

Karna

Your Complete Guide to the Mahabharata Hero

Sharath Komarraju

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Introduction

Karna is the first son of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Kunti bears him out of wedlock, before her marriage to Pandu. Fearing social censure, she abandons him soon after his birth.

The baby Karna is found and raised by a charioteer named Adiratha, and his wife Radha.

He is also a close friend of Duryodhana, the eldest of the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra who are together called the Kauravas. Duryodhana is the story's prime antagonist, and Karna becomes his prime ally in his machinations against the Pandavas.

Karna is depicted throughout the Mahabharata as a character conflicted about his identity. His behaviour is multi-faceted and often contradictory – from cruel to generous, from brave to cowardly, from loyal to ungrateful.

In this guide, we will cover everything you need to know about Karna.

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Biography of Karna

Birth

In the kingdom of Kunti, ruled by King Kuntibhoja, a young princess named Pritha is being fostered at the royal palace. Her true father is Shurasena, a king who rules a neighbouring kingdom – also called Shurasena.

(King Shurasena has a son called Vasudeva, who later marries Devaki of Mathura and becomes father to Krishna and Balarama. Pritha, therefore, becomes the paternal aunt of Krishna.)

Kuntibhoja receives a visit from Sage Durvasa, and he assigns to his foster daughter the task of looking after him. Over a period of a few months, young Pritha (she is past puberty and yet to be married, so we can place her age around fourteen or fifteen) tends to Durvasa's every need.

Durvasa is happy with the girl's attentiveness, and as a parting gift, he gives her a boon that allows her to summon any number of gods – one at a time – to her side and have sons by them.

After the sage's departure, Pritha is almost disbelieving of her luck: could it be true? Could she actually call upon the gods? Or was the sage merely playing with her?

In order to test the boon, then, Pritha calls upon the sun god, Surya – and is properly shocked when he does appear before her.

'Go away!' she pleads with Surya. 'I meant this only as a test.'

But Surya would not leave. 'I am bound by the sage's power, Princess,' he says. 'I can leave only after giving you a son.'

Abandonment

The son that is born to Surya and Pritha is said to be adorned with natural armour and earrings that emit a golden glow. These are called kavacha (for ‘armour’) kundalas (for ‘earrings’).

The kavacha kundalas of Karna are meant to make him invincible in battle. As long as he wears these, no weapon can penetrate his skin.

Surya of course leaves as soon as Karna is born, and Pritha is left to deal with the baby on her own. News of the princess having become pregnant before her marriage is bound to cause scandal, so Pritha exercises the only choice she has – of abandoning her son.

She calls for a waiting woman and asks her to put the boy inside a basket, and to let it slide downstream on the Yamuna. The basket is then found by a childless charioteer named Adiratha, who takes it to his wife Radha.

Together, they give him the name Vasusena (‘he who is born of wealth’), and undertake to raise him themselves.

Kunti and Karna’s paths diverge at this moment. From here, Kunti goes onto become queen to Pandu and mother to the five Pandavas. Karna begins his new life as a poor man’s son.

Tutelage under Parashurama

Despite being a charioteer’s son, Karna does not spend much of his early life learning his father’s trade. Adiratha and Radha presumably tell him quite early on that he is adopted, because right from a young age he begins to seek ways to move up the social ladder.

His first teacher, by all accounts, is Sage Parashurama. But with him, Karna knows that he cannot pretend to be a Kshatriya (because Parashurama is a sworn enemy of the Kshatriya race).

Karna disguises himself, therefore, as a Brahmin, and presents himself before the sage. ‘I am a poor Brahmin youth, Holy One,’ he says. ‘I wish to learn the art and craft of using weapons.’

Parashurama is only too glad to take the young man under his wing, and treats him much like a son. But one day, owing to a worm that stings Karna on the thigh, Parashurama guesses that his young ward is not a Brahmin.

For this, he curses Karna. ‘In the very moment you need these skills most,’ he says, ‘you will forget them.’

Dronacharya

Karna is then said to go on to secure a studentship under Drona. Along with the Pandavas, the Kauravas and Ashwatthama, he also (allegedly) learns his craft under the acharya.

I say allegedly because apart from a few throwaway mentions, he does not feature very strongly in this period. Also, we know from the Ekalavya incident that Drona is fiercely class-conscious. How did he agree to take a charioteer’s son into his exclusive club of princes?

Also, when Karna later appears at the graduation ceremony, all the royals in the arena act as if they’re seeing him for the first time. Indeed, Kunti faints upon catching sight of her long-lost son for the first time in years.

All of this suggests to me that Karna did *not* in fact practice under Drona. After his stint under Parashurama, he perhaps spent a year or two in the wilderness before choosing to go to the graduation ceremony.

The Graduation Ceremony

It is important to note that by the time the Kuru princes are showing off their skills, Karna has already finished his training under Parashurama. Though he was cursed by the sage, all his skills and weapons are intact.

If we consider Yudhishtir to be around sixteen at this time, we can arbitrarily place Karna’s age at eighteen. (Please note that the Mahabharata does not give us actual ages of characters – we’re often left making educated guesses. So if you say Karna is nineteen or twenty one, I am not going to argue.)

At the announcement of the graduation ceremony, Karna might have thought to himself: *If I have any chance of upgrading my status, this is it.*

Because if he presents himself as a challenger to one of the princes and gives a good account of himself, it is entirely possible that he will be given employment in the king's army.

So his strategy would be to appear at the ceremony and match the skills of the most feted of the Kuru princes.

By this time, Drona's infatuation with Arjuna is common knowledge in the city. Rumours also abound that Arjuna is the best archer among them all. So it becomes natural for Karna to aim to emulate all of Arjuna's feats.

The King of Anga

As it turns out, though, the trip yields much richer dividends for Karna than he anticipates. Not only does he turn heads by matching every one of Arjuna's skills with the bow, he also earns the friendship of Duryodhana – who crowns him king of Anga.

For someone who was hoping to earn a position in the army as a best-case scenario, this is an embarrassment of riches.

But the manner in which he secures this status is a bit convoluted: when he finishes his show of prowess, Kripacharya (Drona's brother-in-law, the Kuru princes' first teacher) asks Karna to reveal the details of his birth.

Whether this is intended to be an insult or whether Kripa was just following standard social norms, we don't know. The important thing is that Karna *perceives* this as an insult. And hesitates to answer.

Spotting this, Duryodhana rises to the support of this new warrior and says, 'It doesn't matter what this man's birth is. If he needs to be someone in order to display his skill, I shall make him king of Anga.'

And right there, in the middle of the arena, Duryodhana crowns Karna king.

Loyalty to Duryodhana

At this point, a question may occur to us: *why does Duryodhana bestow upon a virtual stranger such a lavish gift?*

One possible reason is that Duryodhana is simply a noble soul who does not like seeing injustice of this sort meted out to the unfortunate. By this theory, Duryodhana has a streak of magnanimity in him, of which this particular act is proof.

A more plausible reason, I think, is that Duryodhana – even in the few moments of watching Karna – understands that this young man will likely grow up to be the only warrior that will possess the skill to match Arjuna.

Since Bhima and Arjuna are the main pillars of Yudhishtir's strength, and since Duryodhana fancies himself as the foil to Bhima, he may have thought that if he plays the game carefully enough, he can mould Karna into Arjuna's nemesis.

We know that at the moment of Karna's arrival, Duryodhana and his brothers are in the process of walking out of the arena in disgust as Arjuna's performance draws raucous praise from everyone. So we know that the kernel of jealousy is already present in Duryodhana's heart.

As for Karna, this is the moment that seals his friendship with Duryodhana. To be sure, this is not an equal friendship; this is a friendship between a pauper and his benefactor. It is characterized by loyalty, sycophancy and fear more than the usual bonds of trust and love that define friendship in its purest form.

Ridicule by Bhimasena

It is at this point that Adiratha, Karna's adopted father, enters the arena and blesses his son with tears in his eyes. Assuming this to mean that Karna is a mere son of a charioteer, Bhimasena, in a tone of voice intended to ridicule, says out loud enough for everyone to hear:

‘So you are a Sutaputra! As befits your race, you should drop these weapons and pick up the whip, so that one day you might become an accomplished charioteer like your father. You deserve the kingdom of Anga as much as a dog deserves to taste the butter placed in front of the sacrificial fire.’

Duryodhana once again rises to his new friend's defense. ‘Cast an eye upon this youth!’ he says. ‘Look at the splendour of his ornaments, his armour – can anyone doubt that he is of high birth?’

Duryodhana here makes a reference to Karna's scars that have ostensibly been left behind after he peeled off his natural armour. This suggests that the visit by Indra to weaken Karna against Arjuna happens *before* his arrival at the graduation ceremony.

In any case, by this time, the sun begins to set, and the battle between Karna and Arjuna does not come to pass after all. Duryodhana leads Karna away, and the people of Hastinapur leave for their homes as well.

At Draupadi's Swayamvara

Karna is present at Draupadi's groom-choosing. The archery test set by Drupada, the king of Panchala, is so difficult that Duryodhana does not bother to enter it. But Karna does.

However, just as he steps up to the podium and makes to string the bow, Draupadi addresses the gathering and says, 'I do not wish to be wedded to a Sutaputra.'

Two questions arise here: first, does Draupadi have the right to prevent a suitor from trying his luck at winning her hand? (Answer: *probably yes*.) And second, is Draupadi morally right in insulting Karna as a Sutaputra even though he is now king of Anga? (Answer: *probably no*.)

After Arjuna successfully passes the test and wins Draupadi's hand, Karna challenges the third Pandava to a duel. At the same time, Shalya, the king of Madra, also challenges Bhimasena with the mace. These are the two main battles that happen at the hall of Panchala after Draupadi has been won.

Arjuna, however, easily defeats Karna in this fight. Interestingly enough, Karna does not make use of his Vasava weapon, nor do his *kavacha kundalas* help him unduly.

This is the first time after the graduation ceremony that Karna faces Arjuna in a real-life fight. He loses.

The Dice Game

Despite being the king of Anga, Karna manages to be present by Duryodhana's side at all the important events of the story. He accompanies the eldest Kaurava to Indraprastha during the Rajasuya. Along with Shakuni and Duhsasana, he makes up the 'crooked foursome' team that is always scheming against the Pandavas.

Whether he does this of his own volition or whether his presence is requested by Duryodhana, we do not know.

Also, to be fair to him, he is by no means a permanent fixture at Hastinapur's royal court. By the time of the Kurukshetra war, many characters give off-handed accounts of how illustrious a king he has become of Anga.

At the dice game, though, he plays the role of chief antagonist – and becomes the main reason for Draupadi's disrobing. He argues with Vikarna that Draupadi has been lost (with Vikarna taking the opposite view) by Yudishthir. He also goes the extra yard by suggesting that Draupadi is nothing but a whore for having wed five husbands.

Enmity with Arjuna

It is often puzzling to work out exactly why Karna considers Arjuna his prime enemy.

At the beginning, before his arrival at the graduation, it is understandable that Karna views Arjuna as his main target to emulate. Only by matching the skill of the 'best of Drona's pupils' can he hope to catch the eye of the public.

But after his appointment as the king of Anga, there is precious little that happens to justify the hatred he professes to feel for Arjuna. Yes, he loses a battle to him at Draupadi's swayamvara. But that's hardly a reason for hate. After all, everyone who fights against Arjuna in any kind of battle loses to him.

So, what gives? I can only imagine that Karna takes this mantle of being the designated Arjuna-killer from Duryodhana. Powered by his loyalty toward Duryodhana, and his eagerness to please him, Karna is always vocally signaling his intent to kill Arjuna.

If there is anyone that Karna personally despises, it must be Draupadi because of the humiliation she causes him by rejecting him. Karna avenges this (or so he thinks) during the dice game, but in return he earns the wrath of Arjuna.

From that moment onward, Karna becomes Arjuna's enemy number one.

The Gandharvas

Karna gets another chance to showcase his ability as warrior and loyalty as friend during the final year of the Pandavas' exile.

Duryodhana goes to Kamyaka – partly on Karna's encouragement – in order to ridicule the Pandavas for their miserable plight. But he locks horns with a group of Gandharvas and gets taken captive by them.

Karna does not attempt to free his king. Indeed, he flees the scene the moment he realizes just how dire the situation is. It requires a rescue act by Arjuna and Bhima to save Duryodhana's life.

This is another example of a situation in which Karna's skills are desperately needed – but he is found wanting.

Conquering the World

However, immediately after returning from the forest after having been rescued by Arjuna, Duryodhana resolves to conquer the world – like Yudhishtir before him – and perform the Rajasuya.

He enlists the help of Karna to subjugate all the known kingdoms. This time, Karna steps up to the plate.

In an expedition of conquest and diplomacy that extends in all four directions, Karna establishes the supremacy of Duryodhana in all the great kingdoms.

Coming as it does so close at the heels of a cowardly act, one may wonder why Karna is so keen to run away when faced by Gandharvas – and yet perform the task so admirably when fighting other kings.

Alas, no explanations are forthcoming from the text itself. It is possible that when faced by Gandharvas, Karna thought that he would never be a match for them. Also, in that incident, he would have had to fight alone, with only a small division of the Kuru army for support.

On the other hand, during his expedition, he would have had the full force of Duryodhana's army behind him. He would have also carried with him messages bearing the names of Bhishma and Drona in an official capacity.

In other words, the kings whom Karna visited during this quest would have received him as an emissary of the Kuru house, not as an individual warrior. This would have caused at least some of these kingdoms to fold without fighting – not because they were afraid of Karna but because of the thrust of Kuru's name.

Would Karna have been the same warrior without the Kuru army behind him? Would he still have the skills to defeat the likes of Bhagadatta in a single man-to-man combat?

Evidence says no.

During the Virata Parva

Karna gets another opportunity to put one across Arjuna during the cattle raiding that happens at the end of the Virata Parva. Duryodhana, Karna, Kripa, Drona and Bhishma attack the kingdom of Matsya with the intention of stealing their cattle. They also have some army with them.

But Arjuna single-handedly fights them off and defends Virata's kingdom.

One may argue here that this is not *just* Karna's inadequacy. After all, Drona, Bhishma and Kripa also lose to Arjuna on this day. We may excuse Karna saying that he simply ran into a hero at the top of his game on this day.

Still, for someone who insists on being known as Arjuna's equal, this is another single combat that Karna loses. And it is not even a close call.

Generosity to Indra

Karna's given name is Vasusena. He comes to be known as Karna after it becomes common knowledge that he has peeled off his natural armour and earrings.

Indra's motivations here are quite clear: as father to Arjuna, he wishes to protect his son from his most fervent enemy. What is not clear is why Karna – despite being warned by Surya that the Brahmin who is going to visit him is actually Indra in disguise – insists on giving away the one thing that makes him powerful enough to match Arjuna.

The ostensible reason is that Karna is a man given to generosity, especially to Brahmins. If a Brahmin asks him for something, he will not refuse.

So he gives up the kavacha kundalas, and Indra gleefully accepts them. In return, Indra is magnanimous enough to give Karna a dart that is powerful enough to kill anyone – including Arjuna.

But there is a catch. Karna can use this dart only once. After this one use, it will return to Indra.

So in essence, Karna trades the armour of invincibility for a devastating weapon that can only be used once. During the war, Krishna tricks him into using the Vasava dart on Ghatotkacha, thus freeing Arjuna from danger.

Quarrel with Bhishma

One other aspect of the Karna story is how little Bhishma thinks of him. We must note that Bhishma's complaint with Karna is not that he is a Sutaputra, but that he is a braggart with nothing to show for his tall claims.

Karna, for his part, does not back down when confronted by Bhishma like this. A humbler man might take the grandsire's criticism on the chin and strive to prove him wrong, but Karna throws insults back at Bhishma. His chief grouse is that Bhishma has always been partial to the Pandavas – which, we should remember, is also Duryodhana's pet peeve.

(This is the other confusing side to Karna's character: the reader is never sure whether his words are his own or if he is speaking as Duryodhana's proxy.)

As ill fortune would have it, Bhishma and Karna have their most serious run-in on the eve of the Mahabharata war. Bhishma goes to the extent of telling Duryodhana that he will not fight in the war at the same time as Karna.

(Is this desirable behavior on Bhishma's part? I'd argue not. But perhaps he does this on purpose, to keep Karna out of action so that Arjuna is protected.)

In this moment, with Bhishma throwing down the gauntlet, Karna has the choice of setting aside his ego for the sake of his friendship with Duryodhana. He might have put up his hand and said, 'You know what, I am sorry. Let's put our quarrel aside for Duryodhana's good.'

But he doesn't. He says, 'The grandsire is right, O King. Either he fights or I fight.'

And Duryodhana, placed in a predicament where he has to choose between Bhishma and Karna, opts for the former. Karna, therefore, ends up sitting out the first ten days of the war.

Finest Hour

Karna's noblest moment, without a doubt, is when he rejects the bribe that Krishna offers him for defecting on Duryodhana.

In a private conversation, Krishna reveals to Karna the truth of his birth. 'If you come to fight on the side of the Pandavas, Vasusena,' he says, 'you will be the emperor of the world. The world will sing your praises. Yudhishtir and the other Pandavas will become your slaves. And Draupadi will become your wife. She will bear your sons, who will become kings after you.'

This is just about everything that Karna has always wanted: status as king, brother, husband and father. But he says no, deducing correctly that the world will look upon all his unearned rewards with scorn.

'I was born a Sutaputra, O Krishna,' he says in a memorable line. 'And I shall die a Sutaputra.'

This is Karna embracing his identity – and recognizing that a man cannot shed the weight of his past as easily as Krishna is suggesting. Arjuna will forever be his enemy. Draupadi will forever hate him after that day at the dice game.

Besides, there is also the small matter of being loyal to Duryodhana.

Incidentally, this is one of the rare instances where the reader gets to glimpse Karna in private, without the presence of Duryodhana. So if there is anything to the theory that Karna often speaks as Duryodhana's proxy, we may consider this that rare moment where he speaks his mind with Krishna.

Promise to Kunti

Soon after Krishna tries and fails to lure Karna over to the Pandava side, Kunti tries to do it as well.

Her method is less diplomatic than Krishna's. She hopes to win over Karna emotionally, by claiming herself as his birth mother. 'Must I see my sons fight one another in this war?' she asks him, as if he has had anything to do with her choices.

Karna is wise to this. He explains that while she may have given birth to him, it is Radha the wife of Adiratha that fed and raised him. 'I am the son of Radha,' he says. 'You're not a mother to me – because you did everything to me that a mother shouldn't.'

Still, Kunti comes away from this encounter with a bit of a victory, because Karna's propensity to be generous gets the better of him. Without her asking, he gives her a promise.

'Even if I have opportunity to do so, my lady,' he says, 'I shall not kill any of your other sons except Arjuna. So regardless of how the war ends, you will still have five sons at the end of it.'

This is, of course, tacit admission by Karna that though he does not acknowledge Kunti as his mother, he does acknowledge the fact that *she* thinks of *him* as her son. And that he is willing to make an allowance for that.

But – this conflicts with his promise of loyalty to Duryodhana. For all the accusations leveled at Bhishma for being partial, it is Karna who ends up pulling his punches during the war.

Reconciliation with Bhishma

On the tenth day, after Bhishma has fallen onto his bed of arrows, Karna visits him late at night in private. The two men speak with each other without the anger and hatred that characterized their earlier interactions.

Bhishma says that he knows of Karna's real lineage. (He reveals that Vyasa visited him just before the war and told him.) He admits that Karna is not half-atiratha as he mockingly claimed before. Karna is, in fact, an atiratha.

Bhishma makes one last ditch attempt at using Karna to influence Duryodhana. 'It is not too late to call off this war, my son,' he says. 'Speak to Duryodhana, because he will listen to you. Give the sons of Pandu half the kingdom, and live in peace.'

But Karna refuses to take this advice. He says that matters between the Pandavas and Kauravas have slid too far to be resolved with peace. 'We are warriors, Grandsire,' he says. 'And we wish to fall on the battlefield like you have.'

Bhishma smiles resignedly, but finds it in his heart to bless Karna with all success.

During the War

Karna's entry into the war coincides with the appointment of Drona as the commander of Duryodhana's forces.

While the first ten days with Bhishma at the helm saw cautious, protracted fighting, Drona brings with him a streak of mercilessness that goes well with Karna's fighting style.

Karna finds himself in a number of key situations in the war. Here are a few of them:

- He plays an important role in the killing of Abhimanyu, by breaking the bow of the son of Subhadra by shooting at him from behind.
- He kills Ghatotkacha during the battle at midnight by using the Vasava dart that Indra gave him.
- On four separate occasions, he wins battles against Yudhishtir, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva – but he spares their lives to honour his promise to Kunti.

On the flip side, he gets into an argument with Kripa, who seems to take on the mantle of ‘Karna-needler’ from Bhishma. This angers Ashwatthama, who gets into a war of words with Karna. The two heroes almost come to blows before being separated by Duryodhana.

Asking for Shalya

On the evening of the sixteenth day of battle, Karna tells Duryodhana that the only factor separating him from Arjuna was the quality of their respective charioteers. While Arjuna has Krishna, he, Karna, has some unnamed Suta manning his steeds.

‘If only you can persuade Shalya to drive my vehicle tomorrow, O King,’ he says, ‘I shall become Arjuna’s equal.’

Whether Karna truly believes this or whether he is merely posturing for Duryodhana’s benefit is touch to discern. But if we take these words at face value, we have to ask: what of the day Arjuna defeated you in the garb of Brihannala, with Uttara Kumara as charioteer?

Duryodhana, of course, does not ask his friend this question. Even if he had, Karna would probably have said, ‘Arjuna was fighting to defend his master’s kingdom, O King, while we were merely looking to steal some cattle. The stakes are different now.’

In any case, Duryodhana gets Shalya to perform the role of charioteer for Karna on the eighteenth day.

But if Karna hopes that Shalya will be to him what Krishna is to Arjuna, he is to be severely disappointed. While Krishna guides, mentors, provokes, advises and helps Arjuna, all Shalya does is to taunt and discourage Karna.

By the end of the seventeenth day, Karna is wishing that he had fought with his regular charioteer.

The Final Battle

Despite the years of anticipation built around the final Arjuna-Krishna battle, it ends up being quite one-sided when it happens.

The only moment of alarm for Arjuna occurs when Aswasena the Naga appears, and flies in the form of an arrow shot from Karna's bow straight at his forehead. But for Krishna's timely intervention by making the chariot sink into the earth, Arjuna will have lost his life instead of his crown.

After this, Krishna leaps off the vehicle and drags the wheel out of the mud onto firmer ground.

Later, when Karna's chariot-wheel gets stuck, he asks Shalya to do so the same thing that Krishna so eagerly did for Arjuna. But Shalya refuses. It is left to Karna to try and lift his vehicle *with his charioteer sitting in his seat*.

Karna makes an appeal to Arjuna's sense of righteousness at this moment: he says that if he can be granted a few minutes of respite, he will tend to his wheel and get back on the terrace of his car.

Arjuna considers this, but Krishna advises him to let his deadliest arrow fly. He recounts all of Karna's many misdeeds, especially the harsh words he spoke against Draupadi on the day of the dice game.

His anger thus stoked, Arjuna shoots the fatal arrow at his longtime enemy and kills him.

Recognition in Death

Karna's death is not accompanied by flower rains or divine voices. But a few days later, when Yudhishtir and his brothers are paying their respects to the dead on the banks of the Ganga, Kunti tells them of the secret that she has been carrying.

The Pandavas are distraught at this knowledge. Yudhishtir in particular is horrified that victory in this war has required them to kill their own elder brother.

After a few minutes of grief, the Pandavas honour Karna as the first Pandava.

Two Karnas

Karna has captured the imagination of storytellers down the years. Popular culture tends to focus on the 'tragic hero' aspect of his story, dramatizing his

abandonment, his suffering, his ill luck, and all the injustices that are meted out to him.

But the Mahabharata also gives us a glimpse of another Karna: a vile braggart, a bully, a man with all bluster and no substance, and someone who allows false loyalty to Duryodhana cloud his judgement on what is right and what isn't.

Karna is therefore a mess of contradictions: he is generous yet selfish, cowardly yet brave, noble yet cruel, proud of his identity yet eager to escape it.

As readers, we may be frustrated by this. We may be forgiven to ask: who is Karna, really? Is he one of the good guys or one of the villains? Is he Kunti's firstborn, Arjuna's equal, Yudhishtir's elder brother, the rightful king of Hastinapur? Or is he Duryodhana's wicked henchman, Draupadi's rejected suitor, a mouse of a man who runs away from battles, an upstart?

The answer of course, is that he can be – and is – all of the above.

We must resist the idea that Karna is all good, but equally, we must not vilify him as a monster either. Any portrayal of him that does just one of the two is being lazy, and it does an injustice to the most human of all the Mahabharata characters.

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How was Karna born?

Short answer: Using a magical incantation gifted her by Sage Durvasa, Kunti bears Karna out of wedlock, before her marriage to Pandu. Fearing social censure, she abandons him soon after his birth. The baby Karna is found and raised by a charioteer named Adiratha, and his wife Radha. Karna therefore grows up as a member of the 'Suta' caste, and earns the derogatory moniker: Sutaputra.

Durvasa's Boon

In the kingdom of Kunti, ruled by King Kuntibhoja, a young princess named Pritha is being fostered at the royal palace. Her true father is Shurasena, a king who rules a neighbouring kingdom – also called Shurasena.

(King Shurasena has a son called Vasudeva, who later marries Devaki of Mathura and becomes father to Krishna and Balarama. Pritha, therefore, becomes the paternal aunt of Krishna.)

Kuntibhoja receives a visit from Sage Durvasa, and he assigns to his foster daughter the task of looking after him. Over a period of a few months, young Pritha (she is past puberty and yet to be married, so we can place her age around fourteen or fifteen) tends to Durvasa's every need.

Durvasa is happy with the girl's attentiveness, and as a parting gift, he gives her a boon that allows her to summon any number of gods – one at a time – to her side and have sons by them.

After the sage's departure, Pritha is almost disbelieving of her luck: could it be true? Could she actually call upon the gods? Or was the sage merely playing with her?

In order to test the boon, then, Pritha calls upon the sun god, Surya – and is properly shocked when he does appear before her.

‘Go away!’ she pleads with Surya. ‘I meant this only as a test.’

But Surya would not leave. ‘I am bound by the sage’s power, Princess,’ he says. ‘I can leave only after giving you a son.’

Abandonment

The son that is born to Surya and Pritha is said to be adorned with natural armour and earrings that emit a golden glow. These are called kavacha (for ‘armour’) kundalas (for ‘earrings’).

The kavacha kundalas of Karna are meant to make him invincible in battle. As long as he wears these, no weapon can penetrate his skin.

Surya of course leaves as soon as Karna is born, and Pritha is left to deal with the baby on her own. News of the princess having become pregnant before her marriage is bound to cause scandal, so Pritha exercises the only choice she has – of abandoning her son.

She calls for a waiting woman and asks her to put the boy inside a basket, and to let it slide downstream on the Yamuna. The basket is then found by a childless charioteer named Adiratha, who takes it to his wife Radha.

Together, they give him the name Vasusena (‘he who is born of wealth’), and undertake to raise him themselves.

Kunti and Karna’s paths diverge at this moment. From here, Kunti goes onto become queen to Pandu and mother to the five Pandavas. Karna begins his new life as a poor man’s son.

The Nature of Union

The nature of Kunti’s union with Surya has become the subject of some speculation. Specifically: did Surya and Kunti unite sexually, in the manner of mortals? And did Kunti carry Karna through a full-term pregnancy?

Or was their union of a spiritual nature and the boy born instantaneously?

Instantaneous births happen elsewhere in the Mahabharata: when Parashara seduces Satyawati on a fog-covered island on the Yamuna, their son

Dwaipayana is brought forth in a matter of hours, and he grows to maturity on the same day.

There is also the concept of ‘returning a woman’s virginity’ after getting her pregnant. Parashara assures Satyawati that she will remain a virgin after giving birth to their son. (By this we must assume that the woman’s hymen will grow back.)

A similar sort of arrangement might have been at work in Kunti’s case as well.

However, we know that in the cases of Yudhishtir, Bhima and Arjuna, the births are separated from one another by a year. So the implication is that Kunti carries each of the three boys to term in her womb. (Though this is by no means certain. She may just have waited a year after each delivery to ease the burden of child-rearing.)

Using these two incidents as illustrative examples, we can surmise that (a) the union of Kunti with Surya was a sexual one, (b) Kunti has her virginity returned to her after her delivery, and (c) she carries the boy in her womb to term.

So the birth of Karna happens, in reality, ten months or so after Durvasa leaves the palace of Kuntibhoja. Which leads us to ask another logical question.

Is Durvasa the father of Karna?

If one wears the hat of rationality and rejects the notion of gods and demons in the Mahabharata universe, one may be forgiven for asking whether Karna is the father of Sage Durvasa himself.

Circumstantial evidence points squarely at him. With Kunti attending to him throughout his visit, he certainly had access to her. Besides, the balance of power tilted in his direction. If he propositioned the princess, she could hardly bring herself to reject him.

(The most she might have done is ask for assurance that her ‘virginity’ would remain intact. And Sage Durvasa would grant it readily.)

In this scenario, the entire fable – of a magical chant, summoning of gods, and having sons by them – is only a contrivance to ensure that Kunti remains virginal in the eyes of the world.

The story may have been suggested by Durvasa to Kuntibhoja. Or the king – with all the resources of propaganda at his disposal – might have come up with it himself. After all, if we agree that Kunti carried Karna to full term, the king would have certainly known of his daughter's illegitimate union with Durvasa.

Why does Kunti Abandon Karna?

The birth of Karna is often depicted as Kunti's secret alone. The image in the average reader's mind is of a girl carrying the burden of separation and pain deep in her heart. She is a lone sufferer.

In films and plays, Kunti herself places the basket containing Karna on the river's surface. The implication is that no one else in Kuntibhoja's palace knows of this.

But if we accept the premise that Kunti carried Karna to full term, this is impossible. Even if by some elaborate ruse the pregnancy is kept secret, when it comes time for her to deliver the baby, a nurse's presence is inevitable.

More reasonably, we may assume that Kuntibhoja knows about his daughter's pregnancy right from the moment signs of it becomes visible. And knowing that Durvasa is the likely father, he is left with no choice but to keep it all under wraps.

For those in the know, Kuntibhoja furnishes them with a fantastic story concerning gods and magical chants. This is to ensure that even if the secret is spilled, Kunti's 'virginity' remains intact and her prospects wouldn't unduly suffer.

As for the baby? What other option does the king have but to abandon it?

One may argue that he could have been more humane about it – perhaps he could have sent for a poor couple and given the baby to them to rear – but the most important thing to do was to sever all links between the baby and Kunti.

Conclusion

Now you know everything about the birth of Karna. Summing up:

- Karna is born to Kunti out of wedlock, before her marriage.
- His father, according to the official version of events, is the sun god, Surya. Kunti summons him out of curiosity using a magical chant given her by Sage Durvasa.
- Whether Karna is a full-term baby or an ‘instantaneous’ one is up for debate. But evidence from other similar events suggests the former.
- The decision to abandon Karna was likely not taken by Kunti alone. Kuntibhoja and other elders of his court almost certainly had a say in it.
- Some rational theorists posit that the true father of Kunti is not Surya but Durvasa. If one is to reject all magic in the Mahabharata, this is a reasonable assumption given the circumstances.

Why was Karna cursed?

Short answer: During his youth, Karna earns curses on three separate occasions: first, Parashurama curses him that his Brahmastra will fail him; second, Bhumi the Earth goddess curses him that she will swallow his chariot wheel at an important moment; third, a Brahmin curses him for the sin of killing a cow that his weapons and pride will fail him when he needs them most.

Parashurama

As a young boy, in a bid to escape the confines of his Suta caste, Karna resolves to learn the skill of weapon-wielding from Sage Parashurama.

It is well known at this time that Parashurama only trains Brahmin boys, so Karna disguises himself as a Brahmin and approaches the sage. The latter is taken in by Karna's impressive appearance and accepts him as a disciple.

For a long time Karna manages to conceal the truth, but toward the end of his tenure, an incident happens that blows his cover.

One afternoon, Parashurama rests his head on Karna's thigh under a tree and falls asleep. The boy sits erect and unmoving in order not to disturb his teacher's nap. But in a short while, a worm (a bee or a leech in some versions) appears out of nowhere and begins to sting Karna on the thigh.

Karna flinches at the first contact of the insect on his skin, but after that, despite the bleeding and the pain, he remains still. Only after Parashurama wakes up does he notice that his student is pale and tense.

Parashurama sees the worm clinging to Karna's thigh, and immediately kills it with an incantation. Turning to Karna he says, 'No Brahmin can have such incredible tolerance for pain. I have no doubt that you're a Kshatriya in disguise!'

(Ironically, Parashurama sees through Karna's disguise but thinks that he is a Kshatriya. And because of his long-standing quarrel with Kshatriyas, he is moved to curse Karna.)

‘Because you have lied to your preceptor,’ says Parashurama, ‘all that you have learned from me will forsake you when you most need it.’

The Unnamed Brahmin

On a different occasion, while wandering for the sake of practicing with his bow, Vijaya, Karna finds a spot deep in a forest where he shoots a number of fierce arrows at trees and shrubs.

During that time, he accidentally strikes and killed a calf belonging to a Brahmin. He curses Karna that his chariot-wheel will sink to the earth in the midst of an important battle, and that I will be struck by the same fear that had consumed that poor animal when it breathed its last.

Karna gives him a number of cows, and he also wishes to placate the man’s anger by means of other gifts. But the Brahmin, though he accepts what Karna gives him, says that he cannot take back his word. ‘Give in to the dictates of your fate, Karna,’ he says. ‘That is your atonement for killing my calf.’

Though it is not explicitly mentioned, it appears that this incident with the Brahmin occurs after Karna becomes king of Anga. Yet another unfortunate event happens during this time, which angers Bhumi the Earth goddess.

The Curse of Bhumi

Once, when Karna is riding around the city of Anga in his chariot, his charioteer accidentally runs into a walking woman carrying a pot of oil. The collision causes the woman to drop her pot, and by the time Karna descends to the ground, all the oil has already spilled onto the earth.

With the intention of salvaging as much oil as possible, Karna picks up the moist earth and squeezes dry with his hands, causing the oil to drip back into the pot. Such is the strength in his fingers that he manages to half-fill the pot with oil.

This pleases the walking woman who had been hit, and Karna asks her to come by the royal palace to collect the remaining oil that had been lost.

But this act of being squeezed by Karna’s hands hurts and angers Bhumi. On the one hand there is the sheer physical discomfort of being handled like that

by a man. On the other there is the matter of disrespect. Could Karna not have let the oil go and compensate the woman for a *whole* potful?

So Bhumi also curses Karna. 'For this insolence, O king,' she says, 'I shall see to it that your chariot will not remain on firm ground during the most important battle of your life.'

Cursed by Generosity

In addition to these three instances, Karna makes a habit of hurting himself with his own generous nature. At the end of the war, when Arjuna asks Krishna how they had managed to vanquish Karna, Krishna replies that a number of small factors had come together to help them in the mission.

Here are a few times when Karna's own generosity turns around and 'curses' him:

- When Indra appears in the garb of a Brahmin and asks Karna to give up his kavacha and kundalas, despite knowing the true identity of his visitor, Karna does not say no.
- Just before the war begins, Krishna reveals to Karna the secret of his birth, and offers him the throne of Indraprastha and the loving servitude of the Pandavas if only he agrees to forsake Duryodhana. Karna refuses.
- During his conversation with Kunti, after he (rightly) denounces her claims of being his mother, he gives her a promise that he would not seek to kill any of the Pandava brothers other than Arjuna. True to his word, he captures and spares all four Pandava brothers on four separate occasions.

Cursed by Fate

Karna is also cursed by fate, which is the name we may give to all the forces in the world that act upon a man without his permission. Despite his best intentions and his most strenuous efforts, Karna finds that the walls erected around him by destiny are way too high and torturous to scale.

