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Karna and Arjuna Valiant Brothers at War

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Karna and Arjuna are two valiant warriors, both important characters in the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. In fact, they are probably two of the greatest warriors ever.

These combatants were born of the same mother, hence, were half-brothers. Yet, their diametrically different personalities and mutual antagonism went on to become one of the prime reasons for the Mahabharata itself, forming its basis for the Kurukshetra war.

Though these striking personalities were always at loggerheads with each other, it is the concluding war between them that is the most cataclysmic and gripping in the entire tale of the Mahabharata.

It is believed that even the warriors in the battlefield and the Devas or Gods in Swargaloka (heaven) watched this battle in awe and admiration for these two Atirathis (greatest of warriors).

A soldier is given the title of an Atirathi only if he is capable of fighting 60000 men at one and the same time, also successfully vanquishing them all. In fact, the Mahabharata records only five Atirathis, namely, Krishna, Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Arjuna.

Among these, Krishna only played the role of a sarathi (charioteer) during the war. He never directly attacked anyone in the battlefield. Who was the stronger of the two brothers, Karna and Arjuna? Who was the better archer? Who was more valiant and pure-hearted? To find an apt answer to these questions, we will first have to delve into the life stories of both these great Maharathis (great personalities).

Karna - The Suta Putra (Son Of A Charioteer)

Karna or Radheya, as he is also referred to, is a pivotal character in the Mahabharata. Karna, the King of Anga, is the son of Kunti (the mother of the Pandavas) and Surya (the Sun God). Karna is the closest friend of Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava brothers. He fought on his behalf against his own brothers during the Kurukshetra war.

Throughout his lifetime, Karna had to fight against misfortunes galore. Karna was born to Kunti, before her marriage with Pandu. Hence, he was abandoned by her and was brought up by a charioteer, who is considered to be much lower in caste than Kshatriyas. He had hence to bear the brunt of ridicule and snide remarks from one and all, all through his life.

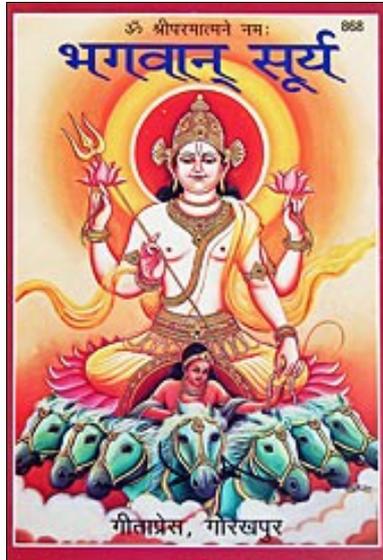
Karna has set an ideal standard for the way a human being should behave during his tenure of life on earth. Many admire him for this valiance and generosity.

Karna's birth

The sage Durvasa once visited Kunti's father's palace when she was very young. Pleased by Kunti's bhakti (devotion) for and seva (service) to him for an entire year, the sage

(usually known for his terrible temper) showered his blessings on her.

Durvasa, though, foresaw that her marital life would be difficult, as she would not be able to bear children through Pandu. He hence granted her a boon that she could call upon any god of her choice, and beget a child through him.



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SURYA

A curious, yet unmarried, Kunti, decided to test the power of the boon. She looked to the Sun and invoked the mantra. Surya immediately appeared before her and handed her a son, who was as radiant and robust as the Sun God himself.

The baby had a Kavacha (armour) and Kundalas (a pair of dangling earrings) at birth. In fact, his name Karna (meaning 'ear' in Sanskrit), came because he was born with divine earrings.

Kunti had not biologically given birth to the child and yet, she knew that she would not have the courage to face the world as an unwed mother. With the help of her maid Dhatri, Kunti placed baby Karna in a basket and set him afloat on the holy river Ashwanadi, which actually joins the Ganga.



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**KUNTI ABANDONS KARNA
FROM THE BOOK
VEER KARNA**

Karna's childhood

The basket with baby Karna kept floating on the river, till it was discovered by Adhirata, a charioteer of the king Dhritarashtra. He and his wife Radha raised the child as their own and named him Vasusena.

Since he was raised as the son of Radha, Karna also came to be known as Radheya. Karna too was a loving son to his foster parents and dutifully served them to the very end of their lifetimes.

Training in warfare

As he grew older, Karna clearly grew more interested in the art of warfare than in being a charioteer. Karna then met Dronacharya, who was an established teacher in the martial arts and the art of warfare. Dronacharya was teacher to all the Kuru princes, but refused to take on Karna as his student, since Karna was the son of a lowly charioteer.

Karna then decided to become self-taught, with the help of his brother, Shona. However, Indian culture demands that you need to have a Guru or teacher whenever you learn something new. Hence, Karna made his actual father, Surya Deva, his guru.

During daytime, Karna gathered information about various ayudhas or weapons. After sundown, he practised them. Many days, weeks, months and years passed in this fashion. Before long, Karna had mastered all the aspects of warfare, like he had planned to.

Karna's introduction to Arjuna

Once, Karna visited Hastinapur (the capital of the Kauravas). There, he befriended Ashwathama, son of Drona, and heard from him that the previous week, Guru Drona had tested his students in their skill of archery.

He had hung a wooden bird from the branch of a tree and then asked his students, one by one, to aim for the bird's eye. He then asked each student what he could see.

Each one gave him a different answer. Someone said that he could see the garden, the tree, the leaves and so on. Drona then asked each one to step aside and not to shoot.

When it was Arjuna's turn, he told his Guru that he could see only the bird's eye and nothing else around. Pleased, the Guru asked Arjuna to shoot the bird - something the boy achieved almost effortlessly.

This story made Karna decide that if Arjuna could successfully hit one eye of the bird, he should be able to hit both of the bird's eyes with a single shot. That very night, Karna, again with the help of Shona, decided to use the Palita (an instrument used to lighten homes).

