
UNIT 4 THE TEMPTATION OF *KARNA* FROM THE *UDYOG PARVA*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the character of *Karna* and his specific predicament in the text when *Krsna* reveals to him the secret of his birth and parentage. *Karna* is *Pandu's* son—(*Kunti's* son to be precise), that she bears before she marries *Pandu*, a son from the Sun god as a result of a boon. *Krsna* makes a proposal to *Karna* that should he join the *Pandavas* in the war against the *Kauravas* he will bestow on him the title of King. Since he is the first born, he will be recognised by everyone as the rightful heir. This is exactly what *Karna* has been wishing for all his life—his claim as a *Ksatriya* and his rightful place in the power structure. With one stroke he would get both if he agrees to *Krsna*. It is this bind that *Karna* is caught in that gets revealed in this episode of Book 5 (55) of the *Mahabharata*. Would *Karna* agree? Would he be foolish if he didn't? What stops him from fulfilling his dreams? These and related questions will be explored in this unit. The objective of this unit is to help us unravel the psychological state of *Karna* and the social environment that he inhabits. It will also help us appreciate the motives that govern various characters in this section of the epic better.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us try to categorise the different events that take place in this chapter (55) of *Udyog Parva* (Book 5) of the *Mahabharata*. The play of narrative within narrative is also to be witnessed here. To begin with, *Dhrtarastra* asks *Sanjaya* to tell him what *Krsna* has told *Karna*. *Sanjaya* narrates the entire conversation

that takes place between *Krsna* and *Karna* where the former reveals the true *Kshatriya* identity of *Karna*. *Krsna* tries to persuade *Karna* to join the *Pandavas*, his brothers in the war against the *Kauravas*. He offers *Karna* the throne and the powers that come with the king with his five brothers standing in attendance. *Karna* refuses the tempting offer, his life's dream, claiming his loyalty to *Duryodhana*. He then narrates an ominous dream that portends the fall of *Duryodhana* and the rise of the *Pandavas*. He projects this war as a grand sacrifice where the unjust *Kauravas* are bound to be annihilated and he along with them. All this is narrated by *Sanjaya* to *Dhrtarastra* who is eager to know *Karna*'s stance. Remember, *Sanjaya* has the gift of sight, the power to see everything even where he is not present. He, therefore, becomes indispensable to the blind *Dhrtarastra* from this book onwards as the latter keeps urging *Sanjaya* to tell him about each event as it takes place.

Following the long conversation between *Krsna* and *Karna*, we move to the short *Vidura-Kunti* episode where the former expresses his grief over the imminent family war. To control the situation, *Kunti* goes to meet *Karna* on the bank of the river Ganges where the two have a candid conversation and she reveals the truth of his (*Karna*'s) birth. She, too, attempts to persuade *Karna* to join his brothers in war and this is coupled with the voice of the Sun-god who advises *Karna* to pay heed to his mother's offer. However, *Karna* is insistent. He offers *Kunti* some respite by promising to kill *Arjun* only in war and not touch *Kunti*'s other sons so that they would always remain five in number. With this, we move to the next episode in this section.

Here, *Krsna* returns to *Upaplavya*, the city where the *Pandavas* are camped, and holds counsel with *Yudhisthira*. On *Yudhisthira*'s request, *Krsna* tells him what he sees at the court of *Duryodhana*. First, he narrates the long speech of *Bhisma*, followed by *Drona*'s compelling argument about kingship and war. This is followed by the speeches of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*. All of them narrate the history of the clan only to bring it to bear upon *Duryodhana* that the Kingdom justly belongs to the *Pandavas* and that the war would bring disaster. *Krsna* narrates to *Yudhisthira* that *Duryodhana* remained adamant and hence he returned, finally suggesting that the war was inevitable and that preparations for it should begin. As *Krsna* claims—

Now I see no other course open but the fourth—punishment. The kings are marching to Kurukshetra to their doom! (113)

