

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Irawati Karve: Introduction

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing our discussion on some of the important people who shaped sociology and social anthropology in its formative years. And in this week, we have been discussing the Indological approach and we already had, I think two sessions talking, one session trying to understand what is Indological perspective and then two sessions on maybe one of the most important figures in the Indological tradition that is G.S. Ghurye. In the previous class we had a discussion of one of his very popular articles on the features of caste system.

So, today we are looking at yet another important person that to a lady sociologist and anthropologist, Professor Irawati Karve. And she is, so I have this very useful essay written by Professor Nandini Sundar. This essay is again taken from the edited book by Patricia Uberoi, Satish Deshpande which is titled, which is an edited book on the development of anthropology in India. I have mentioned that book in the reference section in one of the previous classes.

So, let us get to that article. It is a lengthy article which looks into her biological background, her family situation, her educational trajectory and it also has very detailed analysis about her academic career, her professional career. So, we may not be able to go into each one of them in depth, but I hope to provide you with a very broad overview of her life and work. Let us go to the essay. So, this is the title, the course of anthropology, life and work of Irawati Karve by Nandini Sundar.

So, one of the most important points about Professor Irawati Karve is not only her seminal contributions to the formation of sociology and its orientation in a very particular manner. But also, because she was one of the or she was the, Irawati Karve was India's first woman anthropologist at a time when sociology and anthropology were still developing as university disciplines and here is a family photograph and this is Professor Irawati Karve sitting in this right-hand side. Others are her mother and her father-in-law and her husband. So, she was also the founder of anthropology at Pune University, an Indologist who mined Sanskrit text for sociological features, an anthropometrist a serologist and paleontologist, a collector of folk songs, a translator of feminist poems and

Marathi writer and essayist of no mean repute whose book *Yuganta* transformed our understanding of the Mahabharata. So, it is a very, very, it is a towering personality in terms of her academic credentials are considered.

She was a trained anthropologist and that too trained in a kind of physical anthropology. She was also into the paleontology, she was a collector of folk songs and also Marathi writer and this book is very, very important and popular. So, it is a very important personality in terms of her academic contribution. But Nandini Sundar makes an argument that even though she had made so much of huge contributions, her works are not kind of discussed in the contemporary period. Yet, although Karve was very well known in her times, especially in her native Maharashtra and gets an honorable mention in standard histories of sociology and anthropology, she does not seem to have had lasting effect on the discipline in the way some of her contemporaries such as Bose, Ghurye, Elvin or Dumont had and we will, she tried to understand why that kind of a situation that happened.

So, again the kind of work that Karve did was very, very broad in terms of its intellectual orientations and it was very, very courageous for her to have looked into so many different areas. So, Karve's work stretched from mapping kinship and caste underpinned by anachronistic, anthropometric and linguistic surveys. Anthropometric survey is something what was very, very common during that time where people's physical features were measured on the basis of using some specific scales. And these scales were used to categorize people into these indices were formed on the basis of peoples physical or physiological features like the cephalic index or the nasal index or the height of the body, the proportion of the body and on the basis of this anthropometric people were categorized into different races. So, anthropometric and linguistic surveys are surprisingly contemporary surveys of the status of women using census data, urbanization, weekly market, dam displaced people and pastoralists.

Equally perhaps it is her life as an unconventional woman of letters and her dedication to scholarship her cosmopolitanism as well as immersion in a particular regional context that will continue to be of interest. It is a very interesting personality while she had the opportunity to go to Germany and then have had her education there, but still she was of course a feminist, but still, she had very, very important influence of Maharashtra culture on her. So, that is very interesting set of observations that they are making. Now, the practice of research from Puneri Brahmin to professional anthropologist, it is a biological sketch, you can read this if you are interested, I am just touching upon some of the important things.

Recent histories of introduction of Anglo education in western India note that rather than

representing greater universalization of access to education, colonial education policies in fact helped to consolidate small groups of upper caste particularly Brahmins in the new professions like civil service, law, journalism and teaching. A prominent among this upper caste were the Chitpavan Brahmins who had dominated social and political life under Peshwas and now moved to restore their position from the relative decline they had suffered after the initial establishment of the British rule. And this is the story must be true with every region, the initial waves of modernization was made use by the people who belong to the upper caste and upper class and they embrace this possibilities of education foremost and then made use of going abroad, getting a professional degree and then which helped them to occupy a more settled prestigious job in India. And it is an elaboration about how Iravati Karve who was born into a very illustrious family made use of that. Gender as Chakrabarti points out was critical to both reformist and the orthodox, each of whom identified the real Hindu tradition with their particular stance on gender and quoted from the shastras to prove that.

