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Image Bite Politics to Camouflage Perfidiousness: Demythifying Karna

Sini K S

Assistant Professor in English.

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Abstract:

Epics are never read for the first time. One gets an offhand knowledge of the main crux and sub stories from varied visual and oral narratives. Of late characters of the epics are analysed in accordance with contemporary discourses and are kindled up in new lights. Most often fictitious accounts too are incorporated to idealize the characters. In a post truth narrative frame emotions rather than facts are exhorted. This often generates half baked notions. The paper attempts to demythify the generous and confidant image attributed to Karna in modern retellings by analyzing Ganguly's *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwipayana Vyasa*- the first translation in English 'from the original Sanskrit text'.

Keywords: Image Bite politics, Expert power, Referent power and Charismatic politics.

India is rich with human and compelling stories and myths. They have left an indelible mark in the mindset of the nation. The characters and events are not bound by space, chronology or evidence. Epics incorporate into its narrative all sorts of popular literature, legendary or historical episodes and accounts of the land, race and culture of the continent. The influence of epics on Indian social life is far more pervasive than the any other narration. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* attempt to establish and maintain an order and equilibrium in an otherwise intolerant ethnic diversity. It is a grand assembly of all ethnic groups and of people of all territories constituting almost the whole of Bharat.

The delineations seem life-like and very realistic that even today visual, oral and written narratives loom large with epic characters. The narrative style of the epics, especially *The Mahabharata*, acquaints us with the numerous shades of the characters, thus enabling the readers to comprehend the grey line. Abridged narration of the story line is provided more than once. These abridged narratives supplement and contradict each other. Detailed narration ensue the digest format. This structural arrangement enables the readers to scan the substratal meanings.

But the piecemeal rendition - oral, visual and scriptural- accounts for the fanciful narratives of the events and characters. Modern writers like Dr Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sangh have used 'modern lens' to etch the recitals so as to 'repress, innovate, distort and contain' old and new discourses.

Karna is the first of the characters who was redrawn as the greatest tragic hero caught in the infirmities of the socio-politics of the time. An exploration into the psyche of Karna in the retellings has provided an antithetic notion of him from the epic. Despite being the accomplice of Duryodhana, the 'wicked minded fellow' of the epic, Karna is detailed as a man of charity who from obligation was drawn into the Kaurava camp. But a perusal into the epic helps one to comprehend the in the veracity in the charity Karna upheld and his ardency with Duryodhana. Karna in the modern era is comprehended in a post truth framework

Plebs denies submission to defying forces. It is this zeal of resistance that check the idealistic discourses and makes power effect its own resistance. Acceptance of a hero is marked not just by his prowess but by the sacrifice and humility they exhibit. Karna's acceptance came with his superior knowledge of weapons, his uncompromising enmity with Arjuna and with his charismatic demeanor. When Karna challenged Arjuna in the competition ground, he became a guardian angel for Duryodhana. When Bhima insulted Karna of his humble background, Duryodhana in presto conferred on him the kingship of Anga kingdom so that he become potential enough to challenge Arjuna.

Accusation laid against Duryodhana was his impudence towards the preceptors but concernment towards Karna. This excessive affection was because of the partisan politics he savored of Karna. The preceptors championed the cause of the Pandavas. "Every day the old . . . rising from the morning, with concentrated mind, said, -'victory to the sons of Pandu'" (BhishmaParva XVII 38). This overt exhibition of affection towards the Pandavas made Duryodhana trust Karna who blatantly championed his cause. Right from birth, Karna was excluded from the normal. He was always the other. Though venerated in private, he was never acknowledged except by Duryodhana in public. It was through his skill in weaponry that he tried to resist the exclusion. His friendship with Duryodhana was a means to include in the normative of the society. Duryodhana trusted him completely. He had openly declared " I challenge the Pandavas to battle without depending on Bhishma, Drona, or Aswatthama, or Purumitra, or

Bhurisravas or others . . . but . . . only myself, Karna and my brother Dussasana.” (UdyogaParva LVIII 137)

