

# Reading a text in context



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the former civil servant enjoys traversing the myriad spaces of ideas, thinkers, and books

Nobody reads the Mahabharata for the first time; you will have heard the story first. Indeed, this epic has been told and retold in the oral tradition for hundreds of years, and never ceases to fascinate generation after generation; perhaps, more for the imaginative storytelling, and less for its didacticism.

There is something magical about reading the Mahabharata as *itihasa*. It inspires us as readers to construct meaning and compels us to reflect on the text in context, to discover a little more about ourselves and our society.

Reading the Mahabharata in the 21st century requires us to imagine the lives and worldview of people that lived thousands of years ago. The cultural, theological, and linguistic differences between our world and theirs present challenges to relating the stories those people told to our lives. In interpreting the Mahabharata, two contexts – the ancient and the modern – come together, as if in symbiotic union, leaving us little choice. If

we ignore the ancient context of the great epic, we disconnect it from the world that gives it meaning and end up with a Mahabharata that is after our own image. If we focus only on the ancient context and not at all on our own, we end up with an oppressive Mahabharata that imposes its ancient realities and values on our very different lives today.

That is why in reading the Mahabharata, there is no more important scholar who redacts the epic as brilliantly in its myriad nuanced contexts than Irawati Karve, the first woman anthropologist in India. Her quite remarkable little book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* explores the literary setting, the mythological-historical context, and the sociology and politics of the time as the backdrop; and brings alive the central question of the human condition – the meaning of life and its moral concerns. She helps us dive into the deep waters of continuity and change, in their context and our own, and brings a wealth of scholarship to help us with that exploration.

There scarcely is a child or adult who has listened to or read this labyrinth of magical tales and has not been deeply moved by the tragedy of Karna, the futility of Bhishma, the misfortune of Abhimanyu, the travails of Draupadi, or the stubbornness of Duryodhana. Whether by circumstance or by folly – one's own or that of another – each of them hurtling down the slippery slope.

Irawati Karve humanises the characters of the Mahabharata, strips them of their divine origins and, in poignant fashion, brings alive human frailty as an immutable, universal condition. One that blinds all of us in equal measure by greed, hatred, and ignorance.

In a delicious irony, the third generation of the Kauravas is portrayed as born of human parents, while the Pandavas are fathered by the gods, and the metaphoric battle is joined. The greater irony is that the Pandavas, with Krishna – the supposed good guys – vanquish most Kaurava warriors by deceit. Through the predilections, dilemmas,

actions, inaction and the ethical choices of the central characters – Bhishma, Karna, Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, Dhritarashtra, Krishna Vasudeva – Irawati Karve takes us on a journey to experience the vanity by which we can sink to immeasurable depths and the dizzy heights of compassion to which we may rise; and brings us home to conclude the only abiding truth: that in the end, time devours the universe.

Irawati Karve was a stalwart of Indian sociology and it is important to place her in an academic context, especially one that was dominated by men. She pioneered the use of Indology for the study of Indian society and attempted to use the indigenous epistemological tools available to her. In the backdrop of India's colonisation, this represented an important departure from the anglicised research being conducted in India at the time, and that is what sets her apart.

*Yuganta* presents a historical rendering of the Mahabharata. The characters are not treated

as fictional, their circumstances and actions explained instead by situating them within the social and political context of that time, as might have been. *Yuganta* was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for Marathi in 1968, deservedly, for it presents, to paraphrase Prof W Norman Brown, 'deep insights into complex humanity and holds up a mirror to all the faces that we ourselves wear'.

Irawati Karve explicates through a secular, literary rendering of a genuine folk epic that the Mahabharata does not teach *Dharma* or righteousness; it demonstrates *Dharma-Sukshмата*: the subtlety of *Dharma* – the calculus of the consequences of our thoughts, words and deeds; the situational ethics that we often practice; and why each of us must take responsibility for our actions. That is why it resonates even today. What's more, it is one of the finest set of stories you will likely read; and in *Yuganta*, the most unlikely literary characters you will ever meet.