



**“A comprehensive study on the tragic life of Karna and Eklavya: The Dalit heroes of mahabharata”**

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**Abstract**

*The epics play an important role in the lives of the people. The **Mahabharata** depicts the caste ridden society through the figures of Karna and Eklavya. Their life has been taken as the center in several works of Dalit Literature. Karna being a ‘suta’ was denied of the education of archery skills by Guru Drona. He was not even allowed to perform the feats of archery skills in the Tournament. He had to disguise himself as a Brahmin in order to take archery lessons from Parshuram. Later when Parshuram discovered Karna as a suta, he was cursed. Eklavya, the son of Hiranyadhanus, king of the Nishad’s, also shares the same fate as that of Karna. He was not accepted by Guru Drona in archery because he was a Nishad. Unable to accept the excellency of Eklavya, Guru Drona asked for his right thumb as guru Dakshina and thereby disabling him forever of the excellence. The epic reveals the humanity and greatness of Eklavya and Karna respectively. The Dalit hero Eklavya honors the lowest of the low born by paying his fees to the teacher. Karna’s actions of greatness and charity made him a grand heroic figure. This paper aims to present the Dalits, the Dalits revolt and tribal rights and attempts to seek their action and struggle through the figures of Karna and Eklavya.*

**Keywords:** (epic, suta, Nishad, Dalit, caste-discrimination, Guru Dakshina, Tragic History, Dalit Heroes, revolt)



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## Introduction

‘मस्तकँचाकिये, जातिकानामलियेचलतेहो,  
पर, अधर्ममयशोषणकेबलसेसुखमेंपलतेहो।  
अधमजातियोसेथर-थरकाँपतेतुम्हारेप्राण,  
छलसेमाँगलियाकरतेहोअंगूठेकादान।’

(रश्मिरथी / प्रथमसर्ग / भाग 3)

fo eman eht yrrac uoy hgih dleh daeh ruoy htiW'your caste, but grow up in happiness by the power of unrighteous exploitation. Shivering tremblingly from the inferior castes, you ask for your life by deceit, donating your thumb.’

(Rashmirathi/ First Canto/ Part 3)

The discrimination was rampant in the times and society of the nation. The discrimination based on caste could be seen in each and every field be it the education sector. The castes were divided into four varnas- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. The upper castes exploited the lower castes making them to suffer from various social, economic, political and religious disabilities.

The caste discrimination dates back to the times of **Mahabharata**. With its long rosters of characters, the **Mahabharata** throws light on every possible character and the various modes of life. It explains the rules of the four castes and throws light on every kind of possible human relationship, including teacher- pupil relationship.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar in the book **The Untouchables** has emphasized that the Brahmins wanted to maintain varna system so that they could enjoy the status of priestly and educationist class. The same was practiced by Guru Dronacharya and Kripacharya in the epic **Mahabharata**. Theoppressed and subjugated characters- Karna and Eklavya are taken up by many writers of Dalit literature as their subject to address the issue of caste discriminationof the dalits. There are various poets and authors who have centralized their life and character toraise the awareness about dalit suppression and discrimination by the upper castes.



The stories of Karna and Eklavya are typical example of the discrimination faced by the dalits in the society. Their story encourages the dalits and the oppressed for the emancipation from the clutches of caste discrimination. Their figures have become ideals for the dalits and the oppressed to get back their rights and dignity in the society.

### **Karna: An Ideal for All**

Karna was born out of wedlock of Kunti in her maidenhood. Due to violation of the accepted norms of the society, Kunti abandoned Karna as an infant. He was consigned to a box 'made of wicker work' and was casted into the river Aswa. He was found on the banks of river Ganga and adopted by Adiratha and Radha of the *Suta* tribe. Thus the Kshatriya prince became a charioteer's son in turn suffering discrimination from the upper caste Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

Karna entered 'like a walking cliff' and challenged the Pandava Arjuna in the Tournament exhibition which displayed the archery skills of Kuru princes hosted by Guru Drona. Karna amazed the spectators by performing the excellent feats that Arjuna had already performed and challenged him for a duel. At that moment, Kripacharya, the son of Sardavat, interrupted Suta Karna by enquiring about his lineage and parents that was needed to have a duel with Kuru prince Arjuna. The saddened heart of Karna is expressed by Dinkar as :

Caste! alas! only Caste!, in profound sadness, Karn's heart floundered, Indignant, he looked at the sun, with blazing anger, he affirmed,

“He who always shouts Caste! Caste! is one whose wealth is false arrogance,

“What do I know of caste? My caste is displayed in both my strong arms!  
( Dinkar, 2013).

This whole episode of Tournament shows oppression and victimization of Suta Karna by not only Kripacharya but by the whole upper class society who remained muted and did not give the due right to 'high- souled' Karna who was more proficient than Arjuna.