4.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF *KARNA*

Even since his first appearance on the scene, *Karna* has wished to prove his valour. To achieve this, he challenges *Arjun* and lets him know that he is equally brave and skillful as a warrior. He grapples with the question of his birth and origin. The awareness that he was born *Kshatriya* but denied the rights and privileges that came with it makes him bitter and angry—as *Karna* says “*born a Ksatriya I have yet not received the respect due a baron. What enemy could have done me greater harm than you (Kunti) have?*” That he may be the illegitimate child of a *Kshatriya* adds fuel to the fire; this makes him anxious about his parentage. He has never been claimed a son by any of the *Kshatriyas*, and this continues to haunt him. **Irawati Karve** has suggested that *Karna* “had acquired the skills of the *Kshatriyas* but he could not master their

value-frame”. The code of conduct followed by the *Kshatriya* is not ingrained in *Karna*. **Karve** has observed:

To be rash was a Kshatriya characteristic but the unwritten rule that one must never be small-minded was broken often by Karna... (126)

It is this that makes *Bhisma*, and then *Drona* comment that *Karna* falls short of being the ideal warrior for lack of sound judgment. From the beginning of the epic, *Karna* has been described as significant to *Duryodhana*’s plan of ousting and killing the *Pandavas*. *Ugrasravas* the poet, the actual narrator of the *Mahabharata* has this to say of their relationship—

Duryodhana is a great tree, filled with resentment, Karna is the trunk (1.1.65)

The two are portrayed as inseparable and yet, *Karna* in his words projects a sense of the right and wrong. He is aware of the wrong path he has chosen and continues to tread on it unlike *Duryodhana* who is blinded by power and full of conceit. Let’s look at the temptation of *Karna* next.

4.3 THE PREDICAMENT OF *KARNA* - TEMPTATION

In the narrative *Dhritarashtra* asks *Sanjaya* to narrate to him the conversation that takes place between *Krsna* and *Karna*, after *Krsna* asks the latter to mount the chariot. *Sanjaya* tells him that the words that *Krsna* spoke to mighty *Karna* are both pleasant and in conformity with the *Dharma*. And then he goes on to narrate the conversation between the two. *Krsna* praises *Karna* for being knowledgeable about the truth, the *dharma* and the sacred teachings of the *Vedas*. And then he reveals that *Karna* was born to *Kunti* before her marriage to *Pandu*, and thus according to *dharma*, he then is the son of *Pandu*.

After revealing the truth about his birth, *Krsna* then tries to tempt *Karna* with all kinds of favours and comforts and luxuries that he will enjoy if he so chooses to side with the *Pandavas*. *Krsna* tells him that if he comes with him, he will become the King, and that the *Pandavas* will recognise him as the eldest brother, for he was born even before *Yudhishtira*. *Krsna* then tells him that all those who have gathered to fight in favour of the *Pandavas*, including the *Pandavas* and their sons, will bow down to him, and also that he will be able to approach *Draupadi* with her own willingness.

Krsna tells *Karna* that the latter will have the assistance of the *Pandavas*, the five sons of *Kunti*, the *Panchalas*, and the *Chedis*, and *Krsna* himself will instate him as the king and ruler of the earth. He finally asks the mighty warrior to change sides so that he can enjoy the fruits of the kingdom along with his brothers, i.e. *Pandavas*. *Krsna* tells *Karna* that he needs to make a choice immediately as he must establish the blood line between him and his *Pandavas* brothers. In this manner *Krsna* keeps tempting *Karna*. We shall examine the conversation with *Krsna* in detail in the next section.

4.3.1 Conversation with *Krsna*

Having asked *Karna* to mount his chariot, *Krsna* begins to unveil a seminal truth about the former’s life. He draws on the scriptures to suggest that a son born to a woman before marriage stands to claim his right as a legitimate son and “*You Karna were born that way; under law you are the son of Pandu.*

Under the constraint of the book of law, come with me and you shall be king". This is a moment of great testing for Karna. He has been waiting all his life to lay claim to his *Kshatriya* lineage. Now, when it is offered to him and along with the opportunity to be king, he has to make the tough choice. *Krsna* tempts him by presenting a visual picture of his would-be kingship—*"The five Pandavas shall clasp your feet as your brothers and so shall the five sons of Draupadi and the unvanquished son of Subhadra"* (92). *Krsna* is aware that nothing would please Karna better than to see the *Pandavas* at his feet and himself as the unchallenged king. *Krsna* further draws a picture of wealth and plenitude that would be on offer if Karna decides to join the *Pandavas*—*"Baronesses and daughters of kings shall bring golden, silver, and earthen vessels, herbs, all seeds, all gems, and shrubs for your imagination. And at the sixth turn you shall lie with Draupadi"*. This is meant to further lure Karna so he may lose his rigid stance and give in to the pleasures offered by *Krsna*. His unfulfilled desires are consciously stoked here. Despite his valour and strength Karna never received recognition from the *Brahmins* and was always looked down upon for belonging to the class of *Sutas*. *Krsna* plays upon this bitterness in Karna by suggesting that if he agreed,

