



## A RETELLING OF THE GREATEST INDIAN EPIC: *THE MAHABHARTA*

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### ABSTRACT

The greatest Indian epic, “The Mahabharata” has resonated in the collective imaginations for millenniums owing to its universal themes. Having given the world the Bhagavad Gita, the story of Damayanti, an abbreviated version of the Ramayana, and the Rishyasringa, often considered as works in their own right, it is basically a story of men pursuing power and men who have wronged and have been wronged with. By virtue of this content, the author has tried to put forth her take on the grey characters of Mahabharata.

Keywords: Pandavas, Draupadi, Bhagwat Gita, Krishna, Duryodhana

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Mahabharata has been an oft-cited Indian epic for its grey portrayal of characters, their foibles and the unique codes of righteousness it preaches. The story came into existence as conceived by the medieval saint Tulsidas, and spread by word of mouth for centuries thereafter. The first and most noted English text on Mahabharata has been “Mahabharata” as written by C. Rajagopalachari which is the central focus of discourse here. A lot has been said about the anecdotes, preachings and characterisation of the folklore Mahabharata at various social platforms and literary articles. For those of the opinion that the original Mahabharata is just a story from the standpoint of Pandavas; there are various other texts like Rashmirathi and Mrityunjay (Mahabharata in Karn’s perspective) and The Palace of Illusions (Draupadi’s perspective of turnings) for reference and takes on less focussed characters by similar minded writers and authors. Though the points presented in the article are original in all due sense, it will be insolent to claim to be immune to such visionary and revolutionary

thoughts. The structure of the papers is as simple as it can get. The first section is devoted to the major plot of the elegant epic and the other section is character sketch of the major characters of the bloodshed.

### 2. Plot

Mahabharata - the greatest of its kind in the world, is a timeless story of strife due to lust of power. It speaks a story of the clan of **Kurus** – the **Pandavas** and **Kauravas** torn amongst themselves because of jealousy and greed for the throne of **Hastinapur**.

**Dhritarashtra**, father of the Kauravas was born blind (refer to imperfect birth of Dhritarashtra and Pandu from the story of Ambika and Ambalika) and hence Pandu was asked upon to rule the kingdoms in his stead; making **Yudhishthira**, his eldest son the natural heir after him. However, **Duryodhana**, the eldest of the 100 Kauravas, felt that by lineage he ought to be the king which was partially the reason why the Pandavas and Kauravas were always at dagger’s drawn. Another part of the reason was the fact that Pandavas were demigods-

as in being born of Gods( another back story- refer to the cursed Pandu and blessed Kunti) and hence blessed with divine powers which made them shine against the Kauravas in almost all spheres of life where the two belligerents encountered.

The Kauravas' vile intentions come to fore first when they intend to burn alive the Pandavas in "Lakshagraha"- literally meaning the house of "lac", inflammable materials and was gifted to the Pandavas by themselves. However, following a tip-off by **Vidura**, an incarnation of Dharma, who served the realm and was immune to jealousy and power lust, the Pandavas escape the trap unscathed. Meanwhile, the Kauravas unaugured to their foiled plan crown Duryodhana as the heir to the throne assuming the natural descendants to the throne dead.

When the truth comes up, Dhritarashtra, the fickle- minded king torn between paternal love and honor calls the Pandavas back to the capital. Upon the return of the Pandavas the issue of heir comes up which is diplomatically tackled by Duryodhana when he keeps the well- established city of Hastinapura for him and gives away the hostile lands of Khandavaprastha to the Pandavas. However, with the streak of reign aptitude by inheritance, the Pandavas built it into a lavish city by the name **Indraprastha**. This further fuels the jealousy quotient and hereby the deadly conniving mind of **Shakuni**, Kauravas' maternal uncle comes into play. He invites the gambling dotting Yudhisthira to a game of dice, prompting Yudhisthira to put all he has -his kingdom, slaves, treasury, his brothers, his mother, himself and finally his wife at stake. Expectedly, Yudhisthira loses it all and Draupadi, the common wife of the Pandavas is being disrobed in the public court. However, Lord Krishna comes to her rescue, repaying for a piece of cloth **Draupadi** used to nurse Krishna's wound once during the coronation of Yudhisthira as the crown prince.