For instance:

- Karna is a born to a princess and a god. His is the most privileged of births. By right, he should have grown up to be a king, a great warrior, and a hero.
- If the worm that had stung Karna on that afternoon under the tree had chosen to do something else, Parashurama may not have cursed his disciple. Karna would have given a better account of himself in the final battle against Arjuna.
- If he hadn't been abandoned by Kunti, or if he had been abandoned in a different way (by being fostered secretly at a nobleman's house, perhaps), Karna would not have struggled his whole life to find his identity.
- If Adiratha and Radha had chosen not to tell their son that he was adopted, Karna may have found contentment and solace in being a Sutaputra.
- If Drona, Bhishma and Kripacharya had been kinder to him at the graduation ceremony, his friendship with Duryodhana – and his subsequent loyalty – would not have occurred. Perhaps then he would have become friends with the Pandavas.
- If Draupadi had not rejected him during her swayamvara, Karna would perhaps not have been as hostile toward her during the events of the dice game.

Of course, one might argue that Karna still had a choice of how he could react to the situations in which he found himself. But the point stands that he was not given much of a chance by the world to be what he might have been.

It is as if fate decreed at the moment of his birth that his life is going to be a tragedy.

Conclusion

Now you know everything about the curses of Karna. Summing up:

- As a young boy, during his time as Parashurama's disciple, Karna mistakenly drops his guard with his teacher and earns from him the curse that he will always forget the lessons he had learned during the most inopportune moments.
- As a king, while practicing shooting in the forest one day, he accidentally kills a calf belonging to a Brahmin, who tells him that his own death will be as helpless and wretched as the calf's.
- On a different occasion as a king, Karna squeezes some spilled oil out of the earth with such great pressure that Bhumi, the Earth goddess, curses him for his insolence. Due to this, his chariot wheel sinks into the earth on the seventeenth day of battle.
- Karna's own generosity often ends up as his curse – as in the promises he makes to Kunti, Krishna, Duryodhana and Indra.
- Lastly, Karna is cursed by fate itself. Despite being gifted by birth and training, he is destined to live as a flawed hero who will die a failure.

Was Karna better than Arjuna?

Short answer: Karna is considered the only warrior that can match Arjuna's skill with bow and arrow. He gives proof of this during the graduation ceremony, where he repeats all of Arjuna's feats. However, as the story progresses, Arjuna surpasses Karna comfortably. There is never an instance in the Mahabharata where Karna actually defeats Arjuna.

At the beginning

When Karna is born, he is blessed with divine armor that makes his skin impenetrable to all weapons. In addition, he also has natural earrings that suffuse his face with a soft glow and gives him an ethereal appearance.

The armor and the earrings together are called kavacha-kundalas. ('Kavacha' means 'armor', and 'kundala' means 'earring'.)

With the kavacha-kundalas on, Karna may be considered the most powerful *defensive* warrior in the world. If your skin is impenetrable, and if you're capable of being wounded, your aim and deftness of hand does not need to be out of the world for you to win duels.

The kavacha-kundalas give him such an edge that Karna needed to be only a passable shooter of arrows in order to become the strongest chariot-archer in the world.

Karna, though, goes much further than *passable*. He trains under Parashurama and learns the art of shooting all the main celestial weapons. Parashurama is so impressed with his ward that he gifts him the Vijaya, a bow he has received from Shiva.

So at the moment of Karna's graduation from Parashurama's hermitage – with the Vijaya slung around his shoulder and the knowledge of wonderful weapons coursing through his mind – Karna is no doubt the most skillful archer in the world.

At the Graduation Ceremony

Now we arrive at the graduation ceremony, where the reader catches his first glimpse of Karna. It should be noted that in this scene, Duryodhana describes the young man saying, ‘Look at the scars on his body left behind after he had peeled off his armor!’

This suggests that by this time, Karna has already been paid a visit by Indra, and that he has already given away his kavacha-kundalas.

However, there are other passages that suggest that this is not the case. For instance, his earrings are described as two little suns which bathe his face in an incandescent light.

So there is some doubt as to whether Karna – by the time he appears at the graduation ceremony – has the kavacha-kundalas or not.

But that matter aside, Karna proceeds to perform all of Arjuna’s feats himself, proving himself to be at least as good as the prince.

We may conclude, therefore, that at the time of the graduation ceremony, Karna is at least as skillful as Arjuna with respect to the bow and arrow.

We must also remember that skill at shooting a target is not quite the same as skill at fighting a real live opponent. While Karna has shown himself to be a match at shooting targets (both moving and otherwise), he is yet to prove his battle skills.

Battle Skills

In this respect, Arjuna is in a more privileged position than Karna. Arjuna has the benefit of being a prince – which means that from a young age, he is schooled in matters of diplomacy, politics, battle strategy and rhetoric.

He will also have been trained from an early age to spar with real life opponents in court – from among his own cousins and from volunteers picked out of the army.

Karna, on the other hand – at the hermitage of Parashurama – will have sorely lacked all of these facilities. While he will have trained to be a good

marksman, his knowledge of all the other things that make a good warrior – let's call it 'battle sense' – will have been much poorer compared to Arjuna's.

At the time of the graduation ceremony, therefore, we may not be incorrect in assuming that Arjuna is a far better warrior than Karna, though Karna may have been a better at target practice.

Arjuna Proves Himself

Soon after the graduation ceremony, Drona puts the Kuru princes through a proper test. While the ceremony was about displaying some tricks for the crowd's benefit, now he wants them to actually invade Panchala and bring back King Drupada as prisoner.

In this battle, Arjuna – and his four brothers – proves himself as a strong all-round warrior who can be trusted upon in a live battlefield.

Karna also gets this same opportunity: he is part of Duryodhana's army which has first go at fulfilling Drona's quest. But this army gets routed by the Panchalas.

This is yet another data point which tells us that at this point in the story, Karna is severely undercooked when it comes to real life battle situations, though he can hold his own in controlled environments like tournaments and ceremonies.

At Draupadi's Swayamvara

Between the invasion of Panchala and Draupadi's swayamvara, at least a couple of years pass in story-time. Karna and Arjuna face each other in a man-to-man duel after Arjuna has won Draupadi's hand.

This is by no means a pushover for Arjuna. Karna gives an excellent account of himself, and for a long time the two archers are locked in an evenly matched battle.

Karna is aghast that he is parrying so long with a mere Brahmin. (Arjuna, remember, is in disguise.) He asks Arjuna who he is, and the latter lies, 'I am a mere Brahmin who has the blessings of his preceptor.'

Karna takes this to mean that his opponent is using spiritual powers that are available only to Brahmins. Proclaiming that it is impossible to combat such energies with mere weapons, he withdraws from the challenge.

Now, this is technically a victory for Arjuna – because when an opponent lays down his weapon, it means you have won. But it is also not a conclusive win. It is not as if he made short work of it.

Of course, one may also argue that Karna's stated reason for withdrawing is only to save his face, and that his real reason is that he foresaw he cannot win against this man.

But working in Arjuna's favour is the fact that he knew whom he was fighting. Karna thought he was fighting a no-name Brahmin.

Taking all these factors into account, we may consider that at the time of Draupadi's swayamvara, Karna and Arjuna are about equally matched – both in marksmanship and in battle nous.

At the Dice Game

About thirteen years pass after Draupadi's swayamvara before the Pandavas and Karna 'meet' again. In this interval, Yudhishtir becomes emperor of the world, and Arjuna goes on a twelve-year exile.

In these thirteen years, Karna is presumably ruling over Anga as king. By all accounts he is a wise and generous ruler, well-loved by his subjects. But the responsibilities of being king must have come in the way of his practice of archery.

Arjuna, on the other hand, is free from all worldly distractions during his exile. Yes, he gets married three times and has three sons during this period, but it is not a stretch to suggest that he would have had much more time and clarity of mind to stay in touch with his weapons than did Karna.

Arjuna has also been given the Gandiva and two quivers brimming with celestial arrows during the burning of Khandava.

So by the time of the dice game, we can peg Arjuna significantly ahead of Karna in terms of skill. Karna may have caught up on worldly wisdom, though, by virtue of his being king.

During the Exile

Twelve more years pass after the dice game, during which Karna resumes being king of Anga. The Pandavas retreat into the forest to serve the terms of their exile.

Consider the relative journeys of Karna and Arjuna during these twelve years. Arjuna spends much of this time collecting divine weapons and performing quests. He acquires the Pashupatastra and the Brahmastra. He defeats the Nivatakavachas and frees Hiranyapuri from captivity.

In Amaravati, all the gods of the pantheon – from Varuna to Yama – shower him with extremely powerful weapons. Arjuna also has enough time to practice these skills, knowing that they are going to prove invaluable in getting their kingdom back.

What about Karna? After the Pandavas have been sent into exile, like Duryodhana, Karna must have thought that they have dispensed with their enemies for good. A bit of complacency must have set in. He would have become more comfortable in his skin as ruler; after all, he has been king for almost twenty five years.

Even if we allow that Karna has kept up with his archery and weapons practice, Arjuna is by now miles ahead.

Fighting the Gandharvas

During the twelfth year of the Pandavas' exile, a group of Gandharvas capture Duryodhana. Karna flees from the battle without even mounting a challenge against them.

Arjuna and Bhima, meanwhile, defeat the Gandharvas and rescue Duryodhana.

This is another small piece of evidence that the last twenty five years have not been equally kind to Karna and Arjuna. Fate has blessed the latter with divine weapons and time in which to practice their use. The former has received a kingdom to rule, but he has not been put into enough hardship to incentivize constant honing of his craft.

It is instructive of the human condition that when material comforts become abundant, one loses one's edge.

So when he had nothing, Karna was able to keep up with Arjuna the prince. But after he had gained everything, Arjuna kept improving while Karna remained stagnant – or perhaps even regressed.

The Defense of Matsya

It is during the single-handed battle that Arjuna wages successfully against the Kuru army during the Virata Parva that clinches matters once and for all in the Arjuna versus Karna debate.

Arrayed against Duryodhana, Drona, Bhishma, Karna, Kripa and Ashwatthama, Arjuna manages to fight on his own and protect Virata's cattle from being raided.

Bhishma and Drona repeatedly remark about how astonishing Arjuna's rise as a warrior has been during his exile. They refer not just to the weapons he has at his disposal but also at the more technical elements: his fleetness of hand, his sharpness of mind, his awareness of space...

But these words do not strike Duryodhana and Karna as sincere. They believe that Drona and Bhishma are blinded by partiality for Arjuna. Their explanation for this defeat is that the stakes are much higher for Arjuna (he is fighting to defend a kingdom) than they are for them (they've come just to raid some cattle).

It is at this point that Karna should have seen the writing on the wall that is apparent to everyone: Karna is no longer in the same league as Arjuna. In fact, *no one* is in the same league as Arjuna.

By the time of the end of the Virata Parva, Arjuna is in a league of his own.

Karna's Stubbornness

But Karna refuses to acknowledge this fact. Whether he truly believes his words is up for debate, but he continues to harp on that he is the only warrior in the world that can take on and kill Arjuna.

With the likes of Bhishma and Drona – who were *actually stronger than Arjuna at the start of the Pandavas' exile* – admitting that they themselves can no longer match Arjuna, here is Karna bragging away.

If anything, this stubborn refusal to see the truth prompts Bhishma to mock him, and their quarrel results in Karna boycotting the first ten days of war.

Where does this come from? Probably from a place of fear. And from the desperate need to go back to a time when things were different. Insisting that he is still as good as Arjuna feels a lot better than admitting that Arjuna has improved beyond recognition while he has not.

Without the Kavacha-kundalas

Despite everything that we have considered in the rest of this post, if Karna had kept his kavacha-kundalas, would he still have had a good chance of beating Arjuna?

He may have been able to *withstand* Arjuna's power, because after all the kavacha is said to be impenetrable. (Though one must ask: is it impenetrable even to the likes of the Pashupatastra?) But in order to *defeat* Arjuna, Karna would have had access to at least some weapons comparable to those in Arjuna's quiver.

In any case, Karna gives away the kavacha-kundalas to Indra, further weakening his position. Incidentally, the fact that Indra makes this visit suggests that he thinks Karna stands a reasonable chance against Arjuna with them.

Yes, in return he gets a weapon that will kill Arjuna, but it comes with a 'use once only' condition. The Vasava dart therefore is a poor replacement for the kavacha-kundalas.

The Charioteer

Arjuna gets even more gifts that add to his power. Hanuman, the brother of Bhimasena, sits on top of Arjuna's chariot and imbues it with the power of the wind. The chariot itself is given to Arjuna by Agni during the burning of Khandava.

Allied with the Gandiva and the two inexhaustible quivers, these two are enough to make Arjuna invincible.

But raising him to an unreachable point is the fact that Krishna becomes his charioteer. As Bhishma and Drona repeatedly exclaim, 'Who can withstand the combined effect of Arjuna's skill, the power of his weapons, the sturdiness of the Gandiva, the chariot of Agni, the mast of Hanuman, and the strategic abilities and wisdom of Krishna?'

And what does Karna have besides Parashurama's bow?

Karna tries to redress the balance somewhat by enlisting the services of Shalya as charioteer. But Shalya turns out to be a spy, and he ends up causing Karna a whole lot of harm.

Death of Ghatotkacha

Despite everything, the one weapon that can tilt the scales in Karna's favour is the Vasava dart. If Karna manages to use it against Arjuna during their duel, it will neutralize all of Arjuna's advantages and kill him.

So the death of Ghatotkacha turns out to be a rather crucial event in the Mahabharata war. In a moment of preoccupation, Karna kills the son of Bhima with the Vasava dart. This elicits a yell of triumph from Krishna because at that precise moment, the victory of Arjuna over Karna has become certain.

At this point on, therefore, Karna is absolutely no match for Arjuna. There is simply no way for him to defeat his arch enemy.

Conclusion

The question of whether Karna is as skillful as Arjuna needs to be put in proper context in order to be answered properly.

- To begin with, Karna is definitely as skillful as Arjuna with technical matters of archery – like marksmanship, steadiness of hand etc.
- But Arjuna is more powerful than Karna when it comes to live battle situations, as evidenced by the successful invasion of Panchala.
- At the time of Draupadi's swayamvara, the two warriors are about equally matched.
- In the twenty five years following the wedding of Draupadi, Arjuna improves as an archer and a warrior almost beyond recognition. Karna's improvement – if present – is less drastic.
- At the start of the war, the only edge that Karna has is the Vasava dart. In all other respects, Arjuna is far superior.
- The moment Karna uses his Vasava dart on Ghatotkacha, Arjuna becomes invincible.

Why does Karna hate Arjuna?

Short answer: There are three reasons why Karna hates Arjuna: (1) Professional jealousy because Arjuna is a better archer and warrior, (2) Rivalry with respect to Draupadi, who rejects him and weds Arjuna, and (3) Loyalty to Duryodhana who wishes him to defeat and kill Arjuna at all costs.

Karna Matches Arjuna

The rivalry between Karna and Arjuna begins when the former appears at the graduation ceremony of the Kurus and – without bothering to introduce himself – proceeds to repeat all of Arjuna’s prior feats successfully.

Karna’s appearance here is a surprise to everyone. Duryodhana and his brothers are just about to leave the stadium in disgust when he arrives unannounced. We can therefore conclude that it must have been Karna’s idea.

What did he hope to achieve by coming to the ceremony? He may have seen this as his ticket up the socioeconomic ladder. By now he has already trained under Parashurama and is a skilled archer. Now all he needs is a stage on which to prove himself.

The graduation ceremony offers him that platform. Once he arrives, though, how does he catch the eye and imagination of the spectators? What must he do to create an indelible impression?

He knows already that Arjuna is considered the most skilled of all the Kuru princes. He also knows that the ceremony will be used to showcase many of Arjuna’s tricks with bow and arrow. He will be the apple of everyone’s eye.

For Karna, therefore, what better way to steal the spotlight than proving himself a match for Dronacharya’s favourite disciple? They can’t help but notice him then.

His gambit works. He does get noticed – by Duryodhana. Where he may have been hoping for a job within Bhishma’s army at most, Duryodhana makes

him king, no less. Karna's life changes overnight. From a Sutaputra, he becomes king of Anga.

Arjuna Surpasses Karna

We must remember that Karna is around eighteen years old when this first encounter happens. (Arjuna is around fourteen.) They're only just boys.

As they grow older and as time passes, Arjuna improves at a much faster rate than Karna. He is also blessed with more privilege: not only does he have the advantage of being immersed in palace atmosphere, he also is never encumbered by responsibilities such as earning a living or governing a kingdom.

Karna, on the other hand, lives as a poor man for the first eighteen years of his life. Then he becomes king of Anga. In both situations, he is burdened by life enough that he does not have the sufficient time and energy to keep up with Arjuna.

Also, Arjuna is favoured by the gods. During the burning of Khandava, Agni gives him two inexhaustible quivers and the Gandiva. During his exile, Shiva gives him the Pashupatastra. During his visit to Amaravati, the gods gift him several celestial gifts.

So in the thirty years or so that pass between the graduation ceremony and the beginning of the Kurukshetra war, Arjuna is by far the most powerful warrior in the world, whereas Karna is merely one of the atirathas.

Jealousy

Karna witnesses Arjuna's power on four separate occasions:

- Soon after the graduation ceremony, Karna and Duryodhana fail to invade Panchala and capture Drupada. The Pandavas, though, succeed. Although here Arjuna has the support of Bhimasena, it is he who defeats Drupada and brings him back to Drona.
- Two years or so later, during Draupadi's swayamvara, after Arjuna has won the princess of Panchala, he gets challenged by Karna. The battle is

well-matched. But Karna withdraws from the duel claiming reluctance to hurt a Brahmin.

- During the Pandavas' final year of exile, Karna flees from the battlefield against an army of Gandharvas whereas Arjuna and Bhimasena lead the Kuru army successfully against them.
- Around twenty six years later, Karna and Arjuna meet again on the battlefield at the end of the Virata Parva. This is Arjuna at the peak of his prowess. He lays waste to the entire Kuru army while fighting from a single chariot.

Karna must have noted in the first instance that his battle skills are not up to Arjuna's standard. By the second occasion, he appears to have bridged the gap and given Arjuna a good fight in single combat.

But by the third and fourth incidents, it is obvious to anyone watching that Karna is no longer Arjuna's equal. In fact, it is apparent that Arjuna is miles ahead of everyone – Bhishma, Drona and Ashwatthama included.

During these twenty six years, Karna may have improved himself, but Arjuna's transformation from earthly to celestial warrior is so incredible that he leaves everyone behind.

This must have caused a pang of envy in Karna's heart, seeing how the scales have tilted.

Rivalry over Draupadi?

Another aspect of Karna's antagonism toward Arjuna concerns Draupadi. At the time of Draupadi's swayamvara, Arjuna might have been eighteen or so and Karna twenty two.

Whether Karna enters Draupadi's swayamvara of his own volition or whether he is instructed by Duryodhana to do so, we do not know. But we do know that when Draupadi publicly rejects him ('I do not wish to be wedded to a Sutaputra') before he has had a chance to approach the podium, no one rises to his support – not even Duryodhana.

Which is suggestive of the notion that Draupadi was probably within her rights to say what she did.

However, after rejecting him, she does not raise a murmur of protest when an unknown Brahmin (Arjuna in disguise, but she doesn't know that) comes up to the bow to try his luck.

It later emerges that it was indeed Arjuna who won Draupadi. When Karna comes to know of it, he must have once again burned with envy – because once again he had been prevented from competing fairly with his arch rival.

This incident would have left him feeling black in his heart both for Arjuna and for Draupadi.

Loyalty toward Duryodhana

The biggest factor behind Karna's hatred for Arjuna, though, is that Duryodhana hates Arjuna. And as his humble subject, it is Karna's duty to also hate him.

Duryodhana has one reason and one reason only for helping Karna during the graduation ceremony: and that is the hope that Karna will one day help him kill Arjuna and therefore cripple the Pandavas fatally.

Duryodhana views himself as a reasonable foil for Bhima, but for Arjuna he has no answer – until Karna appears. The eagerness with which he embraces Karna betrays his desperation to strike up a friendship with the new entrant.

None of this is said out loud, but Karna realizes it. He also understands that what exists between him and Duryodhana is not friendship. As a Sutaputra, he knows that true friendship cannot exist between a benefactor and his ward.

The benefactor may sometimes call it friendship to be kind, but the ward must never forget his place. Throughout the story, Karna therefore behaves as if he is Duryodhana's slave or servant.

Bhishma once berates Karna that he is not Duryodhana's friend, that a true friend would correct the princes' wicked ways and guide him toward good.

Karna does not reply to the accusation, but if he did he would say that he is Duryodhana's follower, his subject, his supporter – and in those capacities he

does not have the right to correct his master. If Duryodhana says jump, Karna sees it as his duty to ask, 'How high?'

Obsession with Arjuna

The more often Karna fights with Arjuna without success, or Arjuna demonstrates his far superior skill against an opponent, Karna's obsession with defeating Arjuna intensifies.

Each time Arjuna shows up Karna, Karna bristles because he knows that Duryodhana is watching too, and taking note of his 'friend' not living up to his expectation.

By the time the Kurukshetra war approaches, Karna's repeated claims about 'certainly killing Arjuna' are almost laughably pitiful. Indeed, Bhishma's main complaint against Karna is that for all his talk, he has failed repeatedly against Arjuna – either directly or in a shared arena.

But what may not have struck Bhishma is the possibility that the *losses have caused Karna to overcompensate with words*. The more he loses, the more it becomes apparent to him that he is no longer equal to Arjuna, the more he feels the need to be loud-mouthed.

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Special Ability

Having said all this, there is *some substance* to Karna's bravado with respect to Arjuna: he has the Vasava dart in his possession with which he can certainly kill Arjuna.

For this to happen, though, he must: (a) Isolate Arjuna in single combat, (b) gain enough of an ascendancy to have the time required to summon the Vasava dart, and (c) have the presence of mind to use it.

He can also hurl the weapon at Arjuna when the latter is fighting someone else, but someone of Karna's love for righteousness would not do that.

It is this ability that Karna possesses that makes him Arjuna's primary threat during the Mahabharata war. The Vasava dart is the only weapon that Arjuna cannot counter. Everything that Drona and Bhishma can throw at him, Arjuna can manage just fine.

With this being the case, why don't the Kauravas formulate a strategy with Karna as their central piece? Why don't they construct arrays specifically designed to bring Karna face to face with Arjuna as often as possible?

As it turns out, they do. The Kauravas go to bed every night of the war thinking of this very thing, but come the next morning, they forget about it thanks to Krishna fogging their minds.

Therefore, in a strange way, Karna *is justified* in claiming that he is the only one with the ability to kill Arjuna.

Conclusion

There you have it. Now you know the different reasons behind Karna's hatred of Arjuna.

- Karna begins his journey by matching Arjuna's skill with bow and arrow at the graduation ceremony. Everyone in the world then sees them as 'equals'.

- But as time passes, Arjuna improves beyond recognition through a combination of deliberate practice, experience and blessings from gods. Karna's improvement is less remarkable.
- Karna also loses to Arjuna on several occasions. He also fails at certain quests which Arjuna completes effortlessly immediately afterward.
- All this makes Karna envious of Arjuna. Karna also resents Draupadi for having rejected him publicly during her swayamvara. And he resents Arjuna for having won her 'unfairly' – because he won only by disallowing Karna from competing.
- Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana is by far the biggest factor causing him to hate Arjuna. Because he sees himself as Duryodhana's slave and subject, he sees as his duty to hate whomever Duryodhana hates.
- As Karna's defeats to Arjuna become more and more frequent, his hatred becomes more and more obsessive.

Why and when does Karna remove his armour?

Short answer: Karna's natural armor and earrings – the kavacha-kundalas – make his body impenetrable to weapons. Indra disguises himself as a Brahmin and asks Karna for his armor to protect Arjuna. Despite knowing Indra's true identity, Karna gives up his armor because he does not want to say no to the king of the gods.

Born with Armor

Karna is born of the union between Kunti – when she was an unwed princess – and Surya the sun god. At birth, he has natural armor all over his body (called 'kavacha') and earrings hanging of his ears (called 'kundalas').

Though the exact powers of the kavacha-kundalas are never explicitly described in the story, it is often mentioned that they make Karna almost invincible in battle.

If one has to guess, one might say that the kavacha is more like a thin covering of mail all over his body that protects him from weapons. The kundalas are more difficult to decipher. Do they have any magical properties? Perhaps they allow the kavacha to heal after it has taken a battering?

In some descriptions of Karna, we're told that his earrings 'bathe his face in a warm white glow'. Whether they do anything else besides that is not clear.

Visit by Indra

Accepted wisdom is that as long as Karna possesses the kavacha-kundalas, he is impossible to injure – even for someone as skilled and blessed as Arjuna.

Further, Karna poses a very real threat to Arjuna's life as long as the armor and earrings are in play.

Therefore, in order to protect his son, Indra dons the disguise of a Brahmin and visits Karna. He asks for alms, secures Karna's promise that he will be given 'anything', and then requests Karna to hand over his kavacha-kundalas.

Now, the night before Indra's visit, Surya visits *his* son in a dream and tells him, 'Indra is about to arrive and ask for your armor and earrings. He will come disguised as a Brahmin. Do not entertain his request.'

But Karna replies, 'If the king of the gods himself comes and asks me for something, how can I refuse? People all over the world make offerings of their own to Indra and pray that he accepts them. Here, *he* is asking for alms from *me*. What higher honor can there be?'

So when Indra makes his request, Karna peels off his armor, cuts off his earrings, and gives them away. After this incident, he comes to be known as *Karna*, the 'peeler of one's self'.

Indra Gives a Gift

Indra may have approached Karna expecting to be denied, because when Karna gives up his armor, he is pleasantly surprised. So impressed is he by Karna's generosity – or, rather, his respect for him – that Indra gives Karna a wish.

We must note here that Karna does not know at the moment of giving up his armor that he will be given a gift. This is an act of charity that later becomes a trade.

In any case, Karna then wishes to be presented with the Vasava Dart, a powerful weapon in Indra's possession that can kill anyone. Indra grants the wish, but qualifies it by saying, 'I cannot give you repeated use of this weapon, my son. But you will be able to use it once to kill anyone you wish. After that one use, the dart will return to me.'

If Indra had given Karna the dart for repeated use, it would have made him just as powerful as when he had the kavacha-kundalas. Arjuna's death at his hands would have been more of a certainty.

But by restricting it to only a single use, Indra ensures that the trade is *slightly* lopsided against Karna. He has lost an enduring defensive advantage to gain a one-shot but fatal offensive edge.

When does Indra approach Karna?

This is one of the most puzzling aspects of the Karna story: just when does Indra take Karna's kavacha-kundalas off him? There are two possibilities.

The first is that this incident happens just before the Mahabharata war begins. That means that all through the story leading up to this, Karna has his kavacha-kundalas in his possession.

But this raises a few questions:

- If he had the kavacha-kundalas, why does Karna lose to Drupada during the invasion of Panchala?
- Why is Karna unable to easily defeat Arjuna at Draupadi's swayamvara? At this time, Arjuna himself is not the powerful warrior he will become later. He is yet to receive any gifts from any gods.
- Why does Karna flee from the battlefield when Duryodhana is captured by Gandharvas? If the kavacha-kundalas make you invincible, should that knowledge also not give you almost reckless amounts of courage?
- Why does Karna lose to Arjuna during the defense of Matsya? Granted, Arjuna is very powerful at this point, but with the kavacha-kundalas, Karna should at least put up a fight.
- Why does Karna acquire the name of Karna if the incident that will give him that name has not yet happened? He should be called Vasusena until the war begins. Instead, he is known as Karna right from the beginning.

One explanation for why Karna loses all those battles could be that the kavacha-kundalas are not as powerful as people think. Maybe they provide one

level of protection against weapons, but he is by no means invincible because of them. And he knows it.

But accepting this raises another question: if the kavacha-kundalas are not that great, why does Indra bother to steal them from Karna?

At the Beginning?

The second possibility with this is that Karna gives away his armor and earrings *before he makes his first appearance at the graduation ceremony*.

There is some supporting evidence for this notion. For instance:

- He introduces himself to the royal assembly as Karna. Spectators at the arena seem to already know him as the youth who had given away his natural armor to a Brahmin.
- During his speech in defense of Karna, Duryodhana points to the scars on his body and says, ‘Behold the wounds left behind after he had cut himself to fulfill a Brahmin’s wish. Can someone like this be low-born?’

If we accept this theory, all the questions raised in the previous section are answered. Without the kavacha-kundalas, Karna is just a good warrior with *one special ability*.

From the end of the graduation ceremony onward, Karna must have set his sights on Arjuna as the target of his Vasava dart. This explains his general apathy and cowardice in battle with other people but extreme confidence about being able to kill Arjuna.

Note that this confidence would have struck an observer as false bravado – especially if said observer does not know of the existence of the Vasava. So when Bhishma asks, ‘If you can kill Arjuna, why did you run away from the Gandharvas?’ the question strikes us as eminently fair.

Now, having come this far, we must also acknowledge that if we accept this timeline of events, we’re left with one glaring question.

Namely: If Karna possesses the Vasava dart, why does he not use it during his battle against Arjuna during Draupadi's swayamvara or during the Virata Parva?

The answer for the first is simple enough: Karna does not know at Draupadi's swayamvara that he is fighting Arjuna. But in the second instance, he is on an actual battlefield, and Arjuna is fighting him from atop a single chariot without disguise.

The only possibility that strikes me is that at this point in time, Karna does not deem it worthwhile to use the Vasava on Arjuna. Perhaps he thinks of the Pandavas as already beaten. Perhaps he thinks that since Arjuna has been found out, the Pandavas will be sent back for twelve more years of exile.

Whatever the reason, Karna decides not to use his chief weapon on Arjuna during the defense of Matsya's cattle.

When does Karna become Karna?

Of the two possibilities above, I find the first to be more problematic than the second. Several incidents pop up during the story that are simply not reconcilable with an invincible Karna.

With the second possibility – that Karna gives up his armor when he is a young man, before any of us see him – we only have to answer one minor question: why does Karna not use the Vasava against Arjuna during the Virata Parva?

All the other questions are answered. His failure against Drupada, his cowardice against the Gandharvas, his battle against a disguised Arjuna, and the mystery of his name – all of these are consistent with a Karna who is a decent warrior but with one exceptional weapon tucked away in his armory to be used just once against one special enemy.

So if you put a gun to my head and ask just *when* Karna becomes Karna, I'd say during his early youth, some time before he appears at the Kuru graduation ceremony.

Why does Karna refuse to leave Duryodhana?

Short answer: In an attempt to make Karna fight on the Pandava side, Krishna offers him the throne of Indraprastha if he leaves Duryodhana. But Karna refuses. 'Duryodhana gave me everything when I had nothing,' he says. 'Now that he wants me by his side, I cannot forsake him out of greed for more wealth.'

Krishna's Offer

The context surrounding Karna's decision is this: Krishna has just attempted in vain to broker peace between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. He is just about to leave Hastinapur, return to Upaplavya, and tell Yudhishtir to prepare for war.

Just before he leaves, though, he meets with Kunti – who has been living at Vidura's house for the thirteen years her sons have been away. Kunti reveals to Krishna the secret regarding Karna.

Krishna then decides that Karna should know this piece of information, that he should make the decision of which side to fight on after he knows the truth.

(Of course, Krishna is also hoping that by turning Karna over, he will be protecting Arjuna's life and making the Pandavas' job in the war much easier.)

So he seeks a private audience with Karna on outskirts of Hastinapur. He tells Karna the truth about who he is. He invites Karna to fight at the side of his younger brothers. 'The Pandavas will serve you as slaves, O Vasusena,' he says. 'After the war is won, you will be king of Indraprastha, and Draupadi will be your queen.'

What does Krishna's promise mean?

If we place ourselves in Karna's shoes for a second, we might consider the implications of Krishna's promise.

For your entire life, you have desperately sought to discover your true identity. You know you were adopted. You know you were abandoned at birth. You were repeatedly ridiculed as a Sutaputra, but you know you're not one. You've longed to be a Kshatriya; in your heart, you've always known that you are one.

Now, with one word, Krishna is offering to make you not just any Kshatriya, but the foremost of all Kshatriyas. As the eldest of the Pandavas, you will become the emperor of the earth. Your sons by Draupadi will become kings after you. Your name will become immortal as one of the great Kuru kings.

You're being promised a family – a mother, brothers, a wife, future sons – and you're being promised all the wealth, power and status in the world.

Fate snatched from you everything you deserved. Now it is giving it all back.

All you need to do is forsake Duryodhana and reunite with your real family. You're a Pandava. A Kshatriya. Your place is not by Duryodhana's side. It is at the head of the Panchala army, surrounded by your five powerful brothers.

Ethical Considerations

For a moment, let us consider that Karna does say yes to this, and goes to fight on the side of the Pandavas.

Will the world see him as an opportunist? Will it consider him ungrateful to Duryodhana and therefore immoral? Karna seems to think so. He says to Krishna, 'Duryodhana has allowed me to be a king and rule over Anga while not moving beyond the confines of the Suta tribe. He gave me everything when I had nothing. Now in his time of need, if I forsake him, what will the world say?'

What Karna calls the 'world' might not have had the same moral compass that Karna imagines. Yuyutsu, for instance, forsakes Duryodhana and switches over to the Pandava side just before the war. He does not attract any censure at all.

Also, the ‘world’ has already passed judgement on Duryodhana as ‘bad’ and the Pandavas as ‘good’. Indeed, whichever side Krishna fights on, we’re told, is the ‘good’ side.

So if anything, Karna would have been lauded for having finally found his conscience, and for having finally mustered the ‘courage’ to abandon the wicked Duryodhana.

Karna’s Conscience

In making his decision to reject Krishna’s offer, therefore, Karna is not only resisting his own temptations, but also the fact that in the eyes of the world, forsaking Duryodhana is the *moral choice*.

It is only *his own moral code* that is telling him to stay with Duryodhana. And it goes against every piece of advice that he has received on the subject.

He has heard celestials and elders and sages denounce Duryodhana as wicked and unethical. He knows that Duryodhana is bound to lose the war. He realizes that the world would not see it as wrong at all if he switched sides right now.

And he would finally win the ultimate victory over Arjuna – who will serve him as younger brother – and Draupadi – who will consent to have children with him.

Despite all this, he is unable to accept the trade. Only because Karna’s conscience does not allow it.

Personal Dharma

The Mahabharata often cites the ways of Dharma as subtle and ever-changing. It also introduces us to the difference between absolute Dharma and personal Dharma.

According to the tenets of absolute Dharma, Duryodhana is in the wrong. Krishna alludes to this when he says, ‘I have come to Earth to establish Dharma on firm footing again.’ He is stating that the war of Kurukshetra is between the forces of good and evil. The Pandavas are ‘good’, the Kauravas are ‘evil’.

However, each person making up the story believes that he is in the right, because applies his own personal rules of ethics to a given situation. For instance:

- Bhishma believes it is 'right' to prefer the younger Pandu over the older Dhritarashtra just because the latter is blind. Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana believe that this is 'wrong'.
- Kunti believes it is 'right' for an unwed maiden to abandon her unwanted child. Karna believes that it is 'wrong'.
- Ashwatthama believes that it is 'wrong' of Dhrishtadyumna to behead Drona when he was meditating. Dhrishtadyumna believes that it is 'right'.
- And so on.

Similarly, Karna exercises his personal Dharma when Krishna presents him with a choice. Duryodhana is wicked in an absolute sense. Karna acknowledges this. In the coming war, the Pandavas are going to win. Karna acknowledges this. The throne of Indraprastha and Hastinapur are going to be ruled by the eldest surviving son of Pandu. Karna acknowledges this.

And yet, he does not believe that it is *personally permissible* for him to forsake Duryodhana in time of his need. No matter how bad Duryodhana is to the world at large, and to the Pandavas in particular, he has been a benefactor to Karna. And Karna will never let that debt remain unpaid.

One Final Reason

One other reason that Karna refuses Krishna's offer is because it compels Karna to disown not just Duryodhana but also his entire adopted identity as a Sutaputra.

Consider this: at the beginning, Karna is depicted as being uncomfortable with being called a charioteer's son. Even at Draupadi's swayamvara, he looks around the hall and sighs when Draupadi insults him.

