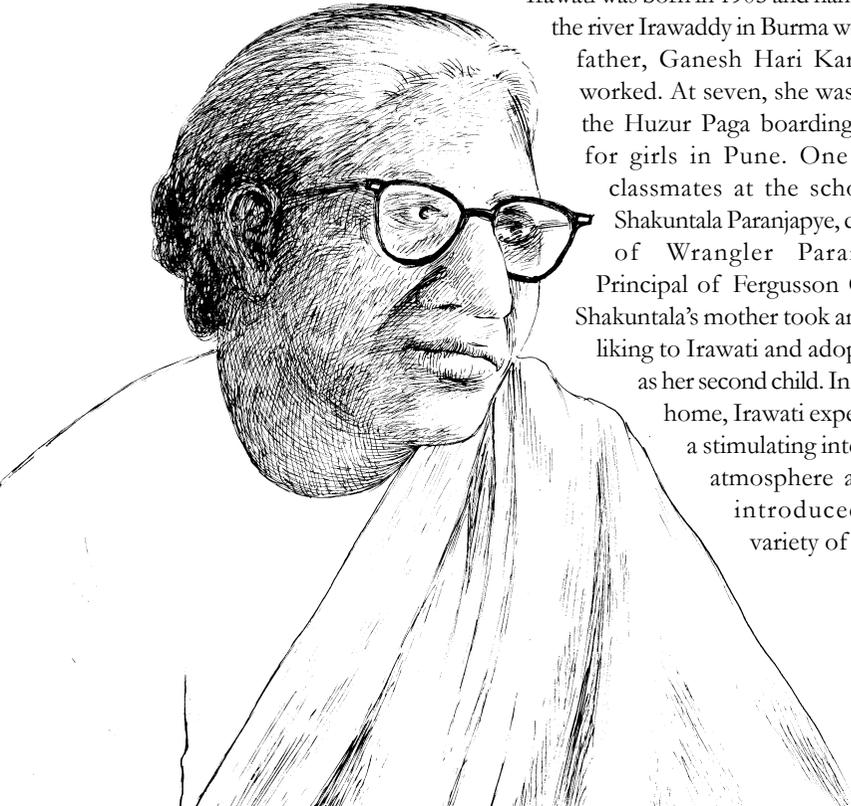


Irawati Karve

(1905 - 1970)

Irawati Karve was India's first woman anthropologist. She took up this subject when it was still in its infancy. She was a pioneer and the first to teach this subject in the Poona University. She was also an Indologist, a collector of folk songs and a translator of feminist poems. She radically reinterpreted the Mahabharata in her book *Yugant*, thus transforming her readers' understanding of the epic.

Irawati was born in 1905 and named after the river Irawaddy in Burma where her father, Ganesh Hari Karmarkar worked. At seven, she was sent to the Huzur Paga boarding school for girls in Pune. One of her classmates at the school was Shakuntala Paranjapye, daughter of Wrangler Paranjapye, Principal of Fergusson College. Shakuntala's mother took an instant liking to Irawati and adopted her as her second child. In her new home, Irawati experienced a stimulating intellectual atmosphere and was introduced to a variety of books.



Irawati studied Philosophy at the Fergusson College, graduating in 1926. She then got the Dakshina Fellowship to work under G. S. Ghurye, the head of the Department of Sociology at Bombay University. In the meantime, she got married to the chemist Dinkar Dhondo Karve – son of the great social reformer Maharishi Karve – pioneer of widow remarriage and women's education in Maharashtra.

Getting married into a 'progressive' family did not prove advantageous. For, while Maharishi Karve encouraged women in public, this liberalism did not extend to his own family. Karve opposed Irawati's attempts to go to Germany for higher studies. Often reformers and revolutionaries are hardest on those closest to them!

Despite opposition in 1928, Irawati went to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology to do her PhD. Her thesis topic was: *The normal asymmetry of the human skull*. Irawati and her husband realized early that they were not cut out for social reform work. So, they both stuck to research and teaching. Dinkar taught chemistry and later became the Principal of the Fergusson College. Dinkar recognized the exceptional intellectual abilities of his wife and solidly stood behind her. He took on household responsibilities so that Irawati could pursue her research. He ensured that there was always petrol in her scooter and money in her purse!



Irawati was the first woman in Pune to ride a scooter! She refused to apply *kumkum* or wear a *mangalasutra*. But despite her disregard for convention, Irawati essentially led a middle class Hindu life. She learnt Sanskrit in school, as all educated children did in those days. Her father gifted her 18 volumes of *Mahabharata* in Sanskrit published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. She loved and cherished this gift. Later she wrote *Yugant* – based on the *Mahabharata*. This book won the literary prize from the Sahitya Akademi for the best book in Marathi in 1967. In this book the super human characters of *Mahabharata* venerated for centuries by Indians have been subjected to devastating scrutiny.