Seeing this, Dhritarashtra realizes that the ball is no longer in his court and before Draupadi could curse his sons for her public humiliation, he releases the dishonest earnings from the Pandavas and compensates the wildly agitated Duryodhana by sentencing the Pandavas and Kunti and Draupadi to 12 years of exile followed by 1 year of incognito life.

If the identity of the Pandavas somehow came up during the 13<sup>th</sup> year, they would be further sentenced to 13 years of exile or "Vanavrata" as it was known as then. The Pandavas spend the 12 years preparing to wage a war against the Kauravas and Arjuna earns "Divyasasta" from Shiva; making him further invincible.

They return to Hastinapur at the end of the stipulated time and demand back their birthright. However, Duryodhana vehemently refutes the idea; even denying as meager as five villages to the Pandavas. Inevitably, for Pandavas, now the war has to be fought since the pot is now brimming with anger against injustice. The Pandavas make allies of many kings with powerful armies; their master shot being Krishna signing up as their advisor and strategist. The Kauravas are led by **Bhishma Pitamah**, the grandsire of Kauravas and Pandavas, sworn to the realm. Their other assets are **Dronacharya**, the guru of warfare to both sides and Karna, a **Kunteya**- son of Kunti, by birth (refer to Kunti's boon and her subsequent haste) but fiercely loyal to Duryodhana. Over a period of 18 days, following a lot of dirty politics (detailed later!) and dharma- adharm discourses, Pandavas emerge victorious with all 100 Kauravas dead.

The Pandavas then rule Hastinapura and their territories for 36 years and then proceed to Heaven through Himalayas. Only Yudhisthira and his dog (actually Dharma) manage to make it to the gates of heaven, all others having fallen dead because of their maneuvers with the principled path of Dharma.

### 3. Writing Style

"Mahabharata" by C. Rajagopalachari is a monologue of events in the order in which they appear in the actual text of the Mahabharata. The author seldom makes any comments on the events, often skipping the points of conflict between the actions and thoughts of the characters hence somehow diminishing the textured nature of the characters. For example, the shaming of Karna by Draupadi on his low- born credentials during her swayamwara doesn't appear in the scene at all. Rather, Karna is simply clubbed with Duryodhana and Dusshasana who failed to win Draupadi over. The scene, as stated in various other accounts was

the earliest event that sowed the seeds of disgust in Karna for Draupadi and was subsequently a cause for Karna applauding her public disrobing. Following from the minimal dialogue that appears in the book throughout, Karna not protesting can be taken as a sign of acceptance of the ongoing humiliation. Granted that I am an over imaginative person, but no dialogue from Karna's part is a part of the sequence in which vital events have been conveniently skipped. Rather the narrative imparts a greater importance to supernatural elements and tends to reason all events on the basis of forgone events or a consequence of somebody's misdeeds in previous birth or a boon or curse from the Gods or sages.

At some rare occasions we find the author moralizing the incidents- accepting the challenge of the dice game by Yudhisthira and the futility of Satyawati's scheming being amongst them. The "Mahabharata" by C. Rajagopalachari has skipped majority of the storyline of the times of Pandavas' exile, simply stating it a grueling exercise mandatory for the war that ensues.

"Mrityunjay" and "Rashmirathi" are projections of Karna's mind and have hence biased my thoughts for him. They have brought down his arrogance of thinking himself as better than Arjuna at warfare to a desperate attempt to retain his self respect. Karna's generous and all- giving nature are eulogized and his reverence for Duryodhana who stood by him in his times of disgrace make him sound as honorable as Yudhisthira from the conventional Mahabharata; a fact further highlighted by his commitment to his vows. These books have given me a lot of insight into the character of Karna which has been spelled out in greater detail later.

#### CHARACTERISATION OF MAJOR PLAYERS

**Kunti** : In Hindu Mythology, Kunti also called Pritha, was the biological daughter of Shurasena, the sister of Vasudev, the foster daughter of her cousin King KuntiBhoja,[2] the wife of King Pandu of Hastinapura and the mother of Karna and the Pandavas. Her story is told within the *Bhagavata Purana*, wherein she speaks on the philosophy of devotion to her nephew Krishna, now known as the Bhakti Yoga.