But between that incident and the start of the Kurukshetra war, *thirty years pass*. During this time, Karna becomes king of Anga, and he embraces his identity as a Sutaputra. He lives with Adiratha and Radha, his adoptive parents.

He marries a woman that Adiratha finds for him. He has sons who are raised as Sutas.

By the time the Kurukshetra war is about to begin, Karna is in a contented frame of mind, at peace with his dual role as a member of the Suta tribe and as king of Anga. In both roles he has found fulfilment. He has succeeded in marrying his adoptive community with his ambition of being a Kshatriya.

Now, if he says yes to Krishna, if he switches sides and fights on the Pandavas' side, what will happen to this little world he has built for himself?

- He will have to renounce the Suta tribe – which has accepted him as his own all these years, and in which he has earned a reputable position.
- He will have to give up the throne of Anga – whose people have come to love him as their king.
- He will have to relegate Adiratha and Radha to secondary status below Kunti.
- His wife will take a lower position in the hierarchy to Draupadi.
- His children will also be considered low-born compared to the children he will have with Draupadi.

What all of this means essentially is that he will have to forsake his entire adoptive family, community and life. He will have to give up people who love him for who he is – Radha, Adiratha, his sons, his wife, his subjects – in favour of people who have always hated him and will now only grudgingly accept him as one of their own.

That is why Karna tells Krishna, 'I was born a Sutaputra. I will die a Sutaputra.'

And that is why he rejects Krishna's offer to leave Duryodhana's side at the beginning of the Kurukshetra war.

Why did Krishna offer Draupadi to Karna?

Short answer: As the Kurukshetra war is about to start, the only threat to Arjuna's life comes from Karna's Vasava dart. Therefore, in order to protect Arjuna's life, Krishna attempts to lure Karna away from Duryodhana over to the Pandava side. He promises Karna the throne of Indraprastha and Draupadi as gifts if he fights with the Pandavas.

When does Krishna know?

It is not clearly mentioned in the text exactly when Krishna comes to know the truth about Karna. Some readers maintain that Krishna – since he is a god – has always known about Karna and Kunti, but only chooses to reveal it at the last moment.

But I think it is more reasonable to assume that Krishna – like everyone else – is kept in the dark by Kunti. The secret remains hers alone, though it is later implied that Vyasa is also privy to it.

The first time that Krishna comes to know about Karna's birth appears to be during his visit to Hastinapur in his capacity as peacemaker. He visits Vidura and has lengthy conversations about this and that with Kunti.

(Though Kunti does not reveal her secret to Krishna here 'on screen', the fact that Krishna immediately sets out to meet with Karna right afterward suggests that she may have done so.)

Krishna's Plan

Let's imagine this scenario from Krishna's point of view for a second.

You've come to Hastinapur with the express intention of making peace between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. You have failed in the quest. (You're not overly surprised by this; in fact, you've already predicted that you would.)

For a while now you've been wondering how to ensure that the Pandavas win this war with minimum damage. More than anything, you're conscious of protecting Arjuna – because without him, Bhishma and Drona will run amuck and destroy the Panchala forces.

And the most fearsome threat Arjuna has in the battle is Karna.

Now, as you're mulling these things over, just as you're about to leave Hastinapur, you come to know that Karna is actually Kunti's firstborn. Suddenly, you see a way of protecting Arjuna.

If Karna were to be told about this, you think, could he be persuaded to switch side and fight for his 'real' family? You will of course know that Karna is beholden to Duryodhana, so he will have to be given something in return.

Well, why not give him everything he has always deserved? If he had been Kunti's son all along, would he not have been the first in line to the throne of Indraprastha? Indeed, would he not have been the official 'husband' of Draupadi?

Karna's Answer

So Krishna makes the offer to Karna – ostensibly in the interest of transparency, but in reality to remove Arjuna from danger.

It is important to note here that Krishna probably does not have any sympathetic feelings toward Karna at this point. He is not trying to do the fair thing by Karna, necessarily. His primary motive is to protect Arjuna. His secondary motive is to win the war. So he pulls out all the stops in his attempt to negotiate with Karna.

However, despite Krishna's best offer, Karna refuses to leave Duryodhana's side in his moment of need. He also refuses to leave the life he has built as king of Anga – a position he has now held for almost thirty years.

If Karna's mouth waters at the thought of being offered Draupadi as queen, he does not show it. A younger Karna – the Karna who stood up to compete at Draupadi's swayamvara – might have been tempted.

But now, Karna is around fifty years of age. He has experienced many of the world's earthly pleasures. Draupadi is not as alluring to him as she might have once been.

Also, the position of king of Indraprastha is also not something that would have attracted Karna at this point, because he has already lived the life of a king for many years now. He knows what it is like.

And to give up all that he has – his adoptive parents, his wife, his sons, his kingdom – in order to join hands with people who have openly disliked him would be foolhardy.

So he says no. He will fight with Duryodhana to the bitter end.

Would Krishna have kept his promise?

One interesting question that crops up here is whether Krishna would have kept his promise had Karna accepted the bribe.

It is important to note here that Krishna makes this offer to Karna without ever consulting the Pandavas. Indeed, even if he believes that the Pandavas would willingly serve their elder brother, would Draupadi consent to get married – *a sixth time* – to a man she herself rejected at her swayamvara?

Would she willingly bear sons to the man who called her a prostitute and caused her to be disrobed in full view of a king's assembly?

After her anger at being staked as a pawn in a dice game by Yudhishtir, would she demurely accept being offered as a prize by Krishna to Karna?

And what of Arjuna, who made a vow that he would kill Karna or consign himself to flames? Would he now make the difficult decision to kill himself because Karna has turned out to be his brother?

Even if we trust Krishna's ability to build consensus in this matter, we must concede that it will be messy at best.

Which leads us to further question Krishna's intentions. Did he, in fact, mean to keep his promise to Karna at all? Or was he just making an offer with the hope that Karna would accept, and then later see what is to be done if Karna survives the war?

Or did he make the promise with no intention of ever keeping it? We know that Krishna is not above lying 'for the right cause'. If he believes that lying to Karna is necessary to defeat Duryodhana, he will do it with no compunction.

Did Karna believe Krishna?

This raises an interesting question: Did Karna even believe that Krishna was making an earnest offer?

When your enemy calls you for a private meeting and makes you a scarcely believable promise predicated on you becoming a traitor to your lifelong benefactor, you probably will consider the whole thing a farce.

It is of course possible that Karna considers all of Krishna's words here lies: his claim that Karna is Kunti's son, his assurance that Karna will become king after the war, and his promise that Draupadi will become Karna's wife and bear him sons.

All of this, Karna may have thought, is just Krishna trying his level best to get him to defect. None of these words are binding; after all, Krishna can orchestrate events such that he can deny the contract ever happened.

Also, what is to prevent Krishna and the Pandavas – after making full use of his services in the war – from killing him?

Seen in this light, Karna's refusal is not just moral and right, but also prudent keeping in mind the reputation for treachery that Krishna has already built for himself.

Who is the underdog?

Notwithstanding what he says to Krishna, it is also possible that Karna believes Duryodhana's side to be stronger in the war, almost certain to beat the Pandavas.

If this is true, the whole offer made by Krishna is laughable. Karna may have thought in his mind: *the Pandavas are going to be killed in this battle. Draupadi will become Duryodhana's slave. Why will I switch from a winning side to a losing side? The throne of Indraprastha will not be Yudhishtir's to give once the war is over.*

Note that these inner thoughts are not inconsistent with what he says to Krishna. Karna may still craftily make Krishna believe that he thinks the Pandavas are the stronger side, and that he is rejecting Krishna on moral grounds.

As the representative of the underdog, Krishna does not have believability on his side when he promises the world to Karna. All his machinations come across (to Karna) as attempts to steal the stronger side's prime warrior.

We must note that Duryodhana also has the same attitude toward Krishna at this time. 'With Drona, Bhishma, Karna, Shalya and the might of the Kuru army on our side, why should we negotiate?' he asks. 'You are the weaker side. You are certain to lose. You are in no position to make offers to anyone.'

Karna, one can reasonably surmise, is thinking the same when he rejects Krishna's grand promises.

Conclusion

All in all, we can gather the following thoughts from this episode:

- Krishna offers Draupadi to Karna as prize if Karna switches sides and fights alongside the Pandavas against Duryodhana.
- It is not clear, however, if Krishna *intends to keep this promise* or indeed if he will be able to persuade the Pandavas and Draupadi to honour it.
- It is possible that Karna doubts Krishna's intentions in this scene – after all, Krishna is Duryodhana's mortal enemy, and any attempts at sweet-talk on his part must be met with extreme suspicion.
- Karna also would have taken Duryodhana's stance on the matter: that the Pandavas are the weaker side in this battle, and are therefore trying to poach Karna by promising him the moon.

Why does Karna abuse Draupadi?

Short answer: Karna abuses Draupadi and calls her a prostitute during the dice game. He does this as retaliation for the way in which she publicly humiliates and rejects him at her swayamvara. Karna also performs the role of chief antagonist against the Pandavas for Duryodhana, and so always needles them on his behalf.

Humiliation by Draupadi

In the Draupadi-Karna relationship, the first salvo is thrown undoubtedly by Draupadi. At her swayamvara, when Karna steps up to the podium and prepares to try his hand at completing the archery task set by Drupada, Draupadi stops him.

Addressing the assembly, she says, 'I do not wish to be married to a Sutaputra.' This is despite the fact that Karna is by now king of Anga.

Interestingly, no one in the assembly – not even Duryodhana – comes to Karna's support. This suggests that while her behaviour may appear harsh, Draupadi is well within her rights to stop a suitor from attempting to win her hand.

(But then, if this is true of swayamvaras in general, much is made of a similar scene in some versions of the Ramayana, where Ravana approaches the bow at Sita's swayamvara. Sita is described as hoping against hope that Ravana would fail. If she had the power to speak up, why did she not?)

In any case, Karna respects Draupadi's wishes and returns to his seat without having a go at shooting the target.

What rubs salt into the wound here is that after rejecting Karna, Draupadi does nothing to prevent a poverty-stricken, nameless Brahmin from competing. The message to Karna is clear: *I'd rather marry this poor man than you, even though you're a king.*

An Interlude

After their chance encounter at the swayamvara, Draupadi and Karna rarely have occasion to meet. They may have crossed paths at Yudhishtir's Rajasuya, but after that, for twelve years they live fairly separate lives – Draupadi as queen of Indraprastha, and Karna as king of Anga.

During this time, Karna marries a girl (chosen for him by Adiratha, we're told), has sons with her, and by all accounts gives a good account of himself as king. He garners a bit of a reputation as a just, generous man.

In this period, Draupadi has grown in stature too. Once a princess of Panchala, she is now queen to the emperor of the world. Anga, one assumes, is one of the many kingdoms that pay tribute to her husband. She is mother to five sons – each born to one of her five husbands.

Both Karna and Draupadi, therefore, have grown in self-importance during these twelve years. Karna, in his position as king, has become more comfortable with dispensing justice, with speaking and with being heard and obeyed.

On the other hand, if Draupadi thought Karna beneath her at her swayamvara, by now – with her own status having grown immeasurably – that feeling will have only intensified.

At the Dice Game

Why Karna is present at the dice game is not explained in the text. Since it is no short distance between Anga and Hastinapur, we may safely assume that Duryodhana must have invited him.

And if he did, is it unreasonable to suppose that he gave him instructions to behave in an abrasive manner toward the Pandavas?

Karna plays a vital role in escalating already roused tensions during the dice game. After Yudhishtir has lost everything to Duryodhana, on his last turn to roll, at Shakuni's insistence, he pledges and loses Draupadi.

And Draupadi, true to the manner of one not used to being summoned anywhere by anyone, sends back a message asking, ‘Did the king lose me first or himself?’

This sets up a debate in court around whether Draupadi has or has not been won.

Argument against Vikarna

Surprisingly, Vikarna, one of the brothers of Duryodhana, springs to Draupadi’s support. (This probably comes as a surprise to Duryodhana and Shakuni – witnessing dissent from one of their own.)

Vikarna argues that by losing himself first, Yudhishtir had lost all rights over Draupadi, so he could no longer fairly pledge her in the game.

Karna, in the manner of someone used to expounding on matters of propriety in Anga, stands and delivers a four-point rebuttal of Vikarna’s points. His conclusion: though Yudhishtir lost himself, he still retained *some* rights, and that included a right to a spouse. So his pledge of Draupadi was valid, and she is now Duryodhana’s slave.

Karna’s Accusation

Having come this far, Karna does not rest his case. He places an accusation over Draupadi and calls her a prostitute. ‘Our scriptures declare,’ he says, ‘any woman who takes five or more paramours in the course of her life is a whore. And this woman has, in the eyes of the entire world, shamelessly wedded five husbands.’

Of course, there are perfectly valid reasons for Draupadi having married all five Pandavas. But there is also truth to the statement that Karna has referenced.

Scriptures of the time do seem to have made the declaration that no self-respecting woman should take more than five sexual partners during the course of her life.

This is the reason that Kunti gives Pandu for not using Durvasa’s incantation after Arjuna’s birth. ‘I have already taken four paramours including

you, my lord,' she says. 'If I take one more, I shall be known in the world as debased.'

(Of course, it's quite another matter that Kunti has already become debased in reality because she had already slept with Surya before her marriage. But no one but her knew about that. As far as the world knew, she only had four lovers.)

Karna Suggests Disrobing

Having made his accusation – and having received no pushback – Karna now calls on Duhsasana to publicly disrobe Draupadi in order to 'treat her like a woman of her character ought to be treated'.

Whether prostitutes of the time were routinely disrobed in assemblies, one does not know. But as Duhsasana approaches to carry out Karna's command, none of the Kuru elders deem it fit to stop what is going on.

Why? We're not told. But everyone seems to be caught up in the logic and reasoning of the debate that took place between Karna and Vikarna. They consider Karna's point to be a sound one, though he takes a bit of a leap from 'slave' to 'prostitute'.

In any case, Vidura is the first of the Kuru elders to reframe the conversation from 'Has Draupadi been won?' to 'Why are we humiliating the daughter-in-law of the house in this manner?'

Once Vidura speaks in these terms, everyone slowly comes to their senses. Dhritarashtra asks forgiveness of Draupadi and gives the Pandavas back their kingdom and wealth.

Revenge?

One can argue both ways about whether Karna still burned with anger for what Draupadi had done to him at her swayamvara. After all, twelve years have passed. Did he still carry a grudge?

But then, Karna is precisely the sort of intense, brooding man that *would* find it difficult to forgive anyone for a slight of that nature. It is entirely possible

that over all those years, Karna was biding his time, waiting for an opportunity to humiliate Draupadi in much the same way as she had humiliated him.

You called me a Sutaputra, he may say, and I called you a whore.

Either way, it seems reasonable to assume that at least part of his motivation for abusing Draupadi so ruthlessly stems from a desire to exact vengeance for her past slight.

Under Duryodhana's Instructions

Much of Karna's general antagonism toward the Pandavas arises out of his desperate need to be seen as loyal to Duryodhana. Since we have already established that Karna had no reason to be present at the dice game and had probably been invited there by Duryodhana, it is not unreasonable to presume that he was under further instructions to put on a boorish, uncouth act.

We know for certain that the dice game is planned by four people: Shakuni, Duryodhana, Karna and Duhsasana. During Draupadi's disrobing, all the main antagonistic events are carried out by one of these four.

Even if Karna did not hate Draupadi enough to want her disrobed in public, he would have had to play his part in order to please Duryodhana. And to please Duryodhana is his life's mission because Duryodhana has given him everything.

In Conclusion

Regardless of the truth about the motivations behind his actions, Karna's abuse of Draupadi – and the subsequent fallout – creates an unbridgeable fissure between the Kuru cousins.

So far, despite cool relationships, they were able to co-exist in relative harmony. But after this, after the Pandavas are sent to exile and robbed of their wealth, there is no going back to peace.

The Pandavas make a series of vows during this scene, all of which they fulfil during the war of Kurukshetra. The most visceral of these promises is Bhimasena assuring everyone that he will one day tear open the chest of Duhsasana and drink his blood.

Why did Bhishma and Karna Quarrel?

Short answer: Bhishma sees Karna as a braggart. With Karna often announcing haughtily that he will kill Arjuna and failing each time, Bhishma reprimands him for making tall claims and never following through on them. For Karna's part, he thinks that Bhishma's partiality toward the Pandavas is hurting Duryodhana's ambitions.

Obsession with Arjuna

Right from his appearance in the story, Karna displays a particular obsession with defeating Arjuna. At the graduation ceremony, he successfully replicates all the feats that Arjuna completes. He rightly earns the descriptor of being 'Arjuna's equal'.

However, Karna never succeeds in defeating Arjuna in a man-to-man duel. During the few occasions they meet, either Arjuna wins or the battle ends without a definite result.

Despite this, Karna is always heard – especially in Duryodhana's presence – proclaiming himself as the only warrior capable of defeating and killing Arjuna.

The other warriors in the Kuru army – like Bhishma and Drona – are bemused by this. Karna has not distinguished himself in any battle that he has ever fought, these men think, and yet he has the temerity to strut around and preen himself.

Bhishma also reminds Karna on more than one occasion that for all his talk about loyalty and friendship, when Duryodhana truly needed to be rescued, Karna was nowhere to be found. It was Arjuna and Bhima who had to fight the Gandharvas and secure Duryodhana's release.

In Karna's Defence

Having said this, there is some substance to Karna's confidence in his ability to kill Arjuna. He is the only warrior to possess a weapon for which Arjuna has no counter. He has the Vasava dart, given to him by Indra.

His bragging, therefore, should not be seen as general vanity regarding his prowess as a warrior. It should instead be seen as a specific statement of fact: he is in fact the only hero on either side of the war that has a theoretical chance of defeating Arjuna.

Bhishma and Drona, skilful as they are, do not possess any weapons that may outsmart Arjuna. Karna, on the other hand, though *not* as skilful as Arjuna, does have the one weapon that can kill Arjuna.

However, in all probability, Bhishma does not know of the existence of the Vasava dart, so his irritation at Karna's incessant bravado is understandable.

Bhishma's Partiality?

But what if Bhishma did know Karna had the Vasava dart with him? After all, during the battle of midnight, during which Karna eventually kills Ghatotkacha, common soldiers of the Kuru army are heard exhorting Karna to use his special weapon. So if they knew about it, chances are that Bhishma did too.

If Bhishma knows about the Vasava and still picks a quarrel with Karna, his intentions are no longer above question. If Bhishma were truly fighting on Duryodhana's side, he would have insisted that Karna be made commander of the Kuru army, entrusted with the sole objective of engaging as often as possible with Arjuna.

The responsibility of all the other warriors – bar none! – will be to provide Karna with easy access to Arjuna, and then hope that in the many ensuing battles, Karna will be able to find a moment to use his weapon.

This would have been the logical way to approach the matter. But Bhishma takes the exact opposite approach, giving Duryodhana an ultimatum that either he or Karna can fight on the battlefield at the same time.

‘The son of Radha and I hardly ever see eye to eye, my son,’ says Bhishma. ‘If we fight together, we will quarrel too often to be of any use to you.’

Protecting Arjuna

The reason that Bhishma gives for his inability to fight alongside Karna is a laughable one. After all, Bhishma is fighting for Duryodhana himself, with whom he has disagreed vehemently on many occasions in the past. Can he not put aside his annoyance with Karna and take up the responsibility of commander for Duryodhana’s sake?

He probably can. This is a man who once fought against his own preceptor – Parashurama – in order not to dishonour a vow. He is not new to putting aside emotions and attending to the matter at hand.

But the fact that he chooses not to do so in this case raises the possibility that he is actively working to sabotage Duryodhana’s cause.

By giving Duryodhana an ultimatum, Bhishma ensures that he puts Karna out of the battlefield for as long as he is ably fighting. That means that Arjuna’s safety is secured.

Bhishma’s intention at this point – as it becomes apparent with his fighting style later – is to draw out the battle for as long as he can and eliminate the *army of the Pandavas* so that the war is brought to a halt. His plan is to force a situation where the Pandavas are left without an army. But he also wishes that none of the Pandavas are hurt during this process.

Reconciliation

Another point in favour of the theory that Bhishma is only engaging in Arjuna-shielding with all of this rigmarole is how easily he reconciles with Karna on the evening of the tenth day.

Bhishma is propped up on his bed of arrows. After all the visitors have left for the day, Karna comes to seek his blessings. Bhishma welcomes him with kindness and speaks to him with encouragement. He also apologizes for having abused Karna inordinately in the past.

He even admits that Karna is one of the atirathas – not a ‘half-ratha’ as he angrily called him before the war.

What has happened between Bhishma’s ultimatum to Duryodhana and this scene to turn Bhishma’s demeanour around? Is it just a dying man’s docility? Or could it be that Bhishma never had any anger toward Karna in the first place?

Here, Bhishma also confesses that he knows of Karna’s true identity. Vyasa, apparently, has paid him a visit before the war begins and told him. This nugget softens the edge of Bhishma’s deception: now the reader may surmise that he intended to protect *both Karna and Arjuna* by keeping the former out of action.

Karna’s Response

Neither Duryodhana nor Karna, alas, are smart enough to see through the grandsire’s manipulation. If they were, Duryodhana would have chosen Karna to fight on the first day of the war instead of Bhishma.

Indeed, in Bhishma’s absence, he would have had more luck implementing the ‘Kill Arjuna at all costs’ strategy with the help of Karna. He would have found ample support from the likes of Drona, Ashwatthama and Bhagadatta.

For his part, even Karna could have swallowed his pride and begged for Bhishma’s forgiveness. He could have contrived to at least be present on the battlefield even if they were all led by Bhishma.

But Karna makes no such attempt. He tells Duryodhana that the grandsire is right; it has to be either him or Bhishma.

It is possible that Karna is here offering Duryodhana a choice: with Bhishma, you will get the most powerful regent of Hastinapur, the most experienced General of his times, and a warrior without peer – but who is partial to the enemy. With Karna, you will get perhaps not the best fighter in the world, but someone who is not only able but also desperately eager to kill Arjuna.

And everyone knows this: Kill Arjuna and the war is won.

What if?

What if Duryodhana had responded differently to this choice given to him by Karna? By siding with Bhishma and allowing Karna to sit out the war, Duryodhana fails to give his friend a vote of confidence. In essence he is saying to Karna, 'You're strong, but I'd rather have Bhishma fighting for me than you.'

But if Duryodhana had said to Bhishma instead: 'Grandfather, for all your ability I think your heart mourns for the sons of Pandu. I wish to ride out to battle with a man by my side who I know is fighting for me.'

And if he had instead made Karna the first commander of the Kuru army? What would have happened?

Bhishma would sit out the battle in this scenario, with the understanding that he will enter the fray once Karna is either grievously injured or dead. The rest of the Kuru army would have focused on Arjuna right from the beginning, and would have employed formations that would encourage Karna and Arjuna to face off against one another repeatedly.

This does not necessarily mean that they would succeed in killing Arjuna. But at least they would give it their very best shot without holding back. And if Karna loses his life while attempting to kill Arjuna, Bhishma can always implement his 'destroy their army' plan later.

On the other hand, if Karna succeeds in killing Arjuna, the war is (just about) over. Duryodhana has won.

The Krishna Factor

We are, of course, underestimating the adaptive power of Krishna in this counterfactual scenario. Seeing that the Kauravas have employed Karna as the commander, Krishna would have guessed that they're betting all their resources on Karna's successful use of the Vasava weapon.

He might have then advised Yudhishtir to employ counter-arrays that ensure that Arjuna is hidden from Karna at all times. He might even have enlisted the services of Ghatotkacha (or another hero) much earlier with the express intention of tempting Karna into using the Vasava on the wrong person.

Overall, therefore, the final result may have been the same – i.e.: Karna uses the Vasava on a lesser warrior in a moment of befuddlement; Arjuna emerges after this to kill Karna; Bhishma enters the fray and is put away with the use of Shikhandi; Drona is killed with a lie – and so on.

In other words, the sequence of the events may have changed with the result remaining the same. And yet, one gets the feeling that Duryodhana would have stood a better chance with this approach.

As it Happened...

Notwithstanding all of this analysis, though, it bears mentioning that the fallout between Bhishma and Karna severely dents Duryodhana's chances to win the war.

Considering that these two are often touted – along with Drona – as among the most powerful and skilful warriors of the army, the fact that Duryodhana is not able to assemble them together on the battlefield for ten whole days is quite significant in the final tally.

It is also a pity that the two men have no real reason to be quarrelling with one another. Bhishma just happens to not like Karna's tendency to overstate his own abilities. This amounts to nothing more than a minor personality clash, which a commander of Bhishma's calibre and experience ought to have handled better.

But instead, Duryodhana is forced to fight with a fractured army right from the start.

Was Karna good or bad?

Short answer: In the Mahabharata, Karna is an ally and henchman of Duryodhana, the prime antagonist. However, he is also a Pandava by birth, and the son of a god. He is depicted as a tragic hero throughout the story, as someone who yearns to do right but is compelled by destiny to end up on the losing side.

Impeccable Lineage

First of all, since the characters of the Mahabharata place much value on this, we must acknowledge that Karna is of extremely high birth. Indeed, it may not be a stretch to say that as human births go, it does not get more privileged than this.

He is the son of a princess and a god. As the union of Kshatriya and celestial stock, Karna is given the best possible start in life in terms of genes.

He is given the divine gift of kavacha-kundalas which make him an invincible warrior – at least until he gives them away. Though he is raised as a Suta, he does not *look like a Suta*, which means that he is able to disguise himself successfully to train under Parashurama.

He is also told by his adoptive parents that he is not theirs, so Karna knows that he is destined for bigger things.

Fighting against Circumstance

In the Mahabharata, we're often told that all consequences are a combination of three things: privilege, effort and circumstances. In order to succeed, all three of them have to align together. Remove any one and the person is bound to failure and obscurity.

In Karna's case, he is privileged by birth and is also blessed with a tremendous work ethic. But circumstances often conspire against him.

For instance:

- He is the firstborn son of a princess and a god. By that token, he should grow up to become one of the great kings of the world. Yet, because he is *unwanted* by his mother, he gets abandoned and raised as a charioteer.
- After his training under Parashurama, his secret identity is revealed to the sage after a worm crawls onto his thigh at an inopportune moment. Parashurama then curses him.
- After his performance at the Kuru graduation ceremony, Karna gains the favour of Duryodhana of all people. If he had been taken under the wing of Bhishma or Drona, for instance, his story might have turned out differently.
- In the final battle, Karna asks for Shalya to serve as his charioteer so that they can together match the skills of Krishna and Arjuna. But unbeknownst to him, Shalya is working for the Pandavas. He discourages and taunts Karna. He refuses to help him during the duel with Arjuna.

Karna is thus dealt blow after blow by circumstances outside his control.

Enmity with the Pandavas

Having said this, Karna also makes some conscious choices which bring out a mean streak – specifically against the Pandavas and Draupadi.

- At the graduation ceremony, Karna appears for the first time in the story and announces an intention to match all of Arjuna's feats. Right from this moment, he is often heard pitting himself against Arjuna in all respects.
- Karna helps Duryodhana plan the events of Varanavata and the house of wax.
- At the dice game, Karna goes out of his way to insult and abuse Draupadi to such an extent that the Pandava-Kaurava relationship is irrevocably damaged.

- During the exile, Karna encourages Duryodhana to go to the forest with the only intention of ridiculing the Pandavas. When the plan backfires and Duryodhana is captured by Gandharvas, Karna flees the battle.

(Here, we must note that it is never clear how much of Karna's antagonism toward the Pandavas is inborn and how much is mere pretension intended as support for Duryodhana. But in at least two of the above instances, he performs actions that goes above and beyond what might have expected of him as a friend.)

Quarrel against Bhishma

On occasion, Karna comes across as a rude, abrasive personality in general. We see an example of this at the dice game, when he speaks harshly to Vikarna while arguing about Draupadi's status.

Karna is merely an outsider – probably present at the hall on Duryodhana's invitation – speaking to one of the Kuru princes. Even allowing for the fact that Vikarna is younger than Karna, the tone of Karna's speech is too derisive and vain.

What really ends up hurting Duryodhana's chances in the war, though, is Karna's quarrel with Bhishma. If Karna is really beholden to Duryodhana so much that he manufactures hate against the Pandavas and Draupadi, then we must also imagine that he should have been able to swallow his pride despite Bhishma's goading.

Yes, Bhishma needlessly provokes him. Yes, Bhishma is also equally at fault for giving Duryodhana an ultimatum to choose between himself and Karna. But Karna need not have played his part to fan to flames further.

He could have taken the moral high ground (he is no stranger to self-righteousness) and attempted to make peace with Bhishma. Instead, he petulantly agrees that he will not fight until Bhishma falls.

Arrogance and Cowardice

Karna exhibits a combination of arrogance and cowardice that riles up many people in Duryodhana's army. After Bhishma falls, Kripacharya and Ashwatthama also once pick a fight with Karna, and their complaint is the same: *for all your tall claims, you have no achievements to speak of as a warrior.*

On more than one occasion during the war, Karna flees from his opponent after being stripped off weapons and chariot. When Abhimanyu is rampaging alone in the Chakravyuha, Karna admits to Drona that 'loyalty to Duryodhana is the only thing keeping him from running away from the battlefield'.

During the battle with the Gandharvas – with Duryodhana desperately needing him to step up – Karna runs away.

Indeed, but for the presence of his Vasava dart and therefore his theoretical ability to kill Arjuna, even Duryodhana might have forsaken him long ago as a lost cause.

Throughout his life, there is not once instance where Karna displays evidence of heroism in battle – where he overcomes odds and wins.

Conquering the World

Karna does have one successful expedition of conquest against his name. Soon after the incident with the Gandharvas, after their return to Hastinapur, Karna sets out in Duryodhana's name and establishes him as emperor to the entire world.

During this tour, he battles with and defeats the likes of Drupada and Bhagadatta, who are notably strong fighters.

However, the qualifying detail here is that Karna is not alone in this quest. He fights at the head of the Kuru army. His success as a leader or commander should not be taken as proof of his skill as a warrior.

Incidentally, during the Kurukshetra war, Karna gives a great account of himself during the Karna Parva, when he gets to lead Duryodhana's forces out against the Pandavas. All his 'heroic' moments occur when he is commander.

This is yet another point in favour of the notion that Duryodhana should have trusted Karna – and not Bhishma – to become his army's first commander.

Generosity

As king of Anga, Karna gains a reputation as a generous king. In popular culture, he is often called ‘Danaveera’, the ‘hero among philanthropists’.

Though very few particular details are given, we’re told that Karna has bettered the lives of thousands of Brahmins during the course of his reign over Anga. Some anecdotes claim that no Brahmin has ever had to return from Karna’s palace empty-handed.

Some may ask the obvious question here: did that mean Karna was charitable only to Brahmins? What of the other varnas?

This is just a quirk of reporting; in those days, the generosity and kindness of a king often was measured by the way he treated Brahmins in his kingdom. The theory was that if Brahmins are happy, the spiritual health of your city is sound.

In practice, Karna must have been generous to everyone. If he had been otherwise, those stories would have come out.

A cynic may view this behaviour from Karna suspiciously: he may say that Karna is only engaging in charitable behaviour because he thinks that is what a king ought to do. But the counter to this is that appearances are hard to keep up for the length of time (around thirty years) that Karna ruled Anga.

So we may conclude that Karna has a generous heart – for those who are less fortunate than he is.

Wisdom and Morality

During his private conversation with Krishna just before the war – the only time we see Karna as himself, when he is not playing the role of Duryodhana’s obnoxious henchman – he displays a sound mind. His words are laced with wisdom and coherence.

He speaks to Krishna respectfully, and reveals his prediction that the Kauravas are going to lose. He rejects Krishna’s offer and refuses to leave

Duryodhana's side despite knowing that they will end up on the losing side of the battle.

Later, when Kunti seeks him out and tries to win him over to the Pandava side, Karna once again speaks with calm self-assurance. He forgives Kunti, gives her a promise, and overall gives one the impression of being comfortable in his skin.

Karna's moral code is also a staunchly rigid one. In it, loyalty and support to Duryodhana comes first. Loyalty to his adoptive parents, Radha and Adiratha, comes second. Loyalty to his adoptive varna, the Sutas, come third.

In order to preserve these three tenets, he is willing to make any sacrifices, and to break ethical boundaries in other ways. His personal moral code is, for him, more important than general, overarching ideas of 'right' and 'wrong'.

Ascension to Heaven

It is instructive that while Duryodhana is sent to hell at the end of the Mahabharata, Karna is shown to be sitting in Indra's hall, 'looking as bright as the sun' in the company of some Apsaras.

The story, therefore, seems to be giving us a subtle hint that despite his many faults, and despite his close association with Duryodhana, Karna is – at the end of the day – one of the good guys.

Or maybe the message is that as long as you're of privileged birth (born to a god and so on), you can do anything in the world of men and you will still be assured of a seat in heaven.

Conclusion

To answer the question of whether Karna is good or bad, then, we must concede that Karna exhibits numerous 'good' attributes. He is generous as a king, loyal as a friend, dutiful as a son, and loving as a brother and father.

He is wise, and he exhibits a keen understanding of morality.

But on the other hand, he is also fierce in his support of Duryodhana – to the extent that he is willing to break the codes of Dharma as it is understood by

people at large. He is willing to break the law, to adopt the persona of someone who is boorish and abrasive, and to be called a villain.

He also possesses a combination of vanity and cowardice that does not endear him to many people. Despite this, he also has a knack for leading armies – giving a good account of himself on two separate occasions as commander.

All this leads one to believe that Karna is – like all of us – a combination of good and bad. And whether a trait of his is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depends on whether you agree with him or not.

Was Karna killed fairly?

Short answer: Karna is killed by Arjuna just before sunset on the seventeenth day of the Mahabharata war. Karna is off his chariot on the ground when Arjuna shoots him. This has led some to suggest that the manner of his death is unfair. But the rules of fairness agreed to by the two sides at the beginning of the war have all long been broken. Within that context, Arjuna is within the bounds of fair fight.

Krishna Protects Arjuna

Before we look at the moral dilemmas surrounding Karna's death, let us recap the general circumstances surrounding the incident.

It is late evening on the seventeenth day of the war. Karna and Arjuna finally come face to face for their much-awaited duel. Krishna is Arjuna's charioteer. Manning Karna's horses is Shalya, the king of Madra.

During the course of this battle, a Naga named Aswasena appears on the scene and begs to be shot from Karna's bow at Arjuna. Karna obliges. The arrow zips through the air and makes for Arjuna's forehead, but right in the nick of time, Krishna stamps down on the chariot and causes one of its wheels to sink into the earth.

Aswasena the arrow only succeeds, therefore, in knocking off Arjuna's crown. Now, with his friend's life saved, Krishna leaps off the chariot and raises the sunken wheel back onto firm ground.

Shalya Refuses

This appears to be normal behaviour for a charioteer: if the vehicle is stuck or immovable, it is his job to rescue it.

But later in the battle, the situation is reversed. Karna's chariot-wheel now sinks into the earth, and Karna asks Shalya to attend to it while he continues to fight Arjuna.

Shalya refuses. 'I only consented to drive you around,' he says. 'Not to maintain your vehicle.'

This is, of course, boorish behaviour from Shalya. But it's also understandable. To expect the king of Madra – who gave one akshauhini of troops to Duryodhana for this war – to perform chores of this nature for a Sutaputra is a bit much.

In any case, Karna is left with no choice but to try and pull out the wheel on his own. He jumps to the ground and fights Arjuna on two feet for a while. Then he says, 'Partha, grant me a few minutes while I repair my chariot. It does not become a warrior of your stature to shoot at your opponent when he is deprived of his vehicle.'

Arjuna thinks about this, but Krishna swoops in and puts an end to the debate. He reminds Arjuna that nothing about the Kauravas and Karna has even been 'Dharmic'.

'Was the disrobing of Draupadi moral?' asks Krishna. 'Was defeating you in a game of dice moral? Was the killing of Abhimanyu moral?' And so on.

Krishna commands Arjuna to shoot when the opportunity presents itself. Arjuna obeys, and with one arrow beheads Karna.

Unjust Fighting

First of all, we must admit that according to the letter of the law, what Arjuna did here is unfair.

