

NERVOUS MEMORIES AND CASTE TROUBLE
Remembering the transnational histories of Indian
anthropologists and the tensions of caste and anti-casteism*

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ABSTRACT. Caste has been a central concept in anthropological theorizations about Indian society. It has been used to explain the cultural diversity and biological variation in the subcontinent as well as the structure that gives India a functioning, cohesive society. But caste has also been looked at through the critical lenses of inequality, as a marker of hierarchy that has justified segregation and cements historical injustices. These different approaches to caste and (anti-)casteism are often in tension in the space of Indian anthropology, a tension that is analogous to the friction between the different approaches to race and (anti-)racism. This paper examines how such tension emerges in the remembrance and commemoration of two central historical figures in Indian anthropology, namely Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Irawati Karve. By tracing the transnational genealogy of these two scholars, I show how their own work on caste was affected by two German figures who represent both sides in a key debate in anthropology, namely the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas (a prominent figure in the school where Ambedkar was trained) and the racial anthropologist Eugen Fischer (Karve's PhD supervisor). This transnational 'history of the present' of anthropological approaches to caste(ism) aims to contribute to understanding a key question in anthropology, in India as elsewhere: how to deal with the trouble of classifying and conceptualizing human differences and social inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

Remembering and commemorating the scientists of the past is a way to engage with the present and future of any chosen science. As the philosopher of science Karen Barad writes, 'remembering is not a replay of a string of moments, but an enlivening and reconfiguring of past and future' (2007:ix). Besides being remembered through the continuation of the texts they wrote, some deceased anthropologists are also celebrated in acts of commemora-

* The research for this paper was conducted within the framework of my doctoral dissertation, for which I was granted the Frobenius Research Award 2023. For a further elaboration on this paper in relation to my overall research on Irawati Karve's biological anthropological work and legacy, see Barbosa (2024).

tion. Much more than just telling us who the commemorated anthropologists were, such acts of remembrance tell us a lot about the contemporary politics and disciplinary debates that relate to the lives and works of these unforgotten scholars.

In India, the commemoration of anthropologists is often influenced by the politics of and debates about caste. Caste, as Arjun Appadurai (1986) put it, has formed a kind of 'gatekeeping concept' in anthropology's theoretical attention to India, both internationally and, in effect, nationally. In sum, caste has been the analytical spinal cord of anthropological theorizations about India and Indians. But caste is not uncontested: different anthropological traditions have their particular views on caste in concurrent and even opposing ways. In addition, like race in other national contexts, caste is a known marker of difference and inequality and has been the operationalizing object of inclusion policies. In this way, caste belonging plays a key role in institutional politics, as well as prominently in India's public universities, as the entrance to this educational terrain is regulated by caste-based affirmative action (Teltumbde 2018). Against this background of caste, at once political and scholarly, the way any anthropologist in India is celebrated can be largely influenced both by their attitudes to caste and by their own caste belonging.

This article deals with the problem of caste in light of the concurrent and contested commemorations of two very different scholars in Indian anthropology. Both born in what is today the Indian state of Maharashtra, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) and Irawati Karve (1905–1970) have been on the centre stage of acts of commemoration in anthropology departments in Pune, the intellectual capital of this Marathi-speaking state. At both ends of the caste hierarchy – Ambedkar a Dalit at the lowest end of the caste spectrum, Karve a Chitpavan Brahman, the upper-most caste group that is prominent among the intellectual elite of Pune – these two Maharashtrian thinkers never seem to have met, although they shared decades of historical coexistence and geographical proximity. Besides this social separation, the distance between Ambedkar and Karve was also an intellectual one: despite writing on similar matters of political and scholarly concern, they barely engaged with each other's work and had different perspectives on their main topic, namely caste.¹

¹ In her academic writings, Karve rarely mentions Ambedkar, and then only briefly. See, for example, Karve (1961:144–145).

While Ambedkar's intellectual approach to caste was vocal about the inequity and injustice of the caste system, Karve was relatively silent about caste-based social inequalities. Instead, Karve's anthropology of human diversity in India focused on the physical, biological differences of caste and ethnic groups, following the racial tradition in which she was trained in Berlin, Germany, in the late 1920s under the eugenicist Eugen Fischer. Two decades later, responding to British social anthropology with which she then came into close contact, Karve's work shed light on the structure and functioning of caste differentiations, emphasizing how caste, as a system of kinship organization, created social and national cohesion. While Karve's social-anthropological work on caste has been canonized in Indian anthropology, especially in Maharashtra, Ambedkar is less well known for his anthropological training: anthropology was just one among other disciplines he was formally trained in during his time at Columbia University, New York, where he was supervised by Alexander Goldenweiser (1879–1961), a close student and mentee of Franz Boas (1858–1942). While Ambedkar's publications on caste do not always feature in Indian anthropological curricula, he is nationally celebrated as a key historical figure in Indian politics and as an icon for Dalit and anti-casteist mobilizations.

As this article will show, the intellectual and social differences between these two anthropologists in relation to caste put a strain on the memory politics relating to Indian anthropologists. As I will argue, the tensions that are perceived in these spaces of canonical remembrance speak for the long discussed yet far from solved debate in anthropology, in India as elsewhere, on how to approach difference and inequality. By providing an ethnographic examination of memorial practices in university spaces in Maharashtra, as well as a historical account of these two anthropologists' intellectual trajectories,² my goals in this paper are twofold.

First, I want to contribute to the transnational assessment of the history of Indian anthropologists.³ Although many of the most prominent figures

² The research for this paper included consultation in German and Indian archives as well as ethnographic research in India, particularly in the city of Pune, where I observed and participated in several anthropology courses and had conversations and interviews with anthropologists, students, geneticists, and Karve family members during a total of ten months between 2017 and 2020. For a more detailed account and reflections on my methodology, see Barbosa (2024).

