

# NARI SHAKTI AND SCHOLARSHIP: REMEMBERING IRAWATI KARVE

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The idea of women's empowerment in India has been, and remains, confined within conceptual frameworks borrowed from the West. These frameworks, though influential, rarely capture the civilisational spirit through which Indian society has historically understood the feminine. In Bharatiya tradition, the idea of Shakti signifies energy, knowledge, and the creative force that sustains society. Recovering this perspective requires not only philosophical reflection but also the rediscovery and recognition of women who shaped India's intellectual landscape long before contemporary debates on gender emerged. And among such figures, Irawati Karve stands as one of India's most formidable sociologists and anthropologists, whose work deserves far greater recognition in our academic

and public consciousness. When we speak of women pioneers, the conversation often gravitates toward the natural sciences. Globally, Marie Curie remains the iconic symbol of female scientific achievement. In India, too, we recall trailblazers like Kamala Sohonie or Janaki Ammal who opened doors in scientific research and inspired generations of girls to gravitate towards the sciences. Yet, the presence of women in the social sciences has received far less attention. The social sciences, in general, have been overlooked or, worse, looked down on in Indian society, which is ironic, given that these subjects are fundamental to interpreting society, culture and civilisation. Such an imbalance undermines our efforts to understand our culture and society, and also leaves room for outsiders to interpret and misinterpret them. What's more, it has also led us to obscure the contributions of thinkers like Irawati Karve, who helped shape the very foundations of Indian sociology and anthropology.

Karve belonged to a generation of scholars who came of age during India's intellectual ferment. The

early decades of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of Indian social sciences as scholars sought to understand their society not merely through colonial categories but through deeper historical and cultural inquiry. It was within this intellectual climate that Karve began to study Indian society with an unusual combination of methodological rigour and civilisational sensitivity. Her intellectual formation was distinctive for its global exposure combined with a deep-rootedness in Indian realities.

At a time when it was still uncommon for Indian women to pursue higher education, Karve travelled to Germany to study anthropology. While this experience introduced her to rigorous academic disciplines and European anthropological traditions, her true brilliance emerged when she moved beyond the physical anthropology of her era. Instead of merely reproducing Western frameworks, she pioneered extensive ethnographic fieldwork and oral history gathering in India, using these tools to examine Indian society on its own terms. This ability to evolve

methodologically, engaging with international scholarship while anchoring her insights in indigenous realities, remains one of the most striking features of her legacy.

After returning to India, Karve devoted herself to building sociology and anthropology as serious academic disciplines. She taught, conducted field research, and contributed to the institutional development of these fields at a time when they were still taking shape. Her work explored the complexities of caste, kinship, and regional cultures, subjects that lay at the heart of Indian social organisation but were often misunderstood or oversimplified by earlier scholars.

What distinguished Karve's scholarship was her insistence on examining Indian society through empirical observation while remaining attentive to its historical depth. She travelled extensively, gathered oral traditions, studied local customs and examined kinship patterns across different regions. Through this work, she demonstrated that Indian society could not be reduced to rigid categories. Instead, it revealed remarkable diversity and

adaptability shaped by geography, language, and historical interaction. Her influential study on kinship structures across India remains a landmark contribution. By mapping different patterns of family organisation, from northern patriarchal systems to the more complex arrangements found in the south and West, Karve showed that Indian social life was far more varied than simplistic stereotypes suggested. In doing so, she challenged the tendency to treat India as a uniform social entity. Instead, she highlighted the intricate cultural mosaics that define the subcontinent.

Sometimes Karve is reduced to a stereotype of a technical sociologist concerned with data and methods. But it's better to recognise that she was also a thinker deeply engaged with India's intellectual traditions. Her reflections on the characters of the Mahabharata, most famously expressed in her book *Yuganta*, illustrate how she combined sociological insight with literary and philosophical reflection. Rather than treating the epic as distant mythology or unassailable scripture,

she approached it through a secular-humanist lens. She revealed the deeply relatable moral dilemmas and political tensions of human life. The result was a strikingly modern, critical interpretation of an ancient narrative. Such intellectual breadth reflected a broader civilisational sensibility. It illustrated how Karve understood that knowledge in India had historically flowed across different domains: philosophy, literature, history, and social observation were never rigidly separated. In this sense, her work resonates with the true spirit of what we now describe as the IKS tradition, not as a rigid orthodoxy, but as a dynamic space where knowledge production emerges from a critical, integrated understanding of culture, society, and civilisation.

Yet, despite her contributions, Karve's name appears inadequately in mainstream discussions of Indian intellectual history. Such neglect is indicative of a broader lacuna within academic discourse where women's intellectual labour often remains underacknowledged. It also illustrates how Indian social sciences themselves became

overly dependent on theoretical frameworks developed elsewhere, sometimes overlooking scholars who attempted to build indigenous analytical traditions.

For such reasons, recovering figures like Irawati Karve is not simply an act of historical correction but part of a larger effort to reclaim a tradition of Bharatiya intellectual feminism. Unlike contemporary narratives that sometimes frame empowerment purely in terms of resistance to tradition, Karve's life demonstrates another possibility: women engaging deeply with society, interpreting it, and contributing to knowledge creation within their civilisational context. And that is precisely where the idea of Shakti becomes meaningful and relevant. In the Indian imagination, Shakti represents not only power but also wisdom and creative potential. Karve embodied this intellectual energy. She questioned established assumptions, explored the complexities of Indian society, and produced scholarship that continues to shape our understanding of culture and social organisation. For young women entering universities today, her example

carries an important message. Intellectual courage does not always manifest through loud ideological battles. But sometimes it appears in the quiet, yet determined, pursuit of knowledge.

Karve pursued scholarship with independence, curiosity and discipline at a time when such a path for women was far from easy. Today, as India increasingly speaks about reviving its knowledge traditions and encouraging greater participation of women in academic life, remembering thinkers like Irawati Karve becomes essential. Their lives remind us that the story of Indian intellectual development is incomplete without recognising the women who helped shape it. To restore them to our collective memory is to celebrate individual achievement while reaffirming the spirit of Nari Shakti. For long, the creative, questioning and knowledge-seeking energy of women has been integral to India's civilisational journey, and now is the time to recognise and nurture that energy.

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