**Blessed by Durvasa**: Sage Durvasa( of Shakuntla-Dushyant fame) , an incarnation of Shiva, is believed

to bless people who please him with fervent prayers and who treat him well as a guest. Kunti, who was living with her foster father KuntiBhoja then, has to play host to Durvasa once. And well does she play, heeding all his unreasonable demands of food at odd hours in the night, the reward for which is her ability to invoke any God at her will and demand a son of him. Kunti, new to the gift and inexperienced and hasty invoked Sun God who gave her a son, Karna. Kunti then comes to her senses and fearing the social stigma of mothering a child out of wedlock decides to get rid of Karna. Karna, who is believed to be born with natural "kawachh" and "kundang" is then put in a basket and left to float on the river Yamuna. Kunti then marries Pandu, the king of Hastinapur. However before they could consummate their marriage, Pandu is cursed to die as soon as he tries enjoying carnal pleasures. On his request, Kunti shares her gift of begetting sons from Gods with Madri, the second wife of Pandu and together they sire 5 sons known as the Pandavas. Pandu dies falling prey to a sexual impulse and Madri follows suite getting "Sati" on his pyre.

Kunti however lives and is frequently touted as the "Iron Lady" of the Mahabharata. She brings the Pandavas up and follows them to Vanavrata and protects them if it's in her power. She's also tactful a display of which is when she advises Bheema not to slay Hadimba, the Rakshasa, but rather marry his daughter and produce a son. Her foresight was instrumental in killing a major part of the Kaurava army when Bheema's son Ghatotkacha causes Kaurava carnage at night and his elimination by Karna used up Karna's "Shakti"- the weapon he'd been saving for Arjuna.

Discussions have also been held over whether Kunti's command for Arjuna to share Draupadi with his other brothers was an innocent utterance or intentional. Coming from a family of strategists- she was Krishna's aunt after all, it would be reasonable to assume her having some of it in her genes. Whatever might have been the reasons, Draupadi being shared equally among the brothers ensured that everyone felt equally against her disrobing- the principle reason for the war of Mahabharata. It was described earlier in the text how Arjuna was looked upon with a jaundiced eye

by his brethren for having won Draupadi. Kunti's decision ensured that the feeling didn't culminate further.

Kunti's character appears that of an intelligent, stable-minded, patient and family-doting modern woman who has got more substance in her than her husband Pandu or brother-

in-law Dhritarashtra. Her maternal love for the sons she has raised causes her to plead to Karna, her first born son, a fierce warrior, to spare her sons. Karna, the honorable man he is, promises to attempt to life of none but Arjuna. Apart from Krishna, she's another trusted advisor to the Pandavas and asking neither of their advice for the ploy of dice game cost them all they had. Like almost all other characters in the "Mahabharata", Kunti has her own set of misfortunes and principles; however, her steadfast support of her sons makes her indispensable to the crisp storyline. After the Mahabharata, she proceeds to the Himalayas with her in-laws, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, where she perishes in a forest fire and attains Heaven.

#### **Pandavas**

**Yudhishthira:** He is the eldest of the five Pandavas and is considered the most virtuous and just of all the major characters (apart from Vidura, who was an incarnation of Lord Dharma itself). He was the son of Kunti and God Dharma and fights in the battlefield using spear and Ratha. It is said that his Ratha used to float 4 fingers above the ground because of his divine virtue. However, the trickery that he has to unwillingly resort to against Drona leading to Drona's subsequent death brings his Ratha back to the ground as his degradation to the level of other mortal beings.

His participation in the infamous dice game has brought him a lot of bad light with him being condemned as emotionally unstable. In the C. Rajagopalachari version of the Mahabharata, it has been spelled out clearly that the vision of being a good and just statesman had him accept the dice challenge since he wanted to remain in Kauravas' good books. This is a clear reference to the fact that he was a poor judge of character, intelligent nevertheless (according to folklore, shall mention later). He gets carried away during the course of the game and gambles away everything. When all is lost

and Draupadi is being disrobed, Yudhishthira doesn't raise a finger publicly though seeds of hatred are sown within him too. Apart from the dice game, there appear few displays of Yudhishthira's emotional state with him being shown inert in instances when he is being instigated by his brothers and wife for their public shaming. Rather, he waits for the right time to attack- when Karna is rendered powerless because of fall of his divine and most powerful weapons. At the dawn of the first day of the war, Yudhishthira proceeds unarmed towards the enemy lines, supposedly to seek blessings from the elders. After he's been blessed by Drona and Bhishma, he calls for any non-Kaurava who believes in the cause of Pandavas and beseeches him to join the Pandavas instead. This, besides \_\_\_ and \_\_\_'s coming up to Pandavas' side also instills unwillingness in Bhishma and Drona, who didn't actually have any personal gain from the war to kill the Pandavas.