Today Brahmins representing all four Vedas shall consecrate you, assisted by the very priest of the Pandavas, while you are seated on the tiger skin (93)

He also exploits Karna's hatred for *Arjun* as he appeases him by suggesting, *"Arjun shall drive the chariot drawn by his white horses"*. Karna's response to *Krsna* is very interesting as we shall see in the next section.

4.3.2 Karna's Response to Krsna

Instead, Karna shares his negative feelings with *Krsna* by claiming, *"Yes Krsna, under law I was born the son of Pandu. But Kunti cast me out as though I had been stillborn!"* The pain attached to being discarded at birth is palpable in Karna's speech. He recounts how *Adhiratha*, the *Suta*, carried him home with love to *Radha* and *"out of love for me the milk of Radha's breasts poured forth at once and she accepted my piss and shit, Madhava! How could a man like me deny her the ancestral offering?"* (93). It is this obligation that Karna finds difficult to turn away from. Also, it is meant to depict the contrast between *Kunti*, a mother who left him at the mercy of fate and another, *Radha*, who accepted him with love. The foster parents gave him a *Suta* identity when he had none and now when his *Kshatriya* identity has finally emerged, it would be an act of betrayal to forsake his *Suta* identity and accept the new one. As Karna says *"Adhiratha, the Suta, thinks of me as his son, and my love demands that I think of him as my father"*. Clearly Karna emphasises here his responsibility to think of *Adhiratha* as his father. His *Dharma* and his love both demand of him to accept his *Suta* identity. Karna also suggests that one cannot be uprooted from a social class and planted in another. His family life and bonds of love are within the social system he had inhabited. It is this that makes him say—

He had my birth rites performed, Madhava, by the rules found in scriptures, out of love for his son, Janardana. He had the Brahmins name me Vasusena. And when I was old enough, he married me to wives, Kesava. I have sons and grandsons by them, Janardana, and my heart has bonds of love with them, Krsna. (93)

Karna goes on to rationalise the other relationship he has built over the years with Duryodhana who, too, has showered him with favours and has found in him a friend. As Karna claims “For thirteen years I have enjoyed unrivaled royal power in Dhrtarastra’s lineage by relying on Duryodhana” and that “Duryodhana has raised arms and prepared for war with the Pandavas, because he relies on me”. It is this that makes Karna reject Krsna’s proposal. Interestingly, Karna refuses to accept Krsna’s enticing offer because of the debt he carries towards his foster parents and his friend /benefactor Duryodhana. He owes them this debt and it drives him to sacrifice himself at the altar of loyalty. As he states—“Govinda, neither joy nor fear nor all the earth nor piles of gold can make me a traitor to my word” (93). Nevertheless, Karna is aware of the impending doom of Duryodhana and is certain of his own downfall and death along with him. As he claims:

The total destruction that looms for the earth is caused by Sakuni, me, Duhsasana, and Dhrtarastra’s son King Duryodhana. There is no doubt, Krsna, that a great battle impends between the Pandavas and Kurus, grisly and mired in blood. The kings and princes who follow Duryodhana’s orders will journey to Yama’s realm, burned by the fire of the weapons in the war. (98)