Karna strung his bow with two arrows and successfully hit both eyes of the bird in a single shot. This was a feat that only the most extraordinary archer could ever achieve.



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PARASHURAMA

Wanting to learn about the use of divine weapons, Karna approached Lord Parashurama, who was the Guru of Drona. Since he only taught Brahmins, Karna pretended to be one and requested to be taken in as a student. So pleased was Parashurama with Karna's prowess that he declared him to be equal to himself in the art of warfare and archery. Parashurama even gifted his personal bow, Vijaya, to Karna.

Karna is cursed

One afternoon, Parashurama lay down on Karna's lap for a while. After a little time, a giant bee stung Karna's thigh. Karna was in deep pain but did not move so as not to disturb his Guru's sleep, even as the wound began to bleed.

When Parashurama awoke, he deduced that Karna was a Kshatriya and not a Brahmin, as only a Kshatriya could have endured such excruciating pain. Feeling insulted at being lied to, he placed a curse on Karna, that all his martial skills, including the use of the Brahmastra, would fail him when he needed them the most.

Karna pleaded with him for mercy and revealed that he was only the son of a charioteer and not a Kshatriya. Parashurama relented, but this curse was now irrevocable. He then gifted Karna a celestial weapon called Bhargavastra and eventually blessed him saying that in the end, Karna would achieve everlasting glory and immortal fame.

Leaving Parashurama's ashram, Karna was forced to shoot an arrow at a cow that was rushing at him. The dead cow's owner was furious when he witnessed the incident. He cursed Karna that he too would be killed in the same way that he killed the poor helpless animal.

There is yet another incident where Karna saw a little girl crying over her pot of spilt ghee. She was upset and afraid that her stepmother would punish her for the accident. Karna offers to procure fresh ghee for her, but the child refuses, saying that she would only accept the old ghee, even if it were to be mixed with the soil.

Karna then took the mixture in his hand and squeezed it, in order to separate it from the soil. This incensed Bhoomidevi (Mother Earth), who accused him of inflicting immense pain on her. She told him that she



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**KARNA IS CURSED
FROM THE BOOK
KARNA - BRAVE, GENEROUS, ILL-FATED PRINCE**

would trap his chariot wheel in the earth, during a crucial period in the battlefield, thus making him vulnerable to his enemies.

Sadly, all these curses took effect at one and the same time during the war of Kurukshetra, rendering him totally helpless while at war.

Karna is crowned King of Anga

Drona held a tournament at Hastinapura, to display the skills of the Kuru princes. Arjuna emerged as a particularly gifted archer at this event. Though Karna took part and also surpassed Arjuna's feats, he was refused a duel with Arjuna, as only a prince could challenge him.

Duryodhana, who noted Karna's potential and knew he was his strongest chance against Pandavas, immediately offered him his friendship and the throne of the kingdom Anga, thus him a king, hence, also eligible to duel Arjuna.

This event gave rise to a strong bond between Duryodhana and Karna. This in turn resulted in intense rivalry between Karna and Arjuna, sparking off hatred among the rest of the Pandavas as well.

Though Karna was loyal to Duryodhana, he never wished to be party to the latter's vile ways. He constantly advised Duryodhana hone his battle skill to defeat his enemies, rather than deceit. He also disliked Shakuni, Duryodhana's uncle, and was opposed to the game of dice, that ruined the Pandavas' pride.

When the Pandavas emerged alive from the Lakshyagraha (house of lac) incident that was meant to kill them, Karna chided Duryodhana, telling him that cowardice would only rob him of all his glory.

When the princess of Chitraganda refused to marry Duryodhana during her swayamvara, Karna carried her away by force, so as to hand her over to him. When the others present there tried to stop him, Karna defeated all of them single-handedly and finally accomplished his mission.

The Draupadi Swayamvara

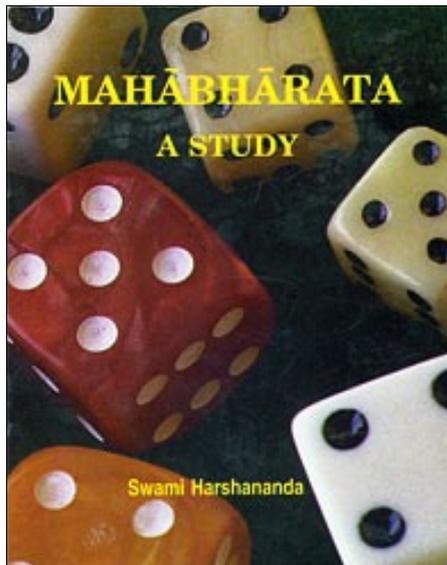
The Draupadi swayamvara was attended by many great kings and princes from all over India. Karna was also present at the function. An artificial revolving fish was hung up from a pole placed in the center of the hall. Directly below this was a bowl of water. All participants were assigned the task of looking down at the reflection of the fish and hit its eye.

Karna proceeded towards the target and he would have successfully completed the task, but on Krishna's gesture, Draupadi stopped him, saying that no Sutaputra had the right to participate in this swayamvara.

The Pandavas were there too, disguised as Brahmins. When all the others failed, Arjuna stepped into the ring and successfully hit the target, thereby winning Draupadi's hand in marriage.

When Karna later came to know of Arjuna's true identity, his feelings of rivalry further intensified.

The Game of Dice



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**DICE
FROM THE BOOK
MAHABHARATA - A STUDY**

The Kauravas won the game of dice by trickery, with the help of Shakuni. Draupadi, the Pandavas' wife, was dragged into court. Karna humiliated her by saying that a woman with more than four husbands was just a 'whore' and so, she could afford to carry on with more men.

Incensed, Arjuna swore to personally kill Karna.

Karna subsequently fought many battles before the Kurukshetra war and won all of them, thereby becoming stronger by the day.

