



Karna (The Unsung Hero of Mahabharata: The Voice of the Subaltern)



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Abstract

My research paper entitled ‘Karna- The Unsung Hero of Mahabharata: The Voice of the Subaltern’ appealed me a lot personally, as though this paper I did not just get the pleasure of reading several books but also got chance to do research on the greatest epic Mahabharata. Mahabharata is considered the greatest epic among all the grants and holy book, however, seeing it through the eyes of Karna, is entirely different as he is not just the greatest archer but also the unsung hero whose life is not less than any inspiration for all of us.

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1. Introduction

It is said that whatever is not described in the Mahabharata does not exist, even the Ramayana and all the Puraanas are summarized in this epic. The greatest of all Puraanas, the Srimad Bhagavata Maha Puraana are present there in Mahabharata. There are so many characters in the great epic Mahabharata but Karna comes across as the most evocative one. One cannot but be awed by his towering personality and sheer strength of character, and at the same time help to identify oneself with the moments of frailty in his tragic life. It is the realistic mix of nuances that makes Karna such a credible and lifelike character. The intriguing story of a hero who despite being born to royalty was brought up lovingly by a lowly charioteer and his wife, his whole life was one great struggle against cruel destiny and all the odds placed in his way by the inequities of his time.

In the process, he blazed a new trail glory, emerging as the greatest epitome of Purushakaara (Manly Effort), with tremendous achievements both as a man and also as a warrior... The more we research about the epic more convinced we became about Karna the unsung hero of Mahabharata who never gets his due. Most of us understand the Mahabharata as the story of a great war- revolving around the Pandavas, how they suffered at the hands of their cousins, and how they were protected at every stage by Shri Krishna. But we always ignore the fact

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that the eldest Pandava was Karna who could never get his due. How unfortunate and tragic it is that he actually had to be associated with the very enemies of the Pandavas and how he himself bore this burden and still continued to behave as an exemplary hero, committed to fulfilling his pledged duty. He will perhaps always be remembered more as a loyal friend of Duryodhana and less as the eldest Pandava or the eldest son of Kunti. The story of Karna begins with the misfortune of his secret birth and unfolds itself amidst the unremitting gloom of injustice and insult. At every stage in his life he had to endure immense hardships and yet never did he deter from the path of righteousness. But then, he gets no credit for his greatness, particularly when he was surrounded by evil on account of his friendship with Duryodhana and company. Born out of wedlock to Kunti and Surya, the Sun God, Karna is abandoned by his mother at birth, a self-made hero whose lot was to contend with the myriad unfortunate interventions of the fate against him.

2. Research Method

Research means to investigate more about particular content. For this paper, I have referred several books and also made notes so that I can focus on my paper and I had tried my best to cover all the details required for the paper. I have referred to various reference books written on Mahabharat and several research papers available online.

3. Results and Analysis

Once upon a time one of the ancestors of the Royal House was Shantanu who was married to Ganga. They had a son Devarata, who later came to be known as Bhishma because of the terribly difficult vow he took in order to establish father Shantanu to marry Satyawati the daughter of a fisherman as his second wife. She gave him two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Both died without any children Devarata had taken a vow of celibacy so that there could never be any child of his who could ever claim the throne. The magnitude of the sacrifice gave him the name Bhishma. Ironically Satyawati now was forced to ask him to beget children on the widow of Chitrangada and Vichitravirya but he refused in keeping with his earlier vow. Satyawati was then compelled to call upon her illegitimate son Vyasa, born before her marriage to Shantanu, through Parashar Rishi, to beget descendants of the two widow, Ambika, and Ambalika. Vyasa being very ugly, the widow of Vichitravirya closed her eyes at his approach and consequently gave birth to a blind son, Dhritarashtra. The widow of Chitrangada turned pale and gave birth to a male child, Pandu. A third child, Vidura, was born to Vyasa from a royal maid. He was the only one who was normal among the three children.

The sons grew up and Bhishma arranged the marriage of his nephews, Dhritarashtra married Gandhari and begot a hundred sons, the eldest being Duryodhana. Pandu had two wives Kunti and Madri. Kunti already had an unacknowledged son Karna from Surya before marriage. He was brought up by Adhiratha, a charioteer and his wife Radha after Kunti abandoned him. He suffered ignominies all his life being branded a charioteer's son and hence a charioteer. Kunti gave Pandu three sons, Yudhishtira from Dharma, Bhima from Vayu and Arjuna from Indra. Madri had twins, Nakula and Sahdev from the Ashwins.