In such a case, it appears strange that he doesn’t join the *Pandavas*. *Karna* sacrifices the promised life he has been dreaming of. Is it loyalty for *Duryodhana* alone or is it *Dharma*, the law that is stopping him from accepting *Krsna*’s offer? *Karna* also claims that accepting the offer would amount to cowardice. *Karna* is aware that the *Pandavas* have been in the right and are considerate of the law while the *Kauravas* have been on the side of *Adharma*. Why does he then follow ideas of loyalty with the unlawful lot? Could it be that *Karna* thinks himself to be irredeemable, suggesting that he has fallen to such an extent that he can’t retrieve himself? He, thus, enters the war to sacrifice himself and purge himself of the sins committed—he tells *Krsna* at the end of their rendezvous “We shall meet again next (in heaven), prince sans blame” signifying that in heaven he would be worthy of an alliance with *Krsna* while in the present situation he has committed many a wrong. *Krsna*’s words leave him more despondent and brooding and yet he continues to follow the path taken earlier. Can we say that if *Karna* agreed to join the *Pandavas*, he would have been instrumental in saving the *Kauravas* from the war? Without *Karna* on his side *Duryodhana* would feel too weak to put up a battle. Why else would *Krsna* call *Karna* to his chariot? *Krsna* called *Karna* and none else because he wished to avert the war. It was not love for *Karna* nor that he doubted the *Pandavas*’ victory in war. Can we then say that, it is *Karna*’s decision that leads them all to battle? Importantly, is *Karna* aware of the significant role he plays at this juncture in the text? Is he deliberately pushing for war—as if to meet death and to take the *Kauravas* to their rightful end, that is death? Is he following another kind of *Dharma* where the wrong must be punished, even when he is on the side of wrong and in rejecting *Krsna* he is actually following the right path? These questions come to mind as we see how *Karna* argues with *Krsna* about right and wrong—*Dharma* and *Adharma*. For instance, he says—

Varsneya, the Dhrtarastra will hold a grand sacrifice of war. Of this sacrifice you shall be the witness, Janardana and you shall be the Adhvaryu priest at the ritual ... The insults I heaped on the Pandavas, to please Duryodhana, those I regret. When you see me cut down by the left-handed Archer, it will be the Re-piling of the fire of their sacrifice. When the Pandava drinks the blood of Duhsasana, bellowing his roar, it will be the Soma draught.

When the two Pancalyas fell Drona and Bhisma, that will be the conclusion of the sacrifice, Janardana. When the mighty Bhimsena kills Duryodhana, then the great sacrifice of the Dhartarastra will end (95-6).

Karna's decision determines the further course of action in the text. On the surface it appears to be an individual's choice. However, this decision of the individual has far reaching consequences. Karna as you recall from your reading of the text, also has a dream that needs to be discussed next.

4.3.3 Karna's Dream

Speaking of Karna's dream you will note that it carries "portentous signs" that "foredoom great danger" for him and his allies. Karna narrates the picturesque dream he has to Krsna in which he says "I saw Yudhishthira and his brothers ascend to a thousand-pillared palace" wearing "white turbans and white robes" and "they all had beautiful stools". The grandeur of the palace here is heightened by the exaggeration that a dream easily facilitates. Also in the dream the Pandavas are wearing white robes and turbans that give them an ethereal quality. Still, white is also the colour of harmony, peace and justice signifying that a new order has been set up. Next, Karna says to Krsna,

... In my vision I saw you drape the blood-fouled earth with entrails, Krsna Janardana. A boundless august Yudhishthira mounted a pile of bones and joyously ate rice mixed with ghee from a gold platter.

In both scenes described here there is reference to violence and death. While Krsna is an active agent here, bringing justice by destroying the "fouled" earth; Yudhishthira on the other hand is seen climbing a "pile of bones" to enjoy abundant food. A new era is being ushered in, as Karna notes:

I saw Yudhishthira swallow the earth which you had served him—clearly he shall enjoy the rule of the earth.

Note that Karna seems to have already accepted defeat at this point, (even before entering the battlefield) in acknowledging the might of Krsna and the integrity of Yudhishthira. He goes on to narrate the dream further—

Wolf-Belly of the terrible feats had climbed a steep mountain and with his club in hand the tiger-like man seemed to survey this earth—clearly he shall destroy us all in a great battle.

Note that Karna is describing his dream but alongside is, also offering an interpretation of it. Bhima surveying the earth from atop a mountain suggests to Karna his invincibility. On his side, Karna is certain that Bhima will destroy all his opponents including him. He also talks of the triumph of law and justice when he claims—

I know, Hrsikesa, that where there is Law there is triumph. Dhanamjaya carrying Gandiva had mounted a white elephant, together with you, Hrsikesa, blazing with sublime luster. All of you shall—about that I have no doubts—slaughter all the kings led by Duryodhana in battle, Krsna.