While the orthodox upheld Brahminical patriarchy, the reformist merely sought to moderate it with paternal humanism among other things in order to make women into suitable helpmates for a new class of educated man. It is a, Uma Chakrabarti is very important, it is a very interesting work about how gender was understood and negotiated in this early period of reformism because gender was a concern for both orthodox as well as the reformist. But each of these discourses worked within a kind of a very given set of parameters, very interesting set of analysis. So, this particular section basically tries to locate Iravati Karve's position as an upper caste Brahmin woman who was born in that particular time and how her life trajectory was influenced by these larger mechanisms. Iravati studied philosophy at Ferguson college graduating in 1926.

She then got the Dakshina Fellowship to work under G. S. Ghurye, head of the department of sociology at Bombay University. In the meantime, she married the chemist Dhinakar Dhondo and there are discussions about how Dhinakar Dhondo had already gone to Europe to get his education and that he encouraged Iravati Karve to go for a higher studies, for a PhD there in Germany. And even though her father-in-law was seen as a reformer, he was not in favour of sending her, his daughter-in-law to Germany but his, her husband persisted.

So, she finally, she had an opportunity to go to Germany. So, those biographical things are given there very, very interesting set of points. Yeah, and some interesting vignettes about her personal life as well. Not only did Iravati and Dhinakar call each other Iru and Dinu, their children call them by those names as well, something again, not very common. This was an often source of amusement or surprise to the children's friends as was Iravati Karve's refusal to wear any signs of married Hindu woman such as Kunkum

or Mangal Sutra.

She was also the first woman in Pune to ride a scooter. Her appearance was evidently an important factor in the overall myth of her persona. Almost everyone who wrote about her or who described her to me emphatically emphasized how imposing she was, tall, fair and well built. So, her personal life, how distinctly she decided to leave that kind of a personal life. Despite her disregard for convention, Iravati Karve's was essentially a middle-class Hindu life.

Her interest and scholarship made possible by particular Hindu reform mindset. Reformist Pune Brahmins retained a sense of tradition, a way of introducing a Maharashtrian audience to the wider world through the middle-class sensibility and she also kind of epitomized that. So, there are, that is a point getting emphasized here. Now, the next section, Guru shishya tradition in anthropology, it talks about her relationship with, her studentship with G.S. Ghurye and how that influenced. Tasting the intellectual antecedents of a scholar can be hard and somewhat speculative task. In Karve's case, there appears to be at least four major influences in her work. The first was an Indological tradition to which both her MA supervisor G.S. Ghurye and she subscribed. The second was an Ethnological tradition which manifested itself in surveys of caste and tribes within India and had broader affinities with what later came to be called as a Diffusionism. And Diffusionism again, we discussed in the previous class as in the case of when we discussed G. S. Ghurye. The third influence was that of a German Physical Anthropological tradition which attempted to provide a genetic basis for the existence of a variety of groups which she imbibed during her PhD in Germany. In her case, fortunately, this was shown of its racist implications. You know that this particular kind of a, providing scientific explanation, providing very rational explanation for the biological differences of people was one of the major foundation for racist kind of thinking during the Hitlers time. So, the scientific racism which believed that people can be or people are different biologically, people are different genetically was the main reason why Hitler could even imagine a world of fully or world dominated by the superior genes, superior people that whom he called it as Aryans. But Nandini Sundar says that though she used this anthropometric kind of material to categorize people, she did not kind of subscribe to that kind of a racist understanding.

Finally, her own curiosity and passion for field work led her to take up new areas of research like socio-economic surveys or archaeological explorations in Sankalaya. Ghurye's influence is apparent much of Karve's work. They shared a common belief in the importance of family, kinship, caste and religion as the base of Indian society, a broad equation of Indian society with Hindu society and an emphasis on collecting empirical facts which would speak for themselves. So, this is again we have come across in the

previous class how Ghurye had this very strong belief that India represents a Hindu civilizational character, and these institutions are something very important. So, but that was heavily influenced by the centrality of Hindu religion in India.