Seeing the courage and manliness of Suta Karna and realizing the right moment to serve his sinister designs to destroy the Pandavas, Duryodhana appointed him as King of Anga. This marked the beginning phase of friendship between Karna and Duryodhana. However, Karna did not take charge of the country. Instead he dawdled in the 'sinister' and 'machiavellian' schemes under Sakuni and Dusasana. Karna's friendship with Duryodhana did not bring him a higher social rank rather he was burdened under the debts of Duryodhana which Karna repayed by participating in the Mahabharatan war from the side of the Kauravas. Also, Duryodhana never offered a girl from the Kaurava family as a bride to Karna.



The greatbowman of mighty strength, Karna, desiring to fight Arjuna went to Drona for learning the *Brahma* weapon with all its mantras and the power of withdrawing it. But Guru Drona rejected his prayer for favouring Arjuna and gave the reason that none other than a Kshatriya or a Brahman should be conversed with *Brahma* weapon. This added to his exploitation and suppression of being adopted by a Suta making him a victim of caste discrimination. He disguised himself as a brahmana and went to Parshuram for learning the *Brahma* weapon for which he was later cursed.

Karna was so excellent at archery that he amazed Bhishma. Bhishma told Adiratha that “indeed your son has great quality like Kshatriya but he cannot practice weaponry as this is reserved for Kshatriyas only. If son of a suta will become archer it will go against Parampara (Tradition) which is a violation of Dharma (duty).” So in the veil of tradition and duty, a lower caste Suta Karna was not allowed to learn archery.

### **Rejection at Swayamvara**

The *suta* Karna had to face humiliation and rejection at every moment of his life. During the ‘excellent jubilee’ Swayamvara of Draupadi, when Karna went to participate as a groom, he met with dejection. Draupadi rejected him as a suit because he belonged to *asuta* tribe. She said “I will not select a *Suta* for my lord.” Thus being rejected once again on the ground of caste, Karna could only laugh. The hypocrisy of the upper castes is also shown in the Swayamvar episode. The Pandava Arjuna disguised as a Brahmin won Draupadi in the Swayamvar. The Brahmins applauded him, “A Brahmin has risen superior on the field. A Brahmin has won Draupadi.” It also depicts the way in which the Brahmins often win and married Kshatriya daughters but the same right was not given to the oppressed ones.

Krishna, ‘the slayer of Madhu’, put Karna on a test by asking him to side with the Pandava instead of the Kauravas in the Mahabharatan war. Krishna discloses to Karna about his divine birth and the identity of Kunti as his mother. Govinda lures Karna, morally being the eldest son of Pandu, with the proposal to be installed as King of Hastinapur and the prospect of enjoying Draupadi as his wife. But Karna rejects the offer. He rises to a high level of supreme beings where he rejects not only the joys of a King but also the distinction of noble birth and his true identity which he had always sought. Krishna Chaitanya opines that “Karna here rejects the distinction of noble birth for which he had always hungered, which was his birth- right and which he could easily recover now by assenting to Krishna’s proposition, he begins to recognize the categorical imperative to become a nobler being.” This test of Karna by Lord Krishna shows his magnanimity upholding the *dharma* and gaining the eternal fame and respect with his refusal to the offer and thereby entering into the ‘Gandiva fire’.



Karna had taken the vow to worship the God sun and give charity to Brahmans and “there was nothing that he would not give to the twice-born ones”. The Lord Indra disguised as Brahmana, being aware of this ever-bountiful nature of Karna and to benefit Arjuna and to remove the intense fear of Yudhishtira sought to take way the *kavachakundalas* of Karna. Karna devoted to his ‘vow’ of giving charity to Brahmanas and to preserve his ‘fame’ which has spread ‘over the three worlds’. Therefore, Karna who is well aware about the intentions of Indra of benefitting the Pandavas gives his *kavachakundalas* to ‘acquire nothing but renown’ and ‘win excellent fame and the highest heaven’. Karna crosses the boundary of *dharma* and *adharma* through this bountiful act of giving charity which no ordinary being could perform forsaking his life. He could have refused to it but he chose to give on his own being generous and in accomplishing the sacrificial task.”

