IRAWATI KARVE

(She draws a parallel between society and a quilt: just as a complete quilt is formed by pieces of different colours and sizes, so is the society formed by different people who come together, form relationships with each other, mix with each other and break up, and yet, the thread that ties them to society still remains.)

(Irawati studied the humanity of the Mahabharata great figures, with all their virtues and their equally numerous faults. Sought out by an inquirer like her, whose view of life is secular, scientific and anthropological in the widest sense, it is also appre-ciative of literary values, social problems of the past and present alike, and human needs and responses in the present and past)

Group Relations in Village Community:

Karve and Damle (1963) designed a methodological experiment to study group relations in village community. They collected both quantitative and qualitative data to test the hypothesis of the struc-turing of interpersonal and inter-group relations by the factors of kinship, caste and locality.

The villages have been chosen on the east-west axis in western Maharashtra so as to represent three geographically distinct environments, namely, one is the village of varkute in north Satara district on the eastern famine tract, the second village Ahupe on the western edge of the Deccan plateau and the third village at the mouth of a small river on the west coast.

The total number of families interviewed was 343, spread over 21 castes. Most of these people, except for Wadi, were residents of the village concerned for over two generations. Their educational attainments were very poor. The touchable were comparatively more literate than the untouchables and the tribals. The family type was more or less the same in all the villages.

The majority 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 authors have seen the boundaries of kin and caste that were transcended in various types of interde-pendence entailed by economic relationships; still a considerable minority did not go outside the caste. Economic independence did not seem to imply social intercourse, like hospitality, etc., on a footing of equality.

As regards hospitality, in almost all the castes, meals were given without any special occasion only to the kin. On some occasions, meals were served to the people of service castes. Occasional hospitality involving the receiving and giving of a cup of tea was also confined to the kin and caste.

At the time of marriage, however, meals were served to almost the whole village by the agriculturists and professionals, while this activity was confined to kin and caste entirely among untouchables and the other service castes. This pattern was not significantly affected by factors like age, education, nearness to city and contact with the outside world.

The study reveals that the traditional values about the caste system, the system of age-grades, etc., by and large, continued to define the status system. It is true that among the many factors such as age, education and external influence sought to be correlated with behaviour and attitudes, only education seems to have some impact on behaviour, attitudes and opinions.

Help as regards 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.

Even occasional help was confined to the caste. Most of the friendships were with persons of one's own caste, except extremely few genuine friendships across the caste. Almost every family had enter-tained guests. These were mostly relations by blood and marriage.

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.

As for the position of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), they did not have a place in the rural economy; and it was very difficult to uplift them. Even when certain public utilities were meant to be used by all, the untouchables were prevented from doing so. This of course was due to the stigma attached to untouchability. However, the fact that the untouchables had more or less ceased to be a functional element in the village system, cannot be ignored. For example, the untouchables had ceased to drag dead cattle of the farmers.

Thus, the authors find that most of the intercourse of an individual was confined to kin groups. And, the inter-group inter-course 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.

Of course, groups based on economic interdependence also bring about relationships and contact but such groups fail to bring about any significant personal and social intercourse. But, the system of social stratification defines and delimits personal and social intercourse. The exhaustive investigation made amply proves the point.

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. This study was undertaken on behalf of the Research Programme Committee of the Planning Commission, Government of India, who bore its cost.

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 anthropolo-gists 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.

In the fieldwork experience of one of the authors, the small town in India seemed to play a role between the two extremes, i.e., the crowded, impersonal, sophisti-cated city and the extremely isolated small and intimate society of the village.

The town with its weekly market was the communi-cation channel between the city and the village. To the city dweller, a small town is a backward place without economic, social or cultural opportunities. To the villager, it is exactly the opposite. 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 assess this small town keeping in view the above considerations.

The authors tried to know the patterns of thought and behaviour of the small town and the villages as regards education, religion and economic activities. In the villages, there were more joint families than in the town but the difference was not too great. The new laws about ceiling area for land were leading to splitting up of the joint holdings both in the villages and in the town.

The immigration population of the town was drawn mostly from the neighbouring areas of the three districts of Poona, Satara and Sholapur. 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 the rural character inasmuch as quite a good percentage of the people possessed land which they tilled themselves or got tilled by the hired labour.