The Indological traditions that Karve subscribed to was of a very different order from Dumont's in that there was no attempt to building or eliciting an underlying model of social relation. And this we will discuss later how what was the kind of a Indological idea that Louis Dumont subscribed to and that is very different from the kind of Indological tradition that Ghurye or other anthropologists really subscribe to that. We will discuss that later. Instead, she was an Indologist in the classical orientalist sense of looking into ancient Sanskrit text for insights into contemporary practice. And this again was one of the important forms of engaging with the or creating Indian knowledge and even now there are people who kind of want to believe or resurrect that kind of an argument.

This kind of Indology had clear affinities with ethnology and diffusionism and though tracing all the details is outside the scope of this essay. The common substratum was the European discovery of Sanskrit as a part of the Indo-European language stream and the influence of the Aryan invasion theory on the classification of Indian population. So, we again had a brief discussion about how diffusionism in Europe emerged as an alternative framework to that of evolutionism. So, here the basic idea was how different set of people, different population groups get diffused or different cultural traits get diffused among different geographic area and how new population, new countries, new people get evolved. So, that particular focus was something you know, Iravati was very much influenced with.

And yeah, one of the political implications of this was that cultural diversity within an area was prima facie evidence that its inhabitants were a racially diverse collection of migrant settlers. The diffusionist belief that the culture progress occurred as a result of inferior races coping, the superior copying, the superior upon contact or conquest also fitted well with the Orientalist theory of an Aryan conquest of the Dravidians. So, this is also the time when Aryan invasion theory was you know considered to be a very as a standard model to understand Indian society. So, her you know interest in anthropology, her interest in diffusionism and this particular history of Aryan invasion also really fitted that well. Though Ghurye, through Ghurye who was a student of Rivers at Cambridge, Karve internalized the understanding of cultural variation in society as a result of the migration of different ethnic groups and a historical approach.

Her book Hindu Society begins by noting the bewildering variety of behavioral pattern found in it and goes on to attribute it to the endogenous kin groups which he called caste and which though through her anthropometric and blood group surveys she showed to be

often distinct from each other. So, that is how she went on to study this kind of distinct groups. Then there is a discussion about her MA thesis under Ghurye, what she worked on other thing. It was on her own caste Chitpavan Brahmins. So, she says Chitpavan Brahmins and ethnic study was the title.

It is a classic example of a physical anthropology because she went on to measure the eye color of the people, she measures the other anthropometric indices combined with an Indological discussion of caste origin in the form of the Parashurama myth drawn from the popular versions of the Puranas written in the specular style of Gazetteers. So, that was how she prepared her MA dissertation and original research. And then she moves to Germany for doing a PhD. German anthropology at the time was dominated by a physicalist tradition owing to the fact that anthropology was generally studied as a branch of medicine, very interesting history of this development of this particular discipline. So, that definitely influence Karve's, intellectual thinking and disciplinary orientation.

Some of the support, her supervisor was somebody who was involved in this eugenics movement which believed that you can work on genetics and then create a racially, biologically superior set of people by eliminating all other inferior kind of people. So, she was accused of being a party to Nazi campaign but later he got free from that. Some of this support went when in 1933 he declared his support for the Nazis. The Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute trained SS physicians in genetic and racial care and Fisher, Fisher was the name of her supervisor, personally served as a judge in Berlins appellate genetic health court, the purpose of which was to determine who could be sterilized. So, he had a very close connection with the Nazi movement.

Fortunately, although Karve evidently imbibed some eugenics inclination from Fisher, she escaped any stronger racist influence. Perhaps one safety net was provided by her location as a colonized Indian. Again, interesting observations because if you are into a particular intellectual tradition which was, which believed in the scientificity of eugenics and as a PhD student you also would naturally follow that. But Nandini Sundar observes that did not really happen in the case of Iravati Karve, maybe also because of the fact that she was not one of these German people who could easily believe in that, but she was an Indian, a person of Indian origin. To summarize, though the combined, through the combined effects of diffusionism, colonial gazetteer style ethnology and German human genetics, it was inevitable for Karve to come to understand her task primarily as one of the mapping social and biological variations in society.