The portrayal of the Drona's death scene on the battlefield seems to indicate that Yudhishthira didn't want to fib to his esteemed guru at all but at the inevitable demands of the battlefield had to do so. That was the only time Yudhishthira is supposed to have stepped out of his Dharma shoes. When after Karna's death, Yudhishthira comes to know that Karna was actually his elder blood brother, he curses his destiny and literally curses the complete womankind in Kunti's stead to not being able to keep any secrets at all. Besides, Yudhishthira is very much of a family man and loves his wife and brothers- a fact that is elucidated at the gates of heaven where he is ready to go to hell to join them. The account here differs in different sources- with some suggesting that appealed by this brotherly affection, the Gods even transfer his brothers and wife to Heaven to join him and others saying that God convinced him that Karma implies being free of affection and hence, he alone stays in Heaven.

**Bheema:** He was the son of Kunti and God Vayu and was known for his indomitable physical strength which was one of the primary causes for Duryodhana's jealousy in their boyhood. He uses the mace as his weapon and is believed that even Indra went weak in his knees. He was singlehandedly responsible for slaying all the 100 Kauravas and numerous others. He is known to have won many

kingdoms and get rid of a number of offenders using brute force- among them Jarasandha( the king of Magadha and brother-in-law of Kansa and hence, nemesis of Krishna), Kichak( commander-in- chief of the forces of King Virata and molests Draupadi) and Bakasura(the Rakshasa of Ekachakra) being the prominent ones.

On the 13th day of the battle of Kurukshetra, Bheema kills an elephant by the name **Aswatthama** (the very name of Drona's beloved son) as part of a trap for murdering Drona. He was also known as **Vrikadora** (one with wolf's belly) because of enormous appetite. During the course of exile, all the food that Pandavas collected from their alms was divided into two- the first part of which was entirely consumed by Bhima alone and the second one was consumed by all others of his kin. Apart from his insurmountable force, Bhima doesn't come across much of a strategist or plotter unlike the other characters. He was driven by commands and advices and requests and shows no intellect in the state of affairs whatsoever.

He is supposed to have loved Draupadi the most among the Pandavas and is, according to some sources exploited by her to avenge against those who have wronged her. At the shameful event of Draupadi's disrobing, he vows to drink Duryodhana's blood someday and Draupadi swears not to let her hair free until she's washed it with it. Bhima redeems both by killing Duryodhan on the battle field, splitting open his chest, drinking his blood and then dancing ecstatically around his corpse and takes another sample to Draupadi. On their way to the heaven, when Draupadi falls the first, Bheema quizzes the learned Yudhisthira why Draupadi, dutiful to all her husbands and her dharma should die. To this Yudhisthira replies that she loved Arjuna more than others, though some folklore says that he knew that Draupadi secretly lusted for Karna, but still Yudhisthira lies to protect the sanctity of the memory of Bheema- Draupadi relationship. Bheema himself is the fifth to fall, given his vice of gluttony without caring for others' hunger.