Krishna meets Karna

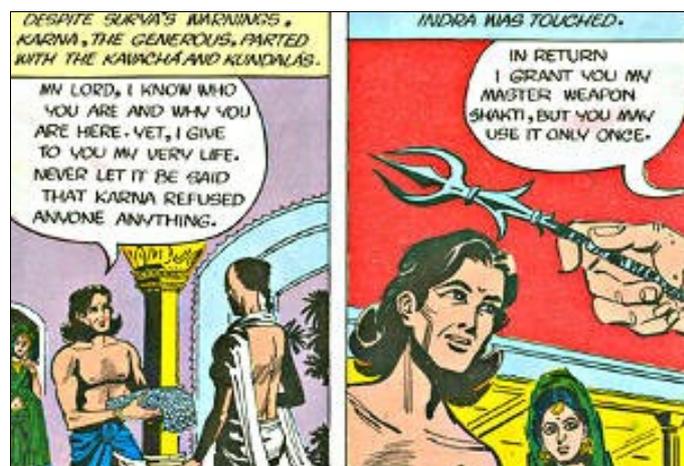
When peace negotiations between the Pandavas and the Kauravas failed, Krishna approached Karna and revealed to him his true identity as the eldest Pandava. He then asks Karna to join their side. Krishna also assured him that Yudhishtira would most certainly give him the crown of Indraprastha.

But Karna refused the offer because he had already sworn fidelity to Duryodhana and had to repay his debt to Duryodhana. He also remarked that as long as Krishna was with the Pandavas, defeat would certainly be awaiting him. Krishna was saddened, but saluting Karna's sense of loyalty, accepted his decision and promised him that his true lineage would remain a secret.

Karna gives away his Kavacha and Kundalas

Indra, the King of the Devas and father of Arjuna, knew that Arjuna would be invincible in battle as long as he had his Kavacha and Kundalas that he was born with. Indra hence decided to take them away and thereby weaken Karna. He approached Karna as a poor Brahmin during his mid-day prayer.

Surya warned Karna of Indra's intentions, asking him not to give away his armour and earrings. But Karna decided that he could not send anyone from his door empty handed, even if it meant his own death.

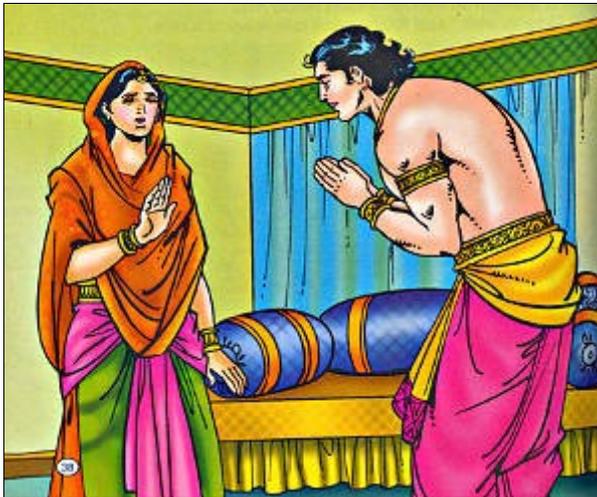


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**KARNA GIVES AWAY HIS ARMOR
FROM THE BOOK
KARNA - BRAVE, GENEROUS, ILL-FATED PRINCE**

Karna readily gave away his Kavacha and Kundalas to Indra, cutting the armor and earrings off his body, earning the name Vaikartana. Ashamed, Indra reciprocated by giving Karna the boon to use his most powerful weapon, the Vasavi Shakti, only once during battle.

Karna meets Kunti



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**KUNTI MEETS KARNA
FROM THE BOOK
VEER KARNA**

As the war approached, a restless Kunti went to meet Karna to reveal his true identity. Mother and son shared a touching moment together. Kunti asked him to call himself Kaunteya instead of Radheya, but Karna gently denied her this desire.

He also refused to join the Pandavas, saying that it was too late now to do that, since he was already a close friend of Duryodhana. However, Karna promised Kunti that he would not kill any of the Pandavas except Arjuna.

Karna was well aware that Arjuna would be invincible, as he was blessed with Krishna's divine grace. But this way, he would be able to repay Duryodhana, while also

perform the rightful duties of an elder brother.

Hence, Karna told Kunti that she could get to keep only five sons, the fifth one being either him or Arjuna. Karna also requested Kunti to keep their true relationship under wraps until his death.

The Kurushetra War - the Dharma Yuddha

Bhishma, the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army, did not want Karna's participation in the war under his leadership. Bhishma said that Karna had insulted both Parashurama and Draupadi and such a person should not fight the war. Bhishma who knew about Karna's true identity, did not want him to fight against his own brothers. Hence, Karna entered the battlefield only on the eleventh day after Bhishma's fall on the tenth day.

Abhimanyu dies

On the thirteenth day of the battle, Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, laid down his life while fighting for the Pandavas. He was trapped in a Chakravyuha formation, which he only knew to enter, and not to survive out of.

He fought valiantly and single-handedly, but was eventually no match to stalwarts like Karna, Drona and Duryodhana. Finally, the young warrior died at the hands of the Kauravas.



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ABHIMANYU VADH

Ghatotkacha breathes his last

Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha, who is a half-asura (demon), decided to enter the battle against the Kauravas. Being extraordinarily powerful, he destroyed almost everything in sight. Duryodhana requested Karna's help to vanquish him.

Karna fought long and hard with Ghatotkacha. The demon started using dark magic. That is when Karna decided to destroy him with the Vasava Shakti, which Indra had gifted him.

Ghatotkacha fell to the ground and died instantly, severely crippling the Pandava side. But Krishna smiled, as he knew that Karna could use this weapon only once. Hence, Arjuna would no longer be threatened by it.

The Karna Parva

The Mahabharat war fought on day 16 and day 17 are jointly referred to as the Karna Parva - when Karna becomes the commander of Kaurava army.

Krishna warns Arjuna to be caution in the battlefield, as Karna is his equal and even much superior to him at times. This proves that even Krishna knew that Karna was almost invincible and could easily succeed in destroying Arjuna if he really focused on it.

