

## Book Review

*Yuganta: the End of an Epoch*. By Karve Iravati (author and translator). Edition and reprint 2008. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, Pages: 217 + xi, ISBN: 9788125014249. Price: ₹ 356, Cover Design: Bharati Mirchandani.

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Received: 28-09-2025

Accepted: 30-11-2025

### How to cite this review article?

Pandey, Sonal. 2025. 'Yuganta: The End of an Epoch'. *Sampratyaya*, 2(2):156-160.  
<https://doi.org/10.21276/smprt.202512.22.a12>

## 12.0 Introduction

**Yuganta: The End of an Epoch** is a critical commentary on the essays in the *Mahabharata* by Iravati Karve (1905–1970), written in 1967 in Marathi, which won her the Sahitya Akademi Award in the same year. The *Mahabharata* is one of the two oldest epics of the Indian subcontinent, renowned for its philosophy, ideology, and mythology. It is among the most widely studied epics in India and has been translated into several languages. This commentary is based on Karve's study of the *Mahabharata* published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. She was deeply fascinated by the wisdom, worldview, and profundity of the *Mahabharata*, which inspired her to produce her own critical interpretation—one of her most celebrated works to date. The Marathi *Yuganta* became so popular that Karve herself translated it into English for non-Marathi speakers.

In this commentary, Karve reinterprets the *Mahabharata* through anthropological and feminist lenses. *Yuganta* transforms the perception of the *Mahabharata* from a divine

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epic into a sociological narrative of moral and cultural transformation, offering one of the earliest feminist and anthropological reinterpretations in Indian scholarship.

## **12.1 Reinterpreting the *Mahabharata*: From Myth to History**

Iravati Karve was one of the earliest Indologists who regarded the *Mahabharata* as a historical treatise rather than a mythological text. She contended that the events in the *Mahabharata* were based on real-life incidents that occurred in the distant past. In her commentary, Karve analysed the events and characters of the epic from an anthropological perspective, situating them within a historical and social context. The commentary offered novel perspectives on the events and characters, stripping the epic of its mythical and divine aura. Unlike other interpretations of the *Mahabharata*, Karve did not glorify its protagonists but exposed their human frailties, locating them within real-life contexts, albeit in antiquity. However, her humanist rationalism often underplays the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of the text. Written in simple and lucid English, this literary work may be regarded as Karve's *magnum opus*. Notably, the groundwork for *Yuganta* was laid in her earlier book *Kinship Organisation in India* (1965), where she extensively used references from the *Mahabharata* to describe kinship structures in India.

### **12.1.1 Humanising the Heroes**

Before Karve's *Yuganta*, the *Mahabharata* was largely treated as a religious treatise, and its characters were placed on a pedestal, beyond the scope of criticism. By situating the epic in a historical context, Karve transformed many of its venerated figures into human beings susceptible to flaws and moral ambiguities. She was the first to unveil the human dimensions of the epic's principal characters—Bhisma, Dhritarashtra, Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Karna, Kunti, Gandhari, Krishna, and others.

She presented a critical evaluation of their values and ethics, reflecting on their strengths and their roles in shaping the epic's narrative. For example, Bhisma Pitamaha, the most celebrated hero, took a vow of celibacy to safeguard his father's love interest. Although he was Shantanu's eldest son, he renounced his claim to the Kuru throne to protect the inheritance rights of his stepbrothers. He pledged lifelong loyalty to the royal throne. Karve posits that Bhisma could have averted the impending war by assuming kingship after Pandu's death. However, his rigid adherence to youthful vows led to the catastrophic war.

Karve argues that ideals and morals are temporally bound; their relevance is contextual. This transformation in worldviews, she asserts, signifies a rupture in the eternal cycle of time. As a historical text, the values and moral codes of the *Mahabharata* had specific contextual significance that eventually dissolved with the end of the epoch—hence the title *Yuganta*, meaning “the end of an epoch.” The cover design, featuring an Ouroboros, symbolises the cyclic nature of events represented in the epic.

### 12.1.2 Relationship between the Gods and the Humans

The *Mahabharata* venerates Vedic, classical, and Purāṇic deities through hymns, rituals, and sacrificial offerings centered on the *yajña*. Temples as designated places of worship are virtually absent in the text. Indra, Sūrya, and Rudra appear as the principal deities, reflecting the Vedic pantheon. The practices of ancestral veneration, along with the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, shaped the moral and philosophical foundations of human life portrayed in the epic.