Is it the law (Dharma) as Karna says that makes him certain of the "slaughter of all kings led by Duryodhana" or the might of the Pandava brothers and their allies or for that matter, is it the colossal figure of Krsna that daunts Karna making him believe the defeat of Duryodhana inevitable? Karna's dream gives us some clue. It appears that according to Karna the support of Krsna for the Pandavas is the decisive point in the battle. Interestingly, Krsna too thinks

that *Karna* is the vital support for *Duryodhana* and without his presence, *Duryodhana* would not enter the battlefield. *Karna* describes all the men he sees in his dream. While *Nakul*, *Sehdeva* and *Satyaki* are decked with pure bracelets, wearing white garlands and robes, *Dhrtarastra*'s army has red turbans except the three white turbaned men—*Aswathaman*, *Krpa* and *Krtavarman Satvata*. Finally, *Karna* ends his dream with the inexorable force of fortune, as he says—

Mounted on a camel cart, O strong-armed Janardana, Bhisma and Drona accompanied by me and Dhartarastra traveled to the region ruled by Agastya, Lord Janardana: soon we shall reach the dwelling of Yama; I and the other kings and the circle of barons shall doubtless enter the fire of Gandiva. (100)

The finality in *Karna*'s voice speaks of his belief that he would lose the war and his life. This further confirms that *Karna* willingly chooses death over life and kingdom. The dream in this sense is significant as it makes us privy to the working of the mind of *Karna*. This adds another dimension to his character which is to be understood in its complexity and subtlety. Besides *Krsna*, *Kunti* too tries to persuade *Karna* to switch sides and join his real brothers the *Pandavas*. Let's look at the exchange between *Kunti* and *Karna* next. It is interesting because *Kunti* reaches out to him as a mother, knowing that she had abandoned him at birth.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Why did *Krsna* tempt *Karna* to join the *Pandavas*? Was it for the well-being of *Karna* or the *Pandavas* or the entire social system of the time? Explain.

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4.3.4 *Kunti* and *Karna*

As the narrative evolves, *Kunti* exhorts *Karna* to follow his *Dharma* and take up his *Kshatriya* identity. She tries to persuade him, reminding him of his duty as the first born *Pandu*. As **Kevin McGrath** notes in his essay

Speaking of Truth—As usual in the Mahabharata, it is the royal women who are the ones to be cognizant in detail and eloquent in expression when matters of kingship arise. They function in the poem as a true mirror of princes. (213)

McGrath further asserts:

Women in epic Mahabharata more than male heroes speak what is considered to be social truth: what is right for ksatriyas and what constitutes good behaviour. They are satyavadini 'speakers of truth' or dharmacarini 'one whose conduct is dharmic'. Usually such speeches are made when crisis is occurring and right demeanour is in question: then, a woman will speak, clarifying the situation and exhorting a hero or king who is not acting correctly and without due regard to ksatriyas dharma. (187)

Note how *Kunti* embarks upon her task by telling *Karna* what is right and wrong for him:

He the God who makes light and spreads heat, he Virocana begot

you on me, Karna, to be the greatest swordsmen. The child of a god, with inborn earrings and armor, you were borne by me in my father's house, covered with glory, invincible son. It is not at all right for you, son, innocently to serve the Dhartarastras without knowing your real brothers. (103)

Here, *Kunti* argues for the right path that *Karna* should take now that he is aware of his *Ksatriya* parentage and not follow the wrong “*innocently*”. *Karna*'s parentage has always been a burning issue in his life and now that it has come to light, he is unwilling to accept it. *Kunti* is both dramatic and eloquent in her persuasions and goes on to urge *Karna* to imagine what life would be if he joined his *Pandava* brothers. Much like *Krsna*, she paints the grand picture before *Karna*—

Surrounded by your five brothers, you shall surely shine forth Karna, like Brahma surrounded by the Vedas and their Branches. Endowed with virtues, the eldest and the best among relations who are the best, your title will no longer be that of a son of Suta, you shall be a heroic Partha (103)

Still, we may note that in the interaction between *Kunti* and *Karna*, *Kunti* describes her young days to *Karna* when she was both a woman and child suggesting that she was doubly gullible, innocent and curious as a young person and open to danger as a girl. She wished to try the strength and power of a boon she received from a saint and in doing so obtained *Karna* from the Sun-god.

