



Yuganta: The End of an Epoch

Irawati Karve

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? ABOUT THE BOOK: Irawati Karve studies the humanity of the Mahabharata's 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, anthropological in the widest sense, yet 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... Seen through her eyes the Mahabharata is more than a work which Hindus look upon as divinely inspired, and venerate.? It becomes a record of complex humanity and a mirror to all the faces which we ourselves wear.

Yuganta: The End of an Epoch Details

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Manab says

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Written by Irawati Karve, India's first woman anthropologist, this Sahitya Academy Award winning book is an attempt to peel of the multiple layers of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Yuganta is an effort to delve under the interpolations that have become part of the structure over the years and to get to the actual crux of the story that it was. And this is the "Eternally human' vivid depiction of the life and ethos of a whole era and class."

It is also an attempt to bring closure to many episodes that readers have always wished had a different ending.

My personal favourite is the imagined exchange between Bhima and Draupadi.

I loved the humanization of the characters and the attempt to trace the beginning of the deification of so many of the personas in the epic, especially the part that focuses on Krishna from the epic and Krishna the God - who seems to be a later avatar.

I highly recommend this book for its interpretations and grounding in critical readings of multiple versions of the Mahabharata. It is a good read for both, those who swear by Hinduism in its current form and those who prefer to practice their own version of it.

Riku Sayuj says

Irawati Karve strips the great epic of its embellishments and additions to lay out before us this stark, thought-provoking. character study. This picture forces us to expand our views on the epic and the people tossed about in it. Full review to follow.

Edit: Irawati Karve deserves much less credit than I initially attributed to her. Most of the radical ideas were in play in Randamoozham and MT does not even try to sensationalize them as Karve later did.

Swetha says

When you learn Corporate Law, you come across a section called **Interpretation of Statutes** where there is a certain set of rules on how an Act must be read. It says *"English language is not an instrument of mathematical precision. It would certainly save trouble if Acts of Parliament were drafted with divine precision and perfect clarity. In the absence of it, when a defect appears, a judge cannot simply fold hands and blame the draftsman. He must set to work on the constructive task of finding the intention of Parliament and he must do this not only from the language of the Statute, but also from a consideration of the social conditions which gave rise to it, and the mischief it was intended to remedy. Thus, he must supplement the written word so as to give 'force and life' to the intention of the legislature."*

I'd like to extend this observation to Mahabharata and Ramayana as well. They are both gloriously fulfilling on their own and when one tries to move farther away from what is thrown light upon, their interpretation fails to triumph. I gave this book 5 stars because Karve stuck to what the Mahabharata had to offer. She had her own expositions but she also concluded that had it been intended otherwise, Vyasa would have written so. In the Mahabharata, everyone's faults are pointed out, every relationship whether illicit or not is laid bare, the ending is not a happily ever after situation but more of a lesson to be learnt from. Therefore, one must only look at it as a final piece and not as a canvas to paint and embellish on.

There are 10 essays in this book analyzing characters other than the Pandavas and their roles. I will just mention a few of my favorite theses.

The Final Effort talks about how Bhishma tried to persistently stop the war even during his last days. The question of whether Bhishma's only goal was for the Kuru clan to flourish regardless of who ruled it, is

raised here.

Father and Son? is a very interesting take on the possibility of whether Yudistira could be the son of Vidura because of the similarities in their ways and also, because they are both related to Yama.

The essay on Draupadi has to be my favorite of all because of Karve's obvious reverence for the character. She compares Draupadi to Sita and says Draupadi went through much more strenuousness. She goes on to study whether the argument Draupadi had raised before her disrobing, that is, whether Yudistira had any stake over her after he had become a slave, was plausible or not. Karve later falters into a fictional writing of her own about Bhima and Draupadi but even that does not appear offensive.

Paradharma Bhayavahah revolves around the class structure in Mahabharata; namely the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The role of each is pointed out through the story of Drona and Ashvatthama and how circumstances led them to stray from being a Brahmin to being a Kshatriya and how it affects them.

Krishna Vasudeva talks about the friendship between Arjuna and Krishna, the Yadava clan, whether Krishna was human or god..but what stuck with me the most was this line: *Krishna remains a figure for thought and search, but never touches one emotionally as do the other figures of this great epic.*

The book also raises questions on whether idol-worship and vegetarianism were part of that epoch or if they came into being later. And since this book is a character study, it does not flow in the form of a story but more like a heavy discussion. It is a breezy read but each essay will leave you lost in thought. Highly recommend this.