So, that turned out to be the most important task that Iravati Karve identified for herself. Then this coming section is about building academic institutions in India, how she served the department of anthropology and sociology in Pune University, so or in before that in

SNDT University and others. After returning from Germany, Karve worked for a while as a registrar of the SNDT Women's University in Bombay, where she was apparently an indifferent administrator. She also did some postgraduate teaching in Bombay. In 1939, she joined a newly revived Deccan College as a reader in sociology and this proved to be a congenial intellectual home for the rest of her life.

So, she studied, she worked in the Deccan College throughout. According to her colleague, the archaeologist H.D. Sankalia, non-interference in the work of others, faith in competence of the individuals as well as the complete freedom to plan and execute one's scheme of research within the means at our disposal was the mainly responsible for a rapid development of Deccan College.

So, yeah. Iravati Karve's work was more Indological, drawing upon ancient texts to explain the present and using anthropometric data to supplement her interpretation with the hard facts. While Damle, by his own testimony, was more concerned with the contemporary social analysis and issues of power and authority. Damle was her colleague in Deccan College. While Damle wanted to analyze the survey in terms of contemporary theory, Karve insisted merely on presenting the facts and letting people do their own interpretation. She consciously eschewed contact with any new sociological theory.

For instance, there was some consternation when Damle began to teach Talcott Parsons and Talcott Parsons is, even that time was considered to be quite an influential scholar who propounded the structural functionalist theory. Both in her research and her teaching this, Karve remained an old-fashioned anthropologist combining the four-field approach, archaeology, physical anthropology, linguistic and cultural anthropology. So, that was her forte, that was her mainstay in research, combining archaeology, and then physical anthropology, linguistic and cultural anthropology. All these discussions are about her interaction with other fellow, you know, fellow sociologists of that particular time, G.

S., D.N. Majumdar, K.N. Bose, I.P. Desai, M.N. Srinivas and others. In those days, Pune University drew students from various parts of India, particularly Kerala, where there were no sociology courses. Karve's MA course on social biology, the biological basis of human society and Indian sociology tend to be based on whatever she happened to be working on at that time or was interested in rather than a basic course which had to be covered and would combine anthropometric observations with examples drawn from Hindu epic or transmitted conversationally while she walked around the class or sat at a table. So, observations about how she taught certain papers and how her classes were kind of arranged or classes were held. Like science subjects today, where PhD students often work on aspects of a larger project initiated by supervisor.

Iravati Karve's physical anthropology PhD students were usually assigned subjects that would enforce her larger thesis about the independent origin of Jatis or caste. So, this is again something that we saw in Ghurye's case as well. He would send his students to faraway places to collect material to be used by him later without providing adequate authorship rights and other things. So, here also he says that Nandini Sundar says that Iravati Karve also made use of her PhD candidates to work on her project. So, this is a list of people who went to different places and then worked on areas that were used for that constituted the main focus of Iravati Karve's work.

Or individual stories, anecdotes, how hard it was to get money, to get these projects going, all these things. Now, her take on these ways of apprehending the world fieldwork. The best introduction Karve's fieldwork method comes from the first chapter of *Kinship Organization India*. Research started in Maharashtra in 1938-39 and extended to other places over a number of years before the book was published, finally published in 1953. I moved from region to region taking measurements, blood samples and collecting information about kinship practices and terminology.

The contacts were established through friends, students, and government officials. Supposing I had an acquaintance in Dharwad in Karnataka, I would make that my first station and then get introduced to the friends or relations whose acquaintance do in their own turn would me, would take me to their homes and villages so that I travel from place to place never knowing where my next step was to be nor where my next meal would come from. Very interesting observations about how she went on doing the kind of fieldwork, a kind of a snowball sampling if you were, may so to say. In 1950s, the kind of extensive fieldwork had lost its attraction. Yearlong intensive studies of a village or a tribe in a restricted region were in fashion and contemporary anthropological criticism of her kinship work focused on the fact that the linguistic terminology she collected was not ethnographically grounded in the life of particular caste, Dumont.