At the beginning of the war, both sides have agreed to a collection of rules that defined what is called 'fair fight' or 'Dharma Yuddha'. In this contract, there are such guidelines such as a warrior must only fight another warrior if he is of 'equal station', a warrior must not attack an enemy who has renounced his weapons, and so on.

Included in the document is a rule that a chariot-warrior must not shoot at his opponent if the latter is standing on his two feet.

If Arjuna had done this to Karna on the first day of the war, therefore, or if we apply the rule without any thought given to context and precedent, then yes, Arjuna and Krishna are in the wrong.

The Fall of Dharma

However, the incident happens on the seventeenth day of the Mahabharata war. Also, Karna and the Pandavas have a history together that offers more context to this question.

As Krishna mentions, Duryodhana and Karna have never sought to play fair with the Pandavas. Indeed, their strategy has always been to use the Pandavas' Dharma-following tendencies against them. Krishna is therefore wary of Arjuna letting his enemy slip from his grasp when the moment is nigh.

Now there is the more significant point of Dharma gradually declining in significance as the war wears on.

For the first nine days, Bhishma upholds a semblance of order in proceedings. On the tenth day, he resolves to eliminate the army of the Pandavas by letting loose on foot-soldiers. This is the first breach of the agreed-upon contract.

Bhishma's fall is in itself a huge dereliction of Dharma, with Arjuna shooting at his grandfather from behind Shikhandi. After that, a number of such incidents occur. Abhimanyu, Bhurishrava and Drona are all killed by unfair means.

In the case of the last two, they're beheaded after they have publicly renounced their weapons and *sat down to meditate*. Those are much larger infarctions than shooting at your opponent when he is no longer on his chariot.

Seen in this larger context, the killing of Karna is not all that unfair relative to everything else that happens during the war.

Krishna's Explanation

At the end of the war, after being (unfairly) felled by Bhimasena, Duryodhana accuses Krishna of having fought a morally corrupt war. ‘You have killed Bhishma, Drona, Bhurishrava, Karna – and now me – by unfair means, Krishna. This victory is not deserved!’

Krishna does not answer Duryodhana directly, but noticing that the prince’s words are showing an effect on the demeanours of the Pandavas, he tells Yudhishtir:

‘The army that Duryodhana assembled against you, O King, would have been unassailable if we had fought with purely just means. But our scriptures have said that when one’s foe is stronger than one, there is no dishonour in adopting unfair methods.’

Thus, Krishna himself acknowledges that the manner of the Pandavas’ victory is less-than-fair. But he believes it is justified because the Pandavas have been brought to their knees by Duryodhana *also by unfair means*.

When your enemy uses unjust methods, according to Krishna, there is nothing wrong in matching them.

Was Karna a coward?

Short answer: At different parts of the story, Karna displays a distinct lack of physical courage while fighting in battles. But equally, his generosity and wisdom as king, and his continued loyalty to Duryodhana as friend, mark him out as someone with incredible amounts of moral courage.

The Easy Answer

The easy answer to whether Karna is a coward is **yes**. During the final year of the Pandavas' exile, when Duryodhana is captured by Gandharvas and needs rescuing, Karna flees the battlefield and hides in the forest until the Pandavas have finished the job.

During his first meeting with Arjuna in a man-to-man fight (at Draupadi's swayamvara), Karna withdraws from battle citing that it is 'improper' for a Kshatriya to fight a Brahmin with otherworldly powers. It is quite possible that the true reason behind this forfeiture is Karna's fear that he will lose – and perhaps even die.

During the Mahabharata war, Karna flees the battle on more than one occasion, not least against Abhimanyu.

All of these instances seem to suggest that yes, Karna is a coward. But of course, here we're only speaking of *physical* courage. If we expand the definition of the word to include moral, emotional and spiritual elements, Karna is not found as wanting.

But first, let's speculate about reasons behind Karna's cowardice. After all, why is he so fearful?

Why is Karna so fearful?

Elsewhere on this blog, we have posited the theory that Karna loses his kavacha-kundalas as a young man, way before he makes his first appearance at the Kuru graduation ceremony.

If this is true, then it is consistent with Karna's observed behaviour. If you've been stripped off your natural armour and earrings – artefacts that make you impossible to injure – a certain amount of fear is bound to enter your being.

This is especially true if Karna has already developed a fighting style that *relied on the power of his kavacha-kundalas* up until then. Once Indra makes off with them, Karna now has to reinvent himself from the ground up as a warrior.

Earlier, he may have focused on offence-first strategies, leaving defence to the magic of his kavacha. Now he has to pay attention – like other mortals – to arrows that the opponent is shooting at him as well.

This also explains why Karna is wonderful (Arjuna's equal, in fact) at shooting lifeless targets but not as good when facing a real enemy. When shooting at an object, he can be his old self, the Karna of the kavacha-kundalas, and focus completely on the finer points of letting an arrow fly.

But when pitted against a live opponent, he can no longer pretend that he is invincible. He has to invest significant amounts of attention toward warding off what the other man is throwing at him.

So it is my submission that the loss of the kavacha-kundalas has made Karna a coward in battle.

Learning the art of defence

Does Karna ever actually learn the art of defence to compensate for the loss of his kavacha-kundalas? Evidence suggests that he does, at least in terms of skill.

In his first ever examination on the field of battle – during the Kuru invasion of Panchala – he fails utterly. But a couple of years later, when he meets Arjuna in single combat, he matches the Pandava blow for blow over the course of a lengthy battle.

In this intervening time, therefore, Karna seems to have plugged some of the gaps in his defensive skills. But what seems more difficult for him to master is

his mind: though he can train his body and muscles to adopt his more rounded fighting style, his mind still seems fixated on the fact that he is no longer invincible.

This notion is not unreasonable. Mental wounds inflicted in childhood leave lasting scars. Most of us never fully liberate ourselves from them.

One must also note that this must have been a painful process for Karna. Restructuring one's entire style of fighting from scratch is easier when you're younger and still learning. But as an adult, to unlearn everything and put the pieces together in a different way – especially without the guidance of a preceptor – is excruciating.

While Karna has been busy with this, he loses ground to Arjuna who doesn't have to worry about such things.

Confidence against Arjuna

While Karna exhibits fearful behaviour in battle with other people, whenever the prospect of fighting Arjuna rises, he is up for the fight. And he often gives a good account of himself too. Why?

This is because he has the Vasava dart. Whenever he is duelling Arjuna, in his mind he feels invincible. All his fear deserts him because he knows that if matters become dire, he can always use the dart and win.

This explains why Karna – despite showing very little evidence of courage against other warriors – always brings his best game when Arjuna is his opponent.

Courage as Commander

On the other hand, Karna displays plenty of courage and skill when he is leading or commanding armies. In such cases, one assumes again that his fear of injury is removed by the presence of the army around him. And this allows him to flex his skills to their fullest.

The certainty that nothing can happen to him seems to be the main ingredient that Karna needs to fight at his best. Whether that assurance comes

from the Vasava dart or from the presence of plenty of bodyguards and soldiers that surround him, without it he is reduced to a shadow of his potential self.

On two occasions in the Mahabharata, Karna distinguishes himself with success while leading an army. First, he leads the Kuru army on an expedition of conquest and makes Duryodhana an emperor. This happens, ironically, soon after that debacle with the Gandharvas.

Then, during the two days that he serves as commander during the Kurukshetra war, he performs many heroic deeds. Among other things, he wins individual battles against each of the four Pandavas. No mean feat.

During this time, we must note that his Vasava dart is no longer with him. So while he is almost invincible around *other people*, he is no longer so against Arjuna.

Other forms of courage

Thus far in this article, we have examined only Karna's physical courage. But then, we must remember that other forms of courage too.

- In his role as king of Anga, and in the reputation he builds for himself as a wise and generous man, he exhibits a significant amount of **emotional courage**. One needs to have near mastery over one's emotions to be a much-loved ruler of a kingdom.
- In his insistence to loyalty – to Duryodhana despite everything, to Radha and Adiratha, and to the Suta tribe for having reared him – Karna shows himself to be a man of great **moral courage**.
- In his self-awareness, in the predictions that he makes to Krishna about the end of the war, in the knowledge that he displays of his own place in the universe, and in the ease with which he forgives Kunti for having abandoned him, we can see that Karna has plenty of **spiritual courage**.

Some of the much more celebrated characters of the Mahabharata – Bhishma, for instance – can be thought of as more deprived than Karna when you expand the definition of 'courage' in this way.

Conclusion

To properly answer the question of whether Karna is a coward, one must take into account the following points:

- On several occasions, Karna displays the behaviour of a man who is physically fearful of his safety.
- The reason for this is that ever since losing his kavacha-kundalas, Karna's mind has always dwelled on the possibility that he will be injured during a fight. This is despite him honing a defensive aspect to his fighting style.
- He distinguishes himself as a brave and successful warrior whenever he is given an army to lead or command. As a commander, you always have access to safety whenever you need it.
- When one expands the definition of the word 'courage' to include moral, spiritual and emotional elements, Karna outshines many of the more 'powerful' characters of the story such as Bhishma.

Karna and Duryodhana: What was their friendship like?

Short answer: Karna and Duryodhana are often depicted as friends, but the power imbalance between them is too large for friendship to develop. Karna sees Duryodhana as his benefactor and his king, and himself as more of a slave. Duryodhana considers Karna nothing more than a pawn with which to destroy the Pandavas.

The Nature of Friendship

Elsewhere in the Mahabharata, Drupada tells Drona that friendship cannot exist between two individuals who are significantly different in social standing.

Drona and Drupada are friends as children. Drupada promises Drona: 'When I am king, half my kingdom will be yours.'

But after they grow up, Drona becomes a poor Brahmin and Drupada is crowned king of Panchala. Drona naively believes that Drupada's age-old promise is a binding one. He appears in Drupada's court, accompanied by Kripa and Ashwatthama, and says, 'Drupada, your old friend has come seeking you. Please give me half your kingdom like you promised.'

Drupada is amused at Drona's words. 'If you want charity, my man,' he says, 'I shall give you gifts like a king ought to give a Brahmin. But how can friendship exist between someone of your stature and someone of mine?'

(Drona feels slighted by this remark, and he takes vengeance upon Drupada by asking the Kuru princes to invade Panchala.)

Karna and Duryodhana

With that preamble, let us examine the relationship of Karna and Duryodhana.

Let's look at Duryodhana's point of view first. At the graduation ceremony, when he meets Karna for the first time and watches him flawlessly repeat all of Arjuna's many feats with bow and arrow, Duryodhana is struck by strategic possibilities.

Making his job easier, the Kuru elders – in a desperate bid to save Arjuna's self-respect – begin to question and ridicule Karna.

Now, by this time, Duryodhana and his brothers have already been relegated to second-berth-status behind the Pandavas. Arjuna is the most skilful of them all. Bhima is the most powerful.

Even at this young age (fifteen? Sixteen?) Duryodhana knows enough about polity to guess that when the time comes, Bhishma will favour Yudhishtir over him. In order to become king, then, he knows that he will have to fight – and somehow defeat the sons of Pandu.

He considers himself a decent match against Bhimasena with the mace. But Arjuna's skill far outshines everyone else's. How does one go about defeating him?

While Duryodhana is mulling over these points, fate places Karna in his path.

Why does Duryodhana help Karna?

There is no explicit reason given for why Duryodhana rescues Karna from his state of ridicule. The accepted notion is that Duryodhana has a noble side to him that cannot see a member of the lower class – especially someone so skilled – being discriminated against.

That can certainly be part of the reason, though Duryodhana exhibits this largesse of heart rarely before this incident or since.

But certainly a big part of his motivation behind helping Karna is his idea that this young man can be groomed to become Arjuna's nemesis.

Also, Duryodhana would have been smart enough to realize that even Bhishma cannot be relied upon to be stupid. There is a good possibility that Bhishma will recruit Karna as a soldier or a leader of a division of the Kuru army. Even though he does not speak during the ceremony, he will most likely make a move right afterward.

Duryodhana is therefore eager to make his play immediately. He jumps to Karna's aid, gives a heartfelt speech about how class structures are immaterial when deciding skill, and makes his new friend king of Anga.

Now. About that.

Does Duryodhana own Anga?

During this incident, no explanation is offered for this puzzling question: On whose authority does Duryodhana make Karna king of Anga?

Anga does not belong to Duryodhana. We must assume that it belongs to Dhritarashtra as part of his kingdom. Duryodhana is not even a crown-prince. So how is he able to give it away to Karna without so much as taking his father's permission?

The only theory that suggests itself to me is that the princes have been given dominion over small kingdoms as they have come of age, so that Bhishma can keep an eye on how the boys are coping with demands that come with kingship.

We don't know for sure, but perhaps Yudhishtir has also been given a kingdom of his own to rule. Perhaps Bhishma's assessment that Yudhishtir is the better ruler stems from not just his instinct but also from a few months observation.

If this is true, we must further assume that when Duryodhana was given Anga to rule on a trial basis, Bhishma also gave him the power to do what he likes with it. That includes waging wars – and giving it away in alms.

After all, in order to judge a man's behaviour under conditions of power, you must give him all power.

Did Anga become Independent?

Now that we have established that Duryodhana owned Anga at the time of his giving it away to Karna, we must also ask: after this transfer is complete, does Anga become an independent city?

Or does Anga already have a king who has been ruling it all this time, and now Karna just takes his place?

We're not told details about this, but common sense dictates that Bhishma will have safeguards to this kind of behaviour. He cannot allow his grandchildren to merely give away their kingdoms with no repercussions.

We must conclude, therefore, that Karna becomes a tribute-paying king of Anga. His allegiance is pledged at all times to Hastinapur.

We may also surmise that this act of Duryodhana counts as a black mark against his suitability as future king in Bhishma's eyes. And yet, Duryodhana does this because he believes it is worth losing a bit of favour with Bhishma if the trade is that he will gain Karna's loyalty for life.

Friend or Slave?

On several occasions, Duryodhana publicly declares Karna as his friend. But we must also look under the surface at his actions. After all, Kshatriyas are no strangers to claiming friendship with people of lower castes – as Drupada did with Drona.

After he secures Karna's servitude by making him king of Anga, Duryodhana gets a number of opportunities to stand up with his 'friend'. For instance:

- When Draupadi publicly humiliates and rejects him, Duryodhana could have risen and spoken about Karna's many achievements.
- When Bhishma mocks Karna and classifies him as 'half-a-ratha', Duryodhana could have defended him.
- When Bhishma gives him an ultimatum and says that only one of him or Karna should fight in the war at a time, Duryodhana does not speak a word of support.

- When Ashwatthama and Kripacharya later trade words with Karna, again Duryodhana is silent.
- For all his public proclamations of faith in Karna, Duryodhana only turns to him after Bhishma and Drona have failed. Despite complaining about the duo's partiality toward the Pandavas, Duryodhana does not trust Karna to do a better job.

It is possible that after years of backing Karna, his repeated failure to defeat Arjuna has jaded Duryodhana. Still, his demeanour toward Karna is more of in line with that of a master toward his slave than a friend.

What does Karna think?

For Karna's part, he rarely claims to be Duryodhana's friend. He always maintains that Duryodhana is his benefactor, someone who has given him everything – and to whom he must in return give anything that is asked.

Karna does not see it as his duty to judge Duryodhana's behaviour, nor does he think it right to disobey anything that Duryodhana asks him to do. He does not advise Duryodhana to make peace with the Pandavas – because if Duryodhana were happy with peace, their entire relationship would not have existed.

We often see Karna in the presence of Duryodhana in the story, and his behaviour comes across as petulant, callous and rude. But that is the role that Karna sees for himself under Duryodhana. He is the instigator of flames.

Every once in a while we see Karna in private, where Duryodhana is nowhere to be found – like when he speaks to Krishna before the war or when he visits Bhishma on the tenth evening.

On both these occasions, Karna is patient, wise, respectful and generous.

Karna's view, therefore, is that playing the role that Duryodhana asks him to play against the Pandavas is the least he can do to repay the wealth, favour and power that Duryodhana gifted him all those years ago.

Unconditional Support

Some of us may ask at this juncture: sure, Karna can do what Duryodhana wants, but can he not advise him against acts that are clearly immoral?

But that, in Karna's book, would be disobeying and disrespecting his king. Only by offering his complete support and eagerness to serve at all times does Karna think that he can repay Duryodhana's debt.

This is where the relationship differs from friendship. We consider those people our 'true' friends who occasionally tell us what we do not want to hear. But neither Karna nor Duryodhana sees their association that way.

In Duryodhana's view, Karna is a puppet that he has bought. In Karna's view, he must dance to all of Duryodhana's tunes.

Why does Karna kill Abhimanyu?

Short answer: Karna, along with five other warriors (Kritavarma, Ashwatthama, Drona, Kripa and Shalya), kill Abhimanyu inside the Chakravyuha on the thirteenth day. But Karna is the one who breaks Abhimanyu's bow from behind and disarms him. He does this on the advice of Drona, after Karna approaches the preceptor for help.

Drona Promises

On the thirteenth day of battle, Drona promises Duryodhana that on this day, he will kill at least one Pandava atiratha. This comes on the heels of the preceptor trying over the previous two days to capture Yudhishtir alive, only for Arjuna to foil his plans.

For the thirteenth day, therefore, Drona assigns to the Samshaptakas – a class of warriors who take an oath to 'die or conquer' – the task of diverting Arjuna and keeping him busy, so that the rest of the Kaurava army can focus on killing the one Pandava atiratha.

Drona deliberately creates an array called the Chakravyuha – which only Arjuna and Krishna in the Pandava army know how to break.

However, Abhimanyu, the son of Uttara and Arjuna, knows how to 'half-break' this formation. This means that he has learnt to enter it but now how to exit it.

Abhimanyu is Isolated

First thing in the morning, the Samshaptakas pull Arjuna and Krishna away to one edge of the battlefield, effectively keeping them engaged for the whole day.

Faced with the Chakravyuha, and concerned by the prospect of being captured by Drona, Yudhishtir assigns the task of breaking into the formation to the one warrior who knows how: Abhimanyu.

Abhimanyu accepts the quest, but also reminds Yudhishtir about his limitation. 'I know how to break it open, O King,' he says. 'But if I am trapped inside, I will not know how to make my way out.'

Bhima assures Abhimanyu that will not happen. 'I, Satyaki, Nakula and Sahadeva will follow you closely, my son,' he says. 'Leave unto us the work of keeping the Chakravyuha open after you enter it.'

Thus supported, a beaming Abhimanyu declares that he will perform feats on this day that his father and uncle will recount with pride in years. He dashes in his chariot toward Drona's Chakravyuha, easily penetrating and disappearing into the Kaurava ranks.

Bhima and the rest try their best to keep up, but standing in their path is Jayadratha, the Saindhava king. He prevents Abhimanyu's reinforcements from entering the Chakravyuha.

The formation closes all around Abhimanyu, and he gets trapped.

Abhimanyu Rages

After he realizes that he is essentially a dead man, Abhimanyu begins to fight like a man possessed. He destroys an entire akshauhini of Duryodhana's forces on his own.

During this battle he breaks a number of minor battle rules – the most common of which is that mounted chariot warriors should not attack soldiers who are fighting on foot.

Abhimanyu wins numerous dues against the likes of Drona, Ashwatthama and Karna, but interspersed between these are his arrows flying at and piercing the bodies of beasts and men who are beneath the rank of ratha.

Karna asks Drona

Soon after a battle in which Abhimanyu defeats Karna (and kills his son), the latter goes to Drona for advice on how to defeat Abhimanyu. Drona says, ‘He fights with such skill that the only way might be if you break his bow from behind.’

Karna proceeds to do exactly this. Other warriors take a cue from this – for example, Kritavarma kills Abhimanyu’s rear attendants – and soon force the son of Arjuna to fight on foot. Once separated from his chariot, it is only a matter of time before Abhimanyu succumbs.

After his vehicle has been reduced to pieces, Abhimanyu picks up a chariot wheel and begins to fight with it. But the chariot warriors surrounding him shatter it as well.

Abhimanyu’s final weapon is a mace, with which he kills several elephants and horses. He is then challenged by the son of Duhsasana, who also brings a mace of his own to the fight.

The duel proceeds for a long time until both men, overcome by exhaustion, fall unconscious. The son of Duhsasana, though, is the first to recover. He walks over to Abhimanyu (who is just tottering awake) and lands a heavy blow on his head.

Karna’s Role

Karna’s role in killing Abhimanyu is actually a very small one. He merely happens to be the warrior who lands the first blow on the son of Subhadra. He does so under the command of Drona.

One might argue that it is Karna’s fervent plea that made Drona think along the lines of killing Abhimanyu using unfair means, but Drona’s promise to Duryodhana is as good as fulfilled the moment Jayadratha guarded the mouth of the Chakravyuha ably.

This is why that Arjuna – later, after hearing with shock how his son had been slaughtered – holds Jayadratha responsible for it all.

Adharma?

The killing of Abhimanyu is often cited – by characters in the story – later in the war as an example of extreme Adharma. On the fourteenth day, Satyaki uses this as an excuse to mercilessly slice Bhurishrava's throat when the latter is meditating.

Dhrishtadyumna then uses *Satyaki* as precedent to kill Drona when *he* relinquishes his weapons.

(Both these acts will have consequences: Dhrishtadyumna meets his death in the hands of a vengeful Ashwatthama, the son of Drona. Satyaki's unholy act becomes the reason for his fight with Kritavarma many years later, which leads to the death of the Yadavas.)

However, after Abhimanyu is trapped inside the Chakravyuha, and after he sheds all fear of death and begins to blaze forth in all directions like the sun, we must remember that he is *surrounded* by enemy forces.

So it is only a matter of time before he is shot an arrow or two from behind him. As for multiple atirathas teaming up to fight him, these many-to-one battles happen regularly in the war. By themselves, these are not examples of Adharma.

Indeed, the Kaurava warriors do not kill Abhimanyu themselves. The son of Duhsasana also does not take the easy route and shoot arrows at him. He challenges him with a mace – as per the rules of war.

Arjuna Becomes Ruthless

However, it so happens that Abhimanyu is Arjuna's favourite son. Despite being a warrior, and despite realizing deep within his heart that none of the deaths in the war are personal attacks, Arjuna cannot help but take this incident as an affront.

In a moment of grief and anger, he takes an oath that he will kill Jayadratha by sundown on the fourteenth day.

This marks the turning point of the war: this is when Arjuna sheds all his inhibitions and fights the Kauravas with all his might.

Why did Karna go to hell?

Short answer: Karna, in fact, does not go to hell. At the very end of the story, after Yudhishtir has passed all his tests and gained entrance to the hall of Indra, Karna is present there. This is an admission on part of the Mahabharata that Karna's sins were all committed at Duryodhana's behest – and are therefore pardonable.

Karna's Wicked Deeds

Karna commits numerous deeds in his life that can be defined as 'wicked'. For instance:

- He abuses Draupadi with unnecessary brutality during the dice game. It is he who calls her a prostitute and suggests that she should be disrobed in public.
- He has a close hand in the planning of the events of Varanavata – where Duryodhana constructs a palace of wax for the Pandavas and tries to burn them alive.
- He is the first of the Kaurava atirathas to take up the mantle of killing Abhimanyu. He breaks the bow of Abhimanyu while shooting at him *from behind* his chariot.

Karna's Cowardly Deeds

During the course of the Mahabharata, Karna displays a distinct lack of physical courage, which for a Kshatriya is a sinful act. Here are a few incidents:

- During his battle against Arjuna at Draupadi's swayamvara, he withdraws from the challenge citing unwillingness to fight against a Brahmin. But it appears that he is frightened.

- During the Pandavas' exile, when Duryodhana is captured by Gandharvas, Karna flees from the battlefield and leaves his friend to be rescued by his enemies the Pandavas.
- During the final battle of Kurukshetra, Karna flees from several battles, not least against Abhimanyu whom he later handicaps by shooting at him from behind.

Karna's Heroic Deeds

To counterbalance his cowardly and wicked behaviour, Karna does commit some noble actions befitting a hero. Namely:

- When Krishna makes him an offer before the Kurukshetra war and tells him that the entire world and Draupadi will be his if he betrays Duryodhana, Karna withstands temptation and stays loyal to his friend.
- When Kunti tells him about the truth behind his birth, Karna does not forgive her. He does not accept her as his mother. But he promises her that he will seek to kill *only Arjuna* during the battle. 'You will have five sons regardless of who wins the war,' he tells her.
- Just before the Pandavas' year of incognito begins, Karna goes on an expedition of conquest on Duryodhana's behalf. He subjugates all the kingdoms in his path. He makes Duryodhana an emperor.
- When Indra arrives in the garb of a Brahmin and asks him for his natural armour and earrings, Karna does not hesitate to peel them off despite knowing that this is Indra's ploy to protect Arjuna against him.
- As king of Anga, he builds a formidable reputation. His subjects are happy under his rule, and they consider him the most generous of kings.

A Place in Heaven

When Yudhishtir successfully attains heaven in his mortal body, Karna is present in the hall of Indra, looking 'as resplendent as the sun'. This means that

the powers-that-be have decided, after weighing up Karna's good deeds against his bad, that he is worthy of dwelling in heaven.

Duryodhana, meanwhile, is banished to hell – which suggests that Yama comes to the conclusion after considering all matters that all the wicked deeds that Karna perpetrates are primarily Duryodhana's responsibility.

A few other reasons suggest themselves as to why Karna is sent to heaven:

- By the time the Mahabharata war ends, the Pandavas come to know the true identity of Karna, and perform various soul-purifying rites in his name. Perhaps the fact that he had been forgiven by his enemies lessens the weight of his wrongs.
- Ultimately, Karna is the son of Surya, a god. The son of a god cannot be sent to hell for all eternity.
- Karna's wrongful deeds – though highly visible – are overshadowed by the large number of good and generous deeds he performs as king of Anga. His ledger, therefore, is still black despite his villainy.
- Karna's wicked acts can be explained away as motivated by loyalty to a friend, and not out of selfishness or a sinful heart. Thus, Yama might have found it easier to pardon him.

A Period of Atonement

However, Karna does not get sent to heaven straight after his death. He is first taken to hell for a short period of time in order to atone for his deeds.

To Yudhishtir, Indra explains: 'Good people endure a short period in hell as penance for their small number of wrongdoings. They are then taken to heaven forever. Bad people, on the other hand, enjoy a short period in heaven as reward for their small number of virtuous actions. They are then taken to hell forever.'

From the fact that Karna is present in Indra's hall at the arrival of Yudhishtir, we can surmise deduce that Karna – according to Indra – is one of the 'good people'.

We can also surmise that after his death, Karna is first taken to hell until all the sins of his life have been washed away. These include his wronging of Draupadi and the killing of Abhimanyu.

After that, he is taken to heaven where he will reside for the rest of eternity, enjoying the fruits of all his virtuous deeds.

Reunion?

One wonders what the reunion between Karna and the Pandavas in heaven must have been like. Is it awkward for them to reconcile with one another given how bitter their enmity was on Earth?

The Pandavas did come to know soon after the war that Karna was their elder brother. After that, they have had thirty six years in which to get used to the idea that their killing of Karna was unfortunate. Perhaps that is enough time for a new relationship to begin in heaven.

It is also possible that the denizens of heaven do not necessarily fraternize with one another as do the people of Earth. Since heaven is beyond earthly desires and fears, the people that populate it – one imagines – no longer concern themselves with notions such as love and brotherhood.

In any case, Karna and the Pandavas have a happy enough reunion in Indra's hall. Also to be noted is the fact that Kunti is here too, so she is finally able to see all of her sons together.

Why did Karna dislike the Pandavas?

Short answer: There are three reasons why Karna dislikes the Pandavas. One: the Pandavas are the enemies of his benefactor, Duryodhana, so to show his loyalty, he has to hate them too. Two: Bhima and Arjuna call him a Sutaputra at the graduation ceremony. Three: the Pandavas represent the status and wealth that Karna aspires to achieve.

A Struggle with Identity

Karna knows from the start that he is not the son of Adiratha and Radha. He knows that he has been abandoned by his birth mother. From the story of how Adiratha found him, he knows that his birth family is probably a rich one. From the appearance of his earrings and armour, he knows that his parentage is at least semi-divine.

Right from a young age, Karna's deepest desire is to reclaim his 'deserved spot' among Kshatriyas. He does not wish to go through life as a charioteer's son.

He therefore trains under Parashurama. He goes to the graduation ceremony with the intention of catching the eye of some Kuru elder or another powerful man when he repeats all of Arjuna's feats.

There is a good chance that Karna has spent a good amount of time and effort planning his appearance at the graduation ceremony. During this process, he would have understood Bhima and Arjuna to be the most powerful of the Pandavas. And he would have deliberately chosen to emulate the most skilled of the Kuru princes in order to showcase *himself*.

That sets up an immediate dynamic of competition between Karna and Arjuna.

Being Insulted

After Karna's successful performance at the graduation ceremony, there is little chance that he and Arjuna will be friends.

At this stage, Arjuna is a vain prince who believes himself to be the best archer in the world. And yet here is a *second low-born youth in the kingdom* (after Ekalavya) to match his skill.

Arjuna is not known to react well when he discovers an archer as good as he. He does not possess the requisite humility and good cheer that is needed to embrace a potential competitor as friend.

(This is not to say he does not develop these qualities *later*; just that at this point in the story, he does not have them.)

Bhima and Arjuna, therefore, both insult Karna and call him a Sutaputra, implying that he is not fit to be present among them in that arena. None of the Kuru elders admonish or stop the princes.

Kripa subtly supports Arjuna and Bhima by asking Karna to introduce himself and his dynasty. This ensures that the relationship between Karna and the Pandavas starts on the wrong foot.

Loyalty to Duryodhana

All the Kuru elders – even the supposed master strategists like Bhishma – miss a trick at the graduation ceremony. It would have been more sensible to invite Karna into the palace life of Hastinapur, by giving him employment in the army perhaps, or even by keeping him around to groom into a possible warrior in the future.

Instead, by being so eager to defend Arjuna's vanity, the establishment gives Duryodhana an opportunity to strike up a friendship with Karna. Duryodhana jumps at this chance, because right in front of his very eyes he has been shown a way by which Arjuna could be defeated.

Duryodhana thus supports Karna (purely out of selfish motivations, though one cannot be certain about this), and makes him king of Anga right there at the ceremony.

Their friendship is certainly an unequal one. Duryodhana gives Karna all these material comforts, and the understanding is that Karna will remain loyal to Duryodhana in return.

This loyalty forces Karna to appropriate all of Duryodhana's loves and hates. And because Duryodhana hates the Pandavas more than anything, Karna learns to do so too.

Rejection by Draupadi

Karna also gets rejected at Draupadi's swayamvara. When he stands up in Drupada's ceremonial hall with the intention of trying his hand at the archery task that will potentially win him Draupadi, she stops him by announcing to everyone that she doesn't wish to be married to a low-born man.

We must bear in mind that this insult would have burned Karna the most because by this time, he has been king of Anga for a while. He is no longer just a Suta putra. He may have felt that he does not deserve the moniker anymore.

Whether Draupadi is morally right to reject him here is beside the point. But this gives Karna another personal grudge against her, which he acts on during her disrobing.

And of course, his dislike for Draupadi also increases his general distaste for the Pandavas on the whole.

Maturing into Acceptance

However, by the time the Kurukshetra war arrives, Karna has been ruling Anga for more than twenty five years. He may have fervently desired wealth and status of a Kshatriya when he was young, but now he is a middle-aged man who has seen it all.

He remains close to his adoptive parents Adiratha and Radha during this time. He gets married to a girl from the Suta caste, and he remains true to all the dictates of his order.

In fact, Karna tells Krishna that he is thankful to Duryodhana for 'having allowed me to be king while remaining a Suta'.

He has children whom he raises not as kings but as Sutaputras. The man who has railed during his younger life against the term has slowly come to embrace it – so much so that he tells Krishna, ‘I was born a Sutaputra. I will die a Sutaputra.’

At Peace

Karna also becomes a king in his own right during this period. He gains a reputation as a generous and wise man among his subjects. He is well-loved, and his kind treatment of underprivileged people in Anga becomes legendary.

In other words, Karna becomes more and more accepting of who he is. By the time the war begins, he appears to be very comfortable in the life that he has built for himself – with Duryodhana’s help but with his own personality as well.

Karna is in fact so at peace with himself that he is able to reject Krishna’s invitation (to come rule Indraprastha as Draupadi’s husband) and remain true to his values. All the things that Krishna offers him were once alluring to him, but not anymore.

Later, when Kunti reveals herself to be his birth mother, Karna is able to reject her too, and announce that he is the son of Adiratha and Radha.

Contrast this with the feeling of shame he feels when Adiratha publicly embraces him at the graduation ceremony. Then, he wished he was someone else’s son. Now, he proudly claims them as his parents.

At this late stage, all of his personal grudges against the Pandavas have likely evaporated, and the only reason for him to fight against the sons of Pandu is his loyalty to Duryodhana.

Why did Kunti abandon Karna?

Short answer: Kunti gives birth to Karna due to a misguided use of Durvasa's magical incantation to summon Surya, the sun god. Since Kunti is an unwed maiden at the time, she requests Surya to leave without giving her a son. But he replies that he cannot do so. Therefore, afraid of social censure, Kunti decides to abandon her baby.

Durvasa's Visit

Kunti is actually the biological daughter of King Shurasena, who rules over the kingdom by the same name. She is the sister (younger or older, we do not know; probably the former) of Vasudeva, who fathers Krishna with Devaki.

She is, however, given up to fostering at the house of Kuntibhoja, the king of (the kingdom) Kunti. Her birth name is Pritha.

After her marriage, she comes to be known by the name of the kingdom from which she hails. Everyone begins to call her Kunti.

Her life as princess of Kunti is quite uneventful except for when Sage Durvasa visits Kuntibhoja. The king welcomes Durvasa with due honour, and gives Kunti the task of attending to his every need.

Durvasa stays at the royal palace for a few months, and as he is about to go, he leaves Kunti with a magical incantation. He is so pleased with the princess's devotion that he gives her the ability to bear sons with any god of her choosing.

She can summon as many gods as she wishes – one at a time – and have as many children as she wants. All she has to do is recite the incantation.

Kunti's Curiosity

As soon as Durvasa leaves, Kunti is overcome by excitement and curiosity. A part of her is disbelieving: how could she, a mere mortal woman, summon a *god* to have children with?

She wonders if the sage had been playing a prank on her. One morning, while marvelling at the beauty of the morning sun, Kunti recites the mantra. In no time at all, the sun god Surya stands before her in all his glory.

Surya refuses to leave without giving her a son. Through their union is born Karna.

(There is a whole school of thought that the whole story of Kunti's magic is just a lie, and that Karna is Durvasa's son. But we will ignore this theory for the moment.)

Spiritual or Physical?

The actual mechanics of how Durvasa's chant works is not explained with clarity. Some assume that the union between Kunti and the gods is a physical one, just like the union of any other man and woman. Others suggest that the act is a spiritual one, and that Kunti does not lose her virginity as a result.

Some think that Kunti carried Karna to term; others say that Karna was born immediately, on the same day of Surya's visit.

One can argue both ways on this, but we know the following from the births of the Pandavas:

- They are all born a year apart from one another, which hints at the fact that Kunti and Madri carried each foetus to term.
- Kunti considers the four gods that fathered her children as *paramours*, and cites that as the reason for not giving Pandu more sons. This suggests that the union is a physical one.

All of this is important because it allows us to imagine Kunti's predicament while carrying Surya's son in her womb.

Pregnancy

Kunti's pregnancy could not have been a private matter. The princess of a kingdom (or any woman for that matter) does not have the privacy to keep such a thing as her pregnancy secret from everyone.

While it may not have been known to many, at least her closest confidants would have known. Kuntibhoja himself would almost certainly have been given the news.

So the decision of what to do with the infant after he is born would not have been Kunti's alone. All the people – especially her father – who knew of Kunti's secret would have had a say in it.

The most important factor to consider is this: Kuntibhoja would have been keen to smother the secret completely so that it never returns to bother Kunti.

We should also remember that Kuntibhoja's own reputation is at stake here. King Shurasena would not be pleased if he knew that his daughter's adoptive father was so reckless as to allow her to become pregnant before her marriage.

