

The first woman sociologist - anthropologist of India - Irawati Karve

Irawati Karve apart from being India's first woman sociologist-anthropologist, was also a pioneer of feminist scholarship in India, at a time when both sociology and anthropology were in their initial phase of development in India. She is also credited as the founder of the department of anthropology at the Deccan College and Post-Graduate Research Institute at Poona (1939), where she undertook research projects in different branches of anthropology and sociology. It was in an intellectual climate characterised by a conspicuous absence of women academicians, that Karve emerged as a lone female scholar among her male contemporaries such as Ghurye, Bose and Dumont. Karve's expertise in her subject helped her find her footing in a male-dominated discipline, but unfortunately she could not secure a strong place for herself in the narratives of Indian sociology and anthropology. It is well-known that the plethora of literature regarding the development of these two disciplines in India, have been marked by a distinct preponderance of androcentric bias and thus the contributions of female scholars have almost been rendered invisible. Karve has met with a similar fate, and has been systematically and perhaps deliberately neglected in the annals of sociological research in India.

Karve belonged to a generation of sociologists-anthropologists, who combined a knowledge of the rich Indological tradition with a socio-anthropological approach. She too, in her methodology, fruitfully combined the text with the context; and her theoretical framework was the one based on practical realities, informed by extensive fieldwork and a reliance on Sanskrit texts. Karve took equal interest in the different branches of anthropology, viz. physical anthropology, social anthropology, prehistory and folklore and has worked simultaneously on them. She has even worked extensively on issues of sociological relevance. Thus, in this sense, she could easily be paralleled to an amphibian, who fluidly traversed through the terrains of physical anthropology and sociology.

The problems Karve took up for research ranged from family, kinship, caste to contemporary socio-economic surveys on weekly markets or dam-displaced people. Her works cover a holistic conceptualization of Indian society (Channa, 2007). She even worked on a Hindu pilgrimage (which is a significant contribution in the field of sociology of religion) and also took up the unconventional task of critically dissecting some important revered characters of Mahabharata. However, underlying all her analysis, was a marked sensitivity to the notion of womanhood, although till then the concept of feminism had not found a concrete expression in the theoretical

discourses . Moreover, in general , Karve never lost sight of India as her object of study and attempted to use the indigenous epistemological tools available to her. Refuting the colonial myth that India was homogenous and stagnant,she even showed that Indian society had always been progressive in nature . This anti-colonial undercurrent in her works can undoubtedly be considered a forerunner in the field of post-colonial theorizing in India , much before Said, Spivak and Bhaba. In this sense, Karve can be considered to be a nationalist par excellence.

The above discussions thus, make it evident that Karve had in fact constructed a multidisciplinary corpus of knowledge, including both traditional and contemporary issues. Moreover, before her there was no such detailed discussions regarding the important Indian social institutions, specifically kinship, which was either seen as a challenging field of study or an area exclusive to anthropology.Through her works Karve has tried to trace that phenomenon in a systematic way.

Evaluation of the thoughts and ideas of Karve about the Indian society and culture, becomes adequate only if they are placed in the context of the debate regarding the relative importance of tradition and modernity and also within a feminist perspective.

Karve apart from being influenced by Ghurye's Indological approach,was also guided by Rivers diffusionism and more specifically by Boas's historical - particularism and Kroeber's culture-area hypothesis. She had also internalized the German physical anthropological tradition through her doctorate guide Eugen Fischer. She meticulously used all these approaches in her studies,to the neglect of structural-functionalism which was slowly gaining popularity during her times.Moreover,her early works revealed a distinct bias towards Brahmanical Hinduism (for example,her equating of Indian society with Hindu society) and thus she could be called a traditional orientalist.Her respect for tradition was also reflected in the way she dedicated her work on kinship to her husband, "I place my head on your feet and ask for your blessings" or also by her own justification of her frequent visits to the Vithoba shrine as a part of her upholding of tradition.