³ I use 'transnational' (instead of 'international') to denote a perspective that grasps processes or movements that happen not only between or across national institutions but also beyond the realm of nation-states. For a further elaboration on the term 'transnational' in relation to 'international' and 'global', see Clever, Hyun, and Burton (2022).

in the dawn of the discipline in India were trained in the Global North, the implications of such transnational scientific entanglements remain untheorized. Importantly, in the parallels between Karve and Ambedkar lies a difference rooted in a crucial anthropological debate that had its central node in Europe, particularly in Germany: while Karve was trained in the racial anthropological tradition of Eugen Fischer and was later in contact with British structural-functionalism, Ambedkar was trained in the Boasian school of cultural anthropology, a school that emerged as the response of Franz Boas against this German (and not only German) racist tradition of physical, biological anthropology that found in Fischer an emblematic figure.

Last but not least, my second goal is to contribute to tackling a key question in anthropology, in India as elsewhere: how can we anthropologists deal with the problem of classifying and conceptualizing human differences while being aware not only of the possible essentializing risks of mobilizing different categories, but also of the inequity and injustice that is connected to such differences?⁴ In other words, the question that arises out of this friction is embedded in the question of how anthropology can best study caste or race while engaging against casteism or racism. Moved by this question, I conclude by suggesting that thinking about how anthropology can become more attuned to the dimension of inequality is pivotal to the discipline's continuous efforts in both attending to and moving away from the persistent legacies of race in science.

REMEMBERING AMBEDKAR

Across India, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is often commemorated on both his birthday and the anniversary of his death: the former has been a national holiday since 2015 and officially "Knowledge Day" in Maharashtra since 2017.⁵ After graduating in Bombay, Ambedkar studied anthropology, among

⁴ The pervasiveness of the problem implied in this question, allied with how anthropologists tend to avert their gaze from it in order to keep to business as usual, has led anthropologists Katharina Schramm and Claire Beaudévin to call such practices of classifying difference 'the elephants in our ethnographic rooms' (2019).

⁵ A resolution issued in 2017 by the Maharashtra government stated that April 14 should be celebrated as Knowledge Day: 'According to the resolution, all district collectors have been instructed to ensure that Dr Ambedkar's photo is garlanded at 10 a.m. every year, followed by a programme explaining the importance of the day. The Assistant Commissioner for Social Welfare in every district has been given the responsibility to organise

other disciplines, at Columbia University (USA) under Alexander Goldenweiser (Cháirez-Garza 2018, 2021). A Jewish German immigrant to the US, Boas became well-known as a critic of the racist underpinnings of what by the 1930s had become the mainstream tradition of physical anthropology in Germany, a tradition that is most notably represented by a eugenics-oriented school in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWI-A), Berlin.⁶ In a counterpoint to the biological determinism of racial anthropology, Boas argued for a greater attention to be paid to historical and cultural factors in the making of human diversity and for a shift to the study of ‘cultures’ instead of ‘races’. Boas is considered a father figure in the racism-critical liberal tradition of cultural anthropology: he trained a prominent generation of scholars in New York, including Margaret Mead (1901–1978) and Goldenweiser.

Therefore, although Ambedkar’s main area of studies at Columbia University was economics, between 1915 and 1916 he also took ethnology courses under Goldenweiser. For one of these courses, Ambedkar wrote a paper on “Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development”, which led to him being granted a PhD in 1927 (Cháirez-Garza 2018, Naik 2003). Ambedkar’s time as student in the late 1910s at Columbia crucially informed his scholarship: in his writings, he emphasized how caste untouchability and segregation were not given racial phenomena, as other Indian scholars before him, such as Karve’s MA supervisor, G.S. Ghurye (1893–1983), had argued (Barbosa 2024); instead, Ambedkar strove to explain caste as a historical formation connected to motives of power and domination (Cháirez-Garza 2018).

Today, Ambedkar is usually remembered not as an anthropologist, but as a jurist, economist, politician and social reformer with a key influence on national debates (Krishnamurty 2019). Besides authoring the famous speech “Annihilation of caste” (2016), he is widely known for campaigning against untouchability and for the rights of those who face caste-based oppression, particularly Dalits. He has been described as a person ‘who, more than any Indian national leader, mobilized a social and political, institutional, and le-

programmes with speeches on subjects such as social science, history, anthropology, and political science’ (The Hindu 2017).

⁶ Arguably, Boas might have decided to not tackle scientific racism too head on, as he thought his criticism would be dismissed because of his Jewish positionality; but he was undoubtedly influential in intellectual and several backstage political efforts to counter racial anthropology (Anderson 2019). For more on Boas and his school of cultural anthropology, see King (2019).

gal response to social exclusion and injustice and put in place constitutional safeguards' (Mosse 2020:4). Not only did he have an important role in drafting the Indian constitution after independence, he was also key in formulating the framework for affirmative action policies in India. A few months before he died on 6 December 1956, Ambedkar also launched a movement of conversion to Buddhism, which was followed by hundreds of thousands of Dalits as a way to reject the purity beliefs and related caste-based discrimination practices associated with Hinduism.

One morning on 6 December 2018 on the Pune University campus, I noticed that the surroundings of the imposing Ambedkar statue looked very different: a ceremonial white carpet and several rows of chairs covered in white fabric had been placed on the square. 'Ambedkar' is also the name of the building where Pune University's anthropology department is housed, and there is another statue of him in the building's front garden. That statue too was draped with several floral garlands and wreaths that day (Figure 1). Ambedkar was honoured in different ceremonies that day, including one organized by the anthropology department.