Choices

Realistically speaking, what choices would Kuntibhoja have once he is informed of Kunti's pregnancy? This would have happened around Kunti's first or second missed menstrual cycle, so he would still have plenty of time to think it over.

The first thing he might have done is to ensure that as few people as possible ever get to know about this. Then, he would have considered the following options:

- Can the child be given to a waiting woman with instructions for him to be reared in a poor family in Kunti? This way, Kuntibhoja and Kunti can keep an opportunistic eye on the boy as he grows up.
- Can the child be fostered in a family of high birth within the court of Kunti? This way, the child will grow up with all the privilege that he deserves, but this will necessarily mean exposing to secret to more people.

- Can the child be removed from Kunti completely so that there is a clean break between child and mother? This way, neither Kuntibhoja nor Kunti will need to worry about anything.

The first two choices are better for the baby, because a link between him and his birth family is not being completely severed. But they are also risky for Kuntibhoja. With each new person knowing about Kunti's unplanned pregnancy, the risk of that knowledge reaching the wider public – and Shurasena – increases.

Decision

Given all of the incumbent factors, there is only one choice open to Kuntibhoja. He decides to abandon the child.

He arranges for the baby to be placed in a basket and left on the river. It is clear that he intends for the boy to be found – because otherwise he could have easily ordered to have him killed.

Sometimes this decision is portrayed as being Kunti's alone. She is depicted as being the person to let go of the basket on the river. We of course think of her as being very emotional in this moment, tears streaming down her cheeks as she stands and watches the basket disappear out of sight.

But we have no reason to believe it happened that way. For all we know, the instructions would have come from Kuntibhoja, and the dirty deed might have been completed by a waiting woman.

The child, at the time of abandonment, is unnamed. He is later found by a charioteer named Adiratha and is given the name of Vasusena ('he who is born of wealth'). He comes to be later known as Karna, after he peels off his earrings and armour.

Why does Indra approach Karna?

Short answer: Indra is in the enviable position of knowing right from the beginning that the Kurukshetra war is inevitable. He knows that the only warrior capable of and willing to kill Arjuna – his son – is Karna. Therefore, in order to weaken Karna, Indra approaches him in the garb of a Brahmin and asks for his divine armour and earrings.

When does Indra visit Karna?

The exact timing of Indra visit to Karna is debatable. One possibility is that Karna is quite a young man – perhaps thirteen or fourteen – when this happens. At such an impressionable age, Karna may have been too naïve to understand the significance of what is being asked of him.

Here are a few facts:

- By the time Karna appears at the graduation ceremony of the Kurus, he is already known as ‘Karna’ – which means ‘peeler of self’.
- Duryodhana points out his many scars and proclaims: ‘He gave away his natural armour because a Brahmin asked for it. How can you call him undeserving of being here?’
- Throughout his life, Karna displays a distinct lack of physical courage when faced with the prospect of battle. This is inconsistent with a person who has impenetrable armour on him.

The Alternative

The alternative theory is that Indra visits Karna just before the Kurukshetra war begins. This means that throughout his life up to that point, Karna actually had his kavacha-kundalas with him.

This brings up multiple questions such as:

- Why did Karna then lose to Arjuna on two separate occasions?
- Why did Karna flee from the battlefield when Duryodhana is abducted by Gandharvas and needed to be saved?
- How did Karna lose the battle against Drupada when the Kuru princes attack Panchala after their education is complete?

Of course, believing that Karna gave up his armour and earrings when he was younger would mean that he has been in possession of the Vasava dart all along. Why, then, did he not use it against Arjuna when he fights him at Draupadi's swayamvara? Or during the defence of Matsya?

Indra's Motivation

Regardless of the timing of his visit, the motivation behind Indra's visit is quite straightforward. He wishes to protect Arjuna from Karna. This means by implication that he believes that Karna – if he has his kavacha-kundalas – is enough of a match for Arjuna, despite the fact that Arjuna has been blessed with numerous divine weapons.

Indra does not appear before Karna as himself, though. He dons the guise of a Brahmin because Karna has a reputation of never saying no to anything a Brahmin asks.

Surya appears to Karna in a dream and warns him of Indra's plan. He tells Karna not to give away his kavacha-kundalas because that will weaken him immeasurably.

Karna rejects this piece of advice. 'If the king of the gods wants something from me, and he is coming by himself to ask for it, there is no bigger honour. I will not say no.'

What does Karna get in return?

It bears noting that Karna does not expect anything from Indra in return. He gives the kavacha-kundalas as alms. Indra is then moved enough by Karna's nobility to grant him a gift.

Karna asks for the Vasava dart, which allows him to kill any warrior no matter how powerful. This is a fair request from Karna: in return for giving up a defensive power, he asks for an equivalent offensive power.

Indra does give Karna the weapon, but with a caveat: that Karna can use it only once in his entire life. After that one use, the dart will return to Indra.

This is, of course, not a fair trade anymore. Indra is essentially handicapping Karna forever by taking away his kavacha-kundalas, and in return he is giving him one formidable weapon that can be used only once.

If we assume that this exchange happens early on in his life, then we can expect Karna to be fearful of combat in general – because he is no longer invincible – and yet confident of defeating Arjuna – because he is saving his Vasava dart to kill him.

Killing Ghatotkacha

For the longest time, Karna keeps the Vasava dart in reserve to be used against Arjuna. But on the night of the fourteenth day, with Ghatotkacha running amuck, the Kaurava soldiers call out to him and implore him to use his weapon.

Karna does not want to, but he also cannot ignore the beseeching cries of Duryodhana's men. In a moment of perplexity, he pulls out the Vasava and hurls it at Ghatotkacha.

The fall of Ghatotkacha compels Krishna to cry out in delight and to proclaim: 'Karna is no longer powerful enough to kill you, Arjuna. Now your victory is certain.'

This also implies, of course, that until that point, Krishna was not sure that a fight between Arjuna and Karna would end with victory going to the former.

Arjuna's Nemesis

Karna is therefore rightly called Arjuna's nemesis despite the fact that he is not as powerful as Arjuna, and despite losing several battles that Arjuna goes on to fight and win.

Before he gives up his kavacha-kundalas, Karna is a universally strong warrior. He is near invincible against any enemy and any weapon.

But after Indra robs him of his armour, Karna turns into a warrior who is still strong against other opponents, but not invincible against him. More than anything, he is not *confident* of holding his own – hence the many instances of his fleeing the battlefield.

At the same time, when facing Arjuna, Karna's fears dissipate and his poise returns. He knows that he has in his armoury the one weapon that can kill Arjuna.

Despite Bhishma's protestations to the contrary, therefore, Karna is still the only warrior on both sides of the Kurukshetra war capable of defeating Arjuna. And he is the only warrior that Krishna is trying to avoid fighting.

This lends further credence to the notion that it is Karna who should have been made the first commander of Duryodhana's army. But Bhishma sees to it Karna is banished from fighting for the first ten days, thus once again protecting Arjuna.

Why did Bhishma not allow Karna to fight?

Short answer: As the start of the Mahabharata war is imminent, after Bhishma is made commander, he tells Duryodhana that if he and Karna fight on the battlefield at the same time, it will cause unnecessary quarrels and loss to the Kuru cause. By thus removing Karna from action, Bhishma also protects Arjuna.

Bhishma's Ultimatum

Just before the Mahabharata war begins, Duryodhana makes Bhishma the first commander of his forces. This decision is a unanimous one: Bhishma has been leading the Kuru army in all its wars since time immemorial.

Despite his misgivings about Bhishma's will to fight the Pandavas, Duryodhana may have hoped that Bhishma would rise to the occasion and perform his duty as Hastinapur's regent.

Bhishma's first reaction is to (modestly) thank Duryodhana for giving him the honour of leading the Kuru army. Then he makes a few remarks:

- He reiterates that the Pandavas – especially Arjuna – are very tough to defeat in battle. He reminds Duryodhana of the time in Matsya when Arjuna fought all of them singlehandedly and prevailed. 'But,' he says, 'I will do my very best to win this war for you.'
- He reminds Duryodhana that he will not fight against any warrior who has once been or who is right now a woman. When a bemused Duryodhana asks who he is referring to, Bhishma tells him Shikhandi's story.

- Finally, Bhishma gives Duryodhana an ultimatum: that he will not fight if Karna fights. ‘Only one of us should take to the battlefield at once, my son,’ he says.

Duryodhana is flustered at Bhishma’s stand regarding Karna. But Bhishma stands his ground. Karna, understanding his friend’s predicament, offers to sit out the war until Bhishma falls.

Bhishma’s Reason

Bhishma does give a reason for placing this condition. ‘The son of Radha and I are always at loggerheads, my son,’ he tells Duryodhana. ‘If we fight together, I have no doubt that we will quarrel so much that it will cause the army more harm than good.’

An objective reader may ask at this point: Whose fault is it that the Bhishma-Karna relationship is sour?

Karna has never gone out of his way to pick a quarrel with Bhishma. It is Bhishma who has repeatedly poked at Karna’s side, needling him for his misplaced bravado – especially regarding his confidence in defeating Arjuna.

Regardless of how the issue began, one might wonder if it befits a warrior of Bhishma’s standing to effectively cripple his army because he cannot find a way to work with a particular person. One would think that it is the hallmark of a leader to pull a team of disparate individuals together in a common direction.

This makes us ask the question: Did Bhishma have another, secret reason for making this play?

What Bhishma should have done

At this point in time just before the war begins, Bhishma already knows about Karna’s Vasava dart, and the fact that he has been saving it up for a fateful encounter with Arjuna.

Bhishma is also wise enough to know that among all the warriors who have lined up to fight at Kurukshetra, one man alone possesses the ability to kill Arjuna. And that is Karna.

Considering that Arjuna is the most powerful warrior on the Pandava side, and that killing him would mean near-certain victory for Duryodhana, what should Bhishma have done if he were working impartially?

He should have crafted a strategy centered around Karna. He should have instructed all his warriors that the sole aim of the Kaurava army is to ensure that Karna and Arjuna would repeatedly clash, thus increasing the likelihood that Karna will find the opportunity to use his Vasava.

Instead, what does he do? He does the *exact opposite*. Not only does he marginalize the one man who can win Duryodhana the war, he also ensures that he *does not fight*.

Protecting Arjuna?

From the outside, this looks like the behaviour of someone who is keen to protect Arjuna. For all his protestation that he will fight fairly and to the best of his ability, Bhishma seems to be working behind the scenes to protect Arjuna from Karna.

We must also note that Bhishma tells Duryodhana that Karna can fight *after he has been defeated*. It is also possible that Bhishma has plans of his own: perhaps he wishes to fight in such a manner that he brings about a stalemate in the battle without killing any of the Pandavas.

(During his ten days at the helm, this is exactly how Bhishma fights: by exerting himself fully against common infantry and cavalry forces, he endeavours to deprive the Pandavas of their army so that they will be forced to surrender.)

Bhishma plans to fight 'forever': he knows that while he cannot defeat Arjuna, he is no mean warrior either. He can theoretically bring the battle to a close without killing any of the Pandavas. On the other hand, if he falls, then it means that his plan has failed, and that Karna can be allowed to enter the fray.

No matter which of the above theories is true, we must accept an inexorable truth: Bhishma enters the battle with a personal strategy (that of bringing the war to an end with the least damage done) that is at odds with Duryodhana's ambitions.

And as the appointed commander of the army, Bhishma is shirking his duty by doing this. One may not be too far off calling his behaviour traitorous.

Effects of Bhishma's Ruse

Bhishma's machinations bring about a number of consequences that are favourable to the Pandavas:

- Over the first ten days, the Kaurava forces – in the image of their commander – do not exert themselves fully.
- Knowing that Karna is not on the battlefield, Arjuna gets free rein to fight as Yudhishtir's lynchpin, going everywhere and overseeing everything in the company of Krishna.
- The Kauravas miss an opportunity to target Arjuna with the full strength of their army. Imagine Bhishma, Drona, Ashwatthama, Kripa and Bhagadatta fighting with the sole purpose of pitting Karna against Arjuna.
- As it happens, by the time Karna takes to the field, Bhishma is out of action, and the Kauravas have already lost plenty of heroes to Arjuna's prowess.
- Bhishma's tactics frustrate Krishna – twice – to the point that he almost breaks his vow and attacks Bhishma. Bhishma welcomes this: he believes that if Krishna kills him, the battle will come to an end because the prince of Dwaraka has foresworn his oath.

One Piece of Advice

It is only after Drona's ascendance to the position of commander – on Day 11 – that the war begins to assume the flavour of ruthlessness. Drona fights and

strategizes like a man possessed, not allowing his love for the Pandavas (and Arjuna) to interfere with his duty toward Duryodhana.

This is why Duryodhana would have been much better served by appointing either Drona or Karna as the first commander of his forces, even if it meant that Bhishma would watch from the sidelines.

This would have been a tough decision to make because of the optics surrounding it, but with the benefit of hindsight, if one could give Duryodhana one piece of advice that would probably win him the war, it would be this.

His deference to Bhishma may have been the one factor most responsible for his ultimate loss.

Why was Karna cursed by Parashurama?

Short answer: Parashurama curses Karna for the sin of lying about his identity. Parashurama thinks that Karna is a Brahmin boy, but one day, he sees evidence of Karna's pain-bearing ability, and concludes that he must be a Kshatriya. Outraged at this deception, Parashurama curses Karna that he will forget everything he has learnt when he most needs it.

Parashurama's Reputation

Sage Parashurama has a bit of a reputation for being a sworn enemy of the Kshatriya race.

The story goes back to the time of his youth, when a king called Karta Virya Arjuna (he of a thousand arms) kills Parashurama's father, Jamadagni. Parashurama vows revenge and kills Arjuna. After that, he goes on a bloody quest to eliminate the entire race of Kshatriyas.

It is said that he kills every king on Earth before hanging up his axe. By the time he is finished, the five lakes of Samantapanchaka are reddened by blood.

Many years after this incident, the war of Mahabharata occurs here in Samantapanchaka – which also has the name of Kurukshetra because it was claimed by a king called Kuru.

In addition to being known as a Kshatriya-hater, Parashurama also is considered a Brahmin-sympathizer. Drona takes advantage of this quality and procures from the sage all his weapons and the knowledge required to wield them successfully in battle.

Karna's Dilemma

When Karna is a boy growing up in Hastinapur as the son of Adiratha and Radha, he is compelled by a desire to move up the social ladder. He knows that he had been adopted; he also knows that his birth parents were wealthy. By all visible signs, he is a Kshatriya – probably even a prince of a kingdom.

But now he is stuck as a member of the lowly Suta caste, and if he does not grab destiny by the neck and wrestle with it, there is a danger that he will live out his life as a charioteer.

The most important skill he should learn, he decides, is to proficiently wield weapons. If he is good at the art of fighting, he can exhibit himself at any royal festival and gain the favour of the king.

In order to learn this, though, he has to become a disciple to some Brahmin who is adept both at scripture and at fighting. Karna decides to approach Parashurama for this.

However, even Parashurama will not entertain a low-born Sutaputra as student. Karna will need to lie about his identity if he is to gain the sage's favour.

Knowing Parashurama's hatred for Kshatriyas and his love for Brahmins, Karna introduces himself as a Brahmin boy.

Discovery

For the entire period of his time with Parashurama, Karna manages to fool the sage successfully. We're not told explicitly how long Karna lives with Parashurama, but we might hazard a guess that it is around two or three years.

During this time, Parashurama comes to grow affectionate toward Karna. He teaches the young man everything he knows. Karna thus turns himself into a warrior.

But toward the end of his tenure, one day, when Parashurama is sleeping with his head resting on Karna's lap under a tree, a worm crawls onto the boy's thigh and begins to sting him there.

Karna doesn't so much as flinch while the worm sucks blood from him. He does not wish to disturb his preceptor's nap. But the blood from the thigh wound flows onto Parashurama's shoulder and awakens him.

When Parashurama sees what has happened, he concludes that a man with such incredible ability to withstand pain for someone else's welfare must be a Kshatriya.

Ironically, he thinks that Karna is a Kshatriya boy who disguises himself as a Brahmin. In his anger he places upon Karna a curse.

'For the sin of lying to your preceptor, I am giving you this curse,' says Parashurama. 'In that very moment when you most need all the knowledge you have acquired from me, you will forget it all.'

Aftermath

Karna immediately apologizes to Parashurama and tells him the truth about himself. Parashurama is also repentant that he had spoken in haste. But he also acknowledges that perhaps a bigger force is at work here.

'Maybe it is destiny that is showing its hand here, my son,' he says, bidding Karna farewell. 'I wish you all success in everything you do. But my curse will continue to act upon you.'

Whether Parashurama's curse is a one-time effect that afflicts Karna during the final battle with Arjuna or whether it manifests itself *every single time* Karna fights, we do not know.

But if it is the latter, it explains why Karna displays signs of cowardice whenever he finds himself close to combat. Perhaps he is wary that he will forget everything he knows when the pressure is on.

This also is consistent with Karna's ability to display his skill with no trouble at all in competitive scenarios (like the graduation ceremony) where there is no danger to life or limb.

Other Curses

This is by no means the only curse that Karna endures during his early life. During his time as king, while practicing archery one day, he inadvertently kills the cow belonging to a Brahmin, who curses him that his own death – when it comes – will be as unfortunate as that of the cow he killed.

There is also the sometimes-told tale of Karna being cursed by the earth goddess Bhoomi. On one occasion, Karna's chariot causes a child to spill ghee on the earth. Karna descends from his chariot and, in an attempt to retrieve as much ghee as possible for the child, squeezes the mud to make the ghee drip back into the vessel.

He does succeed in salvaging some of the child's ghee, but he squeezes the earth so hard for this that Bhoomi curses him. 'On the day you fight your arch enemy,' she says, 'I will swallow your chariot wheel.'

Against Destiny

All of these incidents reinforce the character of Karna as an unfortunate man fighting throughout his life against the force of destiny. Though he is born to a god and in the womb of a princess of a big kingdom, numerous events outside his control shape his life.

He does succeed in achieving a small part of what he deserves – by becoming king of Anga – but overall, his image is that of a tragic hero trapped by the cruel workings of fate.

Parashurama is therefore just one of the many tools that fate uses to punish Karna.

Why did Karna suffer so much?

Short answer: Karna's suffering is caused primarily by acts of destiny: Kunti's abandonment, Parashurama's curse and Indra's intervention are examples. Karna also suffers inordinately for choices he makes in order to transcend his destiny: his loyalty to Duryodhana, his rejection of Krishna's bribe, and his promise to Kunti being cases in point.

Abandonment

Karna is born in the womb of a princess of a great kingdom, and his father is the sun god. His is therefore the most privileged of births, and by all rights he should have lived a life of great fame, power and wealth.

But right from the beginning, choices made by people around him begin to affect his destiny adversely. The very first of these acts is Kunti's, who decides to abandon her child in order to ward off societal infamy. She puts him in a basket and lets him float down the river, hoping against hope that the elements will let him live.

Karna is found by a poor childless charioteer – named Adiratha – and his wife. He is raised as a member of the Suta caste. Throughout his life, this label of 'Sutaputra' attaches itself to Karna each time he displays ambition to break out of strictures placed upon him by the caste system.

Kunti's decision, therefore, is the first reason for Karna's suffering.

Three Curses

During his early life as the adopted son of Adiratha and Radha, Karna repeatedly tries to move up the social ladder and obtain a life of higher status. In this quest, he seeks out Sage Parashurama and becomes his student.

But he pretends to be a Brahmin boy before presenting himself to the sage, (rightly) fearing that he would be rejected if he went as a Sutaputra.

Parashurama teaches Karna everything there is to know, but just as the tenure is coming to an end, the sage comes to know of Karna's secret and curses him for the sin of lying to his preceptor.

Parashurama says, 'Just when you need the knowledge that you received from me the most, you will fail to remember it.'

Karna also earns similar curses on two other occasions: once when he inadvertently kills a Brahmin's cow, and another time when he tries to squeeze some spilled ghee out of damp earth.

It is ironic that all these times, Karna does not set out to do anything wrong. Indeed, in the case of Parashurama especially, he displays remarkable restraint in the face of pain to allow his preceptor to sleep peacefully – only to be cursed.

These three curses come back to haunt him, finally resulting in his death at Arjuna's hands. They are therefore – combined – the second reason for Karna's suffering.

Indra's Intervention

Karna is born with impenetrable armour covering every inch of his body. His skin is therefore unbreakable. He also has two earrings whose function is unknown, but together, these 'kavacha-kundalas' make him an invincible warrior.

Even with the misfortune of being abandoned at birth and of being cursed by his preceptor, Karna would easily have fulfilled all of his ambition if he were allowed to keep his kavacha-kundalas.

Put simply, as long as his kavacha-kundalas are with him, Karna can never be injured by any weapon. No warrior – no matter how powerful – will succeed in defeating him.

Knowing this, Indra dons the disguise of a Brahmin and approaches Karna. He asks for the kavacha-kundalas in alms. Despite knowing the true identity of his visitor, Karna stays true to his generous spirit and peels the armour off his skin.

Indra's motivation behind this is to protect his son Arjuna. Of course, he gives the Vasava dart to Karna in return, but that is scant price to pay for the kavacha-kundalas.

This intervention by Indra is the third reason for Karna's suffering.

Duryodhana's Friendship

Karna does not actively seek Duryodhana's friendship or favour. He comes to the graduation ceremony of the Kuru princes with the intention of exhibiting his archery skills to the royal assemblage. His hope might have been that someone important from among the Kuru elders would spot and groom him.

But it so happens that none of the 'good' people at the ceremony give him any respect whatsoever. Arjuna and Bhima insult him. Kripa tells him that the occasion does not call for one so low-born to compete with a prince.

The only person that stands up for Karna at this moment – whether for selfish or moral reasons; probably a bit of both – is Duryodhana. Not only does Duryodhana support him, but he also crowns him king of Anga right at that moment so that Karna becomes 'important' enough to challenge Arjuna.

Duryodhana's friendship, therefore, falls into Karna's lap without him ever wishing for it.

Once it does, though, Karna binds himself to it utterly. He chooses to remain forever beholden to Duryodhana no matter how unscrupulous his deeds are. He provides unconditional support to his friend and partakes in his hatred for the Pandavas.

This choice that he makes – to remain loyal to Duryodhana at all times – is the fourth reason for Karna's suffering.

Krishna's Bribe

Before the start of the war, Krishna finds out (presumably from Kunti) about the secret behind Karna's birth. He seeks a private audience with Karna and makes him an offer.

‘If you fight on the side of the Pandavas, O King of Anga,’ he says, ‘your five brothers will worship you like a father. They will make you king after the war is won. Draupadi will become your queen – and she will have sons with you. These sons will become kings of Indraprastha after you. The Kuru dynasty will continue through you and your progeny.’

On the surface, this looks like something that Karna had always wanted. But it is what the *young* Karna had wanted, the Karna who had come to the graduation ceremony looking for acceptance.

In the intervening thirty years or so, Karna has become king of great repute himself. The more he has seen the Kshatriya way of life, the less ashamed he has grown of being a Suta.

He has married a Suta girl, and he has raised his sons as Sutas. He is no longer interested in what Krishna has to offer. Besides, he has long ago taken a personal vow to remain by Duryodhana’s side always.

He therefore rejects Krishna’s bribe, and chooses to die a Sutaputra. This decision to reject Krishna’s offer is the fifth reason for Karna’s subsequent suffering.

Promise to Kunti

Despite all the above factors – even without the kavacha-kundalas, notwithstanding the damage done to him by Parashurama’s curse and by Krishna’s tactics – Karna would have been able to kill four of his brothers in the war.

And if he had been able to capture Yudhishtir and bring him back alive to Duryodhana, the war would have been over. He would have ended up on the winning side.

All this would have been possible – but for a promise he gives to Kunti.

Soon after he rejects Krishna’s offer to defect on Duryodhana, Karna receives a visit from Kunti. She tells him about the truth regarding his birth, and once again implores him to fight on the ‘right’ side.

Karna rejects her pleas, and reaffirms that Adiratha and Radha are his only parents. But he does give Kunti a promise, that he would not harm any of her sons other than Arjuna.

‘This way, my lady,’ he says, ‘regardless of whether it is I or Arjuna who dies in the war, you will still have five sons after it.’

This promise, we must remember, is unprovoked; Karna gives it on his own, of the generosity of his heart. True to his word, he spares all four of his younger brothers in the war after securing victories against each of them.

This is the sixth factor that contributes to Karna’s suffering.

Was Karna a student of Drona?

Short answer: The Mahabharata mentions that Karna is a student of Drona, but only in passing. No significant mention is ever made of him, nor is there an explanation for: (a) why Karna trained under Parashurama, (b) why he appears as a stranger at the graduation ceremony, and (c) how Drona accepted a Suta-putra as a disciple.

Passing Mentions

At the outset, we must say this: Karna is mentioned in passing as a childhood friend of Duryodhana and as a fellow student of all the Kuru princes. For instance, he is said to have had a hand in the poisoning of Bhima, during which the third Pandava visits the kingdom of the Nagas.

However, these are only one-line mentions. The text does not describe any of his activities in great detail. Nor is there any sign of the Karna-Arjuna rivalry that will develop into a constant theme after the two boys grow up into adults.

At first glance, this presence of Karna seems to unequivocally answer the question raised by this post: Yes, Karna was a student of Drona.

But it also raises many more questions, some of which we will explore below.

The 'Drona' Question

Karna appears to be the only non-prince among Drona's students. This makes sense: Drona has been hired by Bhishma to become the preceptor to the Kuru princes alone. For these services he is more than adequately compensated: with a house within the royal compound, a place in the Kuru court, and the prestige that comes with being the royal teacher.

It is highly irregular for someone hired to be a personal tutor to then accept other students, especially if they belong to a lower caste.

Bhishma would consider it unprofessional if Drona had brought someone like Karna into the fold and taught him alongside the Kuru princes. Bhishma would have said, 'I do not pay you to teach Sutaputras.'

Also, we know from Drona's character alone that he is not forgiving of low-born archers that show promise. We only need to remember his treatment of Ekalavya to see evidence this.

How, then, did Drona come to accept Karna as one of his disciples? And when he witnesses that Karna is as skilled and as dedicated as Arjuna, why does he not actively sabotage Karna's career?

Training under Parashurama

If Karna is already training under Drona along with the Kuru princes, why does he feel the need to lie about himself in order to gain access to Sage Parashurama?

With Ekalavya, we know that Drona rejects him, so he builds a mud idol of the preceptor and trains in front of it. But Karna is already learning under the *royal teacher*, no less. He is getting a prince's education. Why does he still need Parashurama?

Even if we concede that he felt he would like to train under *both* Drona and Parashurama, where does Karna find the time? He is a charioteer's son; he would still need to attend to matters of his own life. How is he able to train under Drona, serve Parashurama *and* help his parents out with making a living for themselves?

Each one of them is a full time vocation. How does Karna manage all three?

We know that Karna lies about himself to Parashurama, serves him with utter devotion, and earns a curse from the sage for his trouble. This is consistent with a low-born boy *without access to privileged education*.

It is difficult to accept that a young man who is already training under Drona will also have the same burning desire to train under Parashurama – especially considering that Drona knows everything that Parashurama does.

The Graduation Ceremony

When Karna appears at the graduation ceremony, he is described as a stranger to the Kurus. Duryodhana is about to walk out from the arena in protest that the Kuru elders are partial to Arjuna, and at the gate he meets this young man who is ‘as resplendent as the sun’.

No one among the assembled royals recognize him. The only person who does is Kunti, who swoons at the knowledge that her long-lost son is still alive.

The conversations that develop during this scene suggest that this is the very first time the Kurus are setting eyes on Karna.

Kripa asks him about his lineage. Arjuna and Bhima call him a Sutaputra after seeing Adiratha come up to hug him. Duryodhana springs to his rescue and makes him king of Anga. And so on.

If Karna had been the Kuru princes’ fellow student all along, he would have been a known entity. His name, his identity, the fact that he can match Arjuna with bow and arrow – none of these would have come as surprises.

In fact, the whole thematic thrust of the graduation ceremony *is the fact* that Karna is making his first appearance here. Karna is revealing himself to the world, after having trained under Parashurama in secret. He is making a bid to break out of the confines of the Suta caste and to participate in the world inhabited by Kshatriyas.

(Of course, over the course of the next thirty years, he comes to embrace his Suta caste and becomes unashamed of it enough to declare himself a Sutaputra. But that is another matter.)

Counterpoints

In the spirit of debate, I will now list counterpoints to each of the above questions. I hope that you will see that these not only contradict one another but are also irreconcilable with the rest of the story.

- One might say that perhaps Adiratha is a charioteer who works in Bhishma's employ, and that as a child Bhishma had taken Karna under his wing. On Bhishma's special instructions, Drona accepts Karna as a student. But he always makes sure that he gives Karna 'inferior' training compared to what he gives the Kuru princes.
- One might argue that it is possible that Karna trained under both Drona and Parashurama. Perhaps he trained under Drona as a little boy, but once the princes were slightly older (eight or nine), he was jettisoned by Drona. Karna then sought the tutelage of Parashurama. In effect, therefore, Karna trains under both men, but one after the other.
- About the graduation ceremony, one might insist that if the above is true – i.e.: Karna only trained under Drona for a short while – he is indeed a relative stranger to them all. The princes may have forgotten all about him. Kripa, on the other hand, may have been asking Karna's lineage just to insult him publicly despite knowing who he is.

Conclusion

Despite the above points – all of which are plausible but also speculative – I am comfortable with concluding that Karna was *not one of the students of Drona*.

Believing that Karna trained under Drona – even for a short amount of time when he was young – robs the graduation ceremony of the dramatic impact that it otherwise has. It denies Karna an entry point into the story where he arrives as a stranger to everyone, a mysterious hero who is as powerful as Arjuna.

For this, I am happy to ignore the few mentions of Karna during the princes' childhoods as mistakes made by later interpolations.

But if you form a different opinion, I am not going to argue.

Was Karna a Pandava?

Short answer: Karna is born of the union between Kunti (when she was unmarried) and Surya, the sun god. Later, she marries Pandu. According to social norms of the day, when a woman weds a man, her existing children are considered to have been fathered by her new husband. Therefore, Karna is technically a Pandava – a son of Pandu.

Two Kinds of Sons

During his private conversation with Karna after his peace talks have failed, Krishna speaks of two kinds of sons a woman can have.

Krishna meets Karna in his chariot and takes him to the outskirts of the city. Once they are out of earshot of anyone important, Krishna says, ‘You have studied the scriptures as deeply as I have, O Vasusena. You will know, therefore, that there are two kinds of sons that a maiden might have.

‘One is called the Sahoda, who are the sons born to her fathered by her husband. The other kind is called the Kanina, children born to her of other men from before her marriage. On both occasions, the sons are considered morally to be the children of the maiden’s wedded husband.’

‘Why do you tell me all this, Krishna?’ asks Karna.

Socially a Pandava

Krishna replies, ‘I do so because you are one of the *kanina* sons of Kunti, O Karna, and by the declaration of the scriptures, you are also the moral heir to Pandu. On the side of your father, you have the five Pandavas as your younger brothers.

‘On the side of your mother, you have the Vrishnis for kinsmen. Balarama and I will be happy to serve you as regents. If you come with me, I shall let the

Pandavas know that you were born of Kunti before Yudhishtir. They, along with Draupadi and Subhadra, will embrace your feet.'

Krishna comes to know the secret behind Karna's birth only during his visit to Hastinapur, and he immediately tries to use this as a bribe to pull Karna over to the side of the Pandavas.

Because if Karna forsakes Duryodhana, Arjuna is safe.

Socially speaking, therefore, Karna is a Pandava. If Kunti reveals to the world that he is her son, then he automatically comes to be considered the son of Pandu.

But what about biologically?

Biological Considerations

We must remember here at the outset that *none of the Pandavas* are biologically Pandu's children. The first three of them – Yudhishtir, Bhima and Arjuna – are brought forth by Kunti. The last two – Nakula and Sahadeva – have Madri as their mother.

Neither Kunti nor Madri have these sons with Pandu. They summon gods (if you believe the magical version) or they unite with sages (if you prefer an earthier story) using a process called *niyoga*.

All that is required is that Pandu – Kunti and Madri's legally wedded husband – consents to this practice and accepts the resulting sons as his own.

The process of Karna's birth is exactly the same as that of the other five Pandavas. He is born of the union between a princess (in this case Kunti) and a god (in this case Surya).

If anything, Nakula and Sahadeva are in no way related by blood to Yudhishtir, Bhima and Arjuna – because they're born of Madri. Karna, as Kunti's firstborn, has a deeper biological connection to the first three Pandavas than do Nakula and Sahadeva.

Should Kunti have told Pandu?

This of course begs the question: should Kunti have told Pandu the whole truth about her incantation? When Pandu expresses a desire for sons during their stay at Gandhamadana, Kunti reveals to him only *part* of her secret.

She tells him about the power she has received from Sage Durvasa, but chooses to omit the fact that she had already called on Surya and had a son with him.

Why? One possibility is that she may have thought her first son dead. After all, one cannot expect a babe to survive after being abandoned on a riverbed. Only when Kunti sees Karna at the graduation ceremony does she realize that he is alive.

Another possibility is that she may have thought that admitting to a premarital sexual liaison would cheapen her image in her husband's eyes. Kunti, at this stage, thinks that her mistake has been buried in the past; she has no reason to dredge it up again.

This gives rise to an interesting scenario: Pandu gives his informed consent to father the five children that Kunti and Madri bear. But he does not know about the other son of Kunti. And by the time he arrives on the scene, Pandu is dead.

Pandu's Consent

Krishna is right in saying that when a man marries a woman, all the children that the woman has at the time of marriage automatically become the new husband's sons. But there are certain conditions to this:

- Generally, the biological father of the child is dead in such cases. The new husband therefore adopts the child as his own and promises to raise it.
- The new husband has to consent officially – through a ceremony or some such – that he is willing to take the responsibility of being the child's father.
- This is less of an issue if the woman in question was married to another man when she conceived her child. If she was an unwed maiden, and if the biological father is alive, the new husband is likely to take a dim view of the matter.

In Kunti's case, the biological father is Surya. Though a god, he is very much alive. And he impregnated Kunti when she was a maiden. This means that Pandu's consent cannot be taken for granted.

Would Pandu have adopted Karna?

There is no way to know for certain whether Pandu would have adopted Karna as his son. From the fact that he had no trouble accepting the five Pandavas as his sons, perhaps he would have taken in Karna as well.

But Kunti clearly does not think so. Whether this is because she thinks that Karna no longer lives or because she thinks that Pandu will not accept him, we do not know. Nor is it relevant. The fact remains that she does not tell him.

By the time it is revealed to Kunti that Karna is not only alive but is also going to play an important role in the lives of her other children, Pandu is long dead. And if Kunti were to admit that Karna is actually her son, the world would perhaps make Pandu's decision for him and accept him as one of the Pandavas.

But it would also judge Kunti to be a woman of loose moral character. Not only did she get pregnant before her marriage, but she also hid it from her husband throughout his life.

Conclusion

To conclude, therefore, it is fair to say that Karna is in all respects one of the Pandavas. As long as the five sons of Kunti and Draupadi accept him as the son of Pandu – and Krishna would have ensured that they do – Karna could have become the king of Indraprastha and Draupadi's husband if he had accepted Krishna's offer.

Both biologically and in accordance with the social norms of the time, Karna is the eldest Pandava – and probably would have been the most powerful of them all but for some strikes of destiny.

Was Karna a Kshatriya?

Short answer: Karna's mother is Kunti, who is a Kshatriya woman. His biological father is Surya, who is a god but not a Kshatriya. However, through her marriage to Pandu, Kunti's son from before her marriage – Karna – also becomes Pandu's son. So Karna is a Pandava and a Kshatriya.

Niyoga

Niyoga is a process by which a married couple can gain children by arranging for the wife to unite biologically with another man who acts as a sperm donor. The resulting children will be considered – legally, morally and socially – to be fathered by the husband in the marriage.

This process is generally used in the following cases:

- When a wife is widowed before she has had a chance to have children with her husband.
- When a man is unable to – or has lost the power to – bear children with his wife due to a curse or any other physical health issue.
- When a man is unable to approach his wife sexually due to some other reason, such as a curse.