Although Pandu was younger; he was made king because of his brother Dhritarashtra's blindness. However, he died prematurely and Dhritarashtra assumed royal power. The five Pandavas or the sons of Pandu were educated at the royal court of Hastinapura together with the hundred Kauravas, sons of Dhritarashtra; Ashvatthama, the son of Drona and Karna were the two other students taught by the two Brahmana gurus, Dronacharya and Kripacharya.

There were constant rivalry and animosity between the two branches of the Kuru family, the sons of Pandu and those of Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, plotted to get rid of the Pandavas in connivance with his younger brother Duhshasana and his maternal uncle Shakuni, by inviting them together with their mother Kunti to reside in a house made of lac. The Pandavas being warned by Vidura escaped from it to the forests after setting it on fire. The Kauravas, believing the Pandavas to be dead, performed their funeral rites. In the forest, the Pandavas were attacked by the Rakshasa Hidimba but Bhima disposed of him and married his sister, with whom he had a son Ghatotkacha who fought valiantly for his father in the Kurukshetra war.

In the meantime, Drupada the king of Panchala, whose territory had been partly conquered by Arjuna at the instigation of Dronacharya, was holding a Swayamwara for his daughter Draupadi. The Pandavas went there disguised as Brahmans. Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna proclaimed that anyone who could pierce the eye of a fish hanging from a height while looking at its reflection below in the water would obtain Draupadi as his wife. Prince after prince tried and failed. At last Karna got up as he was likely to succeed and was the cynosure of all eyes, but Draupadi refused, she would not she said; accept a charioteer as her husband. Afterward raised Arjuna

disguised as a Brahmana and won Draupadi's hand. The furious prince tried to kill him and Drupada but was defeated by Bhima and Arjuna. The five Pandava brothers took Draupadi to Kunti who made her the common wife of all of them. Krishna and Balarama congratulated them and their identity was revealed. Dhritrashtra gave them half the kingdom and they settled in Indraprastha.

In order to maintain harmony between the five Pandavas brothers, it was agreed among them with Draupadi. Once Arjuna entered while Yudhishtira was with her and consequently decided that he had to go into exile, although Yudhishtira tried his best to dissuade him. He had many adventures both heroic and amorous. He carried her away aided by Krishna with whom his friendship grew day by day. Meanwhile, he got married to Subhadra who gave him a son, Abhimanyu who later played a heroic role in the Battle of Kurukshetra.

The Pandavas embarked upon a series of conquests which gave Yudhishtira the right to assume the title of the "Ruler of the World". Consequently, he got ready to perform the Rajasuya Yagya to which all the neighboring princes were invited. Duryodhana and his brothers also participated in it but Duryodhana, on seeing Yudhishtira's wealth and power, became full of envy and hatred. Shakuni hatched a scheme of inviting the Pandavas to a game of dice as a means of humiliating them. He was an expert cheat and hence confident of defeating the Pandavas. The old king Dhitrashtra, blinded by the love for his sons, allowed the game to be held after some hesitation. Yudhishtira staked all his material possessions one by one, then his brothers, himself and finally, Draupadi. She was dragged to the court by Duhshasana and molested and humiliated openly in front of all the elders of the Kuru clan. The enraged Bhima swore to drink his blood and when Duryodhana exposed his thigh to her, he also swore to break it as revenge. A frightened Dhritrashtra, on Draupadi's request, gave the Pandavas their freedom and their kingdom. Duryodhana's passionate desire for the throne and his insatiable hatred for them made him persuade his father to recall them for another game. This time, the stake was thirteen years of exile for the loser of which the thirteenth was to be lived incognito failing which the period of exile would begin all over again. The Pandavas, as was to be expected, lost and prepared to go into exile.