Several anthropology students and staff attended the function organized by the anthropology department in commemoration of the anniversary of Ambedkar's death – 'a national hero', as one of the students explained to me – in the departmental secretary's office, where a portrait of Ambedkar hangs high on the wall. The ceremony started with members of the administrative staff adorning the portrait with a garland of saffron, with yellow and orange marigolds.

Different staff members gave speeches to commemorate Ambedkar. The longest and last speech, held by a social anthropology professor,⁷ encapsulates the key tensions around the subject of caste in Indian anthropology today. Alternating between Marathi and English, the professor said:

We have started just a few years back, four or five years ago, celebrating Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Jayanti [anniversary] in Pune at our department, and before that we organized the national seminar "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar as an architect of modern India" – and as an anthropologist as well. So we declared him as an anthropologist because [...] by discipline he is an anthropologist; his first thesis he has submitted in, I think, in... [two staff members in the room say '1916'] 1916, yes, it was an anthropology seminar and he submitted in anthropology. So he contributed a lot, not only as a social thinker or social re-

⁷ Due to the conflictive potential of the theme, I refrain from identifying the anthropologists implicated in situations described in this paper.



Figure 1: Ambedkar statue at the Pune University's Ambedkar building (all photos: Th.P.B.)

former to Indian society and culture, but he has contributed as an anthropologist and therefore officially, you know, we celebrate his birthday and death anniversary. [...] Today I just wanted to convey to all students specifically: anthropologists were the first in the world who rejected the concept of race and race-ism. To the rejection of that time, that race was a myth, to say it properly is not a joke, but then the anthropologists did that! They reject the racial superiority, so we anthropologists should reject the concept of caste. We have to be daring to say that caste is a myth, so that all are equal! So basically, the rejection of discrimination is not that because of the economic structure but it's because once caste is attached to a person... So I think the basic situation in India, what arises today, even in the twenty-first century, it is just the reason of what hierarchy we have. And my PhD students and I have done a lot of research on this... But... [continues slowly, in a serious, low tone] people are not ready to leave caste. [pause] They say [screaming]: 'We want caste! We don't want casteism. But we want caste!' ... You know this is the mentality of Indian people. [...] So my suggestion is: we should reject the concept of caste, of the caste system. Rejection in practice, in our mental thinking that is needed, because your ethnicity first goes with what [another professor] has conveyed, that Ambedkar was the first person to say that 'First and lastly I am an Indian'. [She then explains with examples how her 'ethnicity' is contextual according to the geographical scale of her location, whereby the question of which caste she belongs to is only addressed within Maharashtra]. So this is what I want to convey today, that we will believe in being a human being first. Because what Ambedkar has given is the message of humanity (transcription of speech by anthropology professor at Pune University, 2019, emphases mine).

In India, Ambedkar's commemoration evokes conflicting issues. While it has fuelled political debates on caste, religion and nationalism, in this micro-scale at the anthropology department it reveals the tensions that accompany the practices of Indian anthropologists in relation to the main category of difference they work with, namely caste. On the one hand, the anti-casteist engagement that marked Ambedkar's political and intellectual work was highlighted by the professor's speech and brought together with anthropology's own task. On the other hand, the professor admits that caste remains an important factor in a person's identity, especially in a more localized scale.

At the same time, in the discursive articulations during the commemoration ritual, individual caste positionalities, including Ambedkar's, were actively omitted from all speeches, as well as the fact that he actively worked for the rights of Dalits and for caste-based affirmative action policies. In-

stead, different speeches depicted Ambedkar as a hero for the whole nation.⁸ In this sense, national unity, also adorned with the Buddhist principles of humanity and equality, appears as a common horizon for a post-casteist society. Concomitantly, the social anthropology professor who held the main speech in the ceremony described above sees the goal of a post-casteist society as corresponding to anthropology's own anti-racist and anti-casteist task.

In this sense, the caste-based, Dalit identification that marked Ambedkar's activism and underlies his commemoration can be perceived as standing in tension with this post-casteist orientation. Here one can see a similar dilemma to other contexts of anti-racist discourses: the tension between strategic essentialism (which highlights differences and inequalities) versus the stance of colour-blindness (which affirms universalism and commonality). Ambedkar's pro-Dalit affirmative strategy sits uncomfortably next to the post-casteist, nationalistic, universalizing discourse in relation to their common goal of a society free of casteism. While both share the understanding that caste-based exclusion should not exist, the first sees 'positive discrimination' as a necessary strategy for inclusion and anti-casteism, while the latter denies any discrimination or political operationalization based on caste.

This tension between strategic essentialism and post-casteist 'colour-blindness' also underpins the politics of caste positionality within the university. This becomes especially clear in the contrast between Ambedkar and Karve, starting in the contrast between their respective caste positions. In sum, the anti-casteist politics evoked through Ambedkar are permeated by, and are in tension with, a perception of caste as a key marker of positionality. Given that Karve's upper-caste positionality is well-known, and given how strongly associated she is with anthropology in Maharashtra, the celebration of Ambedkar in this department seems to be articulated in a way

⁸ Unintentionally or not, Ambedkar's nationalistic framing converges with sustained Hindu nationalist efforts to domesticate his anti-Hindu status quo-defying pro-Dalit affordance while moulding his image according to Hindu nationalist ideas (Teltumbde 2018). At the same time, the horizon of a post-casteist society is not articulated in Hindu nationalist discourses; instead, Hinduism upper-caste political actors reject the current existence of casteism in order to deflect the association between Hinduism and the discrimination against Dalits and other lower caste groups. Furthermore, this domestication of Ambedkar by Hindu nationalism is also a reaction to Ambedkar's call for all Dalits to convert out of Hinduism in order to escape casteism, which has created a tension vis-à-vis the long-standing political efforts of maintaining a Hindu majority in the Indian polity by engulfing religiously ambiguous Dalits under the Hindu fold (Viswanath 2015). This is also reflected in how anti-conversion legislation has been formulated in several Indian states (Mosse 2020:5).

that both parallels and opposes him to Karve. On the one hand he is framed as an anthropologist and is thus placed on the same professional level as Karve. On the other hand, his forceful anti-casteist activism and, even when omitted, his Dalit positionality places him at the opposite end of the political and social spectrum in relation to Karve.