Another interesting aspect of this section is the direct intervention of the gods. *Krsna* taken as god in human form is intervening to prevent war. Additionally, the sun-god talks directly to *Karna* corroborating *Kunti*'s tale and urging *Karna* to join the *Pandavas* and relinquish the side of *Duryodhana*. The gods thus, negotiate with humans and strive to change the course of events but in vain. *Karna* would not be moved to cowardice. Instead, he lets others know that he is bound by oath. In the next section we shall look at the class difference between the *Sutas* who were his foster parents and the *Kshatriyas* who were his real family.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Analyse the Character of *Kunti* as an independent assertive woman who was once a curious devoted girl too.

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4.4 CLASS DIFFERENCES: THE *SUTA* AND THE *KSHATRIYA*

Even when it appears that *Karna* is fighting an individual battle, he is always reminded of the class he belongs to. Each time he is reminded of hierarchies that exist in society. At the time when he challenges *Arjuna* to a duel which is a desperate measure to display and prove his prowess, he is rebuffed by *Krpa* who asks him to hold a whip that is becoming of his caste and not a sword. *Karna* avows his fidelity to *Duryodhana*, and the latter rewards him by presenting him the kingdom of *Anga*. However, *Karna* is not presented with a marriage alliance with a *Kshatriya*. In fact, *Karna* claims that he and

his sons have married into the *Suta* class— “*I have offered much and often, but always with Sutas. I have performed domestic and marital rites, but always with Sutas.*” (93) Divisions of caste and class in the society of the time appear strict and fossilised and are not easy to break. At the time of the war, *Shalya* refuses to become a charioteer for *Karna* who is a *Suta*. These instances tell us about the strict boundaries of class and caste at the time. In this sense, *Karna* seems to be fighting for himself and his rights but at a deeper level he is fighting for the entire class that makes the art of war the exclusive rights of the upper class—the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas*. This strict categorisation denies rights to *Sutas* and the trader class. The case of *Eklavya* too comes to mind who, was physically wrenched away from the bow by extracting the sacrifice of his thumb. The inevitable war between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* is the main theme in this unit. It is but pertinent that we look at the strategy in war next.

4.5 STRATEGY IN WAR

Note that the larger question involved in this episode is that of war. The section begins with the blind *Dhrtarastra* immensely curious to know what transpires between *Krsna* and *Karna*. He urges Sanjaya to tell him what *Krsna* said to *Karna*. Note the urgency in his tone when he piles question upon question:

What did that slayer of enemy heroes (Krsna) say to Radheya inside the chariot, what blandishments did Govinda offer the Suta's son? Relate to me what Krsna, with his voice roaring like a flood or a cloud, said to Karna, whether gently or sharply? (92)

It is but obvious that, for the king, the implication would be far and deep. The choice *Karna* makes at this point would decisively change the power dynamics between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Thus, the King of the *Kauravas* would be apprehensive about *Krsna*'s smooth ways of appealing to the people. His interest in what *Krsna* tells *Karna* is politically important for it would determine the strength of the *Kauravas*.

Krsna doesn't tell the truth to *Karna* as an act of sheer good will. He wishes to turn the tide entirely in favour of the *Pandavas*. It may be said that *Krsna* knows the future and thus, wishes *Karna* to protect himself and attain his just position. However, *Krsna* in the text is known equally if not more for strategy than fair-play. In the given scenario he would do well to have a mighty warrior on the side of the *Pandavas*. *Karna* himself claims that it is only with his support that *Duryodhana* has ventured to go to war with the *Pandavas*. Another strategy adopted by *Krsna* is to intimidate the enemy so as to demoralise and weaken the enemy in mind by emphasising the powers of the *Pandavas*. He tells *Karna* –

There is no shadow of doubt remaining that victory's sure of the Pandavas: the Pandava's banner of Triumph is out, the terrible king of the apes has been raised (97)

and

When you see the man of the white horses on the battlefield with Krsna driving his chariot, employing the missiles of Indra, Fire and Wind, and hear the whip-crack of Gandiva as of a thunderbolt, then there will be no more Krta Age, no more Treta, no more Dvarpara.