Mourned by the public, the Pandavas left for the forest. Vidura pleaded in vain with Dhritrashtra to recall them. Krishna visited them in the forest and urged them to fight supported by Bhima and Draupadi but Yudhishtira decided to keep their word and fulfill the wager. Arjuna spent five years in Indra's heaven in quest of weapons. During this time, the other brothers and Draupadi visited holy places and listened to stories of holy men and warriors. Rishi Brihadashva told them the story of Nala and Damayanti to console them. They were attacked several times by rakshasas but each time they were saved by Bhima. Arjuna returned with secret weapons. They lived for four years in the garden of Kubera. Back in the forest, they listened to tales and instructions of holy men. Duryodhana decided to visit them in the forest only to humiliate them but was imprisoned by the Gandharvas and, to his utter discomfiture, had to be rescued by the Pandavas, Karna did many conquests on behalf of Duryodhana who consequently assumed the title of a supreme monarch. Draupadi was abducted by Jarasandha, the king of Sindhu, and the husband of the Duhshala, the sister of the Kauravas but was rescued by the Pandavas.

The Pandavas sought to alleviate their depression in exile by listening to the stories of Rama, Sita, Savitri, and Satyawana and other such tales. Then there is the tale of the Yaksha of the lake. He questioned the four Pandavas before allowing them to drink water. Unable to give him answers and arrogantly defying him, they were laid on the bank by the Yaksha but were rescued by Yudhishtira who restored them to life by answering his questions with humility.

By now twelve years had elapsed and the Pandavas had to begin the last year of their exile during which they had to live incognito. They entered the service of King Virata- Yudhishtira as his counselor, who also played dice with him; Bhima as a cook; Arjuna disguised as Brihannala, as a dance teacher; Nakula as a horse tamer; Sahadeva as a cowherd and Draupadi as the queen's chambermaid. Bhima also distinguished himself as a wrestler in Virata's court. When the King's brother-in-law Keechaka tried to molest Draupadi, she was rescued by Bhima who strangled him to death. The Pandavas also helped Virata to defeat the Trigartas and the Kauravas. At the end of the thirteenth year, Virat gave his daughter Uttara in marriage to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu.

Attempts were made by the Pandavas to arrive at a settlement with the Kauravas while simultaneously enlisting allies in case a war had to be undertaken Krishna was approached by both sides. He agreed to help Duryodhana by giving him his army but himself supported Arjuna. King Shalya became Karna's charioteer but promised Yudhishtira that he would maneuver the chariot in a way that Karna was placed in an unfavorable position. Dhritrashtra and Gandhari attempted to persuade Duryodhana to make peace with the Pandavas but failed. Kunti revealed his actual parentage to Karna in order to win him over to the side of her sons but he

rebuffed her. Krishna also tried to persuade him to support the Pandavas as their eldest brother but he decided to remain loyal to Duryodhana. He, however, promised Kunti that he would let her four sons go but the combat between him and Arjuna would be decisive. Either Arjuna would live or Karna. Kunti would thus remain the mother of five sons. Both armies marched towards Kurukshetra, the Kauravas commanded by Bhishma and the Pandavas by Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi's brother.

Sanjay related the events of the war to Dhritarashtra by the special gift of sight given to him. Arjuna faced with the prospect of war with his kinsmen and elders was caught in a dilemma necessitating the teachings of Krishna that form the Bhagwadgita. For the following ten days, heroes on both sides fought determinedly, at the end of which the Pandavas went at night to consult Bhishma Pitamaha. He told them that he would not take up arms against a woman. Hence, he would not fight with Shikhandin, Drupada's daughter who later lived as a man and who had been Amba in his/ her previous birth. She had been harmed by Bhishma and had vowed to be the cause of his death. Accordingly, Shikhandin is sent to the battlefield with Arjuna who pierced Bhishma with his arrows hidden behind him/her. Both armies gathered around Bhishma and then left him lying on a bed of arrows.

Drona succeeded Bhishma as the Commander of the Kaurava army. Jayadratha, Duryodhana's brother-in-law, succeeded in isolating Abhimanyu and together with the Kauravas army, they killed him although he was unarmed. Arjuna avenged Abhimanyu's death by killing Jayadratha the following day. Ghatotkacha, Bhima's son came to his father's aid and provoked Karna enough to make him use the special spear given to him by Indra in exchange of his armor and earrings and eventually making him powerless to use it against the Pandavas. Then, Drupada and Virata were killed by Drona. Later, at the instigation of Krishna, Bhima killed an elephant called Ashwasthama and called loudly that Ashwasthama was dead. Yudhishtira was persuaded to repeat the cry in order to convince Drona that his son had indeed died. Dejected, he threw away his arms and entered a state of deep meditation when he was beheaded by Dhrishtadyumna bringing the fifteenth day of the battle to an end.