Apoorva Sripathi says

Every little flaw of every character in The Mahabharata is pointed out and I haven't come across such a brilliant piece of work in this genre before. If you're a fan of Indian myth (esp. The Mahabharata) then I suggest you go for this after you read the epic.

Manish says

What a brilliant work of analysis. Irawati Karve studies the key characters of the Mahabharata, strips them of their mythical powers and presents them as ordinary humans struggling and grappling with issues that are alive today as they were 3000 years back. Pick of the lot for me was the essay on Bhishma! Spellbinding.

Akash Nair says

Once in a while you read a book you will cherish all your life. This is such a book. It took me a paltry 3 days to read it but the things I have learnt from it will stay with me forever.

The book is a critical analysis of the characters of Jaya(Mahabharata). All characters are dealt as humans and all divine references are avoided. There are many points in the book which can be contested and debated. The author highlights the differences between the literary style of Mahabharata and Ramayana. She argues the literary style of Mahabharata ,though not flowery and unpolished ,is much more intellectually profound.

It is this style which makes it more relevant than other texts such as Upanishads or Ramayana. The author argues that the Bhakti tradition has indeed corrupted the Mahabharatha and our society in particular producing mere idol worshipers. Many such conclusions and accusations are made, none of them baseless. The author states that Mahabharatha marked the end of the traditional Sanskrit literature, end of an epoch. After that came a romanticized style of literature which doesn't stay true to reality but rather focuses on escapism and idealism. Jaya even today remains one of the few original creations. Others are mostly critical and explanatory literature which derives from this original text. Yuganta is one such derivation, but one that does justice to the original.

Manu says

Yuganta is not a linear retelling of the Mahabharata, instead it uses a few characters to do a critical analysis of the epic. At a simplistic level, the basic story thread is indeed communicated, while delving into these characters and placing them in the context of the story. But more importantly, the examination of various characters, their motivations and actions, belief systems and relationships with each other, as well as the societal frameworks of class, makes up most of the book.

Irawati Karve begins with Bhishma and I almost laughed out loud at her systematic takedown of one of the epic's revered characters. An observation that I really loved - "When a man does something for himself, his actions are performed within certain limits – limits that are set by the jealous scrutiny of others. But let a man set out to sacrifice himself and do good to others, and the normal limits vanish." The portion on Vidura is also a look into the prevailing caste system, roles in society, and the strict adherence to these rules. This is extended in the chapter on Drona and Ashwathama.

Karna is another fan favourite who is at the receiving end of her rebuke. She is not only absolutely clear that he was nowhere in Arjuna's league as a warrior, she also massively tempers the perception of him as a benevolent person. Krishna, in the original work, is portrayed as an astute statesman with his own self interest in play, as opposed to a God. His relationship with Arjuna is as a friend and equal. All these aspects have been wonderfully studied by the author.

Gandhari and Kunti rarely get the amount of attention in retellings and in this respect, this book is very different. Kunti is actually treated very favourably. The essay on Draupadi is different too, because the comparison is to Sita. The similarities and the disparities are analysed very well.

There is a flow of logic that the author adheres to, and the conviction that the epic is based on real events is thus infectious. (though I am quite a believer anyway) The tone through the book is a mix of several emotions - on one hand, the author clearly loves and respects the book, but on the other, she is also merciless in pointing out its inconsistencies and contradictions. I felt that the mood did tend to become preachy occasionally, but that, I think, is a subjective take. The last chapter - 'the end of yuga' seems to mean at least two things here. The obvious one is the end of the Dwapara yuga. But she also mentions that this work was the last one to display original thinking.

For a book that was published almost 50 years ago, this is a refreshing read that offers unique perspectives. P.S. There is some inconsistency in how Vidura's death is described. In one section, it is along with Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra and in another, it occurs a few days earlier. Hope it will be looked into in later editions.

Suman Srivastava says

Loved the book. I am surprised that it isn't better known. Irawati Karve brings to life (as opposed to caricature) the characters of the Mahabharata and relates their actions to social mores of that period. This is a must read for everyone who is interested in the epics and in Indian cultural history. Good thing that she wrote this in the 1960s. Not sure the Hindutva brigade would have allowed this to be published in today's era.

Pritom Ghum says

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Arun Divakar says

Note : *This is an insanely long review which I did not think much of until I finished and posted. So consider yourself warned !*

A short while ago, five of us undertook a road trip which was roughly over 3000 KM in all. As road trips go, it was truly one of the most memorable trips that we had undertaken. Since there was also a lot of driving involved at night, we resorted to telling stories to keep each other awake. Being an incorrigible Mahabharata lover, I chose to tell them in detail of the 18 days of the Kurukshetra war and worked backwards to the beginning of the epic. What started out as a story telling session kept us all awake with a lot of active discussions back and forth. We practically ended up talking almost all of the night. On the one hand it helped all of us stay awake and on the other, I personally got more answers than questions by the time we were done. I wish I had read this before we started the trip !