We must note here that this is a practice that is used as the last resort, when there is no other way in which the married couple in question can bear children.

Examples of Niyoga

In the Mahabharata, multiple examples of niyoga exist:

- Vyasa the sage impregnates three women at the behest of his mother Satyawati. With Ambika he has Dhritarashtra. With Ambalika he fathers Pandu. And with an unnamed Sudra waiting woman, he has Vidura.

- The Pandavas themselves are the products of niyoga. Since Pandu is cursed by Sage Kindama against sexual pleasure, he consents to Kunti and Madri summoning gods and bearing children with them.
- After Parashurama eliminates all the Kshatriyas of the world, the queens of the dead kings bring forth sons into the world by uniting with numerous Brahmins using this practice. It is said that Parashurama destroys the Kshatriya race a total of twenty one times. But it keeps regenerating thanks to niyoga.

Caste Inheritance

When niyoga is used, there are a few rules concerning the caste (or ‘varna’ to be precise) of the child that is born. Here are a few scenarios:

- If the husband of the woman bearing the child is dead, the child inherits the caste of the dead father. Therefore, in the case of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, they become Kshatriyas at birth despite being born to a Brahmin.
- If the husband of the woman bearing the child is alive, the child inherits his caste. Therefore, the Pandavas – despite being born to gods – are considered Kshatriyas.
- If the woman is a maiden at the time of giving birth, the child inherits the caste of her future husband, provided that he does not disown it. Vidura, therefore – assuming the waiting woman was not married at the time of Vyasa’s visit – remains a Sudra all his life.
- If a woman is a maiden at the time of giving birth and she never marries, the child inherits the caste of the maiden’s father.

Karna’s Birth

In the case of Karna, he is born to Kunti before she gets married. But at the moment of her marriage to Pandu, all her premarital children automatically become his.

Even if Pandu had been alive and had for some reason disowned Karna, he would have inherited the caste of either Kunti's adopted father, Kuntibhoja, or her biological father, Shurasena. Both of these men are kings – and therefore Kshatriyas.

Therefore, Karna is a Kshatriya – by birth. However, the story gets a little bit more complicated hereon.

Importance of Actions

Even though Karna is definitely a Kshatriya by birth, the Mahabharata also tells us that one's birth is only a small factor in determining one's order. What carries much more importance is how one lives one's life.

For instance, a Brahmin who commits several sins is not 'really' a Brahmin despite being born in that order. A king who is pious, nonviolent and fearful of battle may be born in the Kshatriya race, but will never be called a 'true' Kshatriya.

Similarly, members of a 'lower' order can also attain the status reserved for higher orders by *moulding their behaviours accordingly*.

Drona is an example of a Brahmin who adopted the Kshatriya order. Yudhishtir is a Kshatriya who is very Brahmin-like. Vidura, though born a Sudra, lives in the manner of a Brahmin and dies like one.

All three of these men, though, *chose* their behaviours consciously. With Karna, a life in the Suta tribe was thrust upon him because Kunti abandoned him as an infant.

A Sutaputra

Karna is found by Adiratha and Radha, a married and childless couple who belong to the Suta caste. Adiratha adopts Karna with due rites and rituals as his own son. They raise him as a Suta.

Throughout his life, Karna is caught in the dilemma: he is by all appearances and qualities a Kshatriya, but he is also by the activities of his daily

life a Sutaputra. For the longest time he suffers underneath the label – and for many years his detractors insult him with the word.

However, as he grows older, after his anointment as the king of Anga, Karna experiences the life of a Kshatriya as well. He is now a Kshatriya by birth *and* by his living.

But two things happen after his ascension to Anga's throne:

1. His past detractors *still* do not consider him a Kshatriya. They still denounce him. Case in point: Draupadi, at her swayamvara, stops him from competing for her hand by announcing to the assembly that she does not wish to be married to a Sutaputra.
2. He realizes himself that he cannot become a Kshatriya just by acquiring the trappings of one.

Karna's Chosen Order

Karna's journey, therefore, can be summed up thus: During the first few years of his life, he is raised as a Sutaputra while being painfully being aware that he is by birth a Kshatriya.

He is therefore simultaneously resentful of being a Suta and desirous of becoming a Kshatriya at all costs. It is this desire that pushes him to lie to Parashurama and to appear at the graduation ceremony.

At the graduation, though, contrary to his wildest expectations, Karna becomes king of Anga because of Duryodhana's intervention. Karna thus gets everything that he has ever wanted. He is now a Kshatriya.

But over the years of being a Kshatriya, he actually grows closer to his adoptive parents. Adiratha and Radha live with him. He marries a Suta girl. He makes sure that his sons are raised as Sutaputras, not Kshatriyas.

This leads us to speculate. Perhaps he saw through the emptiness of the Kshatriya life and preferred the earthy nature of being a Suta? Perhaps he needed to have all of his wishes fulfilled in order to realize that he didn't want them after all? We don't know.

Regardless of the reasons, Karna articulates this when he rejects Krishna's offer to fight on the Pandavas' side. He says, 'I am grateful to Duryodhana for having allowed me all these years to rule Anga *without giving up my Suta caste*.'

And then he says, 'I was born a Sutaputra. I will die a Sutaputra.'

Conclusion

Karna is by birth a Kshatriya. This is because his biological father is Surya the sun god. His legal father is Pandu, the king of Hastinapur. And his maternal grandfather is Kuntibhoja, another king. By all considerations, therefore, he is a Kshatriya.

However, Karna is *raised* a Suta. His adoptive parents are members of the Suta tribe, and they raise him as a Suta. One may say, therefore, that Karna was assigned the Suta caste the moment Adiratha adopted him.

By *choice*, Karna is a Kshatriya as a young man. But after he becomes king of Anga, and after he has had a chance to experience life in both orders, at the end he chooses to be a Sutaputra.

Was Karna a Maharatha?

Short answer: Before the war begins, Bhishma classifies Karna mockingly as an ardha-ratha (half-ratha), thus claiming that he is inferior to a ratha. But later, while lying on his bed of arrows, he privately confides in Karna that he is indeed a maharatha.

Two Classifications

As the Kurukshetra war nears, we learn from a conversation between Bhishma and Drona that all heroes of those times can be classified into two categories: a ratha, and an atiratha.

(The word 'ati' loosely means 'extreme' or 'more', and the word 'ratha' means 'he who is on a chariot'. The word 'ratham' means 'chariot'.)

Essentially, therefore, the terms loosely mean 'chariot warrior' and 'great chariot warrior' respectively.

This may give the reflective reader pause. Is this classification system not discriminatory toward all those heroes who may be bad at archery but good at combat-style weapons like maces and swords?

In two words, it is. But this is also emblematic of the environment in which warriors of ancient India conducted their battles. Invariably their wars happened on flat and arid plains where movement, speed and the ability to fight with bows and arrows were paramount.

If the terrain had been mountainous or filled with trees, people with close-combat skills will have been feted more than those who are archers. As always, it is the environment that picks who 'wins' and who 'loses'.

Atiratha and Maharatha

The words 'maharatha' and 'atiratha' are used interchangeably in the Mahabharata to describe a great warrior who is eight times as good as a 'ratha'.

When asked to classify Arjuna as one of the two types, Bhishma refuses to do so, citing Arjuna's vast repertoire of divine weapons and his immeasurable skill with the Gandiva.

'Arjuna was always the most skilful of all the Kuru princes,' says Bhishma. 'But during the course of his exile, he has become so powerful that not even the gods can stop him. He is beyond all classification. He is in an elevated league of his own, way above all of us.'

According to some sources, Bhishma invents a class called the 'Ati-Maharatha' and assigns it to Arjuna. He reiterates to Duryodhana that the only way for the Kuru army to prevail in this war is by killing Arjuna early.

Classifying Karna

Bhishma goes through the entire roster of warriors fighting on the Kuru side, giving his opinion about whether each one should be called a ratha or an atiratha.

Thus, the likes of Bhagadatta, Shalya and Drona are atirathas. Duryodhana, Duhsasana, and the rest of the sons of Dhritarashtra are rathas. Ashwatthama has the potential to be an atiratha but his volatile temperament holds him back. And so on.

When it comes time to classify Karna, Bhishma mockingly calls him an 'ardha-ratha', or 'half a ratha', implying that he is less of a warrior than even a ratha.

The reason for this is that Bhishma and Karna have by this time repeatedly clashed publicly on the subject of the latter's misplaced arrogance and bravado which never translates to real valour in battle.

More than anything, Bhishma is irritated that Karna always fans the flames of Duryodhana's hatred for the Pandavas. And he does this by giving false assurances that he will kill Arjuna.

And yet, all the times he has met Arjuna in battle, Karna has lost. So by the eve of the war, Bhishma is simply fed up of Karna's posturing.

Bhishma's Motivations

Whether Bhishma cannot help himself or whether he is being deliberately provocative toward Karna, we do not know.

But as a direct result of it, Karna does react with rebellion at Bhishma's classification of him, and throws back a few choice insults of his own. He claims (not without reason) that the Kuru dynasty has come to this point in its history only because Bhishma has been unable to provide clear and stable leadership.

Bhishma then tells Duryodhana, 'Either I or Karna has to fight for you on the battlefield at any given time. If we fight together, we will incessantly quarrel and hurt your cause.'

This is despite the fact that the battlefield of Kurukshetra is an enormous one. If he puts his mind to it, Bhishma can easily arrange the Kuru forces such that he and Karna will never be within shouting distance of one another.

Elsewhere on this website, we have speculated that this may be Bhishma's ploy to protect Arjuna.

Revision on Day 10

On the night of the tenth day of battle, after he has been consigned to his bed of arrows, Bhishma gets visited in private by Karna. In the conversation that follows, the two men put aside their differences.

Bhishma then tells him that he was wrong in calling him an ardha-ratha. 'You are in fact an atiratha,' he says.

But again, we cannot take Bhishma at his word here, because immediately after praising Karna as an atiratha, he requests him to 'be a good friend to Duryodhana' and advise him to call off the battle.

Karna responds in the same way he always has. He insists that 'being a good friend' means giving unconditional support. He also reminds Bhishma – correctly

– that it is too late to withdraw the Kuru forces. The world will think of Duryodhana as cowardly if he does that.

What we can conclude from Bhishma's two classifications is that Karna, as a warrior, sits somewhere between an ardha-ratha and an atiratha.

Assessing Karna

We must remember that all of the above is merely Bhishma's opinion on Karna – coloured by his personal distaste for the man's character.

We must also remember that Karna acts throughout his life as Duryodhana's loyal deputy and slave, so when he is posturing on Duryodhana's behalf, he is doing so only because he thinks that is the best way he can support Duryodhana in that moment.

Therefore, Bhishma is not wrong for judging Karna as vain. Karna is not wrong for wanting to unconditionally support his benefactor. They are both right. The path of Dharma, as Bhishma once said, is subtle.

Now, can a reader objectively assess Karna's achievements and come to a conclusion as to whether he is in fact a ratha or an atiratha?

Unfortunately, Karna's recorded history as a warrior is extremely chequered. Consider:

- By skill levels alone, he is Arjuna's equal – at least until the time of Draupadi's swayamvara.
- If one includes battle performances, Karna drops off dramatically. He loses to Arjuna during the defence of Matsya (though *everyone* loses that day, including Drona and Bhishma), he flees the battle against Gandharvas, and during his many years as the king of Anga, there is no record of him winning a great war all by himself.
- Karna does win the world on Duryodhana's behalf, but he does so at the head of the Kuru army. And the expedition he leads is part-diplomatic. This achievement, therefore, is not purely an indication of his valour.
- And then there is the matter of the Vasava dart, which makes Karna the only warrior with the ability to kill Arjuna.

Conclusion

To finish, one may say that Karna is – by skill alone – one of the atirathas. But his temperament is flaky, and he is prone to sudden attacks of fear and self-doubt while in the middle of an intense battle.

In this, he is not unlike Ashwatthama, who is a slave to anger which keeps him from becoming a true atiratha.

Both these men will have their share of brilliant days on which nobody can touch them, but they will not be able to achieve these days as consistently as an atiratha would. In short, you don't quite know what you will get with them.

Karna, therefore, may be called – like Ashwatthama – an 'atiratha by potential but a ratha by performance'.

Was Karna jealous of Arjuna?

Short answer: Karna's enmity with Arjuna has more to do with his loyalty to Duryodhana than with jealousy. But as someone who matches Arjuna's skill at the graduation ceremony, to see his once-equal opponent grow beyond recognition into the world's greatest archer must have been difficult. Karna also feels envious of Arjuna for having won Draupadi.

Fealty toward Duryodhana

The main thrust of Karna's enmity toward Arjuna is his undying fealty toward Duryodhana. More than anything, Karna wants to defeat Arjuna because he wants to prove himself a worthy aide to Duryodhana.

At the graduation ceremony, when Karna matches Arjuna in skill with bow and arrow, not only does Duryodhana support him against the discriminatory attacks of the Kuru elders, but he also crowns Karna king of Anga right at that moment.

In one fell swoop, Karna receives from Duryodhana everything he had ever wanted: an elevation of status, wealth, and an opportunity to build for himself a name as king.

From this moment on, Karna views himself as Duryodhana's slave. He vows to support Duryodhana in all of his endeavours, including his ambition to destroy the Pandavas and Draupadi at all costs.

Jealousy

However, we can surmise that jealousy must also be present in Karna's heart. We know that Karna matches Arjuna in skill during the graduation ceremony, thus setting up the narrative that he is Arjuna's equal.

Then, over the course of the story, Karna watches as Arjuna becomes stronger and stronger as warrior while he himself stagnates or recedes in his power.

For example:

- Arjuna succeeds in capturing Drupada and in defeating the army of Panchala in order to fulfil Drona's wish. Just a short time prior to this, Karna and Duryodhana fail at the quest.
- During the burning of Khandava, Arjuna receives the Gandiva, two inexhaustible quivers of arrows, and an indestructible chariot from Agni, the god of fire. He also succeeds – fighting alongside Krishna – in defeating the army of the gods led by Indra.
- During the Pandavas' exile, Arjuna becomes an even more powerful warrior, procuring the Pashupatastra from Shiva and a number of other divine weapons from other gods.
- By the time of the agnyaatavaasa, Arjuna is almost invincible, as evidenced by the manner in which he rescues Virata's cattle from the Kuru army.

Meanwhile, Karna takes a different path. He becomes king of Anga. He marries a Suta woman and has sons with her. He gains a bit of a reputation as a generous and wise king.

As an archer, though, he has not progressed much since the time of the graduation ceremony. All of this must cause a tinge of envy in his heart.

Rejection by Draupadi

At Draupadi's swayamvara, Karna intends to attempt to complete the task set by Drupada to win Draupadi's hand. In the entire assembly, besides Arjuna, Karna is the only archer capable of cracking Drupada's test.

However, just as he is about to step up to the podium, Draupadi raises her voice and addresses the gathering. 'I do not wish to be married to a Sutaputra,' she says. 'This man should not be allowed to compete.'

She does not give any explanation for her behaviour, nor does anyone ask her for one. No one rises to speak on Karna's behalf; not even Duryodhana.

From this muted acceptance of Draupadi's words, we may surmise that she is well within her rights to reject any given suitor before he competes. By the same token, she does not have the right to reject a man *after he has won her*.

This public rejection shames Karna – especially because he is now a king worthy of respect and yet the world does not give it to him.

Arjuna wins Draupadi

Not only does Karna get rejected by Draupadi, but he also has to watch as Arjuna – in the guise of a poverty-stricken Brahmin – wins Draupadi's hand, defeats him in single combat, and makes off with her.

At this point, Karna does not know that the Brahmin is tussling with him is Arjuna in disguise. But he learns of it later, a part of him must feel envious toward Arjuna – not just because he wanted Draupadi too and Arjuna won her, but also because Arjuna was given the opportunity to vie for her.

This would have burned Karna's heart toward both Arjuna and Draupadi.

His behaviour at Draupadi's disrobing – where he insists that she is a prostitute and that she should be unclothed in public – could be read as at least partly motivated by personal vengeance. While he is glad to play the supporting role to Duryodhana's antics, he is also not above landing a few blows of his own.

Jealousy about Krishna

On the eve of the seventeenth day of the war, Karna explains to Duryodhana that the only difference between him and Arjuna – in terms of relative strengths as warriors – is that Arjuna has Krishna for a charioteer and friend.

To even the scales, he asks Duryodhana to appoint Shalya as his charioteer. Duryodhana agrees.

Needless to say, this is extremely misguided analysis. Krishna became Arjuna's charioteer out of his free will and desire to help. Since he has promised

not to pick up weapons anyway, his serving as Arjuna's charioteer does not cause the army any corresponding loss.

Shalya, on the other hand, is a *fighting* warrior, himself the leader of a whole akshauhini of troops. Appointing him as Karna's charioteer automatically means that the army is deprived of his fighting and strategic prowess during that day.

Also, Shalya does not *want* to be Karna's charioteer. No self-respecting king – let alone the king of a great kingdom, one of the Kuru elders, no less – will like being given the job of driving the chariot of a Suta.

But Karna is blind to all of this. He is so blinded by envy about Arjuna and Krishna's relationship that he thinks he can simply get himself a 'Krishna' as well by merely appointing Shalya his driver.

Despite all this...

Despite all this, though, the discerning reader will conclude that Karna's ill-feeling for Arjuna is driven mostly by his loyalty to Duryodhana. At no time does he allow his personal jealousy to overpower his duty toward his king.

How do we know this? Just before the war, Karna does get a chance to 'make Arjuna his slave' by accepting Krishna's offer to fight on the Pandavas' side. If his jealousy had been overpowering, Karna would have said yes – and he would have won Arjuna's eternal subservience along with Draupadi as his main wife.

On a personal level, that would have been a victory sweeter than any other. He would have had the last laugh on both Arjuna and Draupadi, his two main tormentors.

But the fact that he says no, and that he chooses Duryodhana, suggests that it is Duryodhana that is most important to him in his life – even more than his personal need to overcome Arjuna.

Was Karna more powerful than Bhishma?

Short answer: In sheer skill and experience alone, Bhishma is much more powerful than Karna. However, Karna's desire to win the war for Duryodhana is much stronger than Bhishma's. Duryodhana, therefore, would have been better off with Karna as his first commander.

A Comparison

Bhishma and Karna both have divine blood in them: Karna's father is Surya the sun god, while Bhishma's mother is Ganga, the river goddess. The human parent in both cases is a person of royal lineage.

If Karna had been allowed to keep his kavacha-kundalas, he would have been far more powerful than Bhishma. Indeed, he would have been the most powerful warrior of the age – bar none.

But without the kavacha-kundalas, Karna is no match for Bhishma. Bhishma is older, more experienced and more skilled. During the quarrel regarding Amba, Bhishma fights and wins against Sage Parashurama, his own preceptor.

During the swayamvara of Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, Bhishma singlehandedly challenges and defeats all the assembled kings of that time. In contrast, during Draupadi's swayamvara, Karna fails to adequately challenge Arjuna.

Karna also displays a cowardly streak on several occasions, running away from battles, withdrawing challenges and so on. Bhishma, on the other hand, is sturdy as a rock. The only time he is defeated is when he runs into a red hot Arjuna at the end of the Virata Parva.

While the two never fight one another, the above analysis is sufficient to conclude that Bhishma is far superior to Karna when it comes to overall fighting ability.

Special Ability

But Karna possesses a special ability that Bhishma does not: he has precisely *one use* of Indra's Vasava dart, with which he can kill one warrior of his choosing.

No one is immune to the power of the Vasava, not even Arjuna. We know this because of the care with which Krishna steers their chariot away from Karna while he has the weapon.

This is a potentially game-changing ability. Arjuna is the lynchpin of the Panchala and Somaka army. If Karna manages to use his dart successfully against Arjuna, and if this happens early on in the war, the Kauravas have won. Pure and simple.

Also, we must remember that Duryodhana's entire reason behind taking Karna under his wing is in the hope that Karna would – when the time is ripe – neutralize the threat posed by Arjuna.

On the other hand, Bhishma – great as he is – is not powerful enough to match Arjuna. And there are doubts as to whether he can summon his customary ruthlessness against his beloved grandchildren.

Duryodhana's Choice

Therefore, within the context of the Kurukshetra war, from Duryodhana's point of view, it is not blasphemous to suggest that Karna is a better strategic asset to have than Bhishma. Here are the reasons:

- The Kuru army already contains many 'leaders' who know how to command forces. There is Drona, Shalya, Kritavarma, Kripacharya – and Karna himself. Bhishma's skills as commander are not indispensable.

- In terms of loyalty alone, Karna far outshines Bhishma. Karna hates the Pandavas as much as Duryodhana, and will exert himself to the fullest extent. Bhishma, on the other hand, is almost certain to go soft.
- Duryodhana can put in place strategies and tactics whose sole intention is to maximize the likelihood that Karna faces Arjuna as many times as possible.
- All the other warriors and all the soldiers in the army will fight with this one purpose: put Karna in front of Arjuna and hope that the former will use the Vasava dart.

Duryodhana, therefore, should have insisted that Karna fight in the war from the beginning. Knowing that Karna is the only person capable of killing Arjuna, allowing him to be left out is a daft move.

Why does Duryodhana choose Bhishma?

After Bhishma is made commander of the army, he gives Duryodhana an ultimatum that either he or Karna will fight at a time in the war. For a reason he cites the fact that they never get along with each other.

But unbeknownst to Duryodhana, it is entirely possible that Bhishma is secretly protecting Arjuna as well. He knows that if Karna fights from the beginning, it is only a matter of time before Arjuna is killed. It is Bhishma's intention, therefore, to keep Karna out of action as long as possible.

Duryodhana, for his part, concedes this point due to the following reasons:

- He does not believe that Arjuna is invincible. He thinks that if Bhishma and Drona can be persuaded to fight at their best, even Arjuna cannot hold them back.
- Bhishma is Duryodhana's grandfather as well. He is the oldest living patriarch in the Kuru line, and he is also the most venerated warrior of his time. Duryodhana might have felt some pressure to agree with him.

An Alternative

But if Duryodhana had taken some time to think about this, he would have realized that between Karna and Bhishma, it is the former who adds most value at the beginning of the war.

Of course, the ideal scenario would be to have both of them on the field together, but failing that, if only one of them can fight at a time, then it is Karna and not Bhishma that gives Duryodhana the best chance of success.

Consider: Karna can be given a first-rate charioteer and left as a free agent, much like how the Panchala army gives Arjuna a free rein. Karna can be given protection from all sides, and be told to relentlessly pursue Arjuna. Karna has only one job: to find and kill Arjuna with the Vasava dart.

Meanwhile, the rest of the army can be led by Drona. With Arjuna marked by Karna, Drona can focus on Bhima, Satyaki and the rest of the Pandava warriors. He can even attempt to capture Yudhishtir alive so that Duryodhana can bring the war to a premature close.

With this strategy, Duryodhana has Karna going after Arjuna and Drona seeking Yudhishtir. As long as Bhima can be kept busy – by the likes of Ashwatthama, Alambusha and Bhagadatta – there is a high chance of success.

And above all, Duryodhana has Bhishma sitting on the sidelines, ready to step in if and when Karna falls.

Conclusion

Karna is definitely an inferior warrior to Bhishma overall, but because of his special ability to kill Arjuna and his passionate loyalty to Duryodhana, the Kauravas would have been better off choosing to begin the war with him in the army and Bhishma sitting out.

Despite being much better than Karna in ability, Bhishma ends up being a liability for the Kuru army during the Kurukshetra war due to his partiality toward the Pandavas.

His desire to protect Arjuna leads him to sabotage Duryodhana's cause by ousting Karna from the army. In terms of value provided, therefore, Karna is better suited than Bhishma to fulfil Duryodhana's ambitions.

Was Karna stronger than Bhima?

Short answer: Karna is stronger than Bhima with bow and arrow. But Bhima is the better all-round warrior. Bhima and Karna clash repeatedly during the war, and on occasions that Bhima wins, he does so by converting the bow-and-arrow duel into a hand-to-hand combat. When the battle stays strictly archery-based, Karna wins.

Ten Thousand Elephants

Bhima has always been the strongest (physically) of all the Pandavas. Some of the anecdotes that are told about his early childhood reflect this. For instance, Kunti apparently drops him by mistake when he is a mere infant onto a rock from a height, only to see that the rock has been shattered and Bhima unharmed.

After the Pandavas and Kunti return to the palace, Bhima quickly takes on the mantle of chief tormentor of the Kaurava brothers. He hurls uprooted trees at them. He picks them up and throws them against walls. And so on.

While the Mahabharata describes these events in a loving tone, the modern reader will not miss the tell-tale signs that Bhima is in fact a bully.

In addition, when Duryodhana and his brothers hatch a plot to him some poison and throw him into the river, Bhima gets rescued by the Nagas who live underwater. Their king gives him a potion to drink.

This not only detoxifies him and saves his life, but also gives him – reportedly – the ‘strength of ten thousand elephants’.

Bhishma's Appraisal

During his pre-war appraisal of the two sides, Bhishma classifies Bhimasena as an atiratha, and also states that he is the best *all-round fighter* among all the

assembled heroes. He is good with bow and arrow, with mace, sword, spear, and with his bare hands.

Bhima's fighting strategy during the war reflects this ability. He is routinely jumping out of his chariot to accost his enemies with close-combat weapons, like a sword or a lance.

Sometimes, he pummels elephants to the ground with his fists. He picks up chariots and tosses them aside. He wrestles. He punches. He does everything.

While Arjuna is the chariot-warrior with exceptional bow-and-arrow skills, Bhima is the man you'd vote for if you did not know the format of the battle beforehand.

Karna's Skill

On the other hand, Karna is known to be a chariot-warrior only. He does not exhibit any particular fondness for fighting on his feet. Also, while his skill with bow and arrow is good enough to match Arjuna during his younger days, by the time the Kurukshetra war arrives, he is only one of those 'better than ratha but less than atiratha' heroes.

Bhishma once says about Ashwatthama that while he has the potential to be an atiratha, his temperament holds him back. The same can be said of Karna.

In other words, it depends very much on a given day whether Karna is fighting at a 'ratha' level or an 'atiratha' level. And this is liable to change over the course of a day with his mood.

With that said, if the battle between him and Bhima is strictly archer-based, Karna is skilled enough to defeat Bhima on most days. If a hundred such duels took place, Karna will win ninety of them.

Simulated Battles

If the duel were to be strictly close-combat based, Bhima will defeat Karna hundred times out of hundred. Only four other characters in the Mahabharata universe are said to be comparable to Bhima in foot-fighting: Jarasandha, Kichaka, Duryodhana and Shalya.

Even with these men, Bhima can be expected to win eighty of hundred challenges. But with Karna he will win all hundred.

This is not a criticism of Karna. Bhima will even consign Arjuna to the same fate.

But real battle is not a simulation: there are no rules preventing participants from using their environment to their benefit, and from mixing up the format of the fight every now and then.

What if we start off Bhima and Karna on chariots on an arid plain (no trees or rocks for cover) but with the choice of changing up the format as they see fit?

Karna will prefer to fight from atop his chariot the whole time, because that is his strength and comfort zone. His strategy will be to keep Bhima from leaving his chariot for as long as possible. The longer they both fight from their respective vehicles, the likelier Karna's victory becomes.

However, Bhima knows this too. His strategy will be the reverse: to leave his chariot at the first opportunity and to use as many different weapons as he can.

In such a simulation, the scales will even out a little. Karna will perhaps win seventy of these duels out of a hundred.

Real Battles

During the war of Kurukshetra, Bhima and Karna clash on several occasions. The scenario in a real war is much like the last simulation we discussed above, where both heroes have the choice to mix up things.

However, there is one important distinction. In a real war, Karna and Bhima are not going to be alone going at each other on a deserted plain. There is plenty of noise surrounding them. Animals and foot-soldiers abound everywhere they look. Bhima's potency as a close-combat fighter therefore increases dramatically.

He can now use soldiers of his own army for cover. He can duck behind an elephant to dodge Karna's arrows. He can even pick up an elephant or a horse and directly *hurl* it at Karna.

In such a chaotic environment, Bhima's versatility is as precious as Arjuna's marksmanship. The odds increase enormously in his favour. Out of a hundred 'real battles' of this sort, Bhima will perhaps win seventy.

Forgiving Bhima

Bhima and Karna face off against each other four times during the Kurukshetra war. Bhima wins two of these battles, one of them ends without a result, and one goes in favour of Karna.

It is instructive to note that on both the occasions that Bhima wins against Karna, he uses unconventional methods – like running around the side and beating Karna's horses into submission with a mace – while on the one occasion he loses, Karna manages to keep him on the chariot the whole time.

This victory against Bhima allows Karna to keep his promise to Kunti – that of not wishing to kill any of the Pandavas besides Arjuna. After he strips Bhima of his armour, he hooks his bow around Bhima's neck and says:

'Go and fight alongside Arjuna, you glutton. You do not belong on the battlefield.'

(Incidentally, these words by Karna exemplify his generous-yet-vain nature. He is being generous to Kunti – and to Bhima – by sparing his life, but he also utters words of contempt while displaying this generosity. Karna's mean streak is always bubbling under the surface.)

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, Karna is more powerful than Bhima – but only if they're going to be fighting from their chariots. If Bhima is allowed to improvise, he is skilled enough to defeat Karna.

This is by no means a certainty, though. Karna does defeat Bhima on one occasion during the Kurukshetra war and spares his life to honour his promise to Kunti.

Was Karna unlucky?

Short answer: Karna is definitely unlucky in some respects. But he also displays a streak of cruelty against the Pandavas and Draupadi. He makes a conscious choice to stick with Duryodhana despite knowing he is in the wrong. The consequences Karna reaps, therefore, are a combination of his luck and his choices.

Exertion and Destiny

The Mahabharata makes this point on more than one occasion: that any given outcome is a result of (a) a person's exertion, and (b) his destiny.

The word 'destiny' may have mystical connotations, but the meaning of it is quite simple: all those factors that are in play with the system and which are out of one's personal control. These may include the actions of other human beings, living things, and any number of elements that are part of the complex world we inhabit.

Even in a naturalist's worldview, there is place for this idea. In modern parlance, we speak of 'controlling the controllable variables'.

Back to the Mahabharata. Developing this idea further, the text insists that of the two contributing factors to an outcome – a person's exertion, and his destiny – the second is more powerful and sometimes sufficient. The first is necessary but insufficient.

In other words:

- A man may exert himself to the fullest and not get the outcome he desires because he is not destined for it.
- A man may not exert himself at all and receive a favourable outcome because his destiny decrees it so.

- A man may not exert himself because he thinks he is destined for success, and it eludes him.
- And so on.

Of course, since one's destiny is always hidden from one's view, the prescription given by the wise men is to exert oneself without giving any thought to one's destiny. And then, if your destiny happens to agree with you, you succeed. If it doesn't, you fail.

Karna's Destiny

Karna is born of the union between a princess and a god. This is about as holy a birth as one can imagine. If there is one infant that can be relied upon to achieve greatness, it is the firstborn son of a princess and a god.

But circumstances surrounding Karna's birth conspire to write a story for him that is complex and often ridden with despair.

Here is a list of all 'unfortunate' things that happen to Karna during his life:

- His biological mother abandons him.
- He is found and adopted by a couple who belong to the low-born Suta caste.
- He is robbed of his natural armour and earrings (which make him an invincible warrior) by Indra.
- He is cursed by Parashurama and by an unnamed Brahmin that he will forget all that he has learned in the moment of his greatest need.
- Of all the people who could have been impressed by his showing at the graduation ceremony, he attracts the attention of Duryodhana, who then uses him as a pawn against Arjuna.

But some 'good' things also happen to Karna as a result of his exertions against his destiny. For instance:

- He becomes king of Anga and gets the opportunity to witness the Kshatriya life first hand, thanks to Duryodhana.

- He gains a reputation as a generous and wise king. He is much-loved by his subjects.
- He is allowed to live as a Kshatriya while also remaining true to the dictates of the Suta caste.
- He thus achieves a lot more material success than the Sutaputra.

Karna's Choice

Toward the end, just as the war is about to begin, Krishna finds out that Karna is in fact Kunti's firstborn, and meets him in private. He offers Karna the kingdom of Indraprastha to rule in Yudhishtir's stead if only he agrees to forsake Duryodhana.

Here, Karna is given a choice to expunge all of the misfortunes that destiny had heaped upon him. He only has to say a word and all that he had deserved at the time of his birth will come true. He will be an emperor. He will even marry Draupadi. His children will become kings after him.

But in order to receive what he is due, he has to give up all that he has earned so painstakingly, fighting against destiny every step of the way.

This means that he will first have to abandon Duryodhana, much like his own mother abandoned him. Then he will have to abandon his family – his wife, his adoptive parents, his children – and the subjects of Anga who had come to look up toward him as a father.

He will have to abandon the Suta caste, the caste that had made him the man he became.

In order to acquire all of the things he thinks he deserves, he will have to give up all of the things he had earned. So instead of making the trade, he tells Krishna, 'I was born a Sutaputra. I will die a Sutaputra.'

At Peace

In rejecting Krishna's offer, Karna reveals himself to be a man who has made his peace with his destiny. He has stopped fighting it, he has stopped questioning it. He has begun to embrace it, and even be thankful for it.

Like all of us, he is also shackled by forces outside of his control. But he comes to realize that he possesses agency to make choices and prioritizations of his own.

Does he choose loyalty or wealth? Selfishness or generosity? Self-preservation or identity? Throughout his life he feels targeted and ridiculed by the world, and he lashes and rails at it.

But when the time comes to choose, he discovers that he is in fact quite comfortable in his 'adopted' world – the world with Adiratha and Radha and Duryodhana in it. The world in which he is king and Suta at the same time, the world in which he has crafted for himself a name.

Despite Karna's many tragedies (as the world sees them), at the very end, he embraces his identity and willingly chooses to fight on the 'wrong' side in order to fulfil his promises to Duryodhana.

If he is unlucky in some respects, he is also lucky to have been given that rare gift: a clear and unswerving moral compass that allows him to say no to untold riches, fame, status and power – only to keep his word to a friend.

Was Karna in love with Draupadi?

Short answer: There is no evidence in the Mahabharata that Karna loves Draupadi. He does desire her for a wife, which is why he attempts to complete the archery task at Draupadi's swayamvara. After Draupadi's public humiliation and rejection of him, he comes to detest her.

First Meeting: Swayamvara

The first time Karna and Draupadi lay eyes on each other is during Draupadi's swayamvara at Drupada's palace in Panchala. Karna is presumably invited because he is now king of Anga, and is also known to be a good friend of Duryodhana's.

Karna and Draupadi do not speak with each other directly at this meeting. Karna rises and signals his intention to try his luck at winning Draupadi's hand, but is shot down by her public rejection of him.

She addresses the assembly just as Karna rises, and says, 'I do not wish to be married to a Sutaputra.' This is despite the fact that Karna has been king for a year or two, and that he has been invited by Drupada.

Karna laughs at this imprudence on Draupadi's part, and quietly returns to his seat.

During this first meeting, therefore, Draupadi does nothing to win over Karna's heart. If anything, she may have hardened it so that he bears a grudge toward her.

Second Meeting: At the Rajasuya?

The second time Draupadi and Karna meet is during Yudhishtir's Rajasuya, after the Pandavas have conquered the world and Draupadi has become its empress.

Karna is once again among the invitees that sit in the hall during the final act of the Rajasuya, when Yudhishtir offers the arghya to Krishna. This instigates Shishupala into launching a tirade of abuse against all the assembled Kuru elders.

Of the many ridiculous things he says during this speech, he compares Karna favourably to Krishna and suggests that Yudhishtir should have honoured the king of Anga instead of the Dwaraka prince.

(There is a hint of irony in this: as a reader, knowing that Karna is the eldest Pandava, of course Yudhishtir should have given the honour to Karna.)

Krishna, of course, kills Shishupala in a dramatic scene, and the Kauravas leave Indraprastha in a huff. It is also during this trip that Duryodhana slips and falls into a pool of water.

Here, too, there is no recorded conversation between Draupadi and Karna. But we may presume that they must have met and exchanged cordialities in their respective roles as hostess and guest.