It is this same woman on the other hand, who took up the task of challenging the "traditional patriarchalism",in *Yuganta*.This work is not only a significant contribution in the field of "Indian feminist hermeneutical tradition", but in fact opened up the possibility of calling Karve a postmodernist.Even her work on the Pandharpur pilgrimage, may be considered to be an illustration of postmodern ethnography.This work is an exemplary instance of her application of participant-observation method(emotionally part of that pilgrimage, but also emotionally and intellectually somewhat distanced) in understanding reality at the ground level in the realm of

religious ideas and practices of common people of India. So while on the one hand the readers of this piece feels the throbbing of the heart of Karve and scores of others participating in this journey; simultaneously, one can't praise enough the objective view maintained by Karve in exposing the caste and gender inequalities practised by the participants.

Karve's *Grandfather* (1963), is specifically noteworthy here, where she openly resented her father-in-law's (Dhondo Keshav Karve, who was one of the pioneers of widow remarriage and women's education in Maharashtra) disapproval of her going abroad for higher studies.

Thus, Karve while analyzing the more conventional institutions of caste and family, seemed to be tradition-bound, whereas she came to her true disposition when she was discussing women and was able to break free from the shackles of traditionalism.

Some instances from her personal life too, like being the first woman in Pune to ride a scooter, or discarding the use of the mangalsutra or kumkum or affectionately calling her husband "Dinu" in the presence of others, bear testimony to the fact that she was unorthodox in many cases.

So, Karve was an unusual blend of tradition and modernity and thus whether she can be labelled as a traditionalist or a modernist, remains unresolved like in similar situations of the interface between tradition and modernity. While on the one hand she had an ingrained sense of rootedness in tradition, on the other hand she was ingenious enough to project herself in the future as a feminist scholar.

Karve's Contributions

Before Karve, adequate attention was not paid to studies on Indian kinship. Instead there was a preoccupation with the study of caste, its place in Hindu society and its uniqueness. Even studies on family, were also quite commonplace. In such a climate, there arrived Karve's path-breaking contribution in the field of kinship studies in India, *Kinship Organisation in India* (1953). In this work she divided the whole of India into three linguistic zones and corresponding four geographical zones—northern, central, southern and eastern. . She had further delineated for each region the most pervasive kinship types. However, the major thrust of the work was in bringing out the differences in the social system of northern and southern India, with special reference to the position of women in these two zones. It is precisely for this reason, Uberoi (1993), has rightly claimed that Karve was a pioneer of an indigenous feminist perspective on the Indian family. In the northern zone while there was a tendency to select wives from regions far off from one's own and to prohibit marriage between close kin, on the other hand, in the south, there existed a strong bias in favour of marriage within narrowly defined kin groups. These differences in

marital arrangements were seen by Karve as affecting differently the women of these two zones. In the north, the women due to their marriage with strangers in a completely patriarchal setup, enjoyed lesser freedom than the women of the south. In spite of pointing to the differences between the two zones, Karve claimed that these differences pertained within the overall cultural unity of India provided by the twin institutions of Hindu caste system and the joint family.

This 1953 work which was the first systematic attempt at studying and analysing in detail the kinship organisation of the whole of India, is a result of extensive fieldwork and a painstaking and intensive study of existing literature. Although this work is highly commendable, yet her giving of equal weightage to synchronic and diachronic evidences, has made localization of data difficult. Moreover, it is essentially a Hindu monograph, neglecting the Muslim and Christian communities of India. Even the tribal communities have received scant attention.

Karve's important work on caste was, *Hindu Society-An Interpretation* (2nd ed. 1968). The main argument of this work was that, the diversity of Indian culture is a result of the variety of cultural patterns held by a multitude of castes.