REMEMBERING KARVE

The memory of Irawati Karve is kept alive in Indian anthropology and in the intellectual space of Maharashtra through varied engagements with her work and persona. Karve worked most of her life in Pune and dedicated most of her writings to understanding the biological and cultural diversity of India's castes and ethnicities, as well as the structural functioning of Indian society. The first woman to be appointed to a sociology or anthropology lecturership in an Indian university, at the famous Deccan College in Pune, Karve's holistic combination of anthropological approaches reflects the different anthropological traditions she was exposed to internationally. Between 1927 and 1930 in Berlin, she undertook her doctoral training in Anthropologie at both the Friedrich Wilhelm University and the infamous KWI-A, where her craniometry-based racial research was supervised by Eugen Fischer. In the early 1950s, she was a guest lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London where she was in close communication with social anthropologists like Louis Dumont (1911–1998) and Christoph and Elizabeth von Fürer-Haimendorf (1909–1995, 1911–1987), who were a formative influence in the writing of her first social anthropological book (Karve 1953). In the US, she was a guest professor in the South Asia Colloquium of the University of California, Berkeley, from 1959 into the 1960s, besides giving several talks across the country on a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship. Thus, Karve's intellectual trajectory is remarkably transnational.⁹

While Karve's social anthropological books (1953, 1961), besides her acclaimed critical analysis of a Hindu epic (2017), are the most remembered and most represented in anthropology syllabuses today, in fact a large part of her oeuvre dealt with anthropometry-based physical and biological research on India's castes and so-called tribes. Although the use of anthropometric

⁹ For more details of Karve's intellectual development during her time in the US and England, see Deshpande and Barbosa (2024). On Karve's research in Germany, see Barbosa (2024).

methods has a long history, both colonial and post-colonial, in the Indian subcontinent,¹⁰ Karve's and other Indian anthropologists' training in the German tradition of physical anthropology was decisive in the consolidation of this approach to research in their work (Bandeh-Ahmadi 2024, Barbosa 2024).

Karve's training in this German school of racial anthropology placed this physical, biological branch of her work in a diametrically opposed camp in relation to Ambedkar. While the latter was influenced by the liberal anti-racist anthropological tradition of Franz Boas, Karve was trained in the school of Boas's arch-rival Eugen Fischer. Fischer was the first director of the KWI-A and, in 1933, became the first Nazi-appointed university rector. Before that, he had made a career for himself by applying Mendelian genetics to the study of 'mixed marriages' and their offspring in German South-west Africa, now Namibia (Barbosa *et al.* 2016, Barbosa *et al.* 2018, Schmuhl 2008). An advocate of racial hygiene, Fischer had an understanding of race that was best shown in his 1933 inaugural address as rector of the University of Berlin, when he asserted: 'What Darwinism was not able to do, genetics has achieved. It has destroyed the theory of the equality of men [...]. The theory of the heritability of mental as well as physical traits has finally been vindicated' (quoted in Proctor 1988:148). This assertion makes clear the view of race that prevailed at the KWI-A, especially after the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933: racial frameworks of differences among humans rejected the possibility of environmental and social factors entering into the make-up of the individual, and it also relegated several characteristics – including cognitive and cultural as well as physical traits – to the realm of the biological and inheritable. This racial-biological view allows little room for the scholarly problematization of inequality or for any political orientation towards the principle of equality.

To be sure, Karve's relationship to her training in Berlin was far from that of the simple absorption and reproduction of knowledge or rote-learning. Indeed, Karve challenged the blatantly racist hypothesis Fischer had suggested she test in her doctoral thesis. Her research conclusion was probably surprising to her German supervisor and colleagues: she stated that she could not observe any correlation between race and skull shape.¹¹ Nonethe-

¹⁰ Bates (1995), Srivatsan (2005), Fuller (2017), Mukharji (2023)

¹¹ Fischer had given Karve the task of comparing the skull asymmetry of the human crania of different racial groups. This task was motivated by a racist hypothesis: skull asymmetry (whereby the right side of the skull – the one allegedly responsible for culture and

less, this training in a racially rooted methodology of bone and body measurements left an indelible mark on Karve's anthropology, and this is perceptible in her numerous physical and biological anthropological publications.¹² She dedicated considerable research efforts to measuring the bodies of people belonging to different castes and ethnicities with the goal of exploring questions of relatedness and differentiation, as well as hypotheses on ancient migrations (Barbosa 2022a).

At the same time, Karve grew aware of the possible racist effects of the tradition in which she had been trained in Berlin, especially after being in contact with post-World War II discussions on the legacies of race science (Barbosa 2022b, 2024). She eventually embraced multiculturalism and cultural relativism and openly expressed a concern about discriminatory appropriations of racial taxonomies. Notwithstanding, until the end of her life, she still practiced anthropometry. The discrediting of this racially informed method, though incomplete, has led to the physical and biological aspects of Karve's oeuvre being less remembered, although they are known to experienced anthropologists in Pune. Overall, the contradictions in Karve's work and her association with a racial school of anthropology constitute a reason why some anthropologists in India may be wary of the uncritical commemoration of Karve, as a few professors hinted to me in interviews.