#### **Arjun**

He is the third son of Kunti fathered by the God Indra. He is the best archer in the Mahabharata( only after Eklavya probably) and his

slaying of his arch- nemesis Karna on the 17th day of the battle is indisputably the most exciting scene in the epic- a congregation of all the events that have gone by. He is the favorite ward of Drona with the latter going to the extent of crippling teenage boys (read Eklavya) to protect Arjuna's dominance and superiority. He wins the hand of Draupadi by accomplishing a nearly impossible feat at her swayamvara. He is half a mind to quit the battle given he has to get the blood of his kith and kin and giants like Drona and Bhishma on his hand. His philosophical discourses with Krishna on issues of righteousness and honor and glory forms an important segment of the Mahabharata called the Bhagvata Gita. Apart from killing Karna, his battlefield conquests involve the killing of Bhishma (not directly,though) and Jayadhrata . Bhishma's prowess in warfare and Arjuna's own reluctance to pick up arms against him make getting rid of Bhishma an uphill task. On the 10th day of the battle, Shikhandi is replaced as Arjuna's charioteer and Shikhandi being a woman in his previous birth made it against Bhishma's principles to slay him. Arjuna, with a heavy heart, progresses to slay Bhishma, by piercing his body with numerous arrows such that Bhishma appears to be lying on a bed of arrows. Angered at Abhimanyu's unjust massacre by a party led by Jayadhrata, Arjuna vows to murder him by sundown or commit suicide. Kauravas on realizing this do the best in their power to protect Jayadhrata. At sundown, they let their guard down and Arjuna appears and slays Jayadhrata. It is then realized that it was Krishna's trick to hide the Sun so as to disillusion the Kauravas with dusk that turns the events in Arjuna's favour.

On the 17th day when a battle ensues between Karna and Arjuna, equally matched in strength and weapons, Arjuna has a catch-22 moment when Karna's chariot breaks down and Arjuna could kill him at the moment and end the war or follow the path of Dharma and not attack at his rival's back. However, Krishna instigates him to slay Karna citing the memory of Karna having being an enthusiast in Draupadi's disrobing as well as Abhimanyu's murder. The character of Arjuna is described as one whose mind is spotless and clean of all impurities. Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita refers

to Arjuna as Anagha, which means pure of heart or sinless. Arjuna's nobility is manifested in his magnanimity in victory and compassion towards adversaries. He bears all the injustice of the Kauravas with stoicism and yet hesitates to kill them just before the war. Before the war, Arjuna appears to be an insecure boy proud of his archer's skills. However, the grueling struggle in exile humbles him down and he attains Pasupatasatra by penance of Lord Shiva. However, his childish arrogance is counted as his vice and he is the 4th to fall on his way to Heaven.

**Draupadi:** She is the daughter of **King Drupad** of **Panchala** and wife of the five Pandavas. The version of Mahabharata by C. Rajagopalachari states that she and her brother Drishtadyumna were granted to Drupad so that he could avenge his insult by Drona. Draupadi does her part by uniting the Pandavas in their goals – the most prominent one being her public disrobing which angered all her husbands alike. Drishtadyumna physically completes the prophecy by slaying Drona at the battlefield. Draupadi had been blessed by Shiva that she would be married to a man who possessed her desired 14 qualities. She was betrothed to be married to Yudhishthira, the crown prince of Hastinapur but having heard the news of the Pandavas death, Drupad holds a swayamvar to find her an apt groom. Karna, who is generally touted as THE man with the 14 desired skills is rejected by Draupadi to partake in her swayamvar causing Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin winning her hand. By the rules of the Narayana, Draupadi was to share her bed with every Pandava for one year cyclically and at the end of every year she would be returned her virginity. She bears the Pandavas 5 sons (known as Uppapandavas) – one per Pandava and one daughter to Arjuna. All her sons are accidentally slain by Aswatthama completing the circle of Karma. **Drona insults Drupad. Drupad's son Drishtadyumna beheads Drona. Drona's son Aswatthama kills Draupadi's sons.**

During Yudhishthira's coronation as the king of Indraprastha, Duryodhana trips into a pool and is mocked by Draupadi who calls him "blind son of a blind man." Having been reduced to a slave of the Kauravas as a consequence of Yudhishthira's loss at

the dice game, Draupadi is insulted publicly by Duryodhana and Karna, who seek vengeance for her insulting them. However, at her disrobing her honor is protected by Krishna who referred to her as "**Krishnaa**" and treated her as a sister. For Bhishma, who had no vested interest in the throne even says to Duryodhana, "**Ghayal nagin, ghayal sherni aur apamanit stree se daro**" (**Be afraid of an injured cobra, an injured tigress and an insulted women**) " As a character, Draupadi who is said to be a woman of breathtaking beauty appears a bit haughty. Even at the admonishing of Lord Shiva, she refuses to lower her standard for ideal man and is hence duty bound to five men with nobody asking for her will.