Krishna hence asks Arjuna to slay the Sutaputra as early as possible, so as to save himself from most certain defeat and destruction.

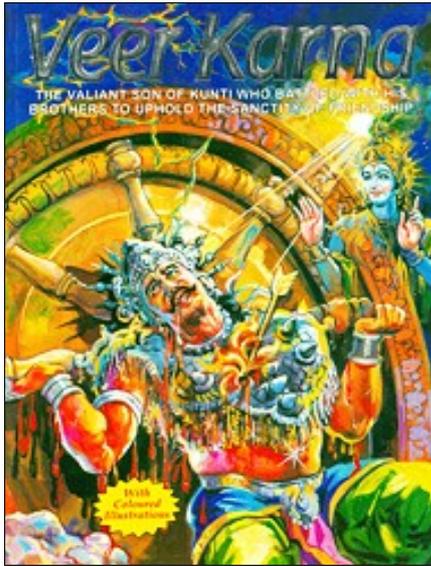
Karna defeated all the Pandavas on the sixteenth day of battle. He first defeated Bhima, but left him alive, since he was his own younger brother. He did not kill any of the four brothers, since he had given Kunti his word that he would only take Arjuna's life.

Karna then asked his charioteer, Shalya, to take him to Arjuna. He took out his powerful Nagashtra and hurled it at Arjuna. This would definitely have killed him, but for the fact that Krishna subtly lowered the chariot into the earth by putting pressure with his feet.

Arjuna let off a volley of arrows, which Karna answered almost effortlessly. Finally, Arjuna was left weaponless. But by that time, the sun had set, and so, Karna spared his life, observing the rules of the war.

On the seventeenth day, both the brothers fought again. Karna cut Arjuna's bow strings many times, but Arjuna was also equally quick in tying it again and again. Karna could not but admire his younger brother's tenacity on the battlefield and commented to Shalya that not for nothing was Arjuna termed as the greatest archer of their time.

A titan falls to the ground



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**KARNA IS SLAIN
FROM THE BOOK
VEER KARNA**

Karna fought long and hard, but just when the battle between the brothers would have reached stalemate, Karna's chariot wheel sank into the ground and got trapped in the loose wet soil, rooting his chariot to the spot.

As the curse of the past took effect, he also forgot the incantations of the divine mantras taught to him by his Gurus. Hence, he could not summon up divine weapons either.

Karna descended from his chariot to free the wheel and requested Arjuna to wait till it was set right, according to the rules of the battle. But Krishna asked Arjuna not to stick by the rules this time, as Karna had also committed enough atrocities against the Pandavas.

Though Arjuna objected to Krishna's stand, the latter convinced him that it would be no sin to kill a man who had stood by evil all through his life.

Arjuna then shot several arrows at the helpless and weaponless Karna, critically wounding him. But Karna

still did not die. Krishna then explained that Karna's acts of generosity were saving him from certain death.

Krishna then took the form of an aged Brahmin, went up to Karna and requested alms from him. The ever-generous Karna told him he had nothing to offer anymore, whereupon the Lord asked him to give away the fruits of all the charity he had done all his life.

Karna, being the kind-hearted soul he was, acquiesced and offered the Brahmin his blood as a representation of the fruits of his charitable actions.

Krishna was touched by the greatness of this warrior and in return, gave him his Viswaroopa darshan (glimpse of his gigantic cosmic form) and blessed him. Karna was one of the very few characters in the Mahabharata to have had this darshan from Krishna.

Krishna headed back to Arjuna and asked him to slay Karna. This, now, was only too simple for Arjuna.

After Karna's death

Kunti requested her sons to perform the final rites for Karna. When they refused, she revealed the truth about his birth. This shocked and saddened the Pandavas, who realized that they had killed their own eldest brother. A furious Yudhishtira then cursed his mother and all women in general, that women would never be able to keep a secret from that point on.

In keeping with Karna's last wish, Karna's Antim Sanskar (last rites) was performed by Krishna himself. Karna was the only person in the Mahabharata who received this great honour.

Arjuna - The Greatest Archer Ever

Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers, was a central hero in the Mahabharata. He is often referred to as Jishnu - the undefeatable one. He is also considered to be a reincarnation of sage Nara, the eternal companion of Narayana or Vishnu.

Arjuna was a dear friend, also brother-in-law, of Lord Krishna himself. In fact, it is believed that it was only Krishna's unstinted support that made Arjuna what he is today. Arjuna was also the direct recipient of the Bhagavad Gita as told by Krishna during the Kurukshetra war.

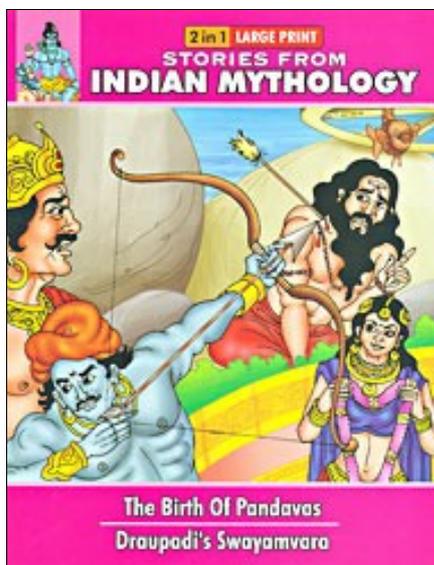
Arjuna's birth

Arjuna was the son of Kunti and Indra. Just like his father, Arjuna too was well-built and exceptionally handsome. He was also additionally loyal, true to his friends, sensitive, thoughtful and most importantly, most respectful to his elders.

Arjuna's life as a student

Arjuna was one of the greatest ever warriors. Being a keen student, he was extremely focused and quickly grasped everything that his guru Drona taught him, soon attaining the status of "Maharathi".