Karna took over as the commander of the Kaurava army after Drona's death with Shalya as his reluctant charioteer. Bhima took his revenge on Duhshasana, tearing his breast open and drinking his blood. A fierce duel ensued between Arjuna and Karna. Karna's chariot wheel got stuck in the mud and, egged on by Krishna and eventually, Arjuna killed him.

Shalya now became the Kaurava general and in a one to one fight was killed by Yudhishtira. Sahadeva killed Shakuni. Defeat starved the Kauravas in the face as apart from Duryodhana, only three warriors were left on their side-Ashvasthama, Kripa, and Kritavarman. Duryodhana was found by Bhima who challenged him and fought him with his club. On the instigation of Krishna, he hit him unfairly on his thigh and kicked him with his left foot. Krishna went off to console Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. Ashwasthama took over as the Kaurava commander.

Ashwasthama, Kripa, and Kritavarmana attacked the sleeping Pandavas at night. However, Krishna, the five Pandava brothers, and Satyaki were absent from the camp at that time and were escaped. Ashwasthama strangled Dhrishtadyumna, the slayer of his father and mercilessly butchered Draupadi's sons and Shikhandin. Demons came out to feed on the dead flesh. Krishna did not kill Ashwasthama as he was a brahmana but cursed him to wander for three thousand years shunned by all.

At the end of the eighteenth day, the Pandava brothers went to meet Dhritarashtra and Gandhari who received them without bitterness. The Kaurava ladies came to the battlefield and Gandhari, the mother of the slain hundred sons, cursed Krishna for not having prevented the slaughter. The funeral rites were performed at which Yudhishtira discovered the true identity of Karna much to his sorrow. Then all concerned retired to the banks of Ganga.

Yudhishtira, now aware of the true identity of Karna and totally disillusioned by the carnage of war, wanted to expiate his sin of fratricide and the destruction caused by the war by retiring to the forest. He was dissuaded from doing so and was installed on the throne. The Pandavas, accompanied by Krishna, returned to the battlefield to be instructed by Bhishma lying on his bed of arrows on the duties of a king, the law at the time of calamity and the law of charity or dana.

Bhishma discoursed continuously on diverse subjects like the law of Karma, respect for Brahmanas, marriage, and inheritance, the sanctity of the cow, funeral rites, feasts and offerings and union with Krishna. After his discourse, Bhishma announced the time of his death and in front of a great concourse of people, his soul ascended to heaven.

Yudhishtira was advised to perform the horse sacrifice or Ashvamedha Yagya. At Arjuna's request, Krishna summarized the Gita. This is known as Anu Gita. Uttara, Abhimanyu's widow, gave birth to a stillborn son, who was restored to life by Krishna and was named Parikshit. Preparations began for the horse sacrifice. The horse

was let loose and Arjuna was appointed to follow him for a year at the end of which the horse was to be sacrificed and the Pandavas cleansed of all their sins.

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari lived for fifteen years with the Pandavas at the end of which they retired to the forests accompanied by Vidura, Kunti, and Sanjaya. The Pandavas visited them in the forest with Draupadi. Vidura died and his spirit entered Yudhishtira. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti, and Sanjaya were granted the capacity to see their dead relatives in the other world by Vyasa. After two years, Yudhishtira got the news that they had all perished in a forest fire.

The curse of Gandhari took effect. Krishna's brother Balarama was killed in a club fight. His clan destroyed itself. Dejected, he lay down in a forest and was accidentally killed by a hunter, Jara. The five Pandava brothers left the affairs of the kingdom in the hands of Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson and retired to the Himalayas accompanied by Draupadi. One by one all died except Yudhishtira who refused to enter heaven without his dog. It was revealed that the dog was actually Dharma in disguise and that Yudhishtira's dharma was in fact only being tested. Indra promised Yudhishtira that he would see his brothers and Draupadi.

On reaching heaven, Yudhishtira saw Duryodhana seated on a throne but not his brothers and Draupadi. He asks to be led to where they were and he was taken to hell where he saw them being subjected to the worst of tortures and torments. He was astonished and stunned but chooses to stay with them in hell rather goes to heaven all alone by himself. Indra appeared to tell him that this was all an illusion and the last test of his steadfastness. He was taken to meet his brothers and Draupadi who was revealed to be the incarnation of the goddess Sri or Lakshmi and all the Pandavas, the incarnations of various deities.