Her dedication and devotion make her one of the great personalities of Vedic culture. She was a multifaceted personality: she could be fiery and angry when the situation called for it, but she still had a compassionate nature. She encouraged people to face life with the same inner strength that she did. After the war, Draupadi looked after Gandhari and Dhritarashtra with respect and affection, even though their sons had wronged her in so many ways. At her first encounter with Gandhari, she even wept alongside with her -as women who had lost all their sons. On the journey to Heaven, Draupadi is the first to fall. Yudhishthira explained a bereaved Bheema that even though she was duty bound to all the brothers equally, she had favored Arjuna and lusted for Karna (prior to her disrobing, according to folklore).

**Dhritarashtra:** Satyawati, the step-mother of Bhishma had planned her marriage to Santanu so that her sons and their descendants become kings. However, her both sons **Chitrangada and Vichitravirya** die before they are able to sire any sons. At her request, Vyasa agrees to impregnate both of **Vichitravirya's** wives- Ambika and Ambalika. Because of his terrible appearance, Ambika keeps her eyes shut during the encounter and is born with a learned son who is blind. Ambalika, forewarned by Satyawati not to do the same as Ambika, doesn't shut her eyes but goes pale at Vyasa's sight instead as a result of which her son would be pale. Ambika's son is named Dhritarashtra while Ambalika's son is called Pandu. By the sastras that prevented the accession of a handicapped man to the throne,

Dhritarashtra, the eldest son and born to be the King was replaced by his Pandu.

Dhritarashtra is believed to be a just and generous king and a loving man until Duryodhana corrupts his Dharma. His blind love for his sons and indulgence in all their plans without much ado reduce him simply to a stamp head to sign off Duryodhana's deals. He was perturbed by the news of Panadavas death in Lakshagraha and was against the dice game trick and Draupadi's public disrobing. However, he doesn't raise a finger lest his sons accuse him of insensitivity to his family.

He appears little during the course of Mahabharata and takes to **Vanavrata** with Kunti and Gandhari after the pogrom has ended. He is supposed to have died in the fire that consumed him as well as both the women.

**PS:** I read in a piece of folklore that Dhritarashtra is a man of amazing strength. When Panadavas come to seek his blessings after the war, he hugs each of the Pandavas. Krishna understands that Dhritarashtra would hold a special vengeance for Bhima since he physically killed all his sons and cheated Duryoshana into death by striking him at his thighs which is against the Gaddayudha rules. So Krishna instead asks Bhima to place a statue in his place for a hug which is crushed to pieces by Dhritarashtra.

**Gandhari:** She is an incarnation of Mati, the Goddess of Intelligence and wife to Dhritarashtra. She bore the 100 Kauravas and one daughter Dusshala. It is said that envious of Kunti getting pregnant before her, she beats her own swollen belly begetting a simple lump of flesh rather than a child. Ved Vyasa is believed to have beaten the flesh into 100 pieces each of which is buried and grows into a Kaurava.

She voluntarily blindfolds herself for life as a sacrifice for her blind husband Dhritarashtra. She is believed to have used her eye-sight only once when she embalms Duryodhana with invincibility prior to his battle with Bhima on the last day of Mahabharta. However, Duryodhana dies anyway since he covers his modesty with a banana leaf as suggested by Krishna making his pelvic region his Achilles' heel.

After the Mahabharata war, when the Pandavas, who murdered her sons, come to seek her blessings, she diffuses her wrath by directing her

deadly sight on Yudhisthira's toe which gets burnt instantaneously.

Gandhari too, like Dhritarashtra loved her sons a lot. However, unlike Dhritarashtra, she isn't blinded by her love into the dungeons of injustice and treason. She refuses to support Duryodhana's claim to the throne, since she knows that he's fighting for something that isn't rightfully his and has now trodden on the path of Adharma.

She leaves the kingdom with her husband and Kunti after the Mahabharata and dies in a forest fire.

**Duryodhana:** He was the eldest of the 100 sons of **Gandhari** and **Dhritarashtra** and the chief antagonist of the epic. His enormous hatred and jealousy of the Pandavas and a false sense of right to the throne was the chief cause of the war of Mahabharata. He avenges his insult by Draupadi by disrobing her publicly and refuses to part away with even 5 villages of his kingdom for the Pandavas to rule.

