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Not so quiet has flown the Iravati

Iravati Karve

(by Jai Nimbkar and Varsha Kelkar-Mane)

The name Iravati is rather unusual, but then her whole life was unusual. The daughter of Hari Ganesh Kamarkar was born in Burma in 1905 when he was working as an engineer there and was named after the river Irawady.

At the age of seven she was sent to India for schooling to Huzoor Paga, a boarding school for girls (and one of the first schools for girls in Maharashtra), in Pune. There she made friends with a classmate, Shakuntala Paranjpye, daughter of Wrangler R. P. Paranjpye. Shakuntala's mother took Iravati to stay with her family: this was to change the course of her life. At this intellectual, atheistic household, she was exposed to a wide range of books and people, one of whom was judge Balakram, who instilled in her an interest in anthropology, a field in which she was to work and leave her mark. It was during this period that she met and later married Dinakar Karve, a Professor of Chemistry in the Fergusson College, Pune, the second son of Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve, one of the pioneers in the field of women's education and widow remarriage in the country.

After her B.A. from Fergusson College, Iravati got an M.A. in sociology under the guidance of Dr. G. S. Ghurye, the founder

of the department of sociology in Bombay university. Her husband, who had realized her intellectual ability, decided that she should study abroad in order to realize her full potential. She accordingly went to Berlin and obtained a Ph.D. in anthropology under the guidance of Prof. Eugen Fischer, Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Eugenics and Human Heredity in 1930.

After returning to India, she worked for a brief period as Registrar of S.N.D.T. College in Pune. Her real interest, however, lay not in the administrative field but in scientific research and the academic field. She eventually accepted a post in the Deccan College Post-graduate Research Institute, and spent her entire professional life working in her chosen field under the aegis of this institute.

The main problems she addressed in her work were, "What are Indians? Why are we what we are?". The goal she thus set for herself was very much in line with the general aims and objects of anthropology. Specific questions she sought answers to were i) whether more detailed cultural and physical configurations can be established in India in terms of historical, proto-historical folk movements, ii) What were the physical features of the people who were responsible for the numerous historic and proto-historic sites found all over India, iii) What is caste? To find answers to such questions, her approach was ethno-historical, perhaps the result of her training in Berlin. She started simultaneous investigations in four inter-disciplinary branches: Paleo-anthropology, irnbological studies, epics and oral traditions, systematic physical anthropological investigations in various regions, and detailed sociological studies in different linguistic areas.

Iravati Karve felt that instead of haphazardly taking measurements of the people of India as a whole, a systematic study of the people of one limited region would be more significant for finding out the racial composition of a cultural region. She was not in favour of taking measurements of primitive groups or caste groups. She said that, for instance, a sample of a hundred subjects from the Maharastrian Brahmins could not give an idea of the gene pool of the twelve endogenous sub castes of the Brahmins.

The two prominent Brahmin sub-castes, Chitpavans and Deshastha Rigvedi, are quite different from each other, and the latter is much closer to Marathas. She therefore strongly advocated that sampling for the Indian population should be done at the caste level and not the caste-cluster level. This concept of caste as a unit of study and a research tool has revolutionized Indian anthropology.

Dr Karve also studied kinship terms and usages and family organization in the Rigveda, Atharvaveda and Mahakharata. She collected data from Gujarat, Karnataka, Orissa, Kerala, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh. The results of these studies were organized into a book 'Kinship organization in India' (1953). This work which has run into three editions, is a classic in cultural anthropology and a basic source book for scholars wishing to work in this field.

Her work brought her recognition in India and abroad. She was elected President of the Anthropology section of the Indian Science Congress in 1957 and was offered a lectureship in the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University.

Her most important contribution includes a number of books such as 'Hindu Society, an Interpretation', in which she has presented a fresh interpretation of the caste structure, 'Kinship Organization in India', and 'Maharashtra, Land and People'. She has also written 'Yuganta', a critique, in Marathi, on the Mahakharata, which earned her the Sahitya Akademi award. Her unorthodox interpretation of various characters hurt the sentiments of some traditionalists, but the book became vastly popular. It has been translated into various Indian languages as well as into English, and is still going into new editions over thirty years after her death in 1970.

Iravati Karve died in her sleep on August 11, 1970 at the age of sixty five. She brought to her scholarship a combination of intellectual integrity, tremendous mental energy and an ability to find a rapport with a wide range of people, and left a permanent mark on learning and literature in modern India.