"It was that man again. That man, with his thick mane, brooding eyes and twinkling earrings, walked towards her, his gold armour glittering so fiercely under the blazing sun that it was blinding. His intense radiance threw tormented shadows and snuffing it abruptly while she stood there, her arms extended, against the vast emptiness of sand"... (Kane, 1)

The story of Karna begins with the misfortune of his secret birth and unfolds itself amidst the unremitting gloom of injustice and insult. A long time ago, a beautiful young princess named Kunti lived with her Uncle, King Kuntibhoj, in a lovely palace along the banks of a wide river. One day Maharishi Durvasa visited the palace of Kuntibhoja. He stayed there for almost a year. During his stay Kunti was given the responsibility of attending to his needs. Kunti served the Maharishi with great reverence without caring for her own comfort. The sage had a very peaceful and happy stay and wanted to reward Kunti for her services. Maharishi said, "Child, one day you will need the help of the Gods. I am going to teach you a secret mantra for inviting the Gods into your life. Be very careful with this mantra! Use it wisely." (Sperling, 5) Early the next morning Kunti was playing by herself in the royal garden. The sun had risen and Kunti watched its rays touched a flower here, a leaf there. She felt its warmth on her skin. She thought about the Sun God waking up the whole world. Forgetting her promise to Durvasa, she began to recite the mantra. She closed her eyes and concentrated the way she had been taught to summon the Sun-God Surya who is compelled to give her a child, fearful that a child conceived before marriage may ruin her reputation, Kunti places the child- born with natural armour and divine earrings- in a wicker basket. She coated the basket with the wax to make it waterproof, and lined it with layers of the silk to make it soft and warm. She placed the baby carefully in his new bed and carried the basket to the river. Then she kissed him good-bye and set the basket afloat and whispered, "May the Sun-God watch over you always and keep you safe. May you find parents who will love you and care for you."

Downstream, Adhiratha was sitting on a rock, hoping to catch a fish for the midday meal. He was a gentleman, a charioteer by trade, and his wife Radha was a gentle and good woman. They were often sad, however, for they were unable to have children. Adhiratha cast the line out over the river and sighed again, he waded out into the current and caught hold of the basket. His surprise knew no bounds when he discovered the sleeping newborn baby inside the boat. When Radha saw the tiny baby lying peacefully asleep, she was overjoyed and said to her husband, "Swamy, it seems that our prayers have been answered. We will keep this baby and bring him up as our own" (Zutushi, 60). He replied I agree with you. He is a gift from God in answer to our prayers. In fact, he himself is Godlike with these divine earrings and armor. After consultation with the Brahmins, he was named Vasushena since he was wearing a Vasu Varma (signifying rich armor; the signification of 'wealth' in his name was further validated by his legendary generosity later in adult life). He also came to be known as Radheya or the son of Radha, and more famously as Karna (signifying ear, because he was born with the divine earrings). Radheya was outgrowing like every other young boy of his age in the village. With his

special features and personality, anybody could see that the boy did not quite belong to the category of ordinary village lads. Because of his strength and skills at any kind of game, nobody would mess up with him and he became a natural leader in the village. Although he soon lose interest in the games that other boys played, while at home he would shape beautiful clay toys. Outside the home he would be interested in wrestling or cut stout branches of trees, shaping them into bows and arrows and shooting them at imaginary targets. Seeing his son in such getup Adhiratha decided to provide him a formal education. Adhiratha was particularly tense, as he recalled how Dronacharya had initially refused to do anything with a *Suta Putra* (charioteer's son), and how he had to seek the intervention of King Dhritarashtra himself. Even after the royal intercession, Guru Dronacharya had only agreed to impart basic education and training in arms to his son. In due course both father and son entered the hut of Guru Dronacharya and touched his feet with due reverence. Karna was lodged in the section reserved for ordinary pupils and away from the section reserved for *princes and other high caste students*. After a few days when Adhiratha visited his son in his lodgings, he found him tense and somewhat angry as well. Before entering the room he had assured him that his son was very bright and a quick learner. But on entering the room he found him in a different frame of mind which made him apprehensive. On being asked, Karna started asking all sorts of questions with his father. He asked, "Baba is it a crime to be a Suta-Putra? Why do scriptures sanction this class-based discrimination? Why the princes and other so-called upper-class students should be given better food, better lodgings, and better education as compared to students like me, who seem to have an inborn stigma attached to their names? Where does my fault lie in all this?" (Zutushi, 68) Similarly, this scenario is also denoted by the term '**subaltern**' conventionally denotes *an inferior military rank, it is more generally used as 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society' often expressed in terms of caste and gender as it is being acquired at birth and is non-changeable*. The term '**Subaltern**' was coined by **Ranjit Guha** and later it was adopted by Marxist **Antonio Gramsci** and further it was discussed by **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** in her essay '**Can the Subaltern Speak?**' People consider Subaltern as the unrepresented group of people in the society, people of inferior race, not fit for making any real contribution to the society and therefore they cannot speak, but in reality subaltern can speak but others do not have the patience to listen to them and same can be seen with Karna, he is capable but he ultimately he is Suta Putra.