He(the ruler of Hastinapura) was no match against Yudhisthira( the ruler of Indraprastha) as a ruler given that he worked with the objective of gaining support for war in his mind and tried to buy people with gold.

Nevertheless, he was an unmatched warrior with mace being his strength and Gandhari's divine sight making him strong as steel. He is believed to be stronger than even Bhima and couldn't have died had Bhima not taken to treachery.

He is an unsurpassable friend who comes to love Karna like he's loved nobody else. It is said that Duryodhana hadn't shed a single tear for the death of any of his brothers but fights vehemently for rights of cremation of Karna's body. He has to fight because Yudhisthira, who has by now been told about Karna's birth, tries to do whatever little he can now do for his estranged, dead brother. This is perhaps the only instance we see in the epic of Kunti's motherly love for Karna- when she can't stand the fact that Karna might not get a proper funeral given that he didn't share either of Kauravas' or Pandavas' blood.

He is the only remarkable warrior on the anti side who has a sense of purpose in the war;

others like Bhishma and Drona being aimless greats hesitating to harm children of their own blood.

His Karma comes to him in his death when he is fatally struck at the very thigh he lecherously invited Draupadi to sit at.

**Karna:** Karna was the first son of **Kunti** born of **Surya**, the **Sun God**. After Kunti abandoned him, he was brought up by Adhiratha, a charioteer. According to some folkore, Karna was, in previous birth born as **Sahasrakavach**, an asura who had to be killed 1000 times to be ultimately eliminated. **Nara** and **Narayana** were two rishis who were blessed with the knowledge of raising dead back to life. So one of them would fight Sahasrakavach and die in ensuing battle and the other would raise him back to life. However, the feat was accomplished only 999 times and hence Sahasrakavach was reborn as Karna and Nara- Naryana were born as Arjuna-Krishna.

Karna as a character is a quintessential modern tragic hero. His life was full of trickery and deceits and everything which rightly belonged to him was taken away from him by destiny. (Being the eldest son of Kunti, he was the rightful heir to the throne of Hastinapura. Also he was the cut out man for Draupadi who rejected him for being a "suta-putra". He was even cursed by Parasurama, his guru, because he had to fib regarding his birth credentials.) This injustice instilled in him a cynical attitude towards the world and hence he's often called in history as a man of low self esteem.

Nonetheless, he was the most generous man that ever walked on the Earth. Even after Surya, his biological father had spilled the beans on Indra's plan to trick Karna into giving away his Kawachch and Kundal, Karna gladly gives them away spelling his own doom.

Though Karna is often said to be an unscrupulous man since he sided with the Kauravas and was often instrumental in their vile plans, I personally feel that like Yudhisthira, Karna was a honorable man. He had never left the side of the man who had stood by him in his disgrace. He was a generous man who never sought any glory or riches. The reason he's counted in the villains of Mahabharata is that the most commonly read version of Mahabharata speaks the story of Pandavas

and hence justifies their actions and beliefs. And by their benchmark, everybody on the opponent's side becomes the bad. However, Karna's honor was in being dishonorable- as the Pandavas would put it. Putting up for his friend, however wrong he might be, was his Dharma.

Karna was a man at par with Arjuna in warfare and the only one with the ability and intent on the Kauravas side to kill him. Even after Krishna tells him of his true birth, he refuses to leave Duryodhana's side clearly stating that his enemies by birth have been better brothers to him than his brothers by birth.

He is a man of his words and doesn't attempt on life of any of the Pandavas except Arjuna as he promised Kunti.

He was tricked even by Death with all his tools vanquished and his rival killing him against the rules of the battle. His Kawachch and Kundal were taken by Indra who granted him a potent weapon Vijaya Shakti which Karna intends to use on Arjun. He is forced to use Shakti on Ghatotkacha when the later demolishes half the Kauravas army at night. He couldn't remember Brahmastra in his last moments because of Parsurama's spell and his chariot gets stuck in the mud following a curse from the Goddess Earth. All these factors culminate to his death, with Arjuna now having redeemed his vow taken at Draupadi's disrobing to kill him.