After returning from Germany, Irawati worked for a while as Registrar at the SNDT Women's University in Bombay (1931-36). In 1939, she joined the newly revived Deccan College, Pune as Reader in Sociology, and worked there for the rest of her life. For a while, she was the only sociologist at the Deccan College, which meant that she had to teach all the papers in the subject. This put a heavy burden on her.

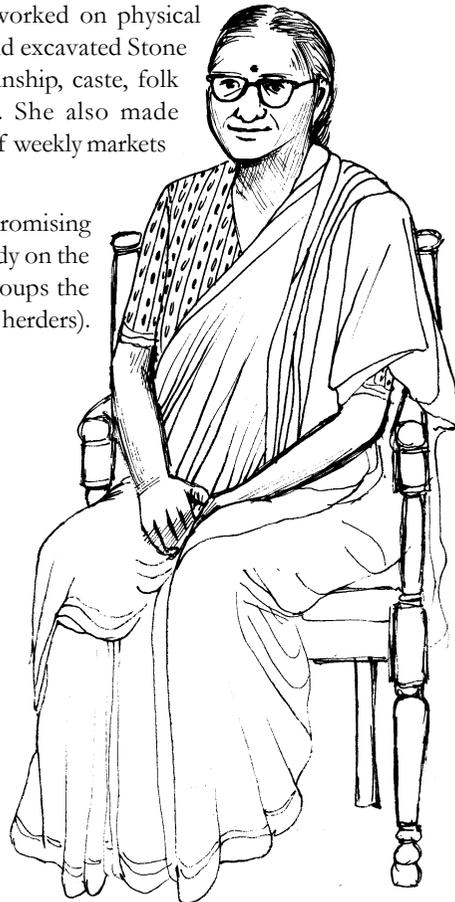
Irawati was influenced in her work by her MA supervisor G. S. Ghurye – they shared a common belief in the importance of family, kinship, caste and religion as the basis of Indian society. She was interested in surveys of castes and tribes in order to piece together a more comprehensive picture of society. Irawati was inherently curious and was passionate about doing field work in new areas of research – like archaeological explorations.

Irawati authored a total of 102 articles and books in English. She also wrote eight books in Marathi. Not only is the range remarkable, but it is quite unique among her contemporaries. She worked on physical anthropology and archaeology – and excavated Stone Age skeletons. She documented kinship, caste, folk songs, epics and oral traditions. She also made landmark socio-economic surveys of weekly markets and dam displaced people.

Later K. C. Malhotra – her most promising student conducted a pioneering study on the human ecology of two nomadic groups the *Dhangars* and *Nandivalas* (both cattle herders).

Doing fieldwork for a woman in those days was not easy. In Irawati Karve's own words:

"I travelled from place to place never knowing where my next step was to be nor where my next meal was to come from.... Rest pauses between work, meal times, and travel in buses full of people and in third class railway compartments filled with men and women ..."



H. D. Sankalia - the eminent archaeologist recalled an incident when he and Karve were doing fieldwork. Nobody from the village would feed them since one of their workers was a 'semi-untouchable' and Irawati ended up cooking at the end of a long day's work. She spent most vacations travelling, while the children stayed home waiting to see the new curiosity she brought with her and hear her latest stories. Sometimes they accompanied her on her trips - Jai to Malabar, Bihar and Orissa, and her son, Anand to Coorg, to measure *Beta Kurubas* and *Jena Kurubas*.

Once she walked for hours up and down the Mula-Mutha River in Pune searching for Stone Age tools. In another expedition she had to sleep in a truck because she could not find a room.

Her literary writings in Marathi were examples of a delicate balance between one who was involved but still detached. She wrote with a sociologist's insight and a writer's eye and what emerged were flashes of rare insight, vivid portraits of 'culture'. One famous example is her essay on the Pandharpur pilgrimage, translated into English as *On the road*. She was one of those responsible for reviving the genre of 'personal essays'.

Irawati Karve widened our understanding of the relation between the present and the past. She was equally aware of the problems and importance of nation building in a multi-cultural, multi-religious, and a multi-lingual state. Her survey of the people displaced through the Koyna Dam holds enormous contemporary relevance when millions are being ousted by mega projects. She wrote sensitively from a women's perspective of what women like Kunti and Draupadi must have felt in the epic *Mahabharata*. Indeed, her pioneering work on kinship and family laid the foundation for future research in several other areas - especially in the field of women's studies.

