

Karna

Karna is one of the central characters in the epic **Mahabharata** from ancient India. He was the King of **Anga** (present day **Bhagalpur**). Karna was one of the greatest warriors whose martial exploits are recorded in the **Mahabharata** an admiration expressed by **Krishna** and **Bhishma** within the body of this work.

Karna was the son of **Surya** (a solar deity) and Kunti. He was born to Kunti before her marriage with Pandu. Karna was the closest friend of Duryodhana and fought on his behalf against the Pandavas (his brothers) in the famous Kurukshetra war. Karna fought against misfortune throughout his life and kept his word under all circumstances. Many admire him for his courage and generosity. It is believed that Karna founded the city of Karnal.

Many believe that he was the greatest warrior of Mahabharata since he was only defeated by Arjuna due to 3 curses, Indra's efforts and Kunti's request all put together.

Divine birth

Karna's father was the solar deity **Surya** and his mother's name was **Kunti**. Karna was born before his mother's marriage to prince **Pandu**. The story of Karna's miraculous birth is this:

When Kunti was a young woman, a wise though irascible old man, the sage Durvasa, visited her father's palace, where Kunti served him with utmost care for an entire year. Pleased by her service and hospitality, the sage foresaw that Kunti would have difficulty having a child after her marriage to Pandu, and granted her a boon to overcome this difficulty. By this boon she could call upon any god of her choice, and receive a child through him. Out of curiosity, Kunti still being unmarried, she decided to test the power of the mantra and called upon the god Surya. Compelled by the power of this mantra, Surya appeared before her and handed her a son, who was as radiant and powerful as Surya himself. The baby was wearing armour ('Kavacha') and a pair of earrings ('Kundala'). Though Kunti had not physically given birth to the baby, she was unwilling to be accused of being an unmarried mother and so with the help of her maid Dhatri, she placed the baby Karna in a basket and set him afloat on a tributary of the holy river Ganga, the Ashwanadi, in the hope that he would be taken in by another family.

Childhood and education

The child Karna was found by **Adhiratha**, a charioteer of King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapur. The name *Karna*, however, denotes 'ear', because Karna was born with divine earrings. The emotional bond between Karna and his foster parents would remain strong throughout his life, filled with love, respect and affection.

Karna met **Dronacharya**, who was an established teacher in the art of warfare. Dronacharya taught the Kuru princes, but refused to take Karna as his student.

After being refused by Dronacharya, Karna decided to learn from Parashurama, Dronacharya's own guru, who was known to teach only Brahmins. He appeared before Parashurama as a

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Duryodhana and Karna,

Karna was a loyal and true comrade to Duryodhana. Following his accession to the throne of Anga, Karna took an oath that anyone who approached him with a request at midday, when he worshiped the sun, would not leave empty-handed. This practice contributed to Karna's fame as well as to his downfall, as Indra took advantage of it. Ultimately, Karna's unfailing generosity resulted in his death on the Kurukshetra battlefield. In karnal there is KARAN-TAAL which stands as a testimony to this Vedic ritual.

The Pandavas were exiled, and during this time Karna took upon himself the task of establishing Duryodhana as the Emperor of the World. Karna commanded an army that marched to different parts of the country to subjugate kings and made them swear allegiance to Duryodhana, the king of Hastinapur or else die in battle.

Karna and Krishna

Following failed peace negotiations with Duryodhana, Krishna approached Karna, who was acknowledged as Duryodhana's finest warrior. Krishna revealed to Karna that he was the eldest son of Kunti, and therefore, technically, the eldest Pandava, and asked him to change sides. Krishna assured him that Yudhishthira would give the crown of Indraprastha to him.

Karna refused this huge offer because he had sworn fidelity to Duryodhana, and as such, was compelled to stay by his side despite his blood ties to the Pandavas. He said that Yudhishthira was

a righteous man, and knowing that Karna was older than he was, Yudhisthira would immediately give up his crown to him, he knew. However, to repay his debt to Duryodhana, Karna would have to confer the crown of Indraprastha immediately onto Duryodhana, which Karna thought was against Dharma. Krishna was saddened, but appreciating Karna's sense of loyalty, accepted his decision, promising Karna that his lineage would remain a secret.

Kunti speaks with her eldest son

The story relates that as war approached, Kunti met Karna to reveal to him that she was his mother. Kunti asked Karna to join the Pandavas, but Karna refused. He could not betray the trust of his friend. However, he promised his mother that he would not attempt to kill any of the Pandavas except for Arjuna.

He told Kunti that she could only keep five sons ó the fifth would either be himself or Arjuna.