Krsna goes on repeating the last phrase so that it appears as an echo and a reaffirmation of the proximity of doomsday. Strategy, however, is not limited

to the sphere of men. *Kunti* decides to meet *Karna* and soften him with her truth. *Karna* is well aware that it is self-interest that has made *Kunti* come to him. It is not the genuine love of a mother for her first born son. *Karna* retorts at her pleadings by claiming that:

When there was time to act you did not show me your present compassion. And now you have laid orders on me, the son to whom you denied the sacraments. You have never acted in my interest like a mother, and now, here you are, enlightening me solely in your own interest. (103)

Kunti like *Krsna* depicts a brilliant scene of kingship for *Karna* but he remains obdurate. However, she is able to extract a promise from *Karna* that includes the protection of her four sons except *Arjun*. The *Mahabharata* as we know is a long narrative with many little narratives in between. The entire narrative and sequence of events that leads to the war, the preparation for the war are all but narratives. Hence, a look at the series of narratives next.

4.6 A SERIES OF NARRATIVES

Yudhishthira asks an important question to *Krsna*:

What did you tell the son of Dhrtarastra in the assembly hall, lotus-eyed one, when you had gone to the city of the Elephant? Please repeat it to me

Krsna narrates the entire episode. Note that the narrative technique in the epic is based on “repetition”. Characters keep retelling events whether it is *Vaisampayana*, the overall narrator of the epic or *Sanjaya* for a brief period or in this case *Krsna*. Along with repetition, stories are provided within a story. For instance, *Krsna* narrates his story and repeats what he has said at the court of *Dhrtarastra* but also recounts the story told by *Bhisma* and by *Drona* of the clan—hence, story within a story. In *Krsna*’s narration we find separate narratives for *Bhisma*, *Drona* as also *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra* persuading *Duryodhana* to give up war and share the realm with his cousin brothers.

In this sense, if we trace the progression of the narrative we will find that *Sanjaya* becomes the first narrator in this section who tells *Dhrtarastra* what has ensued between *Krsna* and *Karna*. Then *Vaisampayana* assumes the role of narrator to describe the conversation between *Vidura* and *Kunti* followed by the scene between *Kunti* and *Karna*. *Vaisampayana* tells us next what *Krsna* and the *Pandavas* discuss. From this point on, *Krsna* assumes the role of narrator who tells *Yudhishthira* what has transpired at the court of the *Kauravas*. *Krsna* opens space for the narratives of *Bhisma*, and of *Drona* followed by those of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*. And the section ends with *Krsna*’s closing lines:

They will not give you the kingdom without war, Pandava. Driven to destroy, they now face death. (113)

This is the entire narrative sequence of this section which is both intertwined and complex.

4.6.1 The Narratives of *Bhisma* and *Drona*

It becomes clear through the ancestral tales narrated by both *Bhisma* and *Drona* that Kingship is not the right of the first born but of a deserving person. These narratives of *Bhisma* and *Drona* are important for the reason that they recount the history of the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. They recount the past as it took place to provide the young King *Duryodhana* a clear understanding and perspective on issues of family and kinship. *Bhisma* speaks of his father King *Santanu*, and delineates the family tree. He speaks of the time when the kingdom was Kingless and *Bhisma* had to maintain his oath and yet protect the lineage of the family. All along the epic, one finds that *Bhisma*'s *raison d'etre* has been the furthering and sustaining of the *Kuru* dynasty and for this he is often seen to go to any limit. Each time the family rule is in jeopardy, *Bhisma* finds ways to overcome it. For this reason, he brings the hermit *Vyasa* (the author of the epic) to his brother's wives and "*propitiated the seer and solicited him for offspring and he bestowed his grace and begot three sons*". *Bhisma* continues his narrative, "*Being blind and thus lacking the faculty of sight, your father could not be King and Pandu great spirited and world renowned became King. He was the King and his sons are their father's heirs*". The story is meant to highlight the right of the *Pandu* brothers to the kingdom. However, it also charts the process of succession and problems of continuing the dominance of the family in a kingdom. *Bhisma* tries to convince *Duryodhana* because he wishes to protect the family line and believes that a war would destroy the lineage.