Kunti for the sake of her own interest ‘beneficial’ to the Pandavas, went to the banks of the river Ganga, where Karna was offering his prayers to the Sun. The poet uses the metaphor of ‘faded garland of lotuses’ for Kunti who was stricken by the heat of the sun. Kunti had to take the ‘shade of the upper garments’ of Karna. This metaphor possibly points towards the self-interest of Kunti who wanted the invincible Karna to join the Pandavas. Kunti had done ‘great injury’ to the abandoned child Karna by depriving him of Kshatriya rites which is ‘destructive’ of his ‘achievements’ and ‘fame’. Karna, fully aware of his birth and biological mother, introduced himself as ‘son of Radha and Adiratha’ to Kunti thereby negating any claim of motherhood from Kunti. Kunti, who had never showed motherly affection to Karna and desiring her own good, along with the aid of ‘affectionate voice’ of Surya from the ‘solar circle’, acknowledged Karna of his birth and solicited him to join his brothers, the Pandavas. Karna in the purview of his Kshatriya dharma and for the sake of his friendship and ‘paying back’ to his ‘master’ Duryodhana rejected the prayer of Kunti. Karna who is larger than life gave a pledge of safety for the Pandavas except Arjuna. Karna assured Kunti that “the number of thy sons will never be less than five. Five it will always be- either with me, or with Arjuna, and myself slain.” The dalit Karna turns out to be a boon for Kunti and the Pandavas and an ideal for the Kshatriyas and the dalits too being devoid of due rights and respect as a being. This act of Karna who never lets anyone go barehand shows his magnanimity where he rises above all the beings in the act of giving.

Karna does not want to be acknowledged for his societal status. He wants to be recognized for his capabilities and hard work. He champions the cause of all downtrodden people-



**“I am their Ideal, for those who are unable to voice their pain!**

**The world may ask, but powerless are they to utter their father’s name!**

**In this world, those who have no one, nor could they call their very own,**

**in whose heart burns the craving that will remain unfulfilled for eons!” (Dinkar,2013)**

The suppressed and ‘subaltern’ hero Karna was always shadowed by the Pandavas Arjuna. Arjuna represents the upper caste in the epic and he is central to the oppression imposed on Karna and Eklavya in their life in the epic. The dalit heroes- Karna and Eklavya were denied to their right to education of the *Brahmastra* and archery skills just to outshine the upper caste Arjuna. The Dalit heroes represent the grim picture of the caste-ridden society where the dreams of low-castes were suppressed.

### **Eklavya: The Nishad Prince**

Eklavya was the young prince of the lowly Nishida tribes. He was born to Devashara and was raised by Hiranyadhanus, the King of the Nishida’s, who was commander in the army of Jarsandha(the King of Magadha). He aspired to study archery in the *gurukul* of Dronacharya but Drona rejects him as his pupil on the basis of caste. But Eklavya was determined to learn the archery skills so he made a clay image of Drona in a forest and started practicing in front of it and in time he excelled in the archery. One day, when Eklavya was practicing in the forest, he heard a dog barking, which disturbed him in the practice. So he fired seven arrows in rapid succession to fill the dog’s mouth without injuring it and this made dog unable to move its mouth. The dog approached the Pandavas and guru Drona and this made guru Drona ponder about the perfectionist who made the dog shut up. Guru Drona approached Eklavya and asked him to introduce himself and his Guru. Eklavya introduced himself as the Nishada prince and showed him the clay sculptor of his Guru. On discovering that Eklavya chose him as his master and thinking about the excellency of the boy from low tribe who has left Arjuna behind in the archery skills, Guru drona asked Eklavya for his right thumb as *guruDakshina*. This *guruDakshina* would deprive Eklavya of his excellent skills of archery. But Eklavya thinking it as moral right and duty gave away his thumb to Guru Drona.

The story of Eklavya is taken up by many writers of Dalit literature to show the chaos Brahminism creates. The Adivasis and Dalits make allegorical connections to his story. Eklavya has raised himself to the grand heights by paying his fees to the Guru but he has betrayed himself and others as pointed out by Shashikant Hingonekar:





**“If you had kept your thumb**

**History would have happened**

**somewhat differently.**

**But you gave your thumb**

**and history also became theirs.**

**Eklavya, since that day they have not even**

**given you a glance.**

**Forgive me, Eklavya, I won't be fooled now by**

**their sweet words.**

**My thumb will never be broken.”**

The parable of Eklavya is a critique of the caste order. His sacrifice proves his noble and pure devotion to guru Drona. His act has outshined Arjuna who remained a barrier to Karna also. In the story of Eklavya, “all the expectations and duties of the traditional order of society are overturned and the world is turned upside down.”

### **Conclusion**

Karna, being a victim of caste discrimination, is a revolutionary. He proves that heroism lies not in caste and community but in human spirit. The dalit literature ponders over the story of Karna so that the appreciation of human ideals among the class increases. The works based on the life of Karna is in a process an effort to bring “New Humanity”.

Karna and Eklavya could not fulfill their dreams due to the oppression imposed by the superior castes yet they nurtured an ambition of becoming the greatest archer in the world. The world needs to take a lesson from their stories who sacrificed themselves for the sake of dharma unlike the people of the upper castes. Although they were suppressed throughout their life yet their highly applauded acts have raised the lower and has given a raise to the voice of the marginalized people.

### **Note**

The quotation in Hindi and English from **Rashmirathi** at the beginning of the paper under section Introduction is taken online from [kavitakosh.org](http://kavitakosh.org).



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