So passionate about archery was this ambidextrous archer, that once he had mastered the art, he would practice in pitch darkness, so as to hone his skills further. He finally came to be known as the greatest archer of his time.



DRAUPADI'S SWAYAMVARA

Arjuna weds Draupadi

His extreme skill in archery won him the hand of Draupadi, his first wife and the daughter of Drupada, king of Panchala. Arjuna, being the peerless archer he was, had no difficulty hitting the rotating wooden fish, thereby emerging victorious at Draupadi's swayamvara function.

Draupadi marries all the Pandavas

When Arjuna came home, along with Draupadi, he asked his mother, Kunti, to see what he had got for her. Kunti, without noticing, asked him to share it with all his brothers. Thus, Draupadi ended up becoming the wife of all the five Pandavas. Yet, it is said that Draupadi loved Arjuna the most among the brothers.

Arjuna's adherence to duty

The Pandavas had set a rule for themselves that no brother would disturb any other brother when he was alone with Draupadi - the penalty for this would be exile for twelve years.

It so happened that a Brahmin sought Arjuna's help, as a team of cattle-thieves had seized his herd. Arjuna was now in a dilemma, as his weaponry was in the room where Draupadi and Yudhishtira were together. As a warrior, he had to save the Brahmin, but that would mean going on exile.

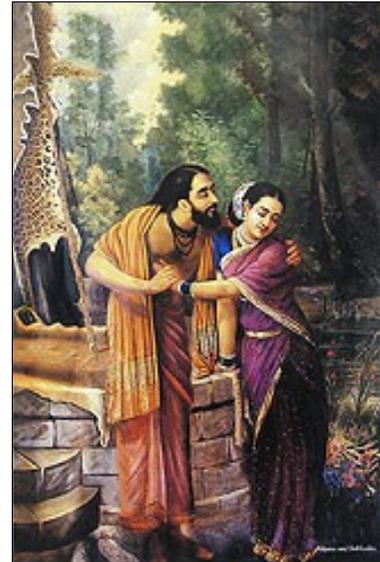
But finally, duty ruled over everything else. So Arjuna picked up his weaponry, defeated the cattle-thieves and left for exile, in spite of opposition from his entire family, and then went on a self-exile of twelve years to repent for the sin committed.

Arjuna marries several times

Arjuna left for Manipur, where he married the Naga princess, Uloopi. During the exile period, he also married many other princesses, so as to strengthen the Pandavas' support base.

Arjuna's most loved wives included Draupadi, Uloopi, Chitrangada and Subhadra, Krishna's sister. Knowing that the family would disapprove of Subhadra becoming the fourth wife of Arjuna, Krishna himself helped the couple elope to Indraprastha. He then convinced everyone to accept Subhadra into her new family.

Arjuna and Subhadra were then blessed with a son, Abhimanyu. Later, Abhimanyu married Uttara and begot a child, Parikshita, who was the lone survivor of the Kuru dynasty. He then went on to become Emperor of the Pandava kingdom.



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ARJUNA AND SUBHADRA

Arjuna gets the Gandeeva

Soon after returning to Indraprastha, Arjuna proceeded to the Khandava forest with Krishna. There, they met Agni, the Fire God, who had fallen ill after consuming the ghee offered to him at one of the yagnas (fire rituals). Agni requested help from Arjuna and Krishna in restoring his health.

Arjuna told Agni that he must give him a powerful unbreakable bow to withstand the power of Indra's astras (weapons). Accordingly, Agni invoked Varuna, the Rain God, and gave Arjuna the Gandeeva, a tremendously powerful bow, which would bring him certain victory in battle. He also gave him a divine chariot, with powerful white horses that would not be wounded by ordinary weapons.

It is believed that the Gandeeva was originally created by the Creator, Brahma himself.

Arjuna is given the Pashupata Astra



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SHIVA LINGA

During the fifth year of the Pandavas' exile, Arjuna left his family to perform penance to please Lord Shiva. He wanted to obtain the Pashupata Astra, Shiva's most powerful personal weapon. Shiva decided to test him further. He created an asura (demon) in the shape of a wild boar to disturb Arjuna's penance. Angry to be disturbed during tapas (penance), Arjuna chased it and shot an arrow at it. At the same time, Shiva, in the guise of a rude hunter, also shot another arrow to hit the boar.

Arjuna and the hunter then had an argument about whose arrow killed the boar. They then started a duel. This resulted in Arjuna being shorn of all his weapons - he became helpless at the hands of the hunter.

Ashamed at this defeat, Arjuna turned to the Shivalinga that he has been worshiping, and offered it flowers, only to find that the flowers had appeared on the body of the hunter instead.

Arjuna then realized the hunter's true identity, and fell at the Lord's feet. Pleased, Shiva granted him knowledge of the Pashupata Astra.

After this, Arjuna proceeded to Indraloka to spend time with his father Indra. There, he acquired further training from the Devas.

Urvashi curses Arjuna

During his stay at Indraloka, Arjuna was propositioned by the apsara Urvashi. Urvashi had once wedded king Pururavas, and had borne him a son named Ayus. Since Ayus was a predecessor of Arjuna, he thought of Urvashi as a mother and rejected her advances, also explaining the reason for it.

A spurned Urvashi told him that these earthly rules did not apply to Apsaras. Yet, Arjuna could not accept this. Urvashi was furious and cursed Arjuna with impotence. Later, at Indra's request, she relented and said that it would last only one year, and that he could choose any one year of his life during which to suffer the life of a eunuch.

The curse was a blessing in disguise, as Arjuna used for the period of one year when he, his brothers, and their wife Draupadi all lived in agyata vaasa (incognito) while in exile.

They lived at the palace of King Virata and Arjuna took the name Brihannala. At the end of this year, Arjuna single-handedly defeated a Kaurava army that had invaded Virata's kingdom.

When Virata Naresh (king of Virata) realized Arjuna's identity, he offered him his daughter, Uttara's, hand in marriage. Arjuna was her dance tutor at the time, and much younger than him. Arjuna hence proposed that Uttara should marry his son Abhimanyu.