It differed in many respects from the villages. The difference was not due merely to being better off than the villagers; it was rather due to accepting new ways of life. 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.

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.

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 physi-cally 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 consider-ation 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.

In this respect, both social and political thinkers will have to discuss this model together with others. The authors think that such an experiment would provide goods and values to people at a cost which

can be borne by the government and to which people can also contribute. The authors also suggest that more such studies in different regions of India might give a direction to social planning.

In the ensuing pages, emphasis will be on Karve's major writings on Kinship Organization in India (1953) and Yuganta: The End of an Epoch (1968).

Kinship Organization in India:

As stated at the outset, Karve had written the first draft of the book during her stay in England in 1951-52 at the invitation of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London where she had the opportunity to discuss many points to Louis Haimendorf and Dumont. On her return, she thoroughly revised the first draft to bring in the form of the book.

By this time, she had spent many hours of discussion with Drs John and Ruth who happened to be in Poona then. The study of kinship is based on personal inquiry supplemented by readings in Sanskrit, Pali, Ardhamagadhi, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and Maithili. Karve endeavoured to read Tamil too with her colleague, Professor C.R. Sankaran.

Kinship Organization in India, first published in 1953, has become the standard work on family structure in India.

The book consists of nine chapters as follows:

1. Introduction

2. Kinship Usages in Ancient and Historical Periods: Data from the Vedas and Brahmanas

3. The Kinship Organization of Northern Zone

4. The Kinship Organization of the Central Zone

5. The Kinship Organization of the Southern Zone: General

6. The Kinship Organization of the Southern Zone: The Regions

7. The Kinship Organization of the Eastern Zone

8. Ownership of Property, Succession and Inheritance

9. Conclusion followed by Appendix I, II, III

Karve has presented the material on Indian kinship dividing the country into four different cultural zones in accordance with the marriage practices followed in each, i.e.,

(1) the northern,

(2) the central,

(3) the southern, and

(4) the eastern.

Three things are absolutely necessary for the understanding of any cultural phenomenon in India.

These are configuration of the linguistic regions, institution of caste and family organization. Each of these three factors is intimately bound up with the other two and the three together give meaning and supply basis to all the other aspects of Indian culture.

(i) Configuration of the linguistic regions:

A language area is one in which several languages belonging to one language family are spoken. For example, zones (1) and (2) comprise the language area of the Sanskritic or Indo-European languages; zone (3) is made up of the Dravidian language area while the zone (4) includes the scattered area wherein Austric or Mundari languages are spoken.

Each of these language areas is further divided into different linguistic regions. In each of such regions, one language and its dialects are spoken. The linguistic regions possess certain homoge-neity of culture, traits and kinship organization. The common language makes communication easy, sets the limits of marital connections and confines kinship mostly within the language region.

Common folk songs and common literature characterize such an area. The kinship organization follows the linguistic pattern, but in some aspects, language and kinship pattern do not go hand in hand. Thus, though the Maharashtra region belongs to the area of Sanskritic languages but its kinship organization is to a large extent modelled on that of the Dravidian south – its southern neighbour.

(ii) Institution of caste:

The second thing one must know if he/she wishes to understand any phase of the culture of any group of people in India is the caste system. The structure of the caste system has been well described by many Indian and foreign anthro-pologists and sociologists. Some important features about caste, however, need to be borne in mind to understand many features of kinship organization described by Karve.

A caste is, with very few exceptions, an endogamous group, confined to one linguistic region (Karve, 1968). Endogamy and distribution over a definite area make caste members related to one another either by ties of blood or by marriage. Therefore, caste can be defined as an extended kin group (Karve, 1958-59).

In Indian literature, both old and new, the various words for caste are jati, jata or kulum. Many castes having similar status and performing similar functions have names, one part of which may be common. Thus, the castes, engaged in the work of goldsmith, have Sonar (worker in gold) as the common part of their names.

In Maharashtra, for example, there are following distinct castes doing work in gold: Daivadnya Sonar, Ahir Sonar, Lad Sonar, etc. Each of them is fully endogamous and occupies hereditary occupation within Maharashtra – a region slightly different from the others. Thus, endogamy, distribution over a definite region and a hereditary occupation are the characteristics of a caste. In addition, castes are also ranked in a certain order.