Dumont's criticism, very important criticism, we will see that later. However, ethnographic fieldwork of the Malinowskian sort is no longer seen as the only natural mode of doing anthropology involving a rediscovery of some older alternative or different national tradition. So, that is a time where there was so much of debate about the kind of ethnographic work, the old-fashioned thing of staying in a village for a year was not seen as the only way of doing research. There are examples about how she uses, illustrations about how she took the help of students and then work on a very shoestring budget to conduct studies. As she grew older and after two heart attacks, Karve stopped doing fieldwork altogether.

All her latest survey work was carried out by her co-authors while Karve helped with

the designing the questionnaire and analysis. Ironically, her scholarly work was not ethnographic. Her literary writings in Marathi were exemplars of a delicate balance between involvement, involved and detached participant observation. Her daily immersion in the social life of Maharashtra was transformed with sociologists and writers' eye into flashes of rare insights and vivid portraits of culture in some of the very nuanced passages. So, these are some of these observations made by Nandini Sundar, not how her many of their literary works or creative works were infused with sociological understandings and insights.

Now, uprising Karve's work celebrating the diversity of India, but this India according to Karve and lot of others was a seen only as a kind of Hindu India. A comprehensive bibliography of Karve's work prepared by K.C. Malhotra just after her death, list 102 articles and books in English, 8 books in Marathi, several unpublished papers and several ongoing projects. Her anthropological output in English can be grouped under four different heads, though her most important contribution was really the way in which one field, one field fed to another.

Not only is the range remarkable, but it is quite unique among her contemporaries, the kind of breadth that she had and the kind of a unique way of doing certain things. One is his physical anthropology and archaeology as we discussed, which is hardly now been studied by any of the sociologists of the present time. Anthropometric and blood group investigations and excavation of stone age skeletons. Second is cultural anthropology, kinship caste, folks' homes, epics, oral traditions which is very common today. And then socio-economic surveys, weekly markets, dam, displaced people, urbanization, pastoralist, spatial organization and finally contemporary social comment, women, language, race etc.

So, this is a very exhaustive list, very curious list of interest presented by a scholar. So, her observations about Indian society, caste, religion, family, I am not reading it out, you can read it later. These valuable cultural traits are described as tolerance and awareness of diversity. She tries to conceptualize Indian civilization as a mosaic of different cultures and identities and how it comes together. While caste and joint families may have been oppressive of specific individuals, they also provided security.

However, this diversity and tolerance are seen as largely Hindu attributes and ultimately it is a high Brahminical culture that provides direction to that unity. So, that is a very interesting idea which is again kind of revived very strongly in the contemporary times that the kind of Hindu Mythology, Hindu Ethics and Hindu Moral System is the main driving force behind Indian civilization. In this, Karve was not very different from Ghurye or indeed most other Indian sociologists to the present who have followed a path

of benign neglect towards minorities, those Muslims and Christians and were not actively excluding them from the definition of Indian culture. And that is very evident now, these minorities irrespective of whether they are too tiny minority or not, they are not seen as a kind of a national self. Indeed, Indian sociology has by and large been unable to free itself from the standard Hindu consensus.

Its Hindu character often concealed through the rhetoric of nationalism and social universality about the greater tolerance of Hinduism. The unity of India has always been a cultural unity based on an uninterrupted literary and religious tradition of thousands of years. The learned Brahmin to whatever region he belonged reads Vedas, Brahmanas, Smritis. Whether it was drama or poetry or grammar or politics or logics or philosophy, whatever excellence or mediocracy was created up to the threshold of this recently, owed it from or mattered to classical or Vedic literature. So, she is very clear that she understands it as a linear connection with Vedic literature and Vedas.

However, there is no attempt even at a sociological understanding of how differently Christianity and Islam might operating in the Indian context. Equally importantly, because the sociological tendency to see religion as a social glue as a fetishized equivalent of society itself, sociologists have been unable to escape from the rap of colonial historiography even when attempting supposedly historical reading of culture. While Karve conceded that linguistic regions crosscut religious unity, here again Muslims and Christians are seen as deviant elements and the blame for partition laid solely at the doors of the Muslim League. So, there are some very maybe problematic observations about Muslims in this particular paragraph. So, Nandini Sundar says that she also belonged to a group of intellectuals in that particular time who imagined India basically as a Hindu India.