Arjuna meets Hanuman

Arjuna also had the powerful Hanuman as an ally. Legend has it that Hanuman once appeared as a talking monkey before Arjuna at Rameshwaram. This is the location where Lord Rama had built the bridge to cross over to Lanka to rescue his wife, Sita, from the clutches of Ravana.

Arjuna did not realize who he was talking to and rather arrogantly remarked that Rama should have made a bridge of arrows, rather than taking the help of monkeys. Hanuman challenged him to build one capable of bearing his weight.

Arjuna accepted the challenge and got to building the bridge. To his dismay, though, Hanuman totally destroyed the bridge. Shamed, Arjuna decided to take his own life.

Lord Vishnu appeared before them and scolded them both - Arjuna for his vanity and Hanuman for making a great warrior like Arjuna feel incompetent. A friendship developed between Hanuman and Arjuna and the former agreed to help Arjuna by strengthening his chariot during the upcoming war of Kurukshetra.



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HANUMAN

The war of Kurukshetra

When the Pandavas returned from their exile and asked the Kauravas to return their kingdom as per their promise, the Kauravas refused. Krishna tried to mediate in order to maintain peace, but this was not to happen. Finally, the great war of Kurukshetra breaks out.

Just before the war

Krishna was concerned about Arjuna, as Karna possessed Indra's powerful Shakti astra. This weapon could be fatal to anyone, including Arjuna. He hence asked Arjuna to pray to Goddess Durga.

Arjuna meditated on her and Durga appeared before him, blessed him and told him that he would be safe during the Kurukshetra war. Krishna also told him that Karna would not fight against him as Bhishma had promised to become the chief of the Kaurava army on the condition that Karna would not fight. But later, after Bhishma's fall, Karna decided to fight against Arjuna.

The Bhagavad Gita

Krishna's brother, Balarama, remained neutral, as both Pandavas and Kauravas were kinsmen of the Yadavas. Krishna decided to become Arjuna's personal charioteer during the 18-day war. This is why Krishna is also called Parthasarathy - that is, the charioteer of Partha or Arjuna. Krishna protected Arjuna many times during the war.



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KRISHNA PREACHING THE GITA TO ARJUNA IN THE BATTLEFIELD OF KURKSHETRA IN MAHABHARATA

the Dharma, without fear of loss or consequence and without desiring for reward. The discharge of one's moral duty, Krishna said, had to be placed above all else.

Krishna then revealed to Arjuna his Vishwaroopa, which showed the whole world starting from and ending with him. This was the most glorious moment in the whole of the Mahabharata - also one of the main reasons for the Krishna avatara itself.

A stunned Arjuna bowed down before Krishna's Vishwaroopa and, summoning up all his energy, readied for the gruelling battle ahead.

Arjuna kills Jayadratha

Arjuna vowed to kill the king of Sindhu, Jayadratha, who he held mainly responsible for his son Abhimanyu's death. He pledged that he would self immolate if he failed in this mission by the end of the day.

This pledge terrified Jayadratha, who even contemplated fleeing the battlefield. But he was held back by Duryodhana, Drona, Karna and Shakuni. Drona promised to keep Jayadratha safe within a Chakravyuha formation and stationed himself and Kritvarma at the helm of the same. He also kept many other layers of warriors and soldiers in front, so as to ensure Jayadratha's complete safety.

Watching the arrangements, Jayadratha started relaxing, as he did not think anyone could actually be successful in breaking into such a huge and complex human barricade.

Arjuna blew his conch and twanged the Gandeeva. Krishna asked him to bypass Drona and Arjuna did so. Drona challenged Arjuna, but he refused, saying that Drona was his teacher, and so, he would not lift arms against him.

Drona then went back into his camp and thought of ways to capture Yudhisthira. Arjuna, in the meantime, got busy slaying all the mighty Kaurava warriors inside the array, slowly diminishing layer by layer of the security.

More importantly, Krishna also showed Arjuna the path of Dharma (righteousness) by revealing the Bhagavad Gita, just prior to commencing the battle.

As the two armies faced each other on the battlefield, Arjuna's grew sad and fidgety. The thought of engaging in battle with his own elders who had given him so much love - the guru Dronacharya, who taught him to wield the bow - weakened his very spirit.

Was it really worth it, he asked himself, to annihilate his own near and dear ones for the sake of a mere kingdom? Arjuna faltered as the war was about to begin.

Krishna, sensing Arjuna's unease, revealed the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna. In it, Krishna stated that Arjuna's primary duty was to uphold

He used his celestial weapons to wreak havoc among the infantry and elephant divisions. As each warrior was killed, their respective armies started to flee from Arjuna. This way, he was able to quickly instabilize most of the defense.

Bheema, Satyaki and Drishtadyumna, meanwhile, managed to keep Drona at bay, thereby making it impossible for him to capture Yudhishtira.

At this time, Yudhishtira sent Bheema and Satyaki to help Arjuna. They also defeat Drona and enter the Kaurava host, without encountering too much trouble.

Karna proceeded to duel with Satyaki and also defeated him. Then Karna also went on to try and defeat Bhima. Bhima managed to slay Karna's horses and his charioteer, rendering him helpless. But since Karna was fighting in his own army, he immediately called another chariot.



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THE BATTLE OF KURKSHETRA

After a prolonged fight, Karna defeated Bhima as well, but did not kill him. But insulting him, Karna moved away. Humiliated, Bhima ascended Satyaki's chariot and proceeded ahead.

Duryodhana requested Drona to stop him, but the Acharya asked him to fight with Arjuna instead. To protect Duryodhana, Drona tied an impenetrable armour to his body and blessed him. Duryodhana then went to duel with Arjuna.

In spite of the armour, Duryodhana was easily defeated by Arjuna. He would have killed Duryodhana, but Ashwatthama, Duhshasana and Kripacharya intervened just in time and saved him.