(iii) Family organization:

The third important factor in Indian culture is the family and by family here is meant the joint family. In India, the joint family has endured for as long as the records exist. Even around 1000 B.C., at the time of the Mahabharata war, the joint family existed more or less as it exists today.

Karve states:

A 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.

The joint family has a seat, a locus, and is made up of a certain type of kin. In the book, Karve states the composition of joint family as there are three or four generations of males related to a male ego as grandfather and his brothers, father and his brothers, brothers and cousins, sons and nephews and wives of all these male relatives plus the ego's own unmarried sisters and daughters.

Karve has followed the classical three or four generation formula but she does not include the generation of the common ancestor, the great grandfather, in the number of generations and does not mention unmarried males at all. This means that formula of the genealogical depth of the joint family is deeper than the classical formula.

She mentions for the joint family of the formula almost all the functional characteristics generally mentioned in the description of the joint family household of the maximum depth and she also makes remarks about the general nature of life in such a household. She further mentions that every joint family has an ancestral seat or locus which some members may leave for an indefinite period.

Karve also refers to ten or twelve houses, each sheltering a joint family, altogether acknowledging common descent and capable of showing relationship through one line, i.e., lineage. She uses the term 'family' for many different kinds of kinship groups including lineage and clan.

She states that when joint families of the two types split, they split into smaller joint families made up of a man, his wife, sons and daughters or a man, his sons and daughters and a couple of younger brothers. According to her method of counting generations, joint families of both these types would be two-generation units, whereas according to others, they would be three-generation units.

Thus, the linguistic region, the caste and the family are the three most important aspects of the culture of any group in India. This applies also to what are called the primitive tribes of India. These tribes have lived with the others for thousands of years. According to the Vedas, the difference between the cultural level of the conquering Aryans and the conquered Dasyus (forest dwellers) could not have been very great. Both were illiterate and polythe-istic.

The present-day cultural problems before India largely revolve round these three entities – language, caste and family – as the following examples will show:

1. The tendency is to minimize the differences and establish uniformities. Some people would much rather have unitary states with one language than a federation with many linguistic states.

2. The new Indian State has abolished in law all privileges and discriminations connected with the caste system.

3. The establishment of a uniform civil code for all citizens is a directive principle of the Indian Constitution. So far a number of laws have been passed which, however, apply only to Hindus and not to others. The action is contrary to the profes-sions about a secular state, which has the task of governing a multicultural, multi-religious society.

4. A state has a right to shape the lives of the individuals it governs. Welding of the Indian subcontinent into a nation is a great cultural task, but very often the urge for uniformity destroys much that from an ethical and cultural point of view can be allowed to remain. The need for uniformity is an administrative need, not a cultural one (Karve, 1961).

The Indian Parliament has during the past decade shown a tendency to legislate with the avowed purpose of changing ancient custom in the direction of uniformity. Thus, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 imposes a compulsory monogamy alien to Hinduism and disliked by many of both sexes; the Succession Act of 1956 likewise runs contrary to ancient custom in unnaturally barring the children of a concubine and their mother from any rights in the father's estate.

There seems to be a number of Indian legis-lators who would like to forbid the practice of cross-cousin marriage so as to bring the marriage law in southern India into line with the north. But uniformity and unity are far from being the same thing, and before sacrificing the latter perhaps to achieve the former they would do well to consult sociologists like Karve (Hutton, 1965).

If we assert that our society is multicultural, we must recognize that we are also a society with many alternative values and ways of life, and we must not destroy them under the pretence of building a nation. The path to uniformity is one tyranny and we shall lose our first cultural value if we make uniformity our goal' (Karve, 1968: 16).

In this book, Karve has discussed the kinship terminologies of all the three language areas. It would have been possible and might have seemed more logical to divide the book into three parts dealing with these areas separately as:

(1) Indo-European or Sanskritic,

(2) Dravidian, and

(3) Mundari organization of kinship.

Instead, Karve presented the kinship organization in geographical sequence of (1) northern, (2) central, (3) southern, and (4) eastern zones.

