mahabharata](#) treats them as historical figures and uses their attitudes and behavior to gain an understanding of the times in which they lived. Karve wrote the book first in Marathi and later translated it into English. The book won the [Sahitya Academy](#) Award for best book in Marathi⁹.
- Paripurti (in Marathi)
- Bhovara (in Marathi) [भोवरा](#)
- Amachi Samskruti (in Marathi)
- Samskruti (in Marathi)
- Gangajal (in Marathi)
- The New Brahmans: Five Maharashtrian Families -biography of her father-in-law in a chapter called Grandfather

One of Karve's most significant contributions was in the field of Indology, offering a non-anglicized perspective on India's culture and heritage. She advocated shedding the colonial lens and subtly championed the idea of unity in diversity, especially at a time when colonial forces sought to divide the country along religious lines¹⁰.

Her engagement with Indian mythology was particularly notable—she reinterpreted it as a historical narrative in her book *Yuganta*.

Her study *Kinship Organization in India* is another remarkable contribution, where she employs regional dialects and geography to examine kinship structures across the country.

Dr. Karve's works, including *The Pandharpur Yatra*, *The Indian Village*, *Bhils of West Khandesh*, and *Yuganta*, remain foundational texts in anthropology and sociology. As Dr. Nadkarni aptly notes, these studies continue to provide a wealth of ideas for advancing research in the social sciences¹¹.

In an era marked by political divisions, social inequities, and a deeply entrenched religious framework, Dr. Karve boldly challenged societal norms and ventured into unexplored intellectual territories.

One of her most poignant commentaries compared society to a quilt—woven from diverse, colorful threads, much like a community composed of people from different backgrounds. Despite conflicts and differences, it is the thread that binds society together. This analogy remains a powerful and much-needed lesson in today's world.

⁸ Malhotra, K. C. (1970). BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PROFESSOR IRAVATI KARVE'S WORKS. *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 31/32(1/2), i–viii. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42930879>

⁹ Lath, M. (1982). Understanding the Mahabharata: Iravati Karve's *Yugant*. *Indian Literature*, 25(5), 134–149. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23331118>

¹⁰ Mollan, Cherylann (19 January 2025). "[Iravati Karve: India's trailblazing female anthropologist who challenged Nazi race theories](#)"

¹¹ Srinivas, M. N. (1987). Development of Sociology in India: An Overview. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22(4), 135–138. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4376593>

Conclusion

Iravati Karve was a pioneering scholar whose contributions left a lasting impact on the social sciences in India. Her interdisciplinary approach, meticulous fieldwork, and profound analyses of kinship, caste, and Indian culture—exemplified in works like *Kinship Organization in India* and *Yuganta*—continue to serve as essential frameworks for understanding the complexities of Indian society. Her legacy extends beyond academia, as she seamlessly bridged disciplines and engaged a broader readership, fostering a deeper appreciation for India's rich cultural fabric.

Her book '*Yuganta*', originally written in Marathi and later translated into English by Karve herself, earned her the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. The work presents a socio-political and historical perspective on the characters of the Mahabharata, departing from its conventional mythological interpretation while drawing insightful parallels with India's history.

The influence of her mentor, G. S. Ghurye, is evident throughout her scholarship, as both emphasized the importance of studying family, caste, religion, and kinship to grasp the foundations of Indian society. Karve also relied extensively on broad survey data to substantiate her findings. As a Classical Orientalist Indologist, she turned to ancient Sanskrit texts to decode contemporary social structures¹². Long before feminism had a name, Iravati Karve embodied its essence—zipping through Pune on a scooter, dissecting skulls, and countering Nazi racial theories with science. From India to Berlin, she defied caste taboos and challenged prejudiced ideologies with quiet brilliance. A pioneering anthropologist, her legacy intertwines logic, empathy, and defiance. Once overlooked, her story resurfaces as a testament to intellectual courage; these and many more tales can be found in a new book titled **Iru: The Remarkable Life of Iravati Karve**, written by her granddaughter Urmilla Deshpande and academic Thiago Pinto Barbosa, illuminates her remarkable journey and the formidable challenges she overcame, forging an inspiring path for future generations of both women and men.

Iravati Karve's work is profoundly significant, offering deep insights into the intricate layers of Indian society and culture. Her exploration of kinship organizations¹³ is essential for understanding the broader social framework of the country. Additionally, her research methodologies and sharp analytical approach provide invaluable guidance for aspiring sociologists and anthropologists. When she died in 1970, Karve left behind more than scholarly papers—she left behind a blueprint for intellectual courage. In a world still struggling to balance identity, equality, and truth, Karve's life reads less like a biography and more like a prophecy. She was a data-driven disrupter before the term existed. A quiet rebel who argued with skulls and sided with justice. A woman who lived like a storm—and left behind a whisper that still stirs the air¹⁴.

¹²Karve, I., & Chandorkar, L. (2014). A Meeting across the Ages. *Indian Literature*, 58(2 (280)), 7–14.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44754508>

¹³H. R. Trivedi. (2000). Kinship Studies and Gender. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(52/53), 4590–4590.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4410090>

¹⁴ Iravati Karmarkar Karve (2007). [*Anthropology for archaeology: proceedings of the Professor Iravati Karve Birth Centenary Seminar*](#). Deccan College Post-graduate and Research Institute. p. 19. Born on 15th December 1905 at Mingyan in Myanmar (then Burma), and named after the River Irawaddy. Her father Hari Ganesh Karmakar worked there in a cotton mill. Her mother's name was Bhagirathi.