Nonetheless Karve has been remembered and memorialized in various anthropological spaces and public events in her hometown of Pune. She is often mentioned in academic events celebrating Women's Day and regularly commemorated on her birthday at both Pune University and Deccan College. The 2019 Indian Anthropology Congress, which took place in Pune, closed with the "Irawati Karve memorial lecture", which revered Karve's legacy and took place in a stage setting that included a large portrait of Karve adorned with marigold garlands.

rationality – was larger) was considered an indicator of the civilizational evolutionary achievement of white Europeans, while Africans were supposed to have more symmetrical skulls and thus be less rational. Karve's dissertation was published in Germany in the same year that she went back to India (1931) with the title "Normale Asymmetrie des menschlichen Schädels [Normal asymmetry of the human skull]". Instead of simply exploring the racist hypothesis that, as she emphasized, Fischer had assigned to her, Karve's dissertation explored the alternative hypothesis of whether skull asymmetry could result from an asymmetry in the spinal column instead. In this sense, instead of resting on a racial explanation, she suggested that skull asymmetry could derive from another, possibly non-hereditary and non-racial physical characteristic.

¹² See, for example, Karve (1941, 1948, 1954), Karve and Dandekar (1951), Karve *et al.* (1968).

The celebration of Karve has most clearly materialized, and been made permanent, in the Irawati Karve Museum of Anthropology at Pune University. Opened in the 1980s, the anthropology department's museum was renamed after Karve following the suggestion of her former student R.K. Mutaktar (by then head of the department). The rebranding ceremony on 15 December (Karve's birthday) 1993 was marked by the opening of a temporary exhibition about Karve's life and work.¹³ Later, a permanent piece on Karve was added to the first room in the museum: a two-meter tall, four-sided wooden and glass cabinet containing objects, pictures and texts related to Karve. The side of the cabinet facing the museum's entrance contains a poster-sized portrait of Karve, which is right above the display of an anthropometric device that Karve brought with her from Germany. The exhibition cabinet displays several other pictures of her, a few of her poems, brief texts on her work and life, and samples of her books, including her PhD thesis published in Germany (Karve 1931). The Irawati Karve Museum of Anthropology receives occasional media attention (e.g. Bari 2019) and many visitors – a thousand per year in the department's estimate.

At the same time, Karve's commemoration triggers key tensions regarding caste and anthropology. The Irawati Karve Museum of Anthropology presents a nodal point in the crystallization of the tensions ensuing from different perspectives on Karve's work and persona, the latter often being viewed through the lens of caste belonging. These tensions are reflected in the shaping of the museum, as the following chronology of interventions in the Museum will demonstrate.

As the former curator of the Museum Narendra Bokhare explained to me that the Museum's development and maintenance has depended heavily on the departmental leadership's attitudes concerning not only the role of ethnological museology, but also, especially since the Museum's change of name, their relationship to Karve and what she represents.¹⁴ Following the retirement of Bokhare (who had installed Karve's cabinet in the museum), the anthropology department dismantled the exhibit at the entrance to the museum, which consisted of the museum's new name in big silver letters, Karve's portrait and a small installation containing a representation of her physical anthropological work, including a human skull. The whole glass wall in this installation was taken down and its objects put away. When I

¹³ The event was visited by guests like former students and family members and was covered by local and national media (Bokhare 2014).

¹⁴ Interview with Narendra Bokhare, Pune, 25 March 2019

first visited the museum in 2017, it was undergoing restoration, and the anthropology department was under new headship. The new head (a biological anthropologist) ordered that the original entrance installation be reinstalled as before. When I asked Bokhare why the former departmental head had ordered the entrance display to be dismantled, he simply pointed to the former professor's Dalit and Buddhist positionality. He dismissed any validity to intellectual criticism of Karve or of the memory politics around her in that anthropology department. For him – a member of a relatively upper caste group – the politics of caste positionality was enough reason for the professors' decisions regarding Karve's visibility in the museum.¹⁵

This controversy around the reshaping of the Museum's entrance adds up to a previous episode of anxiety involving Karve's commemoration in the anthropology department: on the occasion of the Museum's rebranding in 1993, the museum curator also put a portrait of Karve on the wall behind the departmental head's desk with the authorization and sympathy of the then head of department. However, a new departmental head who took office many years later decided to take the portrait down on the grounds that the department should not be 'worshipping only one person'.¹⁶ Again, that decision has been criticized and interpreted by some as politically motivated due to that head of department's caste. This interpretation was exacerbated by the allegation that the same professor used to keep a portrait of Ambedkar in their office.

Hence, as both these controversies show, the discussions around the shape and extent of Karve's remembrance is ingrained in caste politics. In this respect, Karve's caste positionality and the readings of the caste positions of the anthropology professors involved in these disputes play an important role. In sum, the memory politics around Karve's figure take place on the basis of anxious institutional politics that are suffused with tensions concerning the politics of difference.