This procedure was adopted deliberately to emphasize the spatial pattern and interrelation of the kinship organization and the linguistic divisions. Since the geographical distribution of different language families in India is well known, here, she has only tried to relate this configuration with another cultural phenomenon – the kinship organization.

1. The description of the kinship organization of the northern zone is divided into two parts. The first is devoted to material found in ancient Sanskrit records with a short note which adds kinship terms in Pali found in Buddhist literature and in Ardhamagadhi found in Jain literature.

These terms are useful for understanding the meaning of modern kinship terms used in Sanskrit and are briefly explained. The second part is devoted to a description of a generalized model for the whole of northern India called the northern zone and kinship terms in the northern languages (Punjabi, Sindhi, Hindi, Bihari, Bengali, Assamese and Pahadi) are given and briefly explained.

2. The central zone includes central India, i.e., Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat and Maharashtra. In this zone, people speak predominantly Sanskritic languages, though it also includes many tribes who speak Dravidian and Mundari languages. The kinship organization in the central zone, though modelled on the northern pattern, shows some very significant differences which can best be described as being due to culture contact with the other two zones, especially the southern zone of the Dravidian language area.

3. The description of the southern zone is given in two parts. The first part tries to give the whole Dravidian system and its differences from the northern system. In the second part, short description of the kinship system and terms of the linguistic regions of the Dravidian area are given.

The author thinks that her interpretation of the southern system is of great signifi-cance for Indian cultural anthropology. The kinship organization in the various regions within this language area and of different castes and tribes within each region are presented as adjustments necessitated by cultural contact.

4. A new chapter has been added in the second revised edition (1965) dealing with inheritance and succession in the northern and southern zones. The concluding chapter indicates some important problems for research arising out of the present investigation. The third revised edition (1968) includes three new appendices which reflect the author's latest researches in the field.

The studies described in the book lead to further anthropo-logical problems. Some of these are being investigated by Karve with the help of her colleagues but the field is so vast that a larger number of people getting interested in the same problems are always advantageous and so a few of these are indicated as follows:

1. How the kinship organization is influenced and strengthened by the caste system and how both of these conform to certain patterns found in wide geographical areas called linguistic regions? And, yet no linguistic region has the same kind of kinship pattern, no two castes possess identical relationship behaviour and no two families in a caste act exactly in the same way.

2. The rigidity or the elasticity of a social structure may depend either on the nature of a social structure or on the whole cultural fabric of a society. For example, in Maharashtra, some castes follow the northern type of kinship behaviour as regards marriage while the majority of castes allow the marriage of a man to his mother's brother's daughter.

3. Divorce is not tolerated by the Brahmanic law books and has not sanction of the priests. The Hindu law codified by the English with the help of the Brahmin savants and also withheld recognition of divorce. Thus, divorce is granted in the Indian law courts. The refusal to accept the existence of divorce has very far-reaching effects on kinship and caste organization.

4. The family in the majority of regions in India is an auton-omous unit with its own gods, its own observances, its own economic organization, which is semi-independent of other similar units.

Thecaste in its turn is also a closed autonomous unit which has certain limited contacts with other similar units and which controls the behaviour of families in certain respects.

5. The joint family provided economic and social security. The village where people spent all their lives was also the ultimate support of all the residents. The rise of industrial cities and the new opportunities of employment have resulted in loosening 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. Marriage rules are rules about mating which must have an effect on the genetically make of a family or caste. Karve saw that in the north, the rules of marriage lay down that brides should be brought from families which are not related to blood; in other words, as far as possible one should not give a daughter into a family from which a girl is brought as bride and that in one generation more than one bride should not be brought from the same family. Her analysis of southern marriage pattern, based on the chronological division of the kin into older and younger kin, rather than on the principle of generations, is an important contribution to Indian anthropology.

Karve devotes an entire chapter to the comprehensive survey of property, succession and inheritance in the new edition (1965). She explains the differences between the Dayabbaga system of Bihar and Bengal and the Mitakshara system followed by the rest of Hindu India. She also deals with the system in matrilineal Kerala.