The need to acknowledge pluralism is also evident in her view of social issues like language and schooling. She retained a strong Marathi nationalism which is probably enhanced by the Samyukta Maharashtra movement and refused to concede Hindi superior status as a national language or allow English to dominate access to civil service. All primary education she insisted must be in one of the regional languages and there should be no English medium schools at all, an argument that we might find it problematic. Now, her major contributions, one is the mapping of the kinship organizations in India, it is supposed to certainly one of her most important works. Karve's first major book and for which she was perhaps best known was preceded by a number of articles examining kinship terminology and usages in different parts in India, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and comparing them to terms and practices found in the Vedas and the Mahabharata and then folk traditions.

So, this is an elaboration about how she looked at kinship patterns in India looking into different linguistic, different variations. Kinship patterns are mapped onto linguistic zones to come up with the following variation, Indo-European or Sanskrit organizations in the northern zone, then the Dravidian kinship in the southern zone, central zone of mixed patterns found in Maharashtra and Mundari kinship systems of the east. Within each linguistic region there are variations between caste and sub-caste. The unity in all the diversity was provided by the Shuddhi literature, that is Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads and epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana which she reads as sociological and psychological status of the Joan family in ancient North India. So, this kinship organization though it was one of her major works was very vehemently criticized by Dumont and Pocock.

So, that is what is written here. However, the reputation of the book never quite recovered from the demolition job performed by Dumont and Pocock in the first issue of contributions to Indian sociology. We charged Karve with a lack of conceptual precision, insufficient localization of the kinship terms, a haphazard clubbing of terms which make it difficult to say which term for father goes with which term for uncle and also makes a structural analysis impossible and an absence of an attention to what these kinship terms mean to people in practice. So, they were very critical of her this work of this particular work. Maybe very harsh characterization, it is an example of how valuable information can be sterilized for the use of future research by an imprecise formulation, very very harsh criticism indeed.

Now, some of these recent observations about by about Iravati Karve. While Trautmann claims that his work was an extension of the historicist approach, Uberoi regards Karve as a pioneer of the indigenous feminist perspective on the Indian family. Her central contrast of north and south Indian kinship evolved revolved around differences in marital arrangements as seen from the viewpoint of women. Marriage with kin versus marriage with strangers, marriage close by versus marriage close by versus marriage at distance. Similarly, she evaluated modern changes in family life. For instance, the modification of Dravidian marriage practice in the direction of the, in the direction of the northern model from the viewpoint of their possible effects on the women's life.

Yeah, this all again Karve's work on caste is collected in Hindu society and interpretation, though this book too was preceded by several articles on what caste mean culturally. And anthropometrically details about her work. Yeah, elaborations about you know different articles, different ideas, I do not think that we need to go into the details. And the next section is about socio-economic surveys, the way she conducted survey. Significant part of Karve's output is in the form of socio-economic surveys or what today would be seen as an applied anthropology or policy studies.

When the relationship between sociology and policy has always been contested, the dominance of Delhi school style of sociology over regions and ethnography over statistical surveys in the received national history has often tend to conceal this links that it exists. So, she was somebody maybe for the first time undertook in a large-scale survey among different caste and different religious group and later we lost track of that kind of a particular methodological orientation, which you know came to be, yeah especially Delhi school was not something in favor for that. It's all descriptions about how she went and then did very systematic works in different regions in the rural Maharashtra and other places in in Faltan villages others. So, yeah so then Nandini Sundar comes with the kind of a conclusion about how you know there is little doubt that Iravati Karve saw science as her vocation almost the way equivalent of the social services in the university arena.

In concluding it might be useful to summarize what this vocation meant in the Indian context in the critical middle decades of the last century. So, it is a concluding part given by by Nandini Sundar. Yeah. With all this however science was her vocation because she had that inward calling and enthusiasm and curiosity with which she engaged the world at a passion that still shines bright for us these many decades later. So, it is a very lengthy essay I think around 60, 57 pages, but provides you with a very detailed information of a scholar who may be one of the front runners in establishing sociology and anthropology in India that too a woman that in early period.

So, with a set of intellectual insights and intellectual curiosities shaped by the dominant trends of that particular time. So, if you get an opportunity to read this essay read it closely it is a very interesting essay by bringing in the personal and the professional dimensions of Iravati Karve. So, let us stop here. Thank you.