To console Karna Adhiratha sensibly replied, "**My dear son, during your education you will surely study scriptures and find out for yourself that they don't sanction any kind of discrimination. These divisions are all manmade and tools used by those people who wield power to subjugate those who are weak and less fortunate. Let me assure you, my son, being a Suta is not a crime. We earn our living by fair means and struggle hard to make both ends meet. Be assured there is no dishonor involved in all this. But you and I are not in a position to change the system. My advice to you is that you can earn recognition by hard work and dedication and outshine everyone with your superior capabilities. For that, you have to work very hard and convert your anger into the will to overcome the handicap of discrimination. I am sure one day you would achieve such heights as are aspired for only by the best of men**" (Zutushi, 69). To revive his son's flagging spirit, Adhiratha then recounted to him the story of Ekalavya. "My boy listens to this narrative of Ekalavya, the Nishada boy, which should help you to overcome your melancholy and guide you in future. As you know, in our social order, the aboriginal Nishadas belong to a class even lower than us Sutas. Now, this boy Ekalavya wanted to learn Archery from Guru Dronacharya. One day he went to his cottage and requested the guru to train him in that art. Guru Dronacharya refused and got him thrown out of his Ashram. But he did not lose hope. He went into the forest and constructed a clay statue of Dronacharya and started practicing archery in front of the statue, as a surrogate for the guru. In due course, he became an accomplished archery in front of the statue, as a surrogate for the guru. One day, Arjuna and other princes along with Guru Dronacharya was training in the forest at a place which was near to where Ekalavya was also practicing his art. Suddenly a dog with his mouthful of arrows appeared in their midst. Somebody had expertly fired five arrows in its mouth without harming him but ensuring he didn't bark. Everyone, including Arjuna and Dronacharya himself, was shocked at this display of sheer talent. Arjuna, who considered himself the greatest archer in the world, felt particularly let down and expressed his disappointment to his Guru. All of them went in search of this person who had done this to the dog and presently came upon Ekalavya, busy in his solitary practice session at a secluded place in front of the image of Guru Dronacharya. On being asked by Guru Dronacharya regarding the person who had taught this art to him, he pointed towards the image of the guru himself. Everyone including the guru was highly impressed at this extreme dedication and devotion. However, Dronacharya became thoughtful and after a long pause demanded Guru Dakshina from Ekalavya. The boy was elated at this acceptance by the Guru and promised to offer him anything he wanted from him. Dronacharya then demanded the thumb of Ekalavya's right hand. Without a

moment's hesitation, the righteous Nishada cut his right thumb and gave it to his guru, shocking him as well as Arjuna who, a moment ago, was feeling envious of his potential challenger to his position as the best archer in the land."

By this time Karna's marriage was finalized to Vrishali. Afterward he plunged headlong into his new project where he lost count of time. He made tremendous strides forward in this new endeavor. During one of his occasional visits to his village, he was told that his second marriage to Supriya had also been fixed. The same was subsequently solemnized. She turned out to be a very loving, sociable and intelligent. Karna fell madly in love with her and she became his confidant throughout his life. Barring these brief interruptions on account of weddings followed by birth of children, Karna did not allow anything to come in the way of the himself-imposed regime of hard training. In fact, these few years were the most peaceful time in his life. As it happens where a person works with utmost dedication to attain his cherished goal despite rejection from society, Karna became an outstanding warrior, raring to have a go at all those who sought to thwart his quest for self-actualization. Apart from his own determination, the only other force that sustained him in this great effort was the blessings of Surya, his divine Pater.