The concept of hero-worship or personal deity had not yet permeated the religious ideology of the period. Consequently, the notion of miracles or divine intervention is largely absent, with only a few notable exceptions. Human destiny is portrayed as being inseparably bound to one's *karma*—the individual must inevitably face the consequences of their actions, whether sooner or later. For example, Dharma, the eldest of the five Pāṇḍavas, is depicted as the most virtuous among them and renowned for his truthfulness, yet he succumbs to the vice of gambling. When challenged by Śakuni, the maternal uncle of Duryodhana, he fails to restrain himself, ultimately losing his kingdom, his brothers, and finally his wife Draupadī (Pattanaik, 2010).

The ideals of benevolent gods, devotional piety, monotheism, or escapist spirituality are absent from the *Mahabharata*; these theological developments emerged in later religious traditions (Page, 199). Within the epic, interactions between gods and humans are depicted as direct and corporeal encounters—face-to-face engagements between divine and mortal beings. Numerous examples illustrate such alliances: Bhīṣma, born of King Śāntanu and the river goddess Gaṅgā, and Karṇa, the son of Kuntī and the Sun God, popularly known as *Sūrya Putra* (the son of the Sun), exemplify this fusion of divine and human realms.

### 12.1.3 A Feminist Re-Reading of the Epic

Contrary to popular interpretations of the *Mahabharata*, Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* foregrounds female protagonists rather than relegating them to supporting roles. In popular imagination, the *Mahabharata* is a war narrative centred on property disputes and fraternal rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. However, Karve offered fresh insights into the positions and agency of women in the epic, analysing them through a gender-sensitive lens.

She argued that female figures such as Kuntī, Gandhārī, and Draupadī were not merely passive spectators but exercised considerable agency and authority within their familial and social domains. Karve rigorously examined these women's statuses and roles, contending that figures like Kuntī, Gandhārī, Draupadī, and Madrī did not simply mirror male ambitions or aspirations within patriarchy. Rather, they displayed individual autonomy and decision-making power that significantly influenced the epic's trajectory.

For instance, as Pandu suffered from a congenital defect, Kuntī bore progeny for herself and for her co-wife Madrī through a divine boon granted by Rishi Durvasa. When

Madri was blessed with twins, Kunti refused further assistance, fearing that additional sons for Madri might threaten her own status within the household.

Notably, Karve not only compared female figures within the *Mahabharata* but also drew parallels between heroines of other epics. She highlighted similarities and differences between Draupadi and Sita from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, respectively. Both are daughters of the earth—Draupadi born from the sacrificial fire and Sita from the bosom of the earth. Each was married through a *swayamvara*, and both spent significant portions of their lives in exile. Yet their destinies diverged: Draupadi suffered humiliation and exile due to her husbands' misdeeds, remaining embittered throughout the epic, whereas Sita accompanied Rama to the forest voluntarily, motivated by love and devotion.

However, a subaltern reading of *Yuganta* reveals that Karve's narrative retains traces of elitist bias, particularly toward women of indigenous origins—such as Hidimba, Bhima's demon wife, or the tribal woman who perished with her sons in the House of Lac to save Kunti and her family. Nevertheless, *Yuganta* remains one of the most incisive feminist critiques of the *Mahabharata* to date.

#### ***12.1.4 The Interpolations in the Epic***

One of the major shortcomings of religious texts is the tendency of their followers to treat them monolithically and uncritically. Believers often regard their scriptures as sacred and infallible, which has historically fostered prejudice and exclusivity. Contrary to this, Karve—drawing on her anthropological insight—argued that the *Mahabharata* evolved over different historical phases and was not composed as a unified whole. She was among the first to emphasise interpolations within the text.

Initially, the epic began as an oral war eulogy (*Jaya*) sung by bards and *sutas*. Over time, it expanded into *Bharata* and finally *Mahabharata*, with Vyasa as its composer and Ganesha as the scribe. Like a *hamsa* (swan) that separates milk from water, Karve attempted to filter the original narrative from later additions. She argued that Krishna in the *Mahabharata* was a mortal friend of Arjuna, and that the *Bhagavad Gita* reflected a personal philosophical dialogue rather than divine revelation. She believed the romantic and miraculous tales surrounding Krishna were later interpolations that elevated him to divine status.