Karna adopts ‘expert power’ and ‘referent power’. Expert power uses expertise of the individual in their area. The potential of the individual gains upperhand and they can persuade people in power. Duryodhana relies on this expert opinion of Karna. Karna always encouraged a direct combat with the Pandavas. His aim was to establish his supremacy over the third Pandava, Arjuna. For this he relied on his expertise. He believed that once Arjuna was debacled, the rest of the Pandavas were insignificant. But in the combats with Arjuna, even before the Kurukshetra battle, Karna could never overpower Arjuna. In the battle with Drupada, Chitrasena and Arjuna at the Virata battle ground, Karna could never prevail over Arjuna. Every time Duryodhana was at the mercy of the third Pandava. It was after the defeat at the hands of Chitrasena, when Duryodhana contemplated self slaughter, Karna rendered his promise “I truly promise unto thee that I will slay Arjuna in battle . . . when the three and ten years shall have passed away, I will bring the sons of Pritha under thy subjection.” (VanaParva CCL 500)

Karna single handedly conquered the earth which was earlier conquered by the Pandavas together to accentuate the sovereign image of Duryodhana. But even at this Duryodhana could not perform ‘Rajasuya’ sacrifice for he had not conquered Yudhishtira in battle. To assist Duryodhana in his aspiration for sovereignty, Karna adopted the vow “So long as I do not slay Arjuna . . . whoever solicit me [for any thing], I never shall say, ‘*I have it not*’” (VanaParva CCLV 506). Thus the vignette ‘generous’ Karna and the sacrifice that he adopted was evidently a penance made to achieve his ambition. But this penance evolved as a political act which later metamorphosed as his personal identity. Karna thus manifest ‘referent power’. Referent power involves the admiration and reverence people feel because of the values and ideologies adopted by the people in power. Apart from generosity and sacrifice, the military ideologies Karna upheld too earned him repute. Karna never resorted to crude politics to overpower his enemies. He believed in direct opposition. “What is good and advisable for us now is to attack and smite them till they are exterminated.” (AdiParva CCIV 399)

Karna, the only hope of Duryodhana, was chagrined by Bhishma whenever he got a chance. But the last straw came when Bhishma divided his forces according to their merit. Karna was rated as ‘half a Ratha’. “. . . this one who is always boastful of his skill in battle, this

one who always urgeth thee . . . to fight with the Pandavas, this vile braggart, Karna, . . . , this vain wight who is destitute of sense, this Karna, is neither a Ratha nor an Atiratha” (UdyogaParva CLXIX 327). It was not a mere concoction against Karna. He sagaciously accounts for his observation:

Without sense, this one hath been deprived of his natural coat of mail. Always kind, he hath also been deprived of his celestial ear-rings. In consequence of the curse of Rama [his preceptor in arms] as also of the words of a Brahmana [who cursed him in another occasion], owing also to his deprivation of the accoutrements of battle, he, in my judgement, is only half a Ratha. Having approached Falguni [in battle], he, will not certainly escape with life. (327)

Drona too fortified the statement: “That is not untrue! He boasteth on the eve of every battle, but yet he is seen to retreat from every engagement. Kind [out of season] and blundering, . . . , in my judgement, is only a half Ratha!” (327)

The casual sequence of arguments of Bhishma never deterred the trust of Duryodhana in Karna. His political indiscretion was evident in the choice of warriors. He was fizzled out by his own trustees. His foible, superciliousness and undaunted faith in his ally, floundered him. When Maharathas far and wide willingly joined the war and gave their life for him, his own Kuru Commanders deserted him. A king, Bhishma counsels Yudhishtira, “shouldst always exert with promptitude, . . . , for without promptitude of exertion mere destiny never accomplishes the objects cherished by the kings” (SantiParva LVI 315). But though Duryodhana exerted his intentions to Dhritarashtra and his ministers, he failed to exert his demands on Karna. A king should not place his ministers and allies above that for which they are fit. Had he asserted his authority and dismissed Karna’s decision as to not to indulge in battle as long as Ganga’s son lived, Duryodhana could have defaced more enemies. Bhishma had deftly excluded Karna from the battleground for ten days thus assuaging the fears of the Pandavas. This is evident when after the fall of Bhishma, he himself vouches Karna’s excellence as a warrior and reasons out why he inveighed against him in open courts.