This book is new set of glasses which are tinted with a hard and unflinching shade with which Irawati Karve examines the Mahabharata For ease of summing up, some of the major areas the author touches upon are :

1.The Futility Of Human Effort : We struggle all our lives to build name and fame or in corporate lingo, to leave our mark on the sands of time. Yet what happens eventually ? Against the unrelenting blow of the wind called time, the sands scatter and all that were etched in it are wiped out. Yet more and more of us mortals go through the same notions again and again. The Mahabharata has two central characters who depict this to the best : Bhishma and Karna.

Bhishma's entire life is one that goes to vain in the end. He acquired the name and fame by the iron like vow of celibacy he undertook and then on his only aim in life was the sustainment of his clan at the top of the Kshatriya pecking order. Forever just, pious and morally right Bhishma was said to be the paragon of Kshatriya virtue and yet he never raised a finger against the unruly gang of his great-grandsons, the Kauravas. One thing led to another and against the backdrop of the mighty Kurukshetra war, Bhishma

watches the clan he tried so hard to sustain getting butchered to the last man. He had the gift of choosing his own time of death, a terrible gift it turned out to be for he was forced to stay alive watching the bloodbath. Irawati Karve shows a whole new group of perspectives which argue that beyond the guise of a colossus, Bhishma was a failure as a king, warrior and a human being.

There is a lot of lore built around Karna which portrays him as someone who never shied away from helping out others. A powerful warrior and someone who was always at a disadvantage right from his childhood at having been abandoned by his mother. Karna's life was a struggle to obtain an identity and thereby be treated with respect by a highly caste oriented society. Try as he did, he never did attain what he was looking for. Popular portrayals of Karna have always maintained the wounded hero image of his and yet in portrayals based on the core text of the Mahabharata, Karna is a selfish and entirely self-centered man. The author does a very detailed inspection of this amazing character to arrive at a most human portrayal of him which I have seen very few later day writers do. Drawing a parallel with Bhishma, here too was a man who all his life struggled for an ideal and ultimately failed at it.

2. The Women : The course of the main story of the Mahabharata is driven inexorably to the calamitous end by the designs of its pivotal female characters. Unlike most other tales where women are marginalized presences, here the women give new dimensions and meanings to the entire story line of the epic. The author assesses the impact and effect of three of the most powerful characters in the epic : Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi.

The warring factions of Pandavas and Kauravas had two powerful matriarchal figures in the forms of Kunti and Gandhari. The whole storyline of the epic boils down to a game of thrones with the Pandavas challenging the right of the Kauravas who held the throne and the inevitable backlash of this action. Through all these intrigues and complexities these two mothers held their clans strong and yet they were vastly different in the way their lives were lived out. Gandhari was the princess of Gandhara (which might have been Kandahar from the modern day Afghanistan) who was brought in to marry the crown prince of Hastinapura – Dhritrashtra. Belatedly she realizes that she was to be married to a blind man and chooses a life of darkness with the aid of blindfold. While her son, Duryodhana was born a crown prince, she lives long enough to see him become a villain. What is even more tragic about her life is that she gets to see each and every male member of her family except her blind husband get killed during the war.

Kunti is renowned as the mother of the fabled five brothers. Yet her life from a very young age had been one hardship followed by another where she had to either stand and fight or perish. Whether it was to live with an impotent husband or with sons forever cursed to be deposed and living like ascetics, she chose to stand by the men in her life resolutely. The Pandavas struggled through life and on their way to the throne, they had to withstand social isolation, self-imposed exile and also fighting it out every step of the way. There were times when their morale was rock bottom and the will to survive simply vanished. Kunti was like a tigress in such moments, whipping them up to stand and fight and not to waste time languishing around. Our fabled heroes would never have survived were it not for this woman and her steely grit.

The most famous female character of them all is Draupadi. While I have read and written a lot about her with regards to Pratibha Ray's brilliant *Yajnaseni*, there was one difference here that Irawati Karve points out. This was the questioning that she meted out to Yudhishtir at the time when she was dragged into the court of the Kurus and was insulted in front of the assembled crowd. The situation fully justified her questioning her powerless husband and yet it left an ever widening rift between them. In the whole scheme of things, it was but a little incident and yet it ended up with them throwing poisoned barbs at each other even at their death beds. Draupadi was the singular force that kept the five together and along with Kunti strived to drive them towards their goal. As many an author points out, it is only at her death bed that she realizes that the

true love in her life has been Bhima.