Third Meeting: At the dice game

The third time Karna and Draupadi's paths cross – this time fatefully – is during the dice game at which Yudhishtir loses everything and becomes a pauper.

Here, Karna plays the role of Duryodhana's chief enforcer, arguing with Vikarna about Draupadi's enslavement, quoting from the scriptures about Dharma, and ultimately branding Draupadi as an unchaste woman for having taken five husbands – and having children by all of them.

We must note that this is about thirteen years after their previous meeting at the Rajasuya. In the intervening period, Karna has risen in stature as king of Anga, even as Draupadi has settled into her life as empress of Indraprastha.

If they had occasion to speak to one another in this time, the text makes no mention of it.

In any case, at the dice game, it is Karna who suggests that Duhsasana should give Draupadi ‘the treatment a whore deserves’ and undress her in public, right in front of the Kuru elders.

(A part of this is him taking revenge for that long-ago slight during the swayamvara at Panchala. But a much bigger part is him playing a role that Duryodhana assigned him.)

At this meeting, it is fair to say that Draupadi and Karna’s relationship deteriorates beyond repair.

Admiration for Draupadi

However, it is fair to say that Karna expresses admiration for Draupadi at the end of this scene. As she frees her husbands by means of a boon that Dhritarashtra gives her, and as the Pandavas quietly start collecting their things to leave, Karna proclaims: ‘Draupadi has rescued the Pandavas like a lifeboat in the middle of a stormy sea.’

Equally, the same Karna – a few minutes before when everything seemed dire – was suggesting that Draupadi should forsake Yudhishtir and marry Duryodhana instead.

(At which Duryodhana beckons to Draupadi and meaningfully pats his thigh, as if he were calling her to sit on it.)

We may conclude from this that Karna admires Draupadi for the manner in which she has proven herself to be a loyal wife.

No other meetings

Karna and Draupadi never meet again, nor is there a moment in which they are present in the same room together. Not only do they not speak to each other, we rarely see them speak *of* each other.

Draupadi, to be certain, is full of hatred for Karna. More than once during their exile, she exhorts Arjuna to never forget his vow to kill Karna. She knows as well as anyone that it is Karna who is responsible for much of her humiliation during the dice game.

Despite all this, if one has to formulate a theory that Karna was in fact in love with Draupadi, we must also believe one or more of the following scenarios:

- Karna and Draupadi somehow knew each other and were lovers before her swayamvara. Draupadi may have broken things off with him after her swayamvara was announced, but Karna refused to take no for an answer. That explains why Draupadi publicly rejects him. The rest of the story can remain unchanged.
- Karna and Draupadi met each other for the first time at her swayamvara, and she rejected him. Yet, perhaps they got to know each other more intimately during the Rajasuya, and their love blossomed during the thirteen year period leading up to the dice game. This raises the question of why Karna then abuses Draupadi during it.
- Karna's love for Draupadi is unrequited. Despite the shoddy manner in which he treats her, in his heart he carries deep respect and tenderness for her.

None of these three stand up to even a tiny bit of scrutiny. There is some credence to thinking that Karna may have – at some point in his life – desired Draupadi, like all the men in his generation. But the moment she spurned him publicly, any feelings he might have had for her would have instantly evaporated.

Conclusion

There is no possible way, therefore, that Karna has anything approaching love for Draupadi. He may have desired her for a wife during the time of her swayamvara – which is why he tries to compete – but after being rejected by her, he comes to detest her.

All the admiration that he announces is of a grudging nature: the kind that you will see a sore loser admit to after failing to break his enemy.

It is also possible that Karna is besotted by envy toward Draupadi and the Pandavas for the seemingly healthy and harmonious marriage they enjoy despite their unconventional arrangement.

But does Karna love Draupadi? No.

Was Karna the greatest warrior?

Short answer: Karna is classified by Bhishma as an atiratha, so he is one of the greatest warriors to fight in the Mahabharata war. However, Bhishma also cites Arjuna as the greatest warrior of all, placing him in a league of his own. But what makes Karna a threat is that he has the Vasava dart, which is powerful enough to kill Arjuna.

Ardha-ratha or Ati-ratha?

During his classification each assembled hero of the Kurukshetra war as either a ratha or an atiratha, Karna invents a new group for two warriors:

- First, he claims that Arjuna is so powerful and skilful that he transcends classification. He inhabits a higher exalted plane all by himself. One may call him an 'ati-maharatha' – or 'an extreme Maharatha'.
- Then, when Duryodhana asks him about Karna, Bhishma laughs and derisively classifies him as an 'ardha-ratha', implying that the son of Radha is only half as good as a ratha.

As a matter of context, Bhishma opines that all the sons of Dhritarashtra – some of whose names we hear only in passing during the story – are rathas. In effect, therefore, he is saying Karna is only half as good as any randomly selected Dhritarashtra.

This, of course, is a result of Bhishma's irritation at Karna's exuberance. The fact that even such an experienced soldier cannot keep his emotions in check while assessing battle formations is telling.

However, on the night of the tenth day, as he lies on the bed of arrows, Bhishma gets a private visit from Karna. During this conversation, Bhishma admits that he was wrong earlier, and that Karna is no less than an atiratha.

Matching Arjuna

Since Arjuna is considered without doubt the best archer of this time, we may adopt a criterion for every contender for ‘most powerful warrior’ by examining whether or not he can match Arjuna.

Karna does this admirably, at least during their early years. When he appears at the graduation ceremony (he may have been twenty at this time, Arjuna perhaps fifteen), he repeats all of Arjuna’s feats in front of a watching crowd and the royal assembly.

But one must hasten to footnote this by saying: *this is only a display of target practice, not battle skill*. A target – even if it moves, rotates, swerves and revolves – does not strike back.

Shortly afterward, Karna – along with Duryodhana – fails in earning a victory over the Panchala army led by Drupada. Arjuna and Bhima immediately have their go at it and become successful.

(This also may not be as conclusive as it first sounds. Arjuna’s victory here might have been down to the fact that he had Bhima fighting alongside him.)

And then, Karna matches Arjuna in a one-on-one battle during Draupadi’s swayamvara. He gives Arjuna a good fight, and both warriors parry for a long time before Karna withdraws his challenge.

Of course, Arjuna pulls ahead of Karna as they grow into adulthood and middle age. Starting from the time of the burning of Khandava and ending at the Kurukshetra war, Arjuna becomes almost invincible.

But Karna is the only warrior to have ever matched Arjuna – both at hitting lifeless targets and also in single combat.

At the Kurukshetra

If we take performance at the Kurukshetra war as a parameter to judge a warrior’s skill, we have to conclude that Karna does not exactly set things alight.

For one, he is not even present on the field (not his fault) for the first ten days. For another, even after he enters the fray, he does not come into his own until after the death of Drona.

Many other warriors display more skill and courage than Karna. On the Pandava side, Arjuna, Bhima and Satyaki are constantly at the enemy's throat. Even on the Kuru side, Bhishma, Drona, Bhagadatta and Ashwatthama put in performances that surpass Karna's.

In fact, Ashwatthama's final act – that of killing all of the Panchala and Somaka forces by himself on the night of the eighteenth day – may be considered the most influential of all acts in the war.

Duryodhana certainly thinks so. 'Where the likes of Bhishma, Drona, Shalya and Karna have failed, O Drauna,' he says, 'you have succeeded. You have given me peace in the dying moments of my life. May god bless you!'

Special Ability

If we consider special abilities as a criterion while judging a warrior, we may once again have to conclude that Karna is the most powerful warrior on the Kaurava side.

This is because he possesses the Vasava dart, which is capable of killing Arjuna. Despite the many talents of Drona, Bhishma and Ashwatthama, none of those men have the ability to defeat Arjuna. For every weapon in their arsenal, Arjuna has an equal and opposite astra in his quiver.

(The above is not strictly true. Ashwatthama does possess the Narayanastra, for which Arjuna has no counter. But he does have Krishna for his charioteer, who – as the incarnation of Narayana – knows everything about how to quell it.)

Capturing the Pandavas

Karna is also the only one among the assembled Kuru heroes to capture every single one of the Pandavas – not Arjuna – during the course of his time on the battlefield.

He not only defeats Bhima, Yudhishtir, Nakula and Sahadeva each in turn, but he also reduces them to a state where he could kill them if he wanted. Then he chooses not to do so, in order to honour the promise he has made to Kunti.

He also plays an important role in the killing of Abhimanyu, shooting the arrow that breaks the bowstring of the young man. He does shoot him from behind, so he violates the rules of war, but he is the one who disarms Abhimanyu.

No other hero – not Bhishma, not Drona, not Ashwatthama, not Bhagadatta – succeeds in performing this feat of defeating all the Pandava brothers. If this were one criterion, Karna should be considered the most powerful of them all.

Cowardice

During the course of his life, Karna displays a streak of timidity when he is challenged in battle. The most striking example of this is when Duryodhana is captured by Gandharvas and requires Karna and Shakuni to rescue him.

Granted, Karna does not have an army to fight with. Granted, he may have thought that fighting the Gandharvas on his own is foolhardy. But he does flee without even trying. This may be understandable, even sensible. But it does not become a warrior.

Similarly, in the Kurukshetra war, when Abhimanyu is on a rampage, Karna admits to Drona that he wishes he could run away. ‘But for my loyalty to Duryodhana, I would have fled long ago,’ he says.

No other hero fighting in Kurukshetra would make this admission – not even Ashwatthama who is not a Kshatriya by birth. This tendency to run away from battles severely dents Karna’s claim to be the greatest warrior.

Conclusion

In favour of Karna’s contention as the greatest warrior are the following points:

- He is the only warrior who has – at some point in his life – matched Arjuna both at target practice and at one-on-one battles.

- He is the only warrior who has the ability to kill Arjuna in the Kurukshetra war, because he possesses the Vasava dart.
- He is the only warrior to have conclusively defeated, in turn, all the Pandava brothers with the exception of Arjuna.

The following may be said against him:

- His general performance at Kurukshetra does not stand out. He is overshadowed by the likes of Arjuna, Bhima, Satyaki, Bhagadatta, Bhishma, Drona and Ashwatthama.
- Bhishma's opinion of him is that he is an atiratha, which puts him in the same league as a number of other warriors but not *above* them.
- Karna displays an often-recurring cowardly streak in the middle of combat. On more than one occasion, he either flees the battlefield or withdraws his challenge.

Was Karna defeated by Drupada?

Short answer: Karna is present in the army that Duryodhana takes to invade Panchala when Drona asks his students to bring him Drupada as Guru Dakshina. The Kauravas and Karna are defeated soundly by Drupada, who leads the Panchala forces in defense. After the Kauravas have failed, the Pandavas successfully complete the quest.

Guru Dakshina

Shortly after the Kuru princes have shown off their skills with weapons in an arena, Drona gives them a real test: fighting a real army. As his guru dakshina, he asks that his wards: (a) invade the kingdom of Panchala, and (b) bring back King Drupada alive to Drona.

Drona and Drupada have some history together. They grow up as best friends at the hermitage of Bharadwaja, and as a boy Drupada once utters a throwaway line that he will share his kingdom with Drona once he becomes king.

Drona remembers the promise, though, and years later, unable to bear witnessing his wife and child suffering in penury, goes to Drupada and asks for his share.

Drupada laughs. 'A king a pauper can never be friends, O Brahmin,' he says. 'If you wish, I will give you alms. But I will not give you half my kingdom.'

This humiliates Drona to the extent that he wishes to exact revenge upon Drupada. Therefore he asks his students to wage a war against Panchala and bring Drupada back.

The Kauravas First

It is who Arjuna who suggests that the Kauravas should be allowed to go first at this game. He tells Bhima that the Kauravas are certain to fail. The

Kauravas, along with Karna, try their luck at invading Panchala but are soundly beaten.

(An aside: As written, this event leaves the reader feeling a little incredulous. It is scarcely believable that Bhishma would allow the Kuru princes to undertake such a dangerous quest all by themselves. Waging an actual war with a kingdom as powerful as Panchala is not something you would wish to leave to your young princes.

Some theorists claim that this story has been changed over time, that this is actually an invasion event that Bhishma and Drona led against Panchala with the Kuru princes helping them.)

After the shameful return of the Kauravas from their failed quest, the Pandavas take a division of the army out to challenge Drupada again. This time, Arjuna and Bhima play an important role in routing the Panchala army.

They bring Drupada back to Drona, who ‘magnanimously’ offers Drupada half his kingdom back in the name of ‘friendship’. Needless to say, this gesture humiliates Drupada in turn. He prays for a son who would destroy Drona, and receives Dhrishtadyumna.

The birth of Draupadi also occurs as a direct consequence of Drupada’s anger toward Drona.

Karna is Defeated

Karna is part of the force that Duryodhana puts together to fight Panchala. This is not because Karna is one of Drona’s disciples (he likely isn’t), but because Karna is now one of Duryodhana’s henchmen.

This invasion of Panchala by the Kuru princes happens only a short while after the graduation ceremony. And yet Karna does not distinguish himself at the battle.

During the ceremony, however, Karna displays enough skill with bow and arrow to be thought of as Arjuna’s equal. Why?

One possible explanation is that Karna may have been as skilful as Arjuna at target-practice but not so when it came to real-world battle situations. After all,

the target doesn't shoot back. We may conclude that by this time, Karna is quite a skilled archer but not so skilled at combat.

By the time of Draupadi's swayamvara, we must note, Karna manages to give Arjuna a run for his money in a duel with bow and arrow. We can therefore guess that between the Panchala invasion and Draupadi's swayamvara, Karna has improved his battle sense enough to be a match for Arjuna both in terms of skill and tactics.

Other explanations

We can think of other reasons why Karna – despite being a skilled bowman – does not succeed in helping Duryodhana capture Drupada. Here are a few:

- Karna fights as one of the many heroes in Duryodhana's army, whereas Arjuna *leads* the Kuru force. Thus, Karna may have not fought in a prominent enough position that allowed him to exercise his skills to the fullest.
- This is Karna's first proper battle. So far, he has only learned strategy and theory under Parashurama, but he has not felt the visceral sensations of war. The Kuru princes, on the other hand, may have had more practical training with animals and soldiers and so forth.
- The Kauravas went *first*, so they were strangers to how Drupada fought and what strategies he employed. Arjuna and the others would have learned plenty of lessons – chiefly what *not* to do – by watching their cousins get trounced. Karna does not have that luxury.
- Karna has recently given up his kavacha-kundalas to Indra. He is still getting used to the idea that he is no longer invincible, and that he can be killed. This knowledge does not affect his skills when there is nothing at stake – like at an archery competition – but in an actual conflict, he finds himself paralyzed with fear.

Karna's Behaviour Pattern

Karna displays this same behaviour multiple times in the Mahabharata: while placed in a situation that requires him to fight a real enemy and perform the act of a hero, he invariably acts like a coward and flees from the battlefield.

But when he is required to participate in a competition where the primary skill is shooting arrows at targets, Karna excels. That is why he would have probably been able to win Draupadi's hand had he been allowed to do so.

The only battles he appears to be confident of winning are those in which he is fighting Arjuna. This dichotomy – his fear when facing other enemies but confidence when facing Arjuna – is noticed and mocked by Bhishma, who calls him an *ardha-ratha* and insults him unnecessarily before the Kurukshetra war.

But what Bhishma does not realize is that this pattern of behaviour is consistent with a man who has license to use a devastating weapon against an enemy of his choice *on precisely one occasion*. Since he had been saving the Vasava for Arjuna, he is confident – almost arrogantly so – of his ability to defeat him.

His defeat to Drupada – albeit as a small part of Duryodhana's army – further reinforces how much Karna has lost by giving up his kavacha-kundalas.

Was Karna defeated by Abhimanyu?

Short answer: Karna is one of the warriors defeated by Abhimanyu on the thirteenth day of the Mahabharata war. After being isolated inside Drona's Chakra Vyuha, Abhimanyu goes on a rampage and defeats six atirathas and their troops. After this defeat, Karna asks Drona for advice, and together they hatch a plan to kill Abhimanyu.

The Chakravyuha

The Chakravyuha comes about as a result of Drona's failing to capture Yudhishtir on Days 11 and 12 of the war. Drona promises Duryodhana at the beginning of each of the two days that he will capture Yudhishtir alive.

(Duryodhana's plan is to force Yudhishtir to play another game of dice and send them again into the forest for twelve more years.)

On the eleventh day, Arjuna protects Yudhishtir from Drona. Drona then tries to divert Arjuna's attention with the help of the Samshaptakas (a class of warriors led by the Trigarta ruler Susharma).

On the twelfth day, Drona almost succeeds in getting to Yudhishtir, but in the nick of time Arjuna returns to rescue his elder brother again.

On the twelfth night, therefore, Drona is overcome by shame at not keeping his word. This time he promises Duryodhana: 'I will kill at least one Pandava atiratha tomorrow. But the Samshaptakas must keep Arjuna occupied for the *whole* day – not just part of it!'

The Samshaptakas agree, and Drona arranges the Kuru forces in the shape of a chariot-wheel.

This is called the Chakra Vyuha. Among the Pandavas, only Krishna and Arjuna know the art of both breaking into and out of it. And of the others,

Abhimanyu alone knows how to break into it – but not how to escape if trapped inside it.

Abhimanyu gets Trapped

When Yudhishtir sees the impenetrable array in front of him, he has no choice but to entrust Abhimanyu with the task of leading them into it.

The plan is that Bhima and other Pandava warriors will follow close on Abhimanyu's heels in order to keep the formation from healing itself. But Jayadratha guards the mouth of the array with such aplomb that Abhimanyu gets trapped inside the Chakravyuha.

Once he sees the Kuru ranks closing in behind him, Abhimanyu knows that his time has come. From then on, he fights like a man possessed, unleashing himself with full fury at the enemy.

He turns his wrath in particular against the Madra force owned by Shalya. Not only does he defeat Shalya in a one-to-one duel, he also kills several of Shalya's brothers before laying to waste the entire army.

Karna Flees

In his battle with Karna, Abhimanyu kills his horses, shoots down his banner, and breaks his bow. When the younger brother of Karna (perhaps another of Adiratha's sons) arrives in support, Abhimanyu wastes no time in beheading him.

Seeing this, Karna flees from the scene.

Abhimanyu then is challenged by Lakshmana Kumara, Duryodhana's favourite son. This battle is short and sweet, with the son of Subhadra slicing Lakshmana's throat with a sharp arrow and causing his headless trunk to fall to the ground.

Witnessing the death of Lakshmana, six atiratha converge upon Abhimanyu at once. But he picks them off one by one, and wounds them all while simultaneously flaying the Saindhava forces that have stayed behind from the front line.

Karna, Shalya and Ashwatthama together try to have another go at Abhimanyu, but the prince sends them scurrying back once again. Tired and hurt, Karna approaches Drona and says:

“That son of Arjuna defeats us all, O Preceptor,’ he says, even as in the distance, Abhimanyu tears into Ashwaketu, the prince of Magadha. ‘What can we do to defeat him?’

Drona’s Suggestion

Drona turns to Karna with a resigned smile. ‘Have you been able to find even one defect in this boy?’ he says. ‘I cannot see the difference today between Abhimanyu and Arjuna.

‘If the latter is invincible, so is the former. Even the mightiest of car warriors, those who have been hardened by decades of fighting, cannot find a single flaw in his armour. What can one do when a warrior displays such immense skill?’

Karna replies in angst, ‘The wounds he has left on my body sting me so, Acharya. I stay here without running away because I respect my duties as a Kshatriya. The arrows he shoots weaken my heart, and I am consumed with despair as I watch him.’

Drona smiles some more, but this time there is a hard edge to his glance. ‘Abhimanyu is young. His mail is impenetrable. I had once taught Arjuna the art of creating defensive armour.

‘It looks like Falguna has taught his son well. See if you can, Karna, cut off his bow, bowstring, the reins of his horses, and the horses themselves from behind his chariot. Let us first force him onto his two feet. Let us deprive him of his weapon, and then we will see how long he will last.’

The First Blow

Eagerly following Drona’s words, Karna approaches Abhimanyu’s chariot from the flank and breaks his bow. Kritavarma kills his horses while Kripa accounts for the two rear guards.

The prince leaps onto the ground, therefore, and sees that six atirathas are speeding toward him with their bows upraised. Undaunted, he picks up a sword and shield and prepares to defend himself.

Drona cuts off the sword at the hilt, and Karna shatters the shield with a clutch of arrows. Cornered and left without a chariot, Abhimanyu now picks up a fallen chariot wheel, holding it above his head like Vasudeva would hold his Sudarshana Chakra.

And for a while he defends himself gamely, even managing to land a few blows on those soldiers that come close to him. After a short while, Abhimanyu gets into a mace fight with the son of Duhsasana, and is killed.

Karna thus plays an important part in Abhimanyu's death.

Conclusion

On the thirteenth day of the war, after he is trapped inside the Chakravyuha, Abhimanyu defeats all the great Pandava warriors – including Karna. He also kills Karna's younger brother, and severely injures Vrishasena, Karna's son.

Karna fights with Abhimanyu on two separate occasions. The first time, he flees from the battle unable to withstand Abhimanyu's onslaught. Then, he teams up with Ashwatthama and Shalya to have another go but they're all soundly beaten and driven away.

Abhimanyu also kills Lakshmana, the favourite son of Duryodhana.

Karna then takes his revenge on Abhimanyu by cutting off the young prince's bow from behind him (on Drona's orders). In this way, he paves the way for Abhimanyu's eventual death.

Was Karna defeated in Virata Parva?

Short answer: Karna is one of the warriors defeated by Arjuna during the Virata Parva. Fighting in the garb of a eunuch named Brihannala, Arjuna takes on the entire might of the Kuru army on his own and wins. Along with Karna, other Kuru stalwarts such as Bhishma, Drona, Ashwatthama, Kripa and Duryodhana are also beaten.

The Killing of Kichaka

The story of Kuru's raid on Matsya's cattle begins with Bhima killing Kichaka because the latter makes unsavoury passes at Draupadi. Kichaka is the commander of Matsya's army, the brother-in-law of Virata, and his abilities as a fighter and leader in battle are respected all over the world.

This man's death results in an immediate power vacuum in Matsya's army. Kuru – with the urging of the Trigarta ruler Susharma – decides to use this vulnerable moment to steal some of Matsya's cattle.

Susharma pitches the idea to Duryodhana as easy wealth-grab. He proposes that he will attack Matsya from the northwest with his own Trigartan army to divert Virata's attention and forces.

Then Duryodhana can walk in through the kingdom's northeast border at the head of a small division of Kuru's army.

The plan works well – up to a point. At the northwestern border, Virata's army acquits itself well against the Trigartans, chiefly because of the services rendered by Bhima, Yudhishtir, Nakula and Sahadeva in their respective disguises.

At the northeastern border, Arjuna alone – in his garb as the eunuch Brihannala – fights off the entire Kuru army and saves Matsya's cattle.

The Pandavas, thus, protect the kingdom of their benefactor despite the fact that the predicament is of their own causing.

Fighting with Bhuminjaya

Accompanying Arjuna and serving as his charioteer is Bhuminjaya, the son of Virata who is also sometimes called Uttara Kumara. (He is not to be confused by Virata's daughter Uttara, whom Arjuna teaches dance and who later bears Parikshit, the future king of Hastinapur.)

The battle actually starts off with Bhuminjaya vowing to fight the Kuru army on his own with Brihannala as charioteer. But when Brihannala points out each of the Kuru warriors to his 'master', the prince loses his courage and runs away from the battlefield with Brihannala in pursuit.

Brihannala then drags Bhuminjaya back to the chariot, assigns him the role of charioteer, and asks him to take them to the old tree in the cemetery, where 'the Pandavas had hidden their weapons'.

At the cemetery, under the tree, Brihannala reveals his true identity to Bhuminjaya. When they return to the battlefield, Arjuna is wielding the Gandiva and blowing on his conch.

This is the moment that everyone in the Kuru army recognizes Arjuna. Duryodhana cackles in glee. He says, 'The foolish Pandavas have revealed themselves before their year of incognito is up!'

Bhishma's Correction

But Bhishma makes a few calculations and reveals that the thirteen years of the Pandava exile ended on the previous day.

'The wheel of time,' he says, 'revolves with its many divisions – *kalas* and *kashtas* and *muhurtas* – with days and fortnights following the movement of the constellations and planets.

'Taking all the deviations into consideration, there is a two-month increase every five years. In thirteen years, there is an excess of five months and twelve

nights. Calculating it in that way, the thirteenth year of the Pandavas' exile ended yesterday.

‘This means they are no longer required by the terms of agreement to remain in hiding.’

Then, addressing Duryodhana, Bhishma makes a plan of action. ‘Take a fourth of the army and retreat to Hastinapur, O Prince,’ he says. ‘Let half the army remain with us so that we may drive back the advances of Partha.

‘And allow the remaining fourth of our force to be engaged in driving the cattle back to our city. We have come with a purpose. Let us ensure that we fulfil it.’

Arjuna's Response

But the plan proves to be quite ineffective, as Arjuna expertly manoeuvres his chariot to seek out each of the Kuru heroes in turn and defeating them in a series of single combats.

He fights Kripa first and makes that whole section of the army flee in terror. Then he fights Ashwatthama, Karna, Dronacharya and Bhishma one after the other, crippling each division of the Kaurava force in turn and making them retreat from the battlefield.

Then, after driving Duryodhana away as well, he rounds up the cattle and single-handedly guides them back to Matsya.

Explanations

Regardless of how powerful Arjuna has become during the exile years, it is unbelievable that he so easily overpowers an entire array of great Kuru heroes – and the Kuru army – by himself.

Here are a few probable explanations as to how this happened:

- Arjuna does not engage much with the Kuru army itself, concerning himself only with defeating the leaders. The foot soldiers in the army are of course forbidden by law from attacking a chariot warrior.

- The six main heroes in the Kuru army – Drona, Kripa, Bhishma, Karna, Duryodhana and Ashwatthama – do not fight Arjuna at once even though they could. This is again in obedience of battle guidelines, that one warrior should always engage with one other warrior.
- Arjuna does not use earthly weapons but creates some magical illusions with his divine weapons. Some versions of this tale describe him using the Sammohana Astra to put the Kuru army to sleep before quietly driving the cattle away.
- The Kuru army itself is probably not at its full strength. In all likelihood, the six heroes bring along only a small division of the army.

Regardless of how it is achieved, this is a remarkable feat by Arjuna. And it serves the Kauravas a reminder on just how powerful he has become in the intervening years.

Karna's Defeat

This is another incidence of Karna's powerlessness with regards to Arjuna. Despite tall claims that his skill as archer is equal to Arjuna's, Karna is not able to hold off Arjuna even as part of a force that includes Bhishma and Drona.

Later, on the eve of the war, when Bhishma reminds Karna of this and asks why he was not able to subjugate Arjuna that day, Karna replies: 'We were fighting then only to steal some cows, Grandsire, whereas Arjuna was fighting to defend his kingdom. In this war, we will both be fighting for equal stakes.'

Needless to say, Bhishma laughs off this explanation and proceeds to heap Karna with insults.

Why is Karna so ineffectual?

What is not clear to the objective reader is this: why is Karna so ineffectual? When they were both younger men, Karna had not only matched Arjuna at archery during the graduation ceremony, but he had also given him a good fight at Draupadi's swayamvara.

How come he is not even able to stop Arjuna here as part of an ensemble cast?

At this point in the story, Karna either should have had the kavacha-kundalas – which would have made him invincible – or the Vasava dart – which he could have used to kill Arjuna. But he does neither.

One can only guess why. Perhaps Karna is waiting for a grander stage upon which to use the Vasava dart on Arjuna. Or – if he does not have the Vasava yet and he is fighting with his natural armour and earrings on him – the kavacha-kundalas are not as powerful as they are said to be.

Maybe they offer *some* level of protection against *some* weapons, but against Arjuna in this sort of mood they're not of much help.

What was Karna famous for?

Short answer: Karna is most famous in the Mahabharata for being the only warrior who is as skilful as Arjuna at archery. He is also famous for his generosity – he is known never to say no to a Brahmin who asks for alms – and his steadfast adherence to loyalty as the highest virtue.

Famous for Skill

Early on in Karna's life, he establishes himself as one of the most skilful archers of the world. He appears at the Kuru princes' graduation ceremony and deliberately repeats all of Arjuna's feats, thus setting up the narrative that he is a match to Arjuna.

Until the Pandavas leave on their exile, Karna keeps up with Arjuna in this matter. The general observer often thinks of them both as about equally powerful when it comes to fighting with a bow and arrow.

In the Kurukshetra war, Karna has the Vasava dart, which makes him the only warrior on either side with at least a theoretical ability to kill Arjuna. None of the weapons held by any of the other Kuru warriors are capable of harming Arjuna. The Vasava is the only weapon that neither Krishna nor Arjuna knows how to counter.

Karna, therefore, makes his name and his fortune on the promise that he is skilful and powerful enough to defeat Arjuna.

Famous for Generosity

Karna has made a name for himself as being generous and kind to a fault. His feelings of tenderness are not reserved just for those who are more unfortunate than he is; he is equally generous with people who are more powerful than him.

Here are a few examples of his generosity:

- When approached by a Brahmin who asks him for his divine armour and earrings, despite knowing that the Brahmin is none other than Indra in disguise, Karna peels off his gifts and gives them away.
- When Kunti reveals to Karna the secret of his birth, he does not accept her as his mother. But he gives her an unsolicited promise that he will not attack any other Pandava in the war besides Arjuna.
- During his twenty five years as Anga's king, he earns for himself the reputation as a wise and generous king. He is said to have undertaken numerous projects for the benefit of the downtrodden in his kingdom.

Famous for Loyalty

Karna's finest and noblest moment comes when he rejects the offer of Krishna to accept the throne of Indraprastha in return for betraying Duryodhana and fighting on the Pandavas' side.

Krishna tells Karna that he is a Pandava, and that his 'true' place is on the throne with Draupadi by his side and with the Pandavas serving him. Karna, however, rejects the trade and affirms to Krishna that he was born a Sutaputra and that he will die one.

In making this decision, Karna displays loyalty of the finest sort toward Duryodhana – who gave him everything and allowed him to become a king while also staying true to his adoptive tribe – and toward Adiratha and Radha – who saved him from certain death and raised him as their own.

He also rejects the notion that he could rewrite history by a mere decision. With this one choice, will he stop being a Sutaputra and become a Kshatriya? Will the Pandavas magically become his family members? And will he need to forsake those people who have loved him as he was all these years for the sake of his 'true' family?

Karna does not think so. He chooses to remain a Sutaputra, and to remain loyal to Duryodhana to the end.

Famous for Pride

Karna displays an arrogant streak every now and then during the story, especially when he is accompanying or advising Duryodhana. He is prone to make outrageous claims about Duryodhana's nobility, the Pandavas' cruelty, or his own ability to easily defeat Arjuna.

This arrogance leads him to sometimes give Duryodhana advice that feels misguided in hindsight. For instance, during the final year of the Pandavas' exile, he tells Duryodhana that going into the forest with the precise aim of pointing and laughing at the Pandavas is a good idea.

Duryodhana listens, and finds himself captured by Gandharvas. Eventually, he has to rely on Bhima and Arjuna to rescue him.

This boastful nature also rubs Bhishma up the wrong way. After listening to his self-aggrandizement for a long time in silence, Bhishma finally erupts and quarrels with him on the eve of the war. This also leads directly to the grandsire giving Duryodhana an ultimatum: either he fights or I fight.

Whether or not this is a natural part of Karna's personality or whether he feels the need to put on an act in Duryodhana's presence, we do not know. But since we most see Karna and Duryodhana together in the story, his impetuosity is often in plain view.

Famous for Meanness

This is perhaps an extension of the previous section, but a big part of Karna's character – as the reader sees it – has to do with how mean his acts are toward Draupadi – especially during her disrobing.

Even if we allow that Karna is performing a role here under Duryodhana's instructions, we must admit that his overblown bluster becomes the main reason for much of Draupadi's continuing vengefulness. It is not an exaggeration to claim that but for him, Draupadi would not have been disrobed.

He insists that Draupadi is an unchaste woman (because she married five men) and that she should therefore be disrobed in public. That leads directly to Arjuna and Bhima making vows to kill Karna and Duryodhana respectively.

Famous for Misfortune

More than anything, Karna is known to be 'basically a good man' who is 'caught in the wrong situations'. He is often depicted as someone trying to do his best with the forces of destiny arrayed against him.

More specifically:

- He is abandoned at birth by his biological mother, and he is found by a family that belongs to an unimportant caste.
- He is cursed by his teacher and by a Brahmin whose cow he inadvertently kills.
- He is wooed and exploited by Duryodhana for his potential to kill Arjuna. Duryodhana heaps wealth and status on Karna to purchase from him his loyalty.
- Though his kavacha-kundalas make him invincible as a warrior, Indra takes advantage of his generosity and strips him of them.

Thus, a man who is born with the world at his feet and who should deservedly become an emperor ends up living most of his early life being denigrated as a Sutaputra.

He does become king, but in return he is forced to give up his sense of ethics in order to be loyal to his benefactor. At the end, he chooses to die for his adoptive life even when a choice is offered to him to return to his 'real' one.

Karna's enduring image, therefore, is that of a tragic hero who suffers much undeserved hardship during his life.

Was Karna involved in Draupadi Vastraharan?

Short answer: Karna is one of the main characters involved in Draupadi vastraharan. He argues with Vikarna – one of the hundred Kauravas – that Draupadi has been won fairly by Duryodhana, and that now she is his slave. He also calls Draupadi a prostitute for having taken five husbands, and commands Duhsasana to unclothe her in public.

Vikarna's Argument

The first time Karna makes himself heard during the dice game is after Draupadi has been pledged and lost, and after Draupadi raises a point of logic in the hall. Namely: Since Yudhishtir lost himself first, did he have the right over Draupadi to pledge and lose her?

In other words, is Draupadi 'won' or 'not won'?

Vikarna, one of the sons of Dhritarashtra and brothers of Duryodhana, argues in Draupadi's favour. He makes four separate points:

- Yudhishtir staked Draupadi while being under the influence of dice, which is a vice. And people do not consider decisions taken while under the influence of a vice to be of authority.
- Draupadi is not the sole property of Yudhishtir. She is the common wife of all five Pandavas. So Yudhishtir did not have the right to pledge her in the way he did.
- Yudhishtir placed Draupadi as stake not of his own free will but in response to the cajoling of Shakuni. This act, therefore, does not carry the same authority as one performed by the king on his own.

- As Draupadi herself has pointed out, the king lost himself first and became a slave with no possessions of his own. At that very moment, he lost every right he ever held over Draupadi.

Taking these four points together into consideration, Vikarna proposes that Draupadi has been ‘not won’ – i.e.: she continues to be the empress of Indraprastha. She is *not* Duryodhana’s slave.

Karna’s Rebuttal

If it is surprising that Vikarna – one of Duryodhana’s brothers – is speaking up on Draupadi’s behalf, it is even more surprising that Karna gets up without invitation and argues against Vikarna.

(As readers, we must note the irony here: Vikarna and Karna are both going against their brothers here and standing up for what they believe is ‘right’.)

Karna makes the following rebuttals of each of Vikarna’s propositions:

- The king was under the influence of dice. But he was not placed there by force. He entered the game of his own free will.
- It is true that Draupadi is not the sole property of Yudhishtir. But she is the queen, and in that position, Yudhishtir has more of a right to her than anyone else. Why otherwise, during the Rajasuya, did she sit next to him and perform all the necessary rites?
- Yudhishtir entered the game knowing that it had to be played either (a) to the end, or (b) until an elder calls it off, or (c) by mutual agreement of the players. Since these rules were known beforehand, there is no question of cajoling.
- Yudhishtir lost himself before pledging Draupadi. This does not mean, however, that he has lost her. Even slaves have wives and children, and possessions of their own. Why can such a slave, then, not gamble with his wife as stake?

Accusation

Karna might have stopped with having shut Vikarna down, and allowed the Kuru leaders to ruminate over the two sides of the debate. But from here he makes a leap to land a personal insult on Draupadi.

He says: ‘Draupadi is no better than a prostitute because she has publicly taken five husbands. She has also had a son with each of her five husbands. Such a woman does not deserve to be treated with respect in this assembly.’