Karve had also inserted "caste-cluster", between the two recognised institutions of varna and jati. Thus, this automatically brought to the forefront a debate regarding the formation of sub-castes which formed a caste-cluster. Karve sharply differed from Risley and Ghurye, who were of the opinion that jatis were a product of fission in a larger group. On the contrary, Karve believed that a fusion of sub-castes led to the formation of a caste-cluster and thus these groups making up a caste-cluster may not necessarily have a common genetic ancestry and may differ greatly from one another in cultural traditions. So, for Karve, Hindu society was a kind of agglomerative, "a loose coming together of many separate cultural entities" (ibid: 127). Another important point on which Karve differed from Ghurye was that, while the former was of the opinion that the caste system already existed in India before the Aryans came in and that Varna was an Aryan import which was superimposed on the caste-system, the latter believed that caste in India emerged as a result of Indo - Aryan culture. In the concluding chapter of *Hindu Society -An Interpretation*, Karve was vocal about certain situations which posed to be problematic in modern India. Issues associated with language, reform of Hindu legal code in relation to women's position, sanctity attributed to cows, communalism, preferential caste status in law, rights of untouchables and ideals of democracy and freedom were taken up. For her, the establishment of a common civil code throughout the country, was the one of the greatest threats and she adopted a somewhat critical outlook towards the socialist

pattern of society. As a suggestion she said that law makers and social reformers should remain flexible in the principles they introduce, and not superimpose them on groups by destroying their sense of identity. Maintaining unity amidst all diversities is that which should be strived for.

Karve's works covering the lives of either the common women of India or the woman characters of Mahabharata, is a reflection of the feminist standpoint adopted by her. In fact, the quintessence of Karve's lifework is *Yuganta-The End of an Epoch* (1969). This work which is based on the Mahabharata, simultaneously reveals Karve's critical interpretation of tradition in the light of modernity as well as foregrounding a woman's perspective. She not only stripped the characters of the Mahabharata of their heavenly attributes and looked at them as flesh and blood persons, but actually took up the responsibility of expressing the suppressed voices of the "women" in the epic. Her interpretation revealed a distinct feminist bent, which was absent in the original text.

Next, the socio - economic surveys conducted by Karve, were indeed far ahead of her times and reflected on issues such as spatial mobility, displacement and rehabilitation and ecological concerns, which are intriguing problems of the day. In her work with Damle (1963), she shows that kinship, caste and locality exerted a considerable influence on the interpersonal and inter-group relations of the people of the village community. Although economic factors do play a role in certain instances, yet they do not have any serious implications on either personal or social intercourse.

Her 1965 study, along with J.S Ranadive, analyses the changes in material culture and social relations of the dwellers of a growing township and its hinterland. The authors made a plea for social planning based on reality and not on any ideal.

Along with her daughter Jai Nimbkar in 1969, Karve conducted a study among the people who have been displaced by the Koyna dam. They tried to show how developments had its costs, which are paid by the people who were displaced from their habitats. This means development also has a social aspect and thereby entails changes in existing relationships. Following Karve's lead, it can be said, that since family and caste has a location, the loss of location in modern times leads to feelings of insecurity. This work holds enormous contemporary relevance where millions are being ousted by mega projects.

Karve had also worked on the tribal, rural-urban continuum. Karve's work with H. Acharya (1970) is important in this connection. The survey revealed that people belonging to tribal, rural as well as urban areas assembled at weekly markets. There they not only bought and sold goods, but also participated in various kinds of cultural activities.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion thus makes it evident that Karve was indeed a stalwart of Indian sociology when it had just been institutionalized in the country. She experimented with approaches and topics, in an atmosphere that wasn't welcoming of women scholars. An iconoclast to a certain extent and the one with exemplary "sociological imagination", Karve has indeed been able to stir our minds in a way not as strikingly as hers, ever before. However, she had probably taken too much on her palate, due to which some of her works lacked precision and seemed to be wanting in more intensive insights. Nonetheless, this does not imply that her contributions to Indian sociology can in any way be undermined. Her position as an Indian woman pioneer in the field of sociological and anthropological studies in India can never be denied.

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