**Krishna:** Krishna was the son of **Devaki** and **Vasudeva**, a Yadava. He was the chief strategist and counselor of the Pandavas during the course of Mahabharata. Calling him singlehandedly responsible for winning the war for the Pandavas would be no exaggeration.

Krishna's philosophical conversation with his friend and cousin Arjuna during the Kurukshetra War later became known as the famous **Bhagavad Gita**, the holy book of Hindus. How he amassed this great knowledge is revealed in the **Anugita** chapters of Mahabharata, which states that he got this knowledge by interactions with many learned men, and by his own meditations.

Arjuna is credited for bringing Krishna to his melee with both him and Duryodhana vouching for his allegiance. (This is another of Krishna's statesman attributes; even though his sister Subhadra is



married to Arjuna, he gives Kauravas an equal chance to win him.) Arjuna, who takes a submissive position near Krishna's feet, is given a choice to select between Krishna and his armies. Arjuna, who understands that mind is more powerful than bare strength chooses him and Duryodhana gets the entire manpower. Not that Duryodhana minded this choice- he would have taken the army anyways.

He was a master strategist and did all in his power to ensure Pandavas' victory. He broke his vow of not picking any weapon at all in the Mahabharata to elucidate to Bhima that the welfare of society is above petty vows. He even went as far as to accept the title of '**Rannchod Das**' (he who fled the battlefield) to protect his native land of Mathura (not in the context of Mahabharata, agreed). There are many other instances where he openly flouts the battle rules in the interest of his side- be it killing Karna or Duryodhana.

He protected Arjuna from killing himself by facilitating **Jayadrata's** death. He planned the killings of Bhishma and Drona by striking their Achilles' heel. Assigning **Shikhandi** the position of Arjuna's charioteer was his idea and so was killing an elephant named "**Aswatthama**" (the same as Drona's son- a fact that Drona didn't realize and assumed his own son) which killed him of grief and resignation from the battle.

The other side was no less scheming- the only difference was while the Kauravas played before the Mahabharata whereas during a major part of the battle, the ball was in Pandavas' court.

He orchestrated the killing of Ghatotkacha so that Karna would exhaust his Shakti, his last divine weapon, which he'd been saving for Arjuna.

When, at the fag- end of the war Gandhari bid to save Duryodhana's life by bestowing him with divine strength that would originate from her long shut eyes- Krishna suggested that Duryodhana should at least cover his privates before going to his mother, thus making sure that Duryodhana's thighs would be left free of any abnormal qualities and hence striking them would spell his doom. Bhima rule bound by "**Gaddayudha**" or the mace combat refused to strike Duryodhana's thighs as suggested by Krishna but on further instigation did strike and kill him. As **Arnold Schwarzenegger** put it during his

tips to succeed speech- "Break the rules. Not the law, but break the rules."

He tried to instigate Karna, whom he knew to be a fearless and skilled warrior and the only true mortal danger to Arjuna to join the ranks of Pandavas, his biological brothers. He suggests that being eldest of the Pandavas; he might even get to be the king. Also, he will get the right to sleep with Draupadi with Krishna believes that Karna wants very much to do. Kunti however, goes a step ahead and uses her "true mother" credentials to extract a vow from Karna that he won't attempt on the lives on any Pandava except Arjuna. He assigned Shalya to be Karna's charioteer and asked him to praise Arjuna perpetually in Karna's presence to bring his morale down.

Krishna was a quintessential ruler since his youth. He gave up **Radha** when he left **Vrindavan** for Mathura to slay Kansa. He had the foresight to realize that his future held various hindrances and tough decisions would be the norm of his day; so left Radha to live the normal life she was born in.

After the end of the war, **Gandhari** cursed Krishna, whom she held responsible for the slaughter of her 100 sons that his family would perish and he would himself die like an animal at the hands of a hunter.

True to her words Krishna's clans fought amongst themselves under the spell of alcohol and killed every last person present. Krishna's brother **Balram** had long since retired to the life of a **Karmayogi** while Krishna was shot in his foot by a hunter, **Jaya** (an incarnation of Bali, who was supposed to kill the avatar of Vishnu) who mistook it for the ear of a resting deer.

## References

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