Arjuna then started fighting with Karna, Ashwatthama, Kripa and Duryodhana. Since the fight seemed to go on for too long, Krishna told Arjuna that he would artificially create darkness. Using this opportunity, he could slay Jayadratha.

Darkness fell on the battlefield giving the impression of approaching sunset. Thinking he was safe, Jayadratha came out of hiding. Arjuna took out his arrow and killed Jayadratha instantly.

Jayadratha had a boon that one who made his head fall on the ground would die immediately, so Arjuna made sure that his severed head would fly off and fall on the lap of his father, who was meditating close to the battlefield.

Arjuna slays Karna

Arjuna's main target was Karna, who, unknown to him, was his own half-brother. Arjuna had too many grudges against him and this was the time to wreak revenge on Karna. This was the time that both valiant warriors had so looked forward to.

This personal rivalry between them had grown so much, that it all ended in a terrible climactic battle. Both let out powerful weapons of great speed for a long, long time. Both warriors knew very well that only one among them would survive in the end.

A fierce duel took place between the two brothers. At one point of time, Arjuna's arrow

struck Karna's Chariot, hurling it several hundred feet away. Karna's arrow too struck Arjuna's chariot but displaced it only by a short distance.

So valorous was Karna in battle, that even Lord Krishna praised him for his martial skills.

Knowing that Arjuna could be defeated by means of ordinary weapons, Karna used his Nagastra. A snake Aswasena, whose mother was killed by Arjuna years ago, entered the weapon and made it infallible. But Karna did not want Arjuna to be killed by anyone else's might except his own. Hence, he refused to use the Nagastra again on Arjuna.

Arjuna then shot a volley of arrows piercing right through his armour, cutting off his earrings, hitting all his vital points. Karna fell to the ground, reeling in pain.

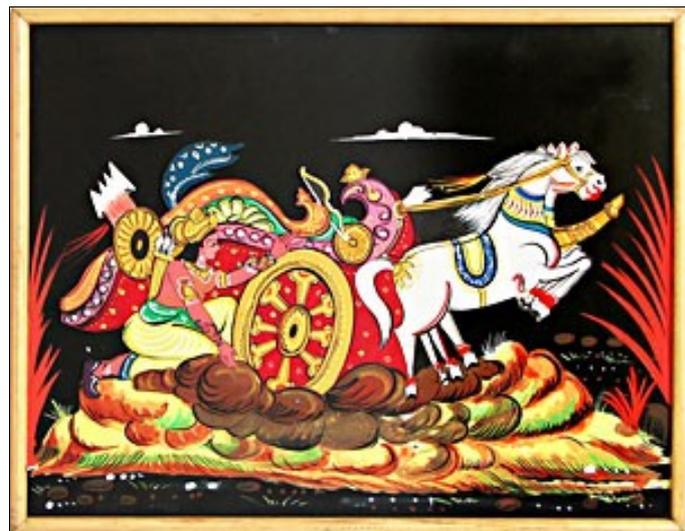
As a result of Parasurama's curse, Karna also forgot the mantras required to invoke the Brahmastra. His chariot wheel also sank into the ground. Though these incidents favoured Arjuna, Karna still continued to fight valiantly.

Arjuna asked Krishna to stop their chariot as well, so that he could fight Karna on equal ground. Arjuna took out a divyaastra (divine weapon) called Rudra. Karna tried again to invoke the Brahmastra to counter this astra, but could not do so.

Karna descended from the chariot and asked Arjuna to wait until he could free his chariot from the soil. Arjuna took back the Rudra weapon.

At this time, Krishna intervened and reminded Karna that all of his past deeds went against the Dharma. Hence, he told him that he did not deserve to receive righteous conduct either. Krishna then asked Arjuna to keep fighting in spite of Karna being without a chariot. After all, he reminded Arjuna, Karna had taken great pleasure in slaughtering the young and defenceless Abhimanyu.

At this point, Karna somehow managed to injure Arjuna, thus making time to pull out his chariot again. Arjuna regained his composure. Krishna asked him yet again to slay Karna and told him that if he did not act now, he may never again get this opportunity to overwhelm Karna and finally win the war of Dharma.



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KARNA TRYING TO LIFT THE WHEEL OF THE CHARIOT IN THE BATTLEFIELD OF KURUKSHETRA IN MAHABHARATA

Arjuna then used his arrow, Anjalika, to behead Karna. Karna died on the spot and the war of Kurukshetra ended the very next day with Duryodhana's death.

After the war

After the war, the Pandavas ruled Hastinapura and won much fame and acclaim from one and all. They then decided to conduct the Ashwamedha Yagna, or "horse sacrifice", to grant them the title of Chakravarti or Emperor.

In this ritual, a horse is let loose to wander at will. The kings upon whose lands the horse wanders have a choice. They can either accept the owner of the horse as their own

master, or they can resist the siege, in which case, they have to fight a war to win. Arjuna led the armed host which followed the horse around. Knowing his might, many kings chose to submit their territories to him. This led to the expansion of the Pandava domain.

The Pandavas ruled for long, after which they decided to renounce the world, handing over the kingdom to Parikshit.

Arjuna in contrast with Karna

We now try to draw a parallel between Arjuna and Karna in order to find out who was the better warrior out of the two. There were many instances when they both faced similar circumstances.

- Both Arjuna and Karna were master archers and both competed for Draupadi's hand.
- Both also had to fight their own brothers in the war.
- Both had a deep connection to the Kauravas. The only difference was that Arjuna hated them and Karna loved them.

Though half-brothers, both showed diametrically opposite personalities. While Karna was an extremely gifted, kind-hearted, brave, giving, generous to a fault and righteous, all of which had been taken advantage of, during the entire episode of the Mahabharata, especially during the Kurukshetra war.

Did Draupadi and Karna love each other?