To provide further context to the role of caste in the disputes over Karve's remembrance, it is relevant to note that caste politics has been a major topic of conflict in Pune University more generally. According to Donald Kurtz's institutional study, caste has been 'the primary cause of the history of conflict in the Pune University' (2009:3). Kurtz acknowledges that 'in modern institutions caste becomes augmented with class interests, alliances, patronage, institutional affiliations, and other factors'; as a result, 'caste di-

¹⁵ Interview with Narendra Bokhare, Pune, 25 March 2019

¹⁶ Anonymized interview with anthropology professor, Pune, March 2019



Figure 2: Entrance wall (rebuilt in 2017) of the Irawati Karve Museum of Anthropology, Pune

visions involved in [the university's] politics are not clear cut. They never are' (2009:5). But, in sum, the competition for university posts and other government positions has been fuelled by rival caste sentiments that pervade the political history of Maharashtra. The top-down establishment of Pune University in 1924 shook the power dynamics of the region's institutional educational landscape, with conflicts emerging along the lines of caste. This was so because the new university was supposed to work through affiliations with both rural colleges and city colleges, and each kind of college was run by a different caste group: most rural colleges were run by Marathas, whereas city colleges in Pune had been led by a demographically small Brahman elite, almost exclusively Chitpavan Brahmans, who 'were firmly in control of the region's cultural, educational, political, and religious institutions'.¹⁷ As a result, disputes between different castes have continued to influence institutional politics at Pune University.

In this scenario, Karve's memory may be affectively coloured by opinions evoked by her caste positionality, opinions which may vary relationally according to the interlocutor's own caste position. Karve's caste affiliation as a Chitpavan Brahman is well-known and has also been conjured up in remembering her work and persona. This evocation of a scientist's caste positionality is not so unusual in studies of science in India. The problem with the way that such studies have treated caste lies in the fact that, as Abha Sur continues, '[s]ince scientists in India are overwhelmingly from the "upper castes", these studies, perhaps unwittingly, end up venerating caste, in particular the brahmin caste, as a signifier of intellectual acuity' (Sur 2011:56–57). Moreover, this happens 'with little concern that caste differentiation is necessarily a hierarchical and oppressive system' (Sur 2011:35). For Sur, this lack of critical reflexivity in the treatment of caste in studies of science results in the prominence of Brahmans in Indian science being left unquestioned, so that 'caste hierarchies are too often both naturalized and legitimized' (Sur 2011:35).

Furthermore, besides the politics of caste positionality, the controversies surrounding Karve's remembrance stem from an intellectual critique of her anthropology. A key aspect of contention regarding Karve's work concerns the frameworks which she uses to study human differences and the

¹⁷ Kurtz (2009:38). Kurtz traces the historical origins of this conflict between Marathas and Brahmans over government power back to 350 years ago, when it revolved around the political rearrangements following the fall of the Mughal Empire and was invigorated during British colonial rule (Kurtz 2009).

politics that they imply. Karve's blatant Hindu nationalistic and anti-Muslim commentary at the height of the partition between Indian and Pakistan (Karve 1947) and her occasional pejorative remarks about so-called tribal groups are two examples of aspects in her work that have been criticized: at times, different interlocutors also explained these flaws in Karve's work in connection with her caste positionality and historical context.¹⁸ More fundamentally, however, Karve's writings on human diversity in India generally lack a critical articulation of the inequalities and injustices that are correlated with the different categories of caste and ethnicity. This is a key aspect of contention in her work, which is exacerbated when contrasted with the vocally anti-casteist efforts of other scholars who lived through the same historical context as Karve, like Ambedkar. The two main accents in Karve's anthropology – her physical, biological anthropology (marked by an adaptation of racial frameworks) and her structural-functionalist social-cultural anthropology – may have reflected a specific predisposition to overlook caste inequalities and injustices, while highlighting and essentializing those caste differences in culturalizing, biologizing, racializing, or functionalizing ways.

In this light, one can also understand the interventions in the Museum of Anthropology in Pune as a critique of Karve's work, beyond her persona, especially given that the physical and racial anthropological accents in Karve's research were materialized through vivid representations in the museum, including the anthropometric measuring device, typical of racial physical anthropology, the installation at the entrance containing a human skull and the attempts to reshape the Museum. These can be read not simply as a caste positionality-based reaction, but also as a critical response to Karve's anthropological frameworks and their essentializing and naturalizing enactments of caste.

*INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS OF CASTE AND
ANTI-CASTEISM*

In one of the anthropology-related courses I visited in Deccan College, Karve's "Hindu society" (1961) was listed as a syllabus topic on 'Caste and

¹⁸ See also Sundar (2008). Karve's anti-Muslim position was articulated in a single paper in 1947 and cannot be found in any of her other writings. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, her position on matters concerning national cohesion assumed a clearly multiculturalist, inclusive character. See Barbosa (2024).

tribe'. In the class that introduced this topic, the lecturer – an anthropologist who had confessed being a big fan of Karve to me – spoke about 'diversity in India'. The lecturer listed several factors in which India is so 'diverse', writing the following on the blackboard:

Composition of Indian Society

– Diverse...

- food
- habits
- geography
- religions
- languages
- ...

– Yet: is it united?

The lecturer posed the rhetorical question: 'We [Indians] are diverse, and yet we're united; why and how?' She went on to talk about family functions and how they bring people together; she explained that family moved to kinship and then moved to caste and concluded: 'Caste is the basic element of Indian society. [...] If you want to be a social member of India, you want to be a member of caste. Good or bad, this is what unites us'. Then a student broke the usual student silence and burst out: 'And caste is what divides us too!' Stunned by the intervention, the lecturer defended herself saying that she did not support the caste system – just as she did 'not support smoking', 'yet people do smoke – and it used to be considered good; today it is bad'. She mentioned that even Islamic rulers and the British at some point understood that they should not disturb the caste system, otherwise it would lead to social unrest, like the 1857 revolt against the British in India. 'So, in the past the caste system was [considered to be] good, today it is bad', she added, concluding the class.