3.The Puppet-Master : Krishna has been the architect of the war and the rise of the five brothers in a thousand different ways. If you look at the interpretations of the epic right now, Krishna is a god who walked among men and helped restore order in a world that was slowly going to hell in a handbasket. The core text of the Mahabharata however differs from this version for there are no gods in them. Retellings from different sources has taken the story away from the plausible to the entirely impossible. Krishna was a crafty and highly articulate King of the Yadava clan who is rather mysterious in the way he lived out his life. His way of totally being dispassionate in his actions is a source of bafflement in a society that reveled in being passionately involved in all that it did. A valiant warrior and charioteer, he was also the one man who orchestrated the death of most the famous warriors in the Kaurava clan . The author begins the episode on Krishna by dispelling the myths about him and points out that beyond all the deeds and words, Krishna also had his own selfish ends to meet while helping his cousins ascend to the throne. Ultimately even he and his clan is not spared from the whirlwind of violence that spreads over the land. At my earlier readings of the Mahabharata, I have always been held in thrall by Krishna's discourse of the Gita to Arjuna before the battle and spurring him into action. Yet if one applies reason to the entire aspect, the Gita does not appear to be a part of the original epic. Krishna speaks to his friend topics that would take a book to cover and in reality such a conversation would last days if not weeks and yet it is said that Arjuna did pick up his weapons and went to war immediately on the first day, so how did this happen ? Krishna and Arjuna were bosom buddies and had a brotherly affection between them and yet later interpretations call Arjuna a devotee of Krishna which all point to the inexorable fact that later representations of the epic gave rise to Krishna as a god and moved away from the true nature of the story.

4.Societal & Class struggles : Being such a massive and intricate story, in the first couple of readings one fails to observe what happens off the main screen. By this what I mean is that it is only rarely that we look at or ponder over what was the effect of this game of thrones on the lives of others who lived at this time. One of the most interesting observations from an anthropological standpoint that the author advances is the rivalry that the Pandavas built with the Nagas. For all the time that I have read this epic, I have taken this word - Naga for its literal meaning which means a snake or a serpent ! At the time of the Kshatriyas of this tale, a good part of India was covered in virgin forests with its own indigenous tribes and other inhabitants. In an episode, Arjuna and Krishna burn down the Khandava forest and slaughter every organism in it for satiating the fire god. According to the author, this puts both of them in list of enemies of the Nagas. What then ensues is a rivalry that is even more bloodied than the Pandava-Kaurava clash. A feud that lasts three generations and one that has a lasting impact on the lives of people who came after the Pandavas with one side trying to out kill the other. The Nagas still exist, for they are the inhabitants of the state of Nagaland in eastern India. If one were to look at this from a social angle, it is the struggle between the settlers and the local populace which sometimes explodes into a frenzy of violence.

The setting of this story is also at a time when the caste system holds sway heavily over the Indian society. In the descending order, the entire society was carved up into : Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Brahmanas were men of knowledge and Kshatriyas were the warriors. The essay in question talks of two brahmanas who stepped away from the path of knowledge to the path of the weapon. The father-son duo of Drona and Ashvatthama were in the Kaurava clan and fought on their side in the war. At length the author goes about the purely selfish reasons that motivated the father and son to step into this role and also how Asvathma, blinded by a quest for glory commits a remorseless massacre post the war. While Drona elicits sympathy for his fickle interest in riches, the warrior Asvathma shows the early streaks of being someone who shows an insane attraction to violence.

In addition to these, there is also an essay that explores the nature of the half-brother of Dhritarashtra :

Vidura who was also the chief minister of the kingdom. It also puts forward a theory that Yudhishtir could have been fathered by Vidura. Pretty much a farfetched theory and I really did not find this to be much beyond speculation.

5.Yuganta : An epoch ends with the Mahabharata in the true sense of the word. An entire nations's worth of people are wiped out in the great war and the world starts afresh. Across India, the belief systems and the social conditions were also undergoing a massive churn. This could also explain how such a stark and hard boiled story like the Mahabharata could at a later point be transformed into a melodramatic soap opera fit for TV. In most serialized renditions of the tale, the stories are full of miracles and divine interventions and yet in the core text there were no gods who intervened in the affairs of mortals. Men and women lived to eat the fruits of their actions and the epic was ultimately a tragic one. It was only perhaps with the advent of the Bhakti movement that the likes of wish fulfilling gods and dreamy literature entered the fray. This essay is also one that traces the anthropological roots of the epic. Was there a written language at the time of the epic ? If so what was it ? This does not appear to have a definitive answers for the tales were sung by bards across the nation. A well-grounded look at the world of the Mahabharata was this essay!