His parent's love indeed gave Karna the courage to follow his heart, and when he was old enough, he left home to seek lessons from *sage* Parasuram, who was known far and wide as the very best archery teacher. Karna knew that Sage Parsuram's school accepted only students of the Brahmin caste, but so strong was his ambition to excel at archery, he presented himself to *sage* Parasuram in a white dhoti and shawl, taking care to cover his golden shield. He had to shave his head, leaving nothing but a thin tuft of hair at the very top and looked just like a young Brahmin boy. Karna spent many years learning everything his teacher had to offer. One afternoon as the sage was taking a nap, resting his head on Karna's lap, a ghastly bug with enormous pincers landed on Karna's thigh. It tore a deep wound in the boy's flesh and blood gushed down his leg. Karna sat quietly through this ordeal. Generous as always, his first thought was for his teacher. He didn't want to disturb his nap. But sage Parasuram awoke and saw the ragged, gaping wound. He wonders who can tolerate this pain only a born warrior. He questioned Karna about the truth; Karna knew it was useless to pretend any longer. He told everything about his past. The sage was angry and hurt. "I have trusted and loved you; you are the finest student I have ever taught. But for years you have chosen to deceive me, as a consequence of your lies, when you most need them, you will forget the lessons you have learned through your deceit" (Spierling,18).

Despite such occurrence of events in Karna's life, he was endowed with a towering personality and was born with some rare human qualities which made him stand apart from his contemporaries. In particular, the spirit of sacrifice and willingness to give away anything to those who asked for the same were inbuilt into his nature. Many people including Brahmins used to wait for Karna to finish his daily morning ablutions, after which Karna would engage in his fabulous charity. A large crowd would gather outside the gates of his palace as he did not turn anyone empty-handed. One day after completing his ablutions, Karna saw a lone Brahmin standing some distance away, said in a loud voice "Bhiksham dehi" as soon as he saw Karna returning from the river. Karna enquired the Brahmin to fulfill his every wish. The Brahmin replied, "*I want you to give me the divine armor and the earrings which are part of your body from your birth*". Karna immediately realized that the Brahmin was none other than Indra himself, he took a sword in his hand, cut off his earrings and tore away the armor from his body. It was very painful and blood started flowing from his body. He handed the blood-soaked armor and the earrings to Indra, who took them with great pleasure. This selfless act of Karna was witnessed by all the Devas and Apsaras who had gathered in the sky at that time. All of them showered flowers on Karna and started singing his praise. Indra also could not remain unmoved. He appeared in his divine form in front of Karna and said, Karna, I am very pleased with you. I want you to ask for a boon or anything that you want from me. He said, Indra Deva if you want to give me something, give me your powerful weapon *Amogha Shakti*, Indra paused and said I will give you my shakti which never fails in destroying the enemy and afterward it will immediately return to its owner again.

Before the battle, Karna had a conversation with Lord Shri Krishna himself and he motivated him by saying that there is no parallel in the whole world including the Pandavas. History will always remember you as a real hero. After leaving this body you will enter the highest Loka which any human being can dream of, to which Karna replied, Keshava had you given the choice to me a while ago I would have asked you what I had done to deserve a life of rejection and suffering. But your Darshan has melted everything inside me. I am feeling like an empty vessel. Both my real as well as imaginary grievances against the world have now vanished.