This debate on caste between the anthropology lecturer and the student demonstrates a longstanding tension in social anthropological approaches to difference and inequity. The professor suggested the concept of unity as an interrogation to start a discussion on the social cohesion of the diversity in the Indian subcontinent ('we are diverse and yet [...] united, why and how?'). As in most nation-building projects, and indubitably so in the Indian case, 'unity' has been at the core of nation-building-related anxieties – even before the country's independence in 1947, which was marked by the traumatic violence of partition, with its religious dividing lines, but most severely af-

terwards. The ‘unity’ slogan still animates nation-building-oriented memory politics in India, the most hyperbolic example being the recent erection of the “Statue of Unity”, the world’s tallest statue, commissioned by the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi to represent Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), a politician who participated in India’s independence process.¹⁹

However, the anthropology lecturer’s attempt to answer the ‘diversity versus unity’ impasse through an understanding of caste as a system of social order and cohesion was challenged by the view of caste as a marker of conflictual intranational divisions. This clash elucidates a key contradiction between different anthropological approaches to caste. On the one hand, we have a structural-functionalist anthropological paradigm under which both the lecturer’s position and a large proportion of Karve’s work can be understood, whereby the analytical focus lies in understanding what keeps a society (or ‘social system’) glued together, cohesive and functional in relation to its internal differentiation. This paradigm reached its height in the mid-twentieth century and is observable in Karve’s “Hindu society” (1961) and many other social anthropologists’ writings about what they called ‘the caste system’. Many of these new writers were Brahmans or Europeans who, like Louis Dumont (1971) and many Orientalists before him, worked closely with Brahman informants and the Brahmanical literature (Michaels 2020). On the other hand, on the student’s side we have approaches that shed light on the problems underlying caste-ism, like casteist discrimination, segregation and structural inequalities. Such caste-critical approaches converge with Ambedkar’s call to ‘annihilate caste’ and its current representations, as we saw above in the anthropology professor’s speech during the Ambedkar commemoration ritual (‘we anthropologists should reject the concept of caste’). As David Mosse (2020) explains, the claim to overcome caste, when asserted by Dalits and other groups oppressed by casteism, usually evokes a self-empowering, aspirational castelessness that reclaims their common humanity, following Ambedkar’s emphasis on the value of equality and his final embrace of Buddhism. It is in this light that – to give another example of monumental memorialization practices – a new Ambedkar statue, called the “Statue of Equality” and planned to be India’s second and the world’s third tallest statue, is under construction in Mumbai (Mahamulkar 2019). Thus,

¹⁹ The 182 meter-tall Statue of Unity was commissioned by Modi in 2013 to mark his tenth year as the chief minister of the state of Gujarat and was inaugurated in 2018 amidst a lot of criticism (Kidangoor and Colony 2018). On Vallabhbhai Patel’s role in the post-independence process and partition, see Menon (1957).

‘unity’ and ‘equality’ stand today in opposite fields in Indian national and monumental memory politics; the two concepts also reflect two different anthropological approaches to caste and society.

At the same time, other claims against the idea of caste have different conditions and implications. Diametrically opposed to the Ambedkar-inspired anti-casteist mobilizations are the post-caste arguments that have been mobilized by Hindu nationalism-inclined and usually upper-caste groups (Mosse 2020). Both in and outside of India, for instance, in the UK, these groups have campaigned against anti-casteist legislation on the basis that the concept of caste is a fabrication of colonial anthropology that is devoid of social truth.²⁰ In doing so, they have evoked post-colonial and anti-orientalist scholarship, including work by the historical anthropologist Nicholas B. Dirks (2001), whose famous book on caste and colonialism sets out to deny the existence of caste as an analytical and tangible object and, in a further rhetorical step, seeks to render casteism ungraspable by the law.²¹

Both kinds of claims to be overcoming caste necessarily engage with anthropology’s attitudes towards caste. In other words, both the Ambedkar-inspired liberational anti-casteism and the Hindu nationalist rejectionist post-casteism mobilize anthropological knowledge to formulate their arguments on how to approach (or not approach) caste-ism. Despite coming from disparate social milieus and with opposite political ends, both deal with epistemological questions regarding the world-making effects of the intellectual enactment and articulation of this category of difference. While Dalit activists and scholars follow Ambedkar’s intellectual tradition by pointing out the historical formation of caste to denounce the privilege-securing and power-driven functions of this category of difference,²² upper-caste, right-wing Hindu groups have denounced the anthropological constructedness of

²⁰ The debate on the anti-casteist legislation plan in the UK ended with that government’s decision not to include caste in the UK’s equality law based on the argument that this ‘risked promoting, creating or entrenching ideas of caste or heightening caste consciousness’ (Government Equality Office 2018:5; quoted in Mosse 2020:19–20). For Mosse, given how upper-caste groups mobilized against this law, this decision ‘bends toward the protection of upper-caste community spaces and away from those seeking protection from discrimination’ (2020:20).

²¹ Mosse (2020:17). A similar debate occurred around the question of whether casteism should be discussed in the UN’s “World conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance” in Durban in 2001 (Natrajan and Greenough 2009).

²² See also Barbosa (2024) on how anti-casteist intellectuals put forward different views on theories about the origins of caste.

caste as false. Accordingly they label it a fabrication of colonial anthropology with the aim of not only emptying caste of any ontological meaning, but also invalidating any policy that rests on the recognition of caste-ism. At the same time, whereas Dalits mobilize for rights and resources by reaffirming their caste position and experience of casteism – and might thereby engage in strategic caste essentialism – the claims that nullify the reality of caste can also be ‘deployed against [Dalits] in elite-dominated domains’ either to reject Dalits’ experiences of caste-based discrimination, or to oppose caste-based affirmative action (Mosse 2020:25). Hence, as Mosse sums up,

These disputes around caste are about how ‘the social’ is made available for public debate and especially for the law; they concern the categories of description and analysis [...]. As Dalits and upper castes enter epistemological debates over categories of description on opposite sides, they engage with anthropology, whose subject of enquiry – the social world – it is increasingly clear, is no longer independent or unaltered by its terms of description and debate (2020:29).