#### ***12.1.5 Kinship, Hierarchy (Caste), and Social Structure***

Karve's enduring interest in kinship, evident in her seminal work *Kinship Organisation in India* (1965), also permeates her commentary on the *Mahabharata*. She provided a comprehensive account of kinship patterns, marital alliances, and social organisation during the epic period. For example, Arjun is cousin of Subhdra, from her mother's line so their marriage reflects the practice of cross cousin marriage, Mother's Brother's Daughter as partner.

Karve discusses various marital systems, such as *niyoga*, in which a married woman could cohabit with another man to produce offspring—a practice prevalent during the *Mahabharata* era. She also examined monogamy, polyandry, and related customs like the practice of sati, bride price. To illustrate, in the chapter ‘Kunti,’ it is mentioned that Bhishma had paid an enormous bride price to secure Madri as a wife for albino (Page 48). Further, she analysed the statuses and roles of different social groups such as the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Sutas and so on. The Sutas are a class of people representing the illegitimate progeny of the Kshatriyas who performed various functions in the court (Page 2). In the *Yuganta*, the Sutas were charioteers, warriors, and repositories of the lore and genealogies of the kingly families (Page 67). They occupy a pivotal role in the storyline of the *Mahabharata*. For example, Unmarried Kunti discards her first born progeny Karna into a river who was adopted by a Suta charioteer Adirath. Karna was a skilled archer but could not participate in the royal archery contest due to his Suta lineage. It is alleged that in the *Mahabharata*, the caste hierarchy was fluid and the King had the authority to raise the status of any individual. Impressed with his archery skill, Duryodhana conferred kingship on Karna by granting him the throne of the Ang Janapada (current Bhagalpur). Although Duryodhana raised Suta Karna to Kshatriya yet he never established marital alliances with Karna as a King of Ang.

Karve remains largely silent on the marginalisation of indigenous communities outside the caste hierarchy. Notably, her essays omit critical reflection on Ekalavya’s exclusion and Drona’s partiality. Despite such gaps, *Yuganta* remains an excellent compendium on kinship, caste hierarchy, and social organisation in the *Mahabharata*.

## 12.2 Style and Scholarly Significance

Although Iravati Karve was trained in physical anthropology in Berlin under Prof. Eugen Fischer, her literary acumen is exceptional. Her critical commentary *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* is among her most acclaimed works. The book won the Sahitya Akademi Award for Best Book in Marathi in 1967.

*Yuganta* offers a rigorous re-examination of the ideology, philosophy, and personalities of the *Mahabharata*, demystifying them and situating them within a historical and sociological framework. The success of the Marathi version inspired Karve to translate it into English for non-Marathi readers, especially international audiences. To assist readers, she included genealogical charts of key characters and maps of the epic’s geographical setting.

Employing anthropological reasoning, Karve posits that the *Mahabharata* is not a mythological but a historical text. By reordering its events chronologically, she stripped it of its mythic layers, though in doing so she often overlooked its ritual and symbolic dimensions.

Remarkably, parallels can be drawn between the *Mahabharata* and Greek mythology. For instance, both Achilles and Duryodhana were made nearly invulnerable by their mothers—Thetis and Gandhari, respectively—but their vulnerable spots (Achilles’ heel and Duryodhana’s thighs) led to their demise (Pattanaik, 2010).

Finally, *Yuganta* stands as the earliest feminist critique of the epic, inspiring later feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti and Meenakshi Mukherjee. Written in lucid English and an engaging style, it remains an outstanding treatise on kinship structures and social organisation in India, an essential text for students and scholars of anthropology and literature alike.

### 12.3 Conclusion

In summation, *Yuganta* is a critical commentary on the *Mahabharata* that offers a secular, analytical, and anthropological interpretation of the epic. Karve approaches the text with scholarly rigor, examining its characters and events through a rational and empirical lens. Her application of a gender-sensitive perspective, introducing an early form of feminist critique, constitutes one of the most significant and enduring contributions of the work. Consequently, *Yuganta* remains a seminal study that continues to shape modern interpretations of the *Mahabharata*.

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