The Great War: Kurukshetra

The guru Dronacharya (Drona) had organized a special formation called the Chakravyuha But, as soon as Abhimanyu entered the Chakravyuha, Jayadratha a Sindhu king from the Kaurava army blocked it, thereby preventing other Pandavas from entering the formation. Abhimanyu was left all alone in the middle of the enemy formation. Once inside, he fought valiantly and held back all the best warriors of the Kauravas single-handedly, including Karna, Dronacharya and Duryodhana. Duryodhana and Karna chose to assist in the elimination of Abhimanyu under Dronacharya's guidance. Karna shot arrows from behind that broke Abhimanyu's bow and the reins of his chariot, while the Kauravas overwhelmed him. The battle ended in Abhimanyu's death.

Ghatotkacha the half-asura son of Bhima, began to destroy the Kaurava forces. Karna engaged him in a ferocious duel, with every single warrior from both sides watching in silent awe. As Ghatotkacha began to use his skills of dark magic, Karna had to use the Vasava Shakti, which had been gifted to him by Lord Indra in return for his divine armour. Using this weapon, Karna killed the Asura Ghatotkacha.

Although his death was a major disappointment to the Pandavas, there was a serene smile on Krishna's face. Krishna knew that, because Karna had now expended this fearsome weapon, Arjuna was no longer vulnerable to it.

Describing days 16 and 17 of the Kurukshetra war. Karna is now the commander of the Kaurava army. Anticipating a likely battle to the death between Karna and Arjuna, Lord Krishna spoke to Arjuna:

"Hear in brief, O son of Pandu! I regard the mighty car-warrior Karna as thy equal, or perhaps, thy superior! With the greatest care and resolution shouldst thou slay him in great battle. In energy he is equal to Agni. As regards speed, he is equal to the impetuosity of the wind. In wrath, he resembles the Destroyer himself. Endued with might, he resembles a lion in the formation of his body. He is eight ratnis in stature. His arms are large. His chest is broad. He is

invincible. He is sensitive. He is a hero. He is, indeed, the foremost of heroes." Karna single-handedly defeated all but one of the Pandavas on this sixteenth day of the Kurukshetra war, as related in the Mahabharata. He overcame Bhima but left him alive, saying that as Bhima was younger than he was, he wouldn't kill him. He defeated Yudhisthira and also left him alive, saying that: "It seems that you have forgotten all the teachings which your guru has taught you, so first go and practice them and then come to fight". Karna then defeated Nakula and Sahadeva but didn't kill them, since he had promised his mother to spare the lives of all the Pandava brothers except for Arjuna.

After defeating all of Arjuna's brothers, Karna asked his charioteer, Shalya, to drive his chariot to where Arjuna was standing. Karna took his powerful weapon, Nagashtra and shot it at Arjuna. Krishna saved Arjuna from certain death by his divine powers; by subtly lowering Arjuna's chariot into the earth, through a gentle pressure of his feet. An angry Arjuna showered all his arrows on Karna, but Karna neutralized them all with his own. Karna then shot more arrows which incapacitated Arjuna and made him weaponless. But the close of the day spared Arjuna's life, since both sides observed the codes of war and stopped fighting.

Seventeenth day

Karna's wheel is stuck as Arjuna aims at him

The much-awaited duel between Karna and Arjuna resumed. Both these warriors matched each other weapon for weapon. This famous duel was witnessed by the gods from the heavens.

Karna cut the string of Arjuna's bow many times. But at each instant he found Arjuna able to tie back the bowstring in the twinkling of an eye. Karna praised Arjuna for this and remarked to Shalya that now he understood why people called him the greatest archer in the world.

Although the duel was evenly-fought for a long while, Karna was suddenly stricken by the playing-out of the curses that had been thrown at him and which would now put him in grave danger. Hampered as his chariot wheel sank into the ground in loose, wet soil, he found himself unable to remember the incantations for his divine weapons, as his teacher Parashurama had foretold. Descending from his chariot to remove the wheel, he requested Arjuna to wait, as the etiquette of battle allowed; but Krishna told Arjuna that Karna has no right to refer to etiquette at this point, having violated those same rules himself when killing Abhimanyu, participating in the laksha-griha conspiracy, assisting Duryodhan in the game of dice and insulting Draupadi in the Hastinapur court. Lord Krishna told Arjuna that it was not adharma to kill a man who had supported evil all his life, and urged Arjuna to kill Karna while he could.

Arjuna shot many arrows at the helpless Karna, severely wounding him, but was curiously unable to kill him. Lord Krishna told him that the great Dharma of noble charity that Karna had performed during his lifetime was protecting him. Lord Krishna ordered Arjuna to redouble his efforts. Arjuna complied and Karna was killed.

After Karna's death

The brothers were shocked to find that they had committed fratricide. Yudhishtira, in particular, was furious with his mother and laid a curse upon all women that they should never thereafter be able to keep a secret.

According to Karna's dying wish, Karna's Antim Sanskar was performed by none other than Lord Krishna himself. This was the honour given to him by Lord Krishna. Karna is the only person in the Mahābhārata epic who receives this great honour.

Karna serves as an excellent example of a gifted, generous, righteous and brave individual who was still doomed because of his loyalty towards Duryodhana.