In fact, Karna had all the five qualities of an ideal husband that Draupadi was seeking before her wedding to Arjuna. Had Draupadi married Karna, she could have had all the qualities in just that one person, without having to go through the trouble of becoming the wife of five men. She then would not have had to go through societal disapproval either.

There is a story that Draupadi and Karna were actually in love with one another, before she married the Pandavas. Neither Draupadi nor Karna had known his actual identity and royal lineage.

Karna would in all certainty have won Draupadi's hand at the swayamvara, but he was denied permission because he was the son of a Suta, a Charioteer. Krishna had known all along that Karna was Kunti's son, but he was the one to tell Draupadi not to let Karna participate. Was this not a clear case of adharma (unrighteousness)?

As the story goes, the Swayamvara incident had so incensed Karna, that he held on to the grudge against Draupadi, finally calling her Veshya or prostitute, during the Dyutkreedha (Game of Dice) episode. This incident actually triggered off the Kurukshetra war.

Arjuna shows his arrogant nature

No doubt Arjuna was the best example of a diligent student, an embodiment of concentration and also one who was blessed with the divine grace of Lord Sri Krishna. In fact, he was always victorious only due to Krishna's presence in his life. Many times, Krishna had resorted to adharma in order to win against both Karna and the Kauravas. How could this probably be justifiable?

Arjuna showed his highly arrogant and vain side many times during the course of the Mahabharata. For instance, after he killed Karna, Arjuna arrogantly proclaimed himself the greatest archer in the whole world.

Krishna merely smiled and said nothing and proceeded to take Arjuna back to his chariot. At Krishna's signal, the flag bearing Lord Hanuman's sign fell to the ground. At that instant, Arjuna's chariot exploded into dust and its horses were burnt alive.

Hanuman appeared before them and revealed that he was the one who had been protecting Arjuna's chariot from the effect of Karna's weapons. He also reminded Arjuna that only Lord Krishna's power was holding the chariot together. Arjuna then realized his error and praised Karna for his bravery.

Karna was more ethical during the war

- Karna had played by the rules during the Kurukshetra war. He never once attacked Arjuna at a weak moment. Once, when Arjuna fainted due to the impact of Karna's arrow, Karna had refused to send more Nagastras in his direction, as it would be a treacherous act toward humanity itself.

In contrast, Arjuna took advantage of Karna's weak moment and killed him, knowing well that he would be rendered incompetent if he let him live any longer.

Krishna himself praised Karna's skill in the battlefield and had told Arjuna that he only survived Karna's attacks because of his own grace and the grace of Hanuman, who was protecting him from sure death. This itself proves that Arjuna was nowhere near being the greatest archer of all time.

- In spite of Karna knowing about his actual lineage, he never once abused Kunti for having left him to fend for himself. On the contrary, he showered her too with the love and respect any mother deserved.

Though Arjuna had not known during the war that Karna was his brother, he would have never bowed down before a mother if she had abandoned him as she did with Karna. Arjuna had never displayed that kind of humility ever.

Also, Karna had kept up his promise to Kunti that he would not harm his four brothers. He only wanted to duel with Arjuna, no one else. Hence, he only defeated them all, but never killed them.

- Karna had known that Arjuna's father, Indra, was tricking him into giving away his Kavacha and Kundala. He was well aware that his own defeat would be imminent if he gave them away. Yet, he did not deny Indra his demands.

In spite of treading the path of dharma, Karna had to face death at the hands of Arjuna, that too, by unethical means.

Why Karna suffered so much injustice

There is an explanation as to why Karna suffered so much injustice and such a violent death. It is said that Karna's friendship with Duryodhana had ultimately led him towards his own destruction. He had unwillingly supported his friend in all his adharmic actions, and hence, had to pay a heavy price for the same.

He had known all along that his relationship with Duryodhana would end up in his own destruction, but he had no other option. Duryodhana was the only one who supported Karna's cause and made him the king of Anga, when all the others had ridiculed him, calling him a Sutaputra.

Karna is also criticised for insulting Draupadi and supporting Duryodhana who wanted to dishonour her in public.

The other adharmic incident Karna carries out during the war is the killing of the young and defenceless Abhimanyu. This was definitely not befitting of an honourable warrior

such as Karna. He eventually paid in the same coin. He too was slain in an adharmic way, when he was unarmed and chariotless.

Karna as a popular figure in Hinduism

Many Hindus still revere Karna for his bravery and generosity. Throughout his life, he suffered immense hardships, but he never gave up hope. Instead, he continued unflinchingly with his duty and finally achieved martyrdom. Even stalwarts such as Bheesma and Krishna considered him to a noble spirit, one of a kind in the entire human race.

Karna truly deserves sympathy. Though born as a divine prince, he was treated as an outcaste all his life. Kunti should have acknowledged and celebrated the radiant Karna as her oldest son, but she cruelly abandoned him instead.

In spite of being the mightiest of warriors, he was never given that recognition. He had to live with all these frustrations haunting him for an entire lifetime.

Added to that, he had also been unfairly cursed several times, which led to his ultimate defeat and death during the war.

Nevertheless, Karna is worthy of the greatest respect and admiration for his amazing personality and indomitable will to fight against all odds.

Arjuna as the greatest of archers

Karna's greatness, should however, not detract us from Arjuna's importance in the Mahabharata. He was a central figure and an incarnation of the Nara. His divine birth was celebrated by the Devas, Munis (sages) and apsaras. Not for nothing was Arjuna so close to Krishna. Such a person could not be a mere ordinary individual.

What was special about Arjuna was his quest for perfection in every field of his life. His life story gives us important lessons to learn from - his unflinching adherence to duty, his respect towards elders, his devotion to his Guru and so on.

Arjuna's might was commendable indeed. He could single-handedly vanquish several armies and one and the same time. He also bore all the Kauravas' insults with dignity and decorum and never acted except with Krishna's permission.

Arjuna's unquestioning devotion to Krishna finally ultimately led him to the path of victory and success. This tells us that moving along the path of dharma alone will help sustain us through our journey of life.

This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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