She has succeeded in bringing out very clearly the contrast between the social system of northern India developed by a patrilineal and patrilocal society, probably associated primarily with a pastoral economy, and depending for its strength on external alliances and the incorporation of outsiders; and that of the south which has its strength in the internal consolidation of closely related kinship groups originally, no doubt, dependent upon agriculture.

It is not, she concludes, through the association of exogamous moieties that reciprocal kinship terms and the obligations that go with them develop, but by the continuous exchange of daughters between two or more families, which may thus grow into a closely-knit kinship unit. It is perhaps characteristics of the author that she should tend to lay emphasis on the less obvious processes in the formation of social units.

She has stressed a somewhat similar point elsewhere, when writing of caste, and in both cases has drawn attention to what Hutton (1965) perhaps may call the inductive method of group formation as contrasted with the deductive. Neither can be neglected of course in the study of Indian social organization, but the objectivity of her work, and her freedom from bias or dogmatism add to the weight of Karve's conclusions (Hutton, 1965).

Karve has not developed any theory but assumes that the theories of the other scholars, e.g., Levi Strauss, can be tried on the data presented by her. And, in the ultimate analysis, the problem of the greatest importance is to understand that the whole which is made up by the entire fabric of the social institutions, traditions and mental habits that goes under the name of a culture and is the foundation of the diverse personalities which one meets and which one is.

A study of single social structure necessarily involves refer-ences to the whole culture without, however, carrying out a full analysis of it. In this sense, each study is incomplete and is doomed to remain ever incomplete.

Yuganta: The End of an Epoch:

Yuganta studies the principal, mythical heroic figures of the Mahabharata from historical, anthropological and secular perspec-tives. 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 aston-ishing to contemporary readers.

IrawatiKarve, thus, presents a delightful collection of essays, scientific in spirit, yet appreciative of the literary tradition of the Mahabharata. She challenges the familiar and formulates refreshingly new interpretations, all the while refusing to judge harshly or venerate blindly.

Context of Mahabharata:

Anyone reading this book might well conclude that Karve's favourite Sanskrit work is the Mahabharata. For when she talks, she may recite long passages of the Mahabharata, launch upon analysis and discussion of personalities and deeds described in it, while her mind, which is constantly bursting with original and interesting ideas, often finds the stimulus for them in that gigantic work.

The Mahabharata has often been characterized by students of Indian civilization as the most informative work among all of the country's ancient literature. It is a growth over many centuries, which incorporates material of many varieties drawn from many sources – possibly a little history, certainly much myth, legend, fairy tale, fable, anecdote, religious and philosophical writing, legal material, even anthropological items, and miscellaneous data of other kinds.

It is a genuine folk epic in basic character, which has been enlarged to a kind of Indian – at least Hindu – cultural encyclopaedia. But, it is not this quality of the Mahabharata that has made it so absorbing to Karve.

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, merci-lessly 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 (Brown, 1968).

Conclusion:

IrawatiKarve (1905-1970) was born in Burma and educated in Pune. A Master's degree in sociology from Mumbai in 1928 and a doctoral degree in anthropology from Berlin in 1930 marked the onset of a long and distinguished career of pioneering research. Karve, a researcher of international repute, known to have nurtured social sense in people and achieved supremacy in the fields of sociology, cultural and physical anthropology, was also an excellent author and a fine example of women's liberation.

Karve had knowledge of both social and physical anthro-pology – a combination which in these days of specialization only few of us can claim. Beyond that her acquaintance with Sanskrit and Pali literature enabled her to write on Indian kinship diachronically, particularly as she has gone to the trouble of learning to read Tamil for the sake of the light which early literature can through on South Indian systems.

She wrote in both English and Marathi, on academic subjects as well as on topics of general interest, and thus commanded an enviably wide circle of readership. Whether through her Hindu Society: An Interpretation, a scholarly treatise in English, or through Yuganta: The End of an Epoch, her study in Marathi of the characters and society in the Mahabharata, we obtain ample illustration of the range and quality of her mind.

But, at the international level, she is known for her study of various social institutions in India, and through her book on Kinship Organization in India, which first appeared in 1953 and marked a notable advance in our under-standing of the structure of Indian society. It has not been superseded by any other general comparative treatment of Hindu kinship in India as a whole, and a reissue is more than overdue.