The narrative of *Drona* continues the saga where *Bhisma* leaves it. He speaks of *Pandu*'s law-spirited good judgement in having established the rule leaves the "lion throne" for the blind *Dhrtarastra* and the younger *Vidura* and goes to the forest himself. *Drona* questions *Duryodhana*'s actions juxtaposing them with those of his forefathers who share and sacrifice to maintain the unity of the family. He retorts: "*Why do you (Duryodhana) though born in the family, resolve to break up the family?*" Finally *Drona* asserts his affiliation before lords and kings by claiming "*Where Bhisma goes, goes Drona*". This also speaks of the loyalty *Drona* bears towards *Bhisma*, the man, and not the kingdom. His final words reinstate the basic motif of the epic—"Victory lies where law lies".

4.6.2 The Narratives of *Vidura*, *Gandhari* and *Dhrtarastra*

In the narrative, *Vidura* has been most vociferous in his critique of *Duryodhana*. Calling a spade a spade, *Vidura* blatantly describes the cruelty and arrogance of *Duryodhana*. Note how he speaks to *Bhisma*:

Devavrata, listen to what I have to say. This dynasty of Kuru was lost and you rescued it—now you pay no heed to my complaints. Who is this defiler of his family, this Duryodhana, that you follow the judgement of this man who is possessed with greed, ignoble, ungrateful, his mind diseased with avarice, disobedient to the commandments of his father, who sees Law and Profit? The Kurus are doomed because of Duryodhana: act, great king, so that they need not perish. (109)

Vidura speaks of the impending destruction of the *Kuru* clan and considers *Duryodhana* "diseased" in mind. *Vidura*'s speech instills fear in the heart of *Gandhari* who unequivocally chides her son—"how dare you aspire in your

folly to kingship, Duryodhana?” Gandhari, like Kunti makes an assertive statement about “The law” and its finality—“*The Realm of the Kurus is ruled by succession: that’s the family law come down to us*”, asserting that we must follow it. She is the upholder of the law as well as its custodian. Finally, Dhrtarastra speaks his mind. Krsna narrates what Dhrtarastra tells Duryodhana—he enlightens his son about the dynastic history of Soma Prajapati who was the founder of the Kuru dynasty. Dhrtarastra describes the story of Nahusa’s son Yayati who was “the sixth from Soma”. Yayati Nahusa had five sons, Yadu was the eldest and Puru was the youngest. Dhrtarastra narrates the story thus—

... befuddled by his pride in his strength” Yadu “grew mighty on four cornered earth and after subjugating the kings dwelled in the City of the Elephants.

He “did not abide by his father’s command” and as a result his father Yayati Nahusa in “fury cursed his son” and “cast him out of the kingdom” along with his other sons who followed him. He then “installed his youngest son Puru who took his orders obediently”. This story told by Dhrtarastra is meant to act as a check on Duryodhana who has been defiant and disobedient towards his elders. Dhrtarastra closes it with the statement:

Thus even an eldest son is not born to kingship, if he is prideful
(112)

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Write a note on the narrative technique employed in this section of the Mahabharata.

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

The unit has taken up in detail each aspect of the section in the course to explore dimensions that may be less visible in the first reading. This section is primarily about Karna. At the same time though, it opens up several other layers of the text which include—caste/class hierarchies; gender stereotypes; loyalty and obligation; Dharma and Adharma; family dynasty and its struggle for dominion; bonds of love and kinship; destiny and predetermination among others. The text moves in several directions and takes into account the opinions of different characters, such as Krsna, Kunti, Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and Dhrtarastra and, indeed primarily of Karna. The vast scope of the narrative widens our understanding of the world of the text and it gets altered as new narratives emerge in the process of movement.

4.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) Does Karna believe in the cause of Duryodhana? If not, then why does he continue his alliance with him? Elaborate.
- 2) What is Karna’s view of Krsna? Comment

4.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Refer to Section 4.3, 4.3.1

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Refer to Section 4.3.4

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Refer to Section 4.6.1 & 4.6.2
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4.10 GLOSSARY

Dharma and Adharma – (Sanskrit) the moral and the immoral; the pious and the profane; the lawful and unlawful.

Raison d'être – (French word) The most important reason for one's existence;

4.11 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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