Karna took over as the commander of the Kaurava army after Drona's death with Shalya as his reluctant charioteer during the battle. Karna was engaged terribly, his chariot was protected by his sons on all sides. His sons Sushena and Chitrasena provided protection on the right and the left flanks, while his eldest son Vrishasena secured the rear side. Realizing that the time for the most decisive battle of the war was near, Shri Krishna said, "Partha, prepare yourself now to fight the mighty Karna... Other than you, no one will be able to stop Karna. The time for you to fulfill your vow to kill him has come" (Zutushi, 265). Karna and Arjuna started using powerful weapons against each other, which resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. After targeting several weapons at each other Arjuna fired a divine arrow at Karna, which penetrated his armor and made him lose consciousness. Arjuna stopped for a while but Shri Krishna urged, "Partha, why do you waste precious time? Continue your attack. A warrior should never lose the opportunity to overcome a powerful opponent, particularly when he is in distress" (Zutushi, 265). While Karna was starting to gain an upper hand, suddenly the wheels of his chariot got stuck in the ground and came to a halt. This reminded him of the fateful curse he had received from the Brahmin whose cow had been accidentally killed by him. Not one to give up, Karna jumped down from his chariot and with a wave of his hand requested Arjuna to stop attacking to allow him time to pull out the wheels of his chariot. As per the *dharma* (customary ethics) of warfare, such allowance was in order. While Arjuna obliged by holding the arrow, Shri Krishna retorted harshly: "Karna, why are you seeking refuge in dharma at this time when you are in a difficult situation? Where was your concern for dharma when you insulted the innocent Pandavas in the Kaurava Sabha? Where was your dharma when you misbehaved with Draupadi? Which dharma sanctioned the killing of a seriously injured and unarmed Abhimanyu by six Maharathis? What kind of dharma did you follow when you participated with your evil friends in watching umpteen plots to harm the Pandavas? Have you forgotten all the evil deeds committed by you?" (Zutushi, 266) Karna had no answer and hung his head in shame. He bent towards the wheel of his chariot and tried to pull it free. Karna like Bhimasena was a very strong person. But despite his best efforts, he was not able to move the accused wheel even a little bit. Shri Krishna, on his part, instructed Arjuna to take advantage of the situation and fire the deadly *Anjalika* missile at Karna. While Arjuna was preparing to load the arrow on his bow, Karna noticed it from a corner of his eye. He immediately turned around and tried to invoke the *Brahma Astra*, but at that time curse given by Parasuram acted and when he actually needs his lessons help he forget all of them. Arjuna had by this time fired the crescent-headed Anjalika, taking him at Karna's neck. The arrow stuck Karna like a bolt of lightning and served his head which landed on the ground with a thud. A bright stream of light emerged from Karna's body and merged with the sun which was shining brightly in the evening sky. But the actual battlefield was enveloped by an eerie silence and the mood was somber on both sides of the divide. Everything seemed to have come to a standstill. The eyes of both Shri Krishna, as well as Shalya, were moist for different reasons. Shalya was sad while Shri Krishna knew that a brother had killed a brother. In that grievance climax of the war, nobody- not even the Pandavas themselves- would have disputed that a real hero, who lived and died for his principles had passed away.

4. Conclusion

The intriguing story of a hero who despite being born to royalty was cast away by his mother brought up lovingly by a lowly charioteer and his wife, his whole life was one great struggle against cruel destiny and all the odds placed in his way by the inequities of his time. On the psychological front, the stigma of his perceived lineage never left him. It required Adhiratha his father, to quote him the equally tragic story of Ekalavya to bring him out of depression into which Guru Dronacharya's rejection for his enrolment for higher studies had pushed him. His psyche again suffered a setback when he was debarred from the tournament on the basis of his lineage, despite being the best performer of the day. Another big shock came his way in the Swayamvara of Draupadi. The biggest ambition of any warrior is to display his powers in battle. But cruel fate even denied him that privilege when he was forced to sit out of the Kurukshetra war for the first ten days. He might have looked normal from the outside but his inner personality was surely impacted by these and many other tragedies. Rejected and insulted by society at every step, he developed some flaws engendered by a defiant spirit and nurtured by association with the devil designs of Duryodhana, his benefactor prince. But those very things seem to enhance and enliven the appeal of his character. At every stage in his life he had to endure immense hardships and yet, never did he deter from the path of righteousness. The various sacrifices he made were only one aspect of his towering, though complex personality. Sometimes it was hard to believe to what extent he could drive himself to adhere to his principles of not sending back anybody empty-handed from his presence. His commitment to his principles generosity was so strong that he knew that he was virtually giving away his own life to Indra in the shape of his armor and earrings despite having been warned beforehand by Surya-deva, his

divine father. In another instance, he broke the sandalwood panels of his own palace for charity, when he could not otherwise procure the sandalwood demanded by an old Brahmin. Before him, all of the Kaurava, as well as Pandava princes, including Arjuna, had pleaded helplessness in meeting the Brahmin's request because of the non-availability of sandalwood in Hastinapura. The commitment to his principles was so deeply embedded in his psyche that he could not breach the same even in the thick of battle and in his worst nightmares. Overall, all this made him a unique personality with no parallel among his contemporaries. Therefore Karna can be considered undoubtedly as the unsung hero of the *Mahabharata*.

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