Thus, these tensions around the ontological implications of different intellectual and political articulations of caste pervade discussions over the role of anthropology in India. More generally, they demonstrate not only a political concern over the effects of various anthropological frameworks on difference and inequality, but also the high stakes of the study of caste vis-à-vis the public and the political. This interplay of anthropological knowledge and politics also demonstrates the co-constitutive dynamic between the politics of (anti-)caste-ism and the production of scientific knowledge about human diversity and social inequality in India. In addition, these tensions in anthropology’s attitudes to caste(-ism) mirror the tensions in the memory politics of the anthropology department described in this paper, as well as national political struggles and historical monument-building efforts. In the space of anthropology in Maharashtra, such frictions become especially visible in the commemorative remembrances of Ambedkar and Karve.

FINAL REMARKS

As Banu Subramanian puts it, ‘[t]o understand the Indian past is to enter time warps in which the “silent and evasive” pasts come to the fore in contemporary India’ (2019: 14). Such time-folding warps are also evident in the

ways in which Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Irawati Karve have been remembered in Indian anthropology, whether in commemorative rituals, museums, or university classrooms. Importantly, the evocations of these two historical figures implied different visions about caste in the present and future. In this sense, much more than just telling who the two intellectuals were, the acts of remembering them tell us a lot about the contemporary politics that relate to the different themes associated with their lives and works.

The commemoration of Ambedkar and Karve in the space of Indian anthropology is intertwined not only with present-day university department politics, but also with different anthropological traditions and frameworks to understand human diversity and social inequality. Implicated in both realms is a politics of difference that is articulated especially through categories of caste – but also of religion and gender – and that permeates most power conflicts in India. This politics of difference is also at the core of anthropological practices, as the discipline in India has commonly been practiced by using such categories, especially caste, as basic entry points to analysis.

In sum, these tensions come to fore in the commemoration of Ambedkar and Karve on different levels and with different ramifications, as manifested in the fissures between different anthropological frameworks of caste. Depending on the framework, caste can be read either as an element of diversity and social cohesion (as in the physical, biological and social anthropological traditions followed by Karve) or as a historical formation permeated by inequity and social injustice (as in the intellectual tradition constituted by Ambedkar). Within this framework, which sees caste as a marker of inequity, a further ramifying tension takes place between different approaches to addressing casteism, where deconstructive calls to debunk caste as a myth co-exist with the tactics of strategic essentialism including caste-based affirmative action (Teltumbde 2018, Barbosa 2024). This tension is further charged by a friction between anti-casteist movements and the role of caste in political subjectivization, as narrated by the anthropology professor during the Ambedkar ritual ('We don't want casteism. But we want caste!'). At the same time, this Ambedkar-inspired impulse to overcome caste anxiously coincides with a diametrically opposed post-casteist approach which is very different from Ambedkar's politics: Hindu nationalist upper-caste groups have mobilized anthropological knowledge to argue against any politics based on the recognition of caste differences and inequalities, denying, by extension, the existence of caste-ism altogether.

All and all, these tensions show the politically co-constitutive force of anthropological frameworks with respect to diversity, (in)equality, and national or social (dis)unity and functioning, which, in Indian anthropology, take prominent shape in the production and articulation of knowledge about caste. Thus, the friction between the commemoration of Ambedkar versus the remembrance of Karve essentially stands for a long-running friction within anthropology, a friction that primarily entails differences regarding diversity and inequality. In sum, while Karve engaged not only with a racial anthropological approach that reached its apex in Germany (an approach which overemphasized the differences among groups as markers of biological, hereditary differentiation), but also with the structural-functionalist traditions of social anthropology (to explain how ‘the caste system’ organized society), Ambedkar was inspired by the liberal anti-racism of the Boasian school of cultural anthropology, which still centrally informs anthropology’s attitudes to or departure from race and racism. Thus, a key dividing line that opened up this insurmountable gap between Ambedkar and Karve runs through Germany and debates about race: it crystallized in the opposition, led among others by Boas and his students, against the scientific racism that was steeped in the German-speaking physical and biological anthropology of the KWI-A tradition put forward by Eugen Fischer.

As the intellectual genealogy briefly traced in this paper has shown, taking the transnationality of the histories of these Indian anthropologists into account is key to understanding their scientific formation and its reverberances in science today. In the difference between both trajectories, we see how these scholars were marked by a key debate in anthropology: the debate on race and racism. Following the binaries of nature versus culture, or nature versus nurture, this debate formed the crucial split between biological and social or cultural frameworks in anthropology, as well as in other sciences. Understanding this history is not only the key to reconsidering and eventually bridging this conceptual dichotomy, as many scholars have striven to do;²³ it is also crucial to comprehending a fundamental debate and question in anthropology, namely how to assess both diversity and inequality, as well as their mutual constitution. While diversity is usually framed in biological and cultural terms, inequality is usually relegated to the realm of the social, and the co-constitutive dynamics between these different realms, by effect

²³ See, for instance, Haraway (1997, 2016), Ingold and Pálsson (2013), Subramaniam (2013, 2014). For a discussion of this, including the matter of racism, from the perspective of biological anthropologists, see Fuentes (2021), Cabana *et al.* (2022).

of the ensuing (sub)disciplinary separations, often remain disregarded. In this sense, continuing this conceptual and inter-subdisciplinary debate in relation to race and racism will be an important key to discussions in Indian anthropology on how to approach caste and casteism.

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