There is nothing purely black or white in this story. All characters serve their own means and live and die like all of us humans. It is an unflinching and stark portrayal of humanities never ending fascination with destroying all that is dear to them and lamenting it later. This book is also a wonderful reminder of the saying : *Big things come in small packages* . In approximately 200 pages, it gave me an in depth perspective into my favorite story of all time.

Vikalp Trivedi says

'Yuganta : The End Of An Epoch' by Irawati Karve is a book which studies the pivotal events and characters of the Mahabharata with a logical , analytical and critical point of view . The brilliance of late Mrs. Karve's knowledge and understanding of the epic can be seen by reading this work of hers .

Mrs. Karve has unveiled each of the main character's both virtues and vices [in between these two vices are more because the criticism in the book is mainly negative] with such an ease that the complex characters of the epic becomes easy to understand for any reader .

If one reads 'Yuganta' , the character will never be the same for the reader if he/she reads further point of views and versions of the epic . Book shatters the mythical and traditional images of the characters [how many authors before dared to criticise or even describe Krishna's personal ambitions and desires ?] .

A must read if you want to understand the pivotal characters of the Mahabharata.
5 Stars.

Smitha says

this was a 'fantabulous' book. I had not even heard of this before being recommended for our Group Read by a fellow member. I am glad to have read it. To my understanding this book is a critical analysis of the

characters of the great Indian epic, 'Mahabharata' the true events of which were said to have taken place around 1000 BC. I had read Mahabharata as a child, the abridged version, as well as many stories from it detailed in various other books. I had also imbibed the great Hindu puranas and epics in my childhood as I was fortunate enough to have parents and grand parents who loved to tell stories, and inculcate the reading habit in me. I had never taken Mahabharata seriously, to me it was a fantastic tale which might not have happened. It is chocful of magical incidents like Gods coming as humans, human children being born to divine beings, sorcery etc. to be taken seriously. But this book made me change my mind. Now I am of the opinion that these events did happen, but were perhaps spiced up by addition of supernatural events in the proceeding centuries. I loved reading about the Aryan culture, I loved the character analysis of various prominent persons, I knew of new facts, I was privy to inner secrets. Infact, for the past couple of days, I was transported to 1000 BC and enjoyed every moment. This book is worth a re-read. I would gladly recommend it to all people who are interested in ancient Indian culture, especially Hindu culture and norms. I envy and applaud Irawati Kharve for being the intellect and author she was. Wish I had at least a quarter of her analytical power.

Gorab Jain says

4.5

Interesting dissection of Mahabharata from a totally different angle, structured into essays for individual characters.

Leaves you gasping for more with so many new questions :

-Why didn't Bhishma renounce when he had so many apt opportunities?

-What forced Pandu to renounce into forest at such a young age leaving the kingdom behind?

-Why Arjun and Krishna had to burn the Khandavaprastha forest *so mercilessly*?

-Have you noticed the contrast between Drupada-Drona story vs Krishna-Sudama story, both based on friendship?

-Many episodes are recounted, in a manner clearly showing many inconsistencies in Vyasa's epic! Which of them could be later interpolations?

The interpretations of these, and their possible implications would want you to read the Mahabharata all over again with a new vision!

Its a small book, but took a very long time. Most of the time was spent staring at the ceiling lost in thoughts while holding it dearly!

I wish I had read this before Devdutt Pattanaik's Jaya (which by the way is more crisp and informative)

Though few parts are narrated repeatedly, may be to make the essays independently readable. A few slacks and a couple of contradictions (death of Vidura).

But then an extra star for the immense and intensive rich research in a non-digital age! High respect and salute to Irawati Karve!

Shinde says

She wields the pen like a scimitar and her mind like a microscope.

As she dissects various personas of Mahabharata, she is brutal, incisive and decisive.

Usually, many scholars leave alone Krishna, for fear of a (?religious/fanatic) backlash. But not Irawati. She

finds him 'Ambitious' , even a little cold-blooded.' But she sums him up aptly as, 'He did not merely speak the Gita; he lived it.'

Her unemotional perspectives on Bhishma, Gandhari ,Kunti and Karna are equally original and path-breaking.

My only grudge is with her judgment on Draupadi. She finds Draupadi's verbal battle at the dice game improper, thoughtless and smug. Completely disagree. Draupadi won a lopsided battle of violence by resorting to cool logic, a woman who articulated philosophically relevant questions that nobody could answer then or now. Genuflections forever.

Beyond that, Irawati is as precise, unerring and consistent as Arjuna's arrows.