And then he barks out an instruction to Duhsasana to proceed to unclothe Draupadi right here in everyone’s presence.

Now, some may argue that Karna had no business entangling with Vikarna in this debate, because what right has he got to speak up in this matter? But technically speaking, Draupadi *does* put the question ‘to the court’, so Karna is within his rights to make his thoughts heard.

But taking that final step and insulting Draupadi is beyond the pale. It is probably driven by his own long-held grudge for what happened at Draupadi’s swayamvara. Equally, he may have been working under Duryodhana’s instructions to be as hostile as possible toward the Pandavas.

Silence in the Court

The most interesting aspect of the whole scene is that no one rises against Karna and puts a stop to Draupadi’s ordeal. The reasons for this are varied:

- The Pandavas cannot rescue their wife because they are now slaves under Duryodhana. Draupadi, technically, is not their wife anymore, and they cannot do anything without first taking the permission of their new master.
- The likes of Bhishma and Kripa are perhaps still puzzling over the relative merits of Vikarna and Karna’s respective arguments. They are still too caught up in the logical and legal framework to notice that a woman is being disrobed in the hall.
- Dhritarashtra chooses to let the whole rigmarole play out because he is too much in love with Duryodhana. A part of him is ecstatic that all of Yudhishtir’s wealth has now been looted.

The only sane voice in the hall belongs to Vidura. He repeatedly reminds Dhritarashtra of the atrocity that is about to take place. He warns him that if Draupadi is disrobed, the Kuru race will suffer all sorts of calamities.

But Dhritarashtra still does not make a decision. Only when frightening natural omens appear all around him does he relent. He begs Draupadi's forgiveness and reinstates Yudhishtir back as emperor.

Admiration for Draupadi

Karna is moved to grudgingly admit that Draupadi has rescued the Pandavas. Though he was just a few minutes ago advising her that she should marry Duryodhana, now he praises her. 'The Pandavas have been saved by the acts of Krishnaa. She became the boat that guided them to shore on a stormy sea.'

This does not change the fact that Karna was the primary antagonistic force driving the entire scene. But for his intervention, Draupadi's suffering – and therefore her resultant thirst for vengeance – would have been much less intense.

Karna is also responsible for finally breaking the Pandava-Kaurava relationship beyond repair. Because after this scene, all four Pandavas take oaths to kill various men responsible for their plight.

- Arjuna takes a vow to kill Karna.
- Bhima takes two vows: one to break Duryodhana's thigh for having the temerity to invite Draupadi to sit on it, and to break open Duhsasana's chest and drink his raw blood.
- Sahadeva promises to kill Shakuni.
- Nakula takes an oath to avenge the dishonour of Draupadi at all costs.

During the scene of Draupadi's disrobing, therefore, the seeds of the Kurukshetra war are sown. And the man most responsible for it is Karna.

Is Karna the real hero of the Mahabharata?

Short answer: Karna is one of the important heroes of the Mahabharata. In a classic good-versus-bad tale, Karna dons the garb of a tragic antihero. If Krishna is the god and Yudhishtir the ideal man, Karna is man as he is: flawed, capricious, frustrated, uncertain, and forever oscillating between hubris and self-loathing.

Heroes of the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata does not have an explicitly introduced protagonist. Many of its characters can lay legitimate claims to being the ‘true hero’ of the story.

Here are a few nominations:

- Arjuna – as the most powerful warrior of the world and as the hero who gets the most ‘screen time’.
- Krishna – as the incarnation of a god and as the person who guides the flow of history.
- Yudhishtir – as the common man’s ideal and as the only human character who succeeds in entering heaven in his mortal body.
- Draupadi – as the chief reason for the Kurukshetra war, and the fulcrum around which the whole story turns.
- Bhishma – as the character who witnesses all the important scenes of the Mahabharata story.

Of the above, Krishna will probably get the most number of public votes because of the fact that his mythology extends beyond the Mahabharata, and his name has come to transcend the work.

Karna the Cruel

On the other hand, Karna is often known as one of the antagonists of the story. Driven by loyalty to Duryodhana – his benefactor – Karna behaves with extreme hatred and vitriol toward the Pandavas. He is often seen plotting one machination or the other to bring about the Pandavas' ruin.

He plays the pivotal role in escalating tensions during Draupadi's disrobing, by arguing that Draupadi has become slave to Duryodhana. He also accuses Draupadi of being a prostitute, and commands Duhshasana to undress her in public.

Due to his actions, the incident becomes the primary reason for the Kurukshetra war. This is the moment during which the Pandava-Kaurava relationships sour beyond hope.

Karna also plays an enabling role in the following incidents:

- The poisoning of Bhimasena as a child – though this is debatable if we accept the theory that Karna was not Drona's student.
- The attempt to trap the Pandavas and Kunti in the palace of wax in Varanavata.
- The planning and implementation of the dice game, which leads directly to Draupadi's disrobing.
- The attempt by Duryodhana to visit the Pandavas in the forest with the express intention to mock them.

Karna the Noble

At the same time, the Mahabharata presents us the narrative of Karna as a noble and 'good' man. Here are some examples:

- Karna makes a name for himself as a generous and wise king during his long reign (twenty five or so years) as the ruler of Anga. His reputation is that no Brahmin had ever been turned away from his home empty-handed.

- Karna displays an extreme sense of loyalty toward his adoptive parents – Adiratha and Radha – and toward his friend Duryodhana. However, during his younger days, he does feel some shame in being called a Sutaputra.
- Karna is remarkably self-aware, as evidenced during his conversation with Krishna just before the war begins. He assures Krishna that the war will be won by the Pandavas, and that he and Duryodhana will die in it.
- His generosity is such that even when he knows that a person is trying to exploit him, if he does so in the garb of a Brahmin asking for alms, Karna will agree. In the case of Indra, despite being warned by Surya, he gives up his kavacha-kundalas citing that it is an honour to be in a position to fulfil the desire of the king of the gods.
- He keeps his promises no matter what the cost. In order to honour his vow to Kunti, Karna spares four Pandavas during the war after having defeated each of them in turn.

Karna the Arrogant

Bhishma notices the arrogant nature of Karna and draws our attention to it. During the war, after Bhishma has fallen, Kripa admonishes Karna for the same failing. This leads to a slanging match between Karna and Ashwatthama. Duryodhana intervenes just in time to separate the two heroes.

Later, when Shalya is asked by Duryodhana to be Karna's charioteer, he also mentions the baseless bravado of the Radheya.

All of this leads the reader to believe that none of the warriors who fight on Duryodhana's side are particularly enamoured by Karna. Not only do they dislike him for egging Duryodhana on, they also do not think of him as a worthy hero.

Karna does not have any great accomplishments in the field of battle. About the only time he gives proof of his fighting ability is when he leads the Kuru army on an expedition of conquest around the world. However, this is quite different to a war.

What really irritates Bhishma – and the rest of the Kuru elders – is that Karna is extremely confident each time he faces Arjuna. But on every single occasion, he loses.

The Mahabharata does not give us an explanation for this behaviour. One reason is that Karna's posturing is entirely for Duryodhana's benefit. He wants to be seen by Duryodhana as being eager to fight Arjuna.

The other reason, of course, is that the presence of the Vasava dart gives him confidence every time he faces Arjuna.

Karna the Cowardly

To counterbalance his arrogance, Karna behaves like a coward on several occasions, right in the thick of battle. For instance:

- At Draupadi's swayamvara, after fighting with Arjuna (who is in disguise) for a long time, Karna withdraws from the challenge citing aversion to fight a Brahmin. But this can easily be construed as lack of courage to keep going.
- When Duryodhana is captured by Gandharvas toward the end of the Pandavas' exile, Karna flees the battle and it is left to Bhima and Arjuna to rescue the Kaurava prince.
- During the war, Karna flees from several battles, not least when Abhimanyu kills his younger brother on the thirteenth day. Also, in the manner befitting a coward, he returns to shoot at Abhimanyu's bow from behind the young man's chariot.

We must hasten to add here that what Karna displays is lack of *physical* courage.

Karna the Unfortunate

The other angle to Karna is that he is an unfortunate target of destiny's cruelty. Despite being born in highly privileged circumstances, he is abandoned

by his birth mother, found by people of a lowly caste, and raised as a charioteer when he deserves to be a king.

He is derided by being a Sutaputra all of his earlier life, until Duryodhana makes him a king – but in return he purchases Karna's loyalty, which he uses as pawn against the Pandavas.

Karna's innate goodness is exploited by many: Indra by asking him for his kavacha-kundalas, Kunti by asking him to not fight her sons, Parashurama who curses him, and Krishna who tries to bribe him and then turns around to insult him on the field.

This image of Karna is that of a helpless man who is trying his best to make a good life for himself with the forces of destiny arrayed against him. He succeeds *only somewhat*; at the end he surrenders to it and accepts that he will forever be a Sutaputra.

Karna the Relatable

While it is impossible to tell who the 'real' hero of the Mahabharata is, one may safely state that Karna is definitely the story's most relatable character.

He displays a full range of human emotions and frailties. He fights against destiny to exert his own will, but ultimately submits to it.

No other character in the story paints a picture of the human condition as vividly as does Karna.

Like him, each of us is born deserving everything. As we grow first into children, then into youth and finally into adulthood, the world progressively exerts its force upon us, making us yield in a thousand ways.

Like him, we have moments where we are generous and kind and noble, but also moments where we are cruel, spiteful and selfish. Like him, we feel that we're better than the world thinks we are, that we deserve more than we're given.

But we also wonder if that's true.

Like him, we can give plenty and want nothing in return. Like him, we can spend our whole lives wanting something and then give it up for a higher ideal when it is handed to us.

If Karna has captured imaginations of storytellers down the years, it is because of this quality: he is the anti-Yudhishtir; a flawed, capricious, inconsistent man who is striving every moment to attain unattainable ideals.

In a story full of memorable heroes, he is the most real.

Is Karna overrated?

Short answer: There is a huge chasm between what Karna says he can do and what he does. Despite his reputation as being as skillful as Arjuna, Karna rarely gives any evidence of his prowess. There is not even one scene in the entire story where Karna fights the odds single-handedly and wins. So yes, Karna is overrated as a warrior.

Matching Arjuna's Skill

The mythology of Karna's great abilities as warrior begins when he appears out of nowhere at the Kuru princes' graduation ceremony. Just as Arjuna finishes his performance to resounding applause from attending citizens, Karna steps up without invitation and repeats all of Arjuna's feats with his own bow and arrow.

He then asks the Kuru elders for permission to challenge Arjuna to a one-on-one battle.

Bhishma and Kripa are quick to nip this in the bud. It is far too risky to allow an unnamed challenger to enter into a duel with a prince. Bhishma has had a bad experience with this sort of thing in the past – when Chitrangada died in a fight with a Gandharva.

Kripa asks Karna to introduce himself, and as Karna is hesitating, Adiratha comes onto the stage to embrace Karna. Seeing this, Bhima and Arjuna ridicule Karna as being a Sutaputra.

Kripa explains to Karna that a challenger has to be of high birth if he is to be taken seriously. Duryodhana takes the opportunity to extend the hand of friendship to the new entrant, and to drive home the point, he even crowns him king of Anga.

All of this makes it obvious to onlookers that Karna is at least as skilful as Arjuna when it comes to archery.

Losing to Drupada

Almost immediately after the graduation ceremony, Drona gives his students a task: invade Panchala, and bring Drupada back to Hastinapur alive as a prisoner.

The Kauravas go first on Arjuna's insistence, and Karna fights alongside Duryodhana. But the Panchalas rout the Kuru army in this battle, which raises questions on Karna's abilities.

How can a warrior who is 'Arjuna's equal' fail so miserably in a proper battle against Panchala? A couple of possible explanations:

- Karna does not fight in a prominent or strategic spot in Duryodhana's army. One-on-one battles are entirely different to wars in which entire armies go at one another.
- Karna's skills so far are only limited to shooting arrows at targets, or at most one other opponent. He is still not quite adept at fighting effectively in a sea of armed men with weapons flying all over.

After the Kauravas return and admit their failure, Arjuna leads the remaining Kuru army back into Panchala and brings Drupada back as prisoner. This proves that Arjuna is a better all-round warrior than Karna – at this stage.

At Draupadi's Swayamvara

The next time Karna and Arjuna meet is at Draupadi's swayamvara. Karna gets publicly rejected by Draupadi, and Arjuna wins her hand by completing the task set by Drupada.

Immediately after, the suitors who attend the swayamvara rise up in revolt at the thought that they have all been defeated by a Brahmin. Shalya and Karna draw their weapons and challenge Bhima and Arjuna respectively.

In this battle, for a long time Karna and Arjuna prove to be evenly matched. Then, Karna asks Arjuna: 'How are you so powerful, O Brahmin? Are you the son of a god or are you the incarnation of Parashurama?'

Arjuna replies, 'Neither, sir. I am just a regular man who has the blessings of his preceptor.'

Karna then withdraws his challenge, saying that Kshatriya energies cannot be expected to defeat Brahmanic energies. Though he does not make an explicit admission, it does appear that he is scared that he might lose.

By this stage, Karna has been king of Anga for two years or so. It would not be amiss to admit that he and Arjuna are still about equally powerful – especially when one-on-one battles are concerned.

Fleeing the Battlefield

The next time we see Karna in a battle situation is twenty four years later, during the final year of the Pandavas' exile. During a trip into the forest, Duryodhana is captured by a band of Gandharvas, and instead of fighting them, Karna flees from the battle.

Duryodhana is then rescued by Bhima and Arjuna.

During these twenty four years, Karna has been king of Anga. He has largely gotten on with his life, marrying a Suta girl, being devoted to his adoptive parents, and building a reputation for himself as a wise and generous ruler.

It is apparent that he has let his fighting skill deteriorate over this time – as kings are wont to do during periods of peace. But he continues to remind everyone around him that he once matched Arjuna.

Meanwhile, during these twenty four years, Arjuna has improved beyond recognition as a warrior. Not only has he gained favour from many gods, but he has also kept himself sharp by successfully completing several quests – both on Earth and in heaven.

At this stage, therefore, Karna is not much of a warrior. But his bluster and arrogance remain.

Conquering the World

A short while after this, Karna rides out at the head of a large military force to conquer all the kingdoms of the world and to establish Duryodhana as the supreme ruler.

He leads this expedition successfully. This suggests that while Karna's skills may have deteriorated when it comes to fighting by himself, he has become quite an able tactician, strategist and commander of armies.

He has also developed the skill of negotiation and diplomacy, which he uses well to secure the world for Duryodhana.

This is an impressive feat, but one must remember that this is not proof of his *fighting prowess*. During this expedition, he has luxury of leading the Kuru army, and he also has the unspoken power of Bhishma and Drona behind him.

At the Kurukshetra

In the final war as well, Karna does little to distinguish himself until he becomes the commander of Duryodhana's army. During the Karna Parva, with complete freedom at his disposal, he finally lives up to his reputation and wins many key battles – not least against the four sons of Kunti.

But until then, he does not impress one as a mighty warrior, though he always claims to be one. He loses to Abhimanyu, to Bhima, to Satyaki – and to Ghatotkacha. He flees after being defeated on several occasions.

His biggest moment comes on the night of the fourteenth day, when he uses the Vasava dart – a weapon he has been using for Arjuna – to kill a mountainous Ghatotkacha.

Even in the final battle against Arjuna, Karna does not come close to defeating his rival. The only time Arjuna gets nervous is when Karna shoots Aswasena the Naga at him.

Krishna protects Arjuna by stamping down the chariot into the Earth so that the arrow knocks off Arjuna's crown instead of slicing his neck.

In Conclusion

Taking all of the above pieces of evidence into consideration, Karna may be called a middling warrior at best – albeit with a special ability of taking a single fatal shot at Arjuna thanks to the Vasava dart.

However, the amount of braggadocio that he displays is irritating in the extreme to those around him. Bhishma, Shalya, Kripa and Ashwatthama are all fed up of his constant posturing despite not having the results to back up the big talk.

Bhishma tries to cut him down to size by quarrelling with him a few times, but Karna refuses to back down even then. His sense of loyalty to Duryodhana does not extend to putting his ego aside and to make peace with the grandsire.

So all in all, yes, Karna as a warrior is overrated – mostly by himself.

How old was Karna when he died?

Short answer: Assuming that Karna is eighteen at the time of the graduation ceremony, he is fifty years old when he dies on the eighteenth day of the Mahabharata war.

A Possible Timeline

Here I am recording all the important events of Karna's life along with his proposed age during the event. Please note that this makes a few assumptions with which you may disagree. I am using what I think are 'reasonable' numbers.

Year 0: Karna is born to Kunti in the kingdom of Kuntibhoja. Pritha rears her child for a few months, and after he begins sleeping for six or seven hours at a stretch, she puts him into a basket and lets him afloat in the river. Radha and Adiratha find the abandoned baby a day or two later.

Year 12: Indra visits Karna and takes the kavacha-kundalas off him. Karna is at this stage nothing more than a callow youth, so his naivety with respect to Indra's intentions is understandable.

Year 15: Karna approaches Parashurama for the opportunity to become the sage's student. Among privileged people, education began a little earlier. But since Karna is a poor charioteer's son, either we assume that he begins later or that his education takes longer to finish because he is essentially studying part-time.

Year 18: Karna finishes his education under Parashurama. He earns a curse from the sage that he will forget all the most important pieces of knowledge that he has learned when he needs them most.

Year 18: Later that same year, Karna appears at the graduation ceremony of the Kurus. Here his timeline overlaps with that of the Mahabharata. Bhishma

is already 70 years old at this point. The oldest Kuru prince, Yudhishtir, is sixteen. Karna is crowned king of Anga at this ceremony.

Year 20: Karna tries to compete at Draupadi's swayamvara and is publicly rejected. He has his first one-on-one battle with Arjuna, which ends without a result. But since Karna withdraws from the challenge, Arjuna secures a moral victory here.

Year 22: Yudhishtir performs his Rajasuya. (**Assumption:** After the Pandavas marry Draupadi, it takes two years to flatten the forest of Khandava, build the great hall of Maya, and conquer the world.) Karna attends the ceremony as guest.

Year 35: During the twelve years of Arjuna's self-imposed exile, Karna rules over Anga and builds for himself a reputation as a wise and generous king. After Arjuna's return, he has a son by Draupadi during the thirteenth year.

Year 36: Duryodhana invites the Pandavas and Draupadi to Hastinapur to play him in a dice game. The events of Draupadi's disrobing happen here. The Pandavas leave on their twelve-year exile.

Year 49: At the time of the Pandavas' agnyaatavaasa (the year of incognito), Karna is a wizened middle-aged man who has been king of Anga for about thirty one years now. He has a wife and children. He is a dutiful member of the Suta caste. At the time of his defeat to Arjuna in Matsya, therefore, Karna is pushing fifty.

Year 50: The Kurukshetra war begins in the year following the Pandavas' return from exile. Bhishma is around a hundred years old at this point. Yudhishtir is forty eight, Arjuna forty six.

Karna's age at the time of his death, therefore, can be reasonably pegged at **50 years old** at his death.

Karna and Arjuna: The Story of their Relationship

Karna and Arjuna are two of the most important characters in the Mahabharata.

Karna is the firstborn son of Kunti, but is estranged at birth and later becomes Duryodhana's friend. Arjuna is the third Pandava, widely considered the most accomplished bowman of his times.

In this post, we will study in detail the relationship between Karna and Arjuna.

First Meeting

Karna and Arjuna first meet when the former arrives unannounced at the Kuru princes' graduation ceremony, and proceeds to repeat – in front of an awestruck crowd – all of Arjuna's previously-accomplished archery feats.

Kunti immediately recognizes the youth as her firstborn (presumably from his earrings and armour, or if he had already given them up, with maternal instinct), and faints out of shock.

Karna challenges Arjuna to a duel in order to prove his mettle as a competent warrior. But the Kuru elders stop this by ridiculing Karna as a lowborn man undeserving of fighting against a prince.

Duryodhana then rises to Karna's support. He instinctively notices that this boy – if nurtured – could turn out to be the perfect nemesis for Arjuna. So he makes Karna the king of Anga on the spot, thus earning Karna's loyalty for life.

Thus, through a sequence of unconnected events, Karna and Arjuna start upon a path of enmity.

Was Karna better than Arjuna?

Karna is often considered the only warrior who can defeat or kill Arjuna in battle. He shows proof of his skill during the Kuru princes' graduation ceremony.

But as time passes, Arjuna comfortably surpasses Karna in skill. There is never an instance in the Mahabharata where Karna defeats Arjuna.

During his early life, Karna is definitely more than a match for Arjuna because of his kavacha-kundalas (armour and earrings). During the graduation ceremony, he performs all of Arjuna's feats and proves himself equal in skill.

But in actual battle, Karna displays persistent weakness. He does not distinguish himself in the quest to invade Panchala and imprison Drupada. In the battle against Gandharvas when Duryodhana is captured, Karna flees from the fight in fear.

At the end of the Virata Parva, he loses to Arjuna. During the Mahabharata war, he loses small battles to a number of Pandava warriors – Abhimanyu and Bhima to name a couple.

Arjuna, on the other hand, never loses a single battle. So he is definitely the more skillful warrior.

Despite all this, Karna remains the only man with at least a theoretical chance to kill Arjuna because he possesses the Vasava Dart, given to him by Indra.

Why was Arjuna invincible?

Arjuna was invincible because of four main reasons:

(1) He was the most skilled archer in of his time, (2) He was blessed with many divine weapons that belonged to gods, (3) He was not burdened by responsibilities of a king, and (4) He enjoyed the numerous benefits that came with being the best friend of Krishna.

By the time of the beginning of the Kurukshetra war, Arjuna is indeed the most powerful warrior of the two sides.

When asked to classify him as a ratha or an atiratha, Bhishma chooses to refrain from classifying Arjuna altogether, stating that he is in an unattainable class of his own.

At the beginning of the story, during his graduation as prince, Arjuna is merely the most skilled of the Kuru cousins. But as the story progresses, he gradually transforms into the world's most powerful warrior.

How does this happen? A number of factors come together to propel him from promise to greatness. Namely:

- He performs a number of quests for gods – the clearing of the Khandava forest, the killing of the Nivatakavachas and so on – and he is gifted several divine weapons as gifts. Examples include the Gandiva, two inexhaustible quivers, a chariot that cannot be damaged, and some destructive missiles like the Pashupatastra.
- Because he is not a king and does not have to attend to a king's responsibilities, Arjuna is able to continually work at his craft and hone it. He continues to improve as an archer without distractions.
- He is undoubtedly blessed with skill and dedication, qualities that catch the eye of Dronacharya early on, who then makes it his mission to make Arjuna the best archer ever.
- Last but not the least, Arjuna becomes the best friend of Krishna – and is fortunate enough to have Krishna serve as his charioteer during the war.

Despite all of this, Arjuna is only *near* invincible – not actually so. The only chink in his armour is that he does not have a counter to Karna's Vasava dart.

This is why Krishna tries his best to bribe Karna into fighting for the Pandavas, and later sacrifices Ghatotkacha to Karna's deadly missile in order to protect Arjuna.

Once Karna is deprived of the Vasava – which happens on the night of the fourteenth day – Arjuna becomes truly invincible.

Was Arjuna stronger than Karna?

Yes. Arjuna defeats Karna on three separate occasions during the Mahabharata:

(1) at Draupadi's swayamvara, after a lengthy battle, Karna withdraws from fighting Arjuna; (2) during the end of the Virata Parva when Arjuna defends Matsya's cattle against the Kuru army; (3) during the final man-to-man duel on the seventeenth day of the war.

Karna is often called Arjuna's equal in terms of skill with bow and arrow, but over the course of the story Arjuna's achievements far outshine Karna's.

Several times, Arjuna completes a task or a quest at which Karna has just failed. At other times, Arjuna pulls off unbelievable victories when the odds are stacked up against him. Karna has no such victories to his name.

For instance:

- After Karna and Duryodhana try in vain to capture Drupada as Drona's Guru Dakshina, Arjuna succeeds in doing so.
- At Draupadi's swayamvara, Arjuna gains a victory over Karna after the latter's forfeiture.
- During the Pandavas' exile, Arjuna travels to Amaravati and wages a successful battle against the Nivatakavachas.
- When Karna flees in fear at the prospect of fighting a Gandharva army to free Duryodhana, Arjuna succeeds.
- During the end of the Virata Parva, Arjuna secures a victory while fighting single-handedly against the Kuru army – which includes Karna.
- In the final battle, Arjuna wins several key battles on the way to finally killing his arch nemesis Karna.

The weight of evidence suggests, therefore, that Arjuna is stronger than Karna.

Why did Karna hate Arjuna?

The main reason Karna hates Arjuna is jealousy.

Since Karna's prime ambition in life is to move up the social ladder and be counted among the greatest Kshatriyas, it is important for him to be seen as Arjuna's equal. But throughout his life, he loses to Arjuna. Draupadi also rejects him but accepts Arjuna as husband.

But is jealousy enough of a reason to explain the obsessive behaviour that Karna exhibits with regards to Arjuna? Some may argue not.

We must also remember Duryodhana's prime motive behind helping Karna is because he sees Karna as the ideal foil against Arjuna.

Since Karna knows this, it is possible that he makes it his mission to get the better of Arjuna at every available opportunity – to show Duryodhana that his trust is not misplaced.

At least a portion of Karna's antagonism toward Arjuna, therefore, is Karna's desperation to please Duryodhana. Every time he insults Arjuna or the Pandavas, it is as if he's saying, 'Look, I am on your side. I hate them as much as you do.'

Why did Arjuna hate Karna?

Arjuna hates Karna because of Karna's active involvement in the abuse and humiliation of Draupadi during the dice game.

Karna argues that Draupadi's enslavement is valid, and that she is a prostitute for having married five men. He recommends that Draupadi should be publicly disrobed. For this, Arjuna vows to kill Karna.

Arjuna and Karna share a mutually fractious relationship throughout the story. Right from the beginning when Karna appears at the graduation ceremony and repeats all of Arjuna's feats, the two are locked in a battle for supremacy.

Arjuna's ambition is to become the best archer of all time. Karna keeps proving that he is Arjuna's equal. One can understand Arjuna's frustration at this.

Until the dice game, though, the enmity between Arjuna and Karna is purely professional. The Pandavas have not interacted with Karna for a period of twelve or so years, and they have become the most powerful men in the world.

It is at the dice game that Arjuna's dislike for Karna turns into hate. Karna takes on the mantle of chief antagonist during this scene, and accuses Draupadi of being no better than a prostitute. He commands Duhsasana to disrobe Draupadi publicly and 'show her her place.'

If Karna had not spoken up at all during this incident, it is likely that Draupadi would never have had to defend herself in so shameful a manner.

Arjuna therefore rightly concludes that Karna is the man most responsible for what has happened. So he takes a vow that he will kill Karna to avenge Draupadi's humiliation. And he fulfils the vow fourteen years or so later in the Kurukshetra war.

Was Karna jealous of Arjuna?

Karna's enmity with Arjuna has more to do with his loyalty to Duryodhana than with jealousy.

But as someone who matches Arjuna's skill at the graduation ceremony, to see his once-equal opponent grow beyond recognition into the world's greatest archer must have been difficult. Karna also feels envious of Arjuna for having won Draupadi.

The main thrust of Karna's enmity toward Arjuna is his undying fealty toward Duryodhana. More than anything, Karna wants to defeat Arjuna because he wants to prove himself a worthy aide to Duryodhana.

However, we can surmise that jealousy must also be present in there somewhere. We know that Karna matches Arjuna in skill during the graduation ceremony, thus setting up the narrative that he is Arjuna's equal.

To then repeatedly lose to him over the rest of the story must be difficult for any man. This would have certainly bred envy.

Also, we know that Karna is rejected by Draupadi publicly at her swayamvara, and then Arjuna proceeds to win her for himself. That is also bound to have caused some envy in Karna.

Despite all this, though, Karna gets a chance to 'make Arjuna his slave' by accepting Krishna's offer to fight on the Pandavas' side.

If his jealousy had been overpowering, Karna would have said yes – and he would have won Arjuna's eternal subservience along with Draupadi as his main wife.

But the fact that he says no, and that he chooses Duryodhana, suggests that it is Duryodhana that is most important to him in his life – even more than his need to overcome Arjuna.

Did Arjuna know Karna was his brother?

Arjuna does not know that Karna is his brother until after Karna's death. Krishna, Kunti and Bhishma are the only three people to know the secret of Karna's birth (besides himself).

After Karna's death, Kunti reveals the information to her sons. The Pandavas, including Arjuna, are distraught at the thought that they have killed their elder brother.

At the beginning, only Kunti knows about the true identity of Karna. When she first spots Karna at the graduation ceremony, she faints because she recognizes the marks on her son's body.

As time passes, though, more and more people are brought in on the secret. Krishna, when he arrives in Hastinapur, reveals that he knows.

But the reader is not told how. One assumes that Kunti tells Krishna about it at Vidura's house in the hope that Krishna can then leverage it for Arjuna's benefit.

Bhishma, on the night of the tenth day of battle, admits to Karna: 'I know that you are Kunti's firstborn.' His source of information is Vyasa.

How Vyasa came to know, we do not know. Either he has been told by Kunti on some prior occasion, or he has been told by Surya, or he just knows because he is Vyasa.

Karna, of course, hears of it for the first time from Krishna's mouth. And he hears it for a second time from Kunti, which is then corroborated by a divine voice that belongs to Surya.

Besides these five characters, as long as Karna lives, no one knows the truth about his birth.

Krishna keeps this truth purposefully from Arjuna and the others out of fear that they would refuse to fight their elder brother if they knew. Kunti tells her sons about her secret only after the war has ended.

The Pandavas are stricken by despair at the thought that they had not only killed their grandfather and their preceptor but also their elder brother. They perform all of Karna's last rites with respect.

Can Arjuna defeat Karna without Krishna?

Arjuna faces Karna on two occasions without Krishna's help, and wins both times. One of these battles – during the Gograhana Parva – is conclusive: Arjuna defeats an entire division of the Kuru army by himself.

The other battle – during Draupadi's swayamvara – ends with Karna withdrawing from the duel mid-way, giving Arjuna a victory.

This does not mean, of course, that Arjuna can defeat Karna on *every occasion* they fight – whether or not in Krishna's presence. If one is able to simulate a hundred Arjuna-Karna confrontations, Karna will probably win ten or more of them.

Also, we must remember that what we call 'skill of a warrior' is not a constant quality. It ebbs and flows.

It is affected by a number of controllable factors: the amount of deliberate practice the hero has put in, the amount of thought he has given to strategy – and uncontrollable ones: like the mood of your charioteer, the number of divine weapons you have, etc.

All said, Arjuna and Karna are considered near equals in terms of skill. So if one were to neutralize all the other factors – meaning we ask them to fight with normal bows and arrows while on foot – we may expect about a fifty-fifty share of the spoils.

By the time of the Kurukshetra war, though, Arjuna is incredibly powerful (through a combination of his skill and his acquisitions). Karna, on the other hand, is severely handicapped because of Shalya's machinations.

There is a moment in the final battle where Karna shoots an arrow (the Naga Aswasena) at Arjuna – and it only misses because Krishna stamps down on the chariot with enough force to sink its wheels in the mud.

So if Krishna had not been Arjuna's charioteer in the battle with Karna, Arjuna would have died.

Was Arjuna the best archer?

When he is young, Arjuna is the best archer among all the Kuru princes. Two other men display comparable amounts of skill to him. One is Karna, who appears at the graduation ceremony and repeats all of Arjuna's feats.

The other is Ekalavya, a Nishada prince who learns archery on his own and surpasses Arjuna.

Being a good archer and being a good warrior in battle aren't always the same. While all good warriors are necessarily good archers, not all good archers are necessarily good warriors.

Fighting in a battle requires more skills than those that go into making a good archer. These may include strategic nous, an ability to learn the right lessons from past experiences, and an ability to improvise on the spot.

Also, many uncontrollable factors go into whether you win on the battlefield or not: chiefly, it is important to fight with the right people, in the right environment, with the right weapons.

With Karna and Ekalavya, we only know that they are as skilled as Arjuna is only to the extent of archery. In the case of Ekalavya, Drona sees to it that the boy never competes with Arjuna even on that front.

As he grows into youth and then into adulthood, Arjuna becomes a better archer, yes, but more importantly he becomes a powerful warrior. He gets given weapons that make him invincible.

He fights with Krishna as his charioteer, and he is supported in most battles ably by Bhimasena – himself a great atiratha.

One may conclude, therefore, that Arjuna is only *one of the greatest archers* of his time (the others being Karna and Ekalavya, as far as we know), but he is the most powerful *warrior* of his time because of all the other factors that work in his favour.

Did Arjuna regret killing Karna?

Arjuna does not immediately regret killing Karna, but he encounters a feeling of unease when Karna dies. He asks Krishna how a warrior of Karna's ability had been defeated, and Krishna gives a list of all of Karna's misfortunes.

Later, when Kunti reveals her secret, Arjuna – along with his brothers – deeply regrets having killed his elder brother.

Immediately after Karna's death on the battlefield, Arjuna does not feel the elation in his heart that he might have expected from finally killing his nemesis. He finds himself sympathetic to Karna's situation.

'How did a warrior of such ability lose to me on this day, Krishna?' he asks. To which Krishna replies, 'A number of people across space and time have united to make this victory of yours possible, Dhananjaya.'

And he names himself, Arjuna, Kunti, Indra, the goddess Earth, and Shalya among the chief killers of Karna.

In contrast, when Bhimasena kills Duhsasana, the other main character to have caused Draupadi's disrobing, there are much more animalistic emotions in view. Bhima tears open Duhsasana's chest and drinks his blood – as he had promised.

Later, when the Pandavas are performing the last rites of all the 'good' men they have lost in the war, Kunti arrives and says, 'Include Karna among those you honour.' And then she tells them her long-held secret.

The Pandavas – including Arjuna – are struck by shock and grief at this revelation. Yudhishtir goes so far as to curse womankind with the ability to keep secrets. Afterward, the Pandavas perform all of Karna's rituals with respect.

Was Karna in love with Draupadi?

It is sometimes suggested that Karna, Arjuna and Draupadi are locked in a love triangle, and that Karna's antagonism toward Arjuna is at least in part because he is in love with Draupadi.

But there is no evidence in the Mahabharata that Karna loves Draupadi.

He does desire her for a wife, which is why he attempts to complete the archery task at Draupadi's swayamvara. After Draupadi's public humiliation and rejection of him, he comes to detest her.

Karna and Draupadi do not spend all that much time in each other's presence to develop an emotion as strong and complex as love.

Though we know that Karna must have desired Draupadi for a wife, we do not know if he was acting of his own volition or under Duryodhana's instructions at the swayamvara.

Once Draupadi rejects him publicly, though, Karna harbours anger for Draupadi. He takes his revenge at the dice game, where he brands her a prostitute for having taken five husbands.

This, in turn, angers Draupadi and Arjuna against Karna – to the extent that Arjuna vows in that same hall to kill him.

The Pandavas reserve special hatred for Karna after the events of the dice game. Draupadi is heard on multiple occasions naming him among the people who have wronged her.

There is simply no reason for Karna, therefore, to love Draupadi.

Final Meeting

Karna and Arjuna meet for the final time on the seventeenth day of the Kurukshetra war, when they challenge one another to single combat with bow and arrow.

Karna is, by this time, one of the last Kaurava stalwarts standing. Bhishma and Drona have already been defeated. It is notable that Krishna allows this fight

to take place only after Karna has used up his Vasava missile in killing Ghatotkacha.

The two brothers tussle with each other for a long while. The deadlock breaks when Karna's chariot-wheel sinks into the earth and Shalya, Karna's charioteer, refuses to repair the vehicle.

It is left to Karna to leap off the chariot and rescue his buried wheel, while at the same time staving off arrows from Arjuna.

In this moment, while Arjuna hesitates to shoot, Krishna implores his friend to show the enemy no mercy. He inflames Arjuna's rage by recounting all of Karna's indiscretions from the past – especially his treatment of Draupadi during the dice game.

Arjuna thus beheads Karna and brings their long-standing rivalry to a close.

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