Thou art an opponent of mine who always challengest comparison with me! . . . I tell thee truly, . . . that I bear no malice! It was only for abating thy energy that I used to say such harsh words to thee! . . . I know thy prowess in battle, which can with difficulty be borne on earth by foes! I know also thy regard for Brahmanas, thy courage, and thy great attachment to alms-giving! . . . In bowmanship, in aiming weapons, thou art equal to Phalguni himself, or high-souled Krishna! O Karna, proceeding to the city of Kasi, alone with thy bow, thou hadst crushed the kings in battle for procuring a bride for the Kuru king! The mighty and invincible king Jarasandha . . . could not become thy match in fight! . . . thou always fightest fairly! (BhishmaParva CXXIV 313)

This knowledge of the potentials was the reason for unfaltering reliance of Duryodhana on Karna. Even when the entire dynasty chastised and denounced Karna, he was the sole conviction of Duryodhana. Duryodhana relied on his might and veracity. He openly declared that he has summoned the Pandavas and their allies for this combat relying only on the might of his confidant and none other. He firmly believed “the mighty armed Karna is alone devoted to our good”(Karna Parva XXXII 71). Karna too had considered Duryodhana as his sole rescuer. “Relying upon Duryodhana, I have always offended the Pandavas” (BhishmaParva CXXIV 313). The politics of inclusion was mutual. From the stigma of being sidelined as a ‘Suta’ to the ‘King of Anga’ was the endorsement of Duryodhana. Duryodhana, on the other hand, envisioned sovereignty by approbating the potential of Karna.

Even when the trust was mutual, Karna who acknowledged before Krishna that “Yudhishtira of virtuous soul become the king forever” (UdyogaParva CXLI 272), never had communicated this to Duryodhana. The one who always criticized the Pandavas and had aggravated the enmity with the Pandavas through the dice game instantaneously proclaimed to Krishna that Duryodhana as unfit for sovereignty. On realising his lineage, Karna drifted from his allegiances in spirit though not in letters.

Karna was the one who always gloated about war. Hence even the Kuru soldiers did not regard the fall of Bhishma as a calamity. “The mighty-armed Bhishma spared the Parthas in battle. Karna, however, will slay them in the fight with his keen shafts . . . filled with joy, they

proceeded, applauding and worshipping the son of Radha” (Drona Parva VIII 12). But during war, we find him wavering in his promise except in his war with Arjuna. Karna, who bragged of his potentials and his allegiance to Duryodhana, failed in his promises to Duryodhana. The blind faith Duryodhana had on Karna led to the downturn of the Kuru lineage.

Duryodhana who adopted blame tactics on Bhishma and Drona never did so with Karna. The Kuruking, though knew that Bhishma and Drona “going even beyond their allotted shares, those two slew my foes” (Karna Parva XXXII 71), never gave them the regard when they battled for him. But much solicitousness and concernment was offered to Karna. During the review of his first day as the commander of the Kuru forces, Karna recapitulated the policies adopted “Arjuna is always cheerful firm, possessed of skill and endued with intelligence. Again when the time comes Vasudeva awakes him (to what should be done). Today by sudden shower of weapons we were deceived by him. Tomorrow however . . . I will frustrate all his purposes”(Karna Parva XXXI 67). To this Duryodhana responded “so be it.” (67)

When made commander of his army, Duryodhana sought with Karna “Either seize kind Yudhishtira the just or slay Dhananjaya and Bhimasena, O son of Radha”. Accepting those words, Karna addressed Salya “Urge the steeds . . . so that I may slay Dhananjaya and Bhimasena and both the twins and King Yudhishtira” (Karna Parva XXXVI 88). But the high-sounding proclamations ended as a mere stunt. Karna on battling with Yudhishtira pierced him ‘with the greatest care’. But even then Yudhishtira could not bear it and he fled from the battle ground. Seeing Yudhishtira fleeing from the battle, Karna pursued him and “desired to seize him by force. He then remembered the words of Kunti” (KarnaParva XLIX 124).Salya too recommended not to seize the best of the kings. Karna remembered the words of Kunti but never did it occur to him the bidding of Duryodhana.

Bhishma had always objected to Duryodhana’s adherence to Karna’s advocacies. He admonished Karna as ‘a low born Suta’sson cursed by Rama’. Karna felt piqued and had declared “It is always my duty to do all that is agreeable to king Dhritarashtra, and especially to king Duryodhana, for he is in possession of the kingdom”(UdyogaParva XLIX 119). Despite these high proclamations, the magnanimous Karna proved false to Duryodhana. On letting Yudhishtira free though he mocked and ridiculed, he gave him the assurance “Indeed, O king,

Karna will never slay one like thee” (Karna Parva XLIX 124). Karna’s vows and braggings were mere politics of appearance. “It provides a way to penetrate appearances without reducing them to epiphenomena or treating them as exhaustively constitutive of political reality” (Connolly 447). His ideology of sacrifice becomes viable as it is in line with the dominant discourse.

Karna adopted the same strategy with Bhima too. When Karna encountered Bhima, he was just shrouding Bhima with shafts of arrows without intending to hurt him, but all the while Bhima was exerting hard. “The wrathful son of Radha, smiling the while, seemed to mock Bhimasena as the latter was battling with great fury. . . . Indeed, the son of Radha, in that encounter, fought mildly with Bhima, while Bhima, remembering his former wrongs, fought with him furiously (DronaParvaCXXXI 280). This political falsity of Karna was never a venial sin but was always regarded so. This hypocrisy is romanticized as the greatness of his character. Duryodhana on seeing the fight between Bhima and Karna, regarded Karna in grave danger and asked his brother Durjaya, Durmarshana, Duhsaha, Durmada, Durdhara and Jaya to aid Radha. “Go, . . . There the son of Pandu is about to devour the son of Radha! Slay that beardless Bhima soon, and infuse strength into Karna” (DronaParva CXXXIII 285). The ever obedient brothers of Duryodhana went and were immediately slain by Bhima. But even at this though “weeping in grief . . . Karna” (285) did not exert himself at Bhima. Thirty one of his brothers were sent forth to save Karna from Bhima. But they were all cruelly slain by Bhima. Though Duryodhana wept in sorrow, not even in a single phrase did he upbraid Karna. As Bhima’s ferocity increased, Karna became desirous of slaying Bhima and with his sharp shafts caused Bhima to lose his senses. “But recollecting the words of Kunti, took not the life of the unarmed Bhima.”(DronaParva CXXXVIII 299). Instead he vexed him with disparaging remarks. “Thou shouldst fight with others . . . but never with one like me . . . Go tither where the two Krishnas are! They will protect thee in battle” (DronaParva CXXXVIII 300). This happens with other sons of Pandu excluding Arjuna. Battling with Sahadeva, ‘smiling the while’, Karna deprived him all the weapons yet slew not despite the opportunity.

When Krishna apprised him of the secret of his birth and invited him to enjoy the sovereignty of the earth, he not only denied but requested Krishna to conceal their conversation from Yudhishtira for Karna says ‘therein lies our benefit’. He adds further “If king Yudhishtira of virtuous soul and well controlled senses, cometh to know me now as the first

born son of Kunti, he will never accept the kingdom. If, again, . . . , this mighty and swelling empire becometh mine, I shall, . . . , certainly make it over to Duryodhana only. Let Yudhishtira of virtuous soul become king forever.” (Udyoga Parva CXLI 273)

On his counsels to Yudhishtira to become an emperor par excellence, Bhishma talks of four kinds of friends: “he that has the same object, he that is devoted, he that is related by birth and he that has been won over by gifts and kindness” (KarnaParva XLIX 124). A good strategic ruler regards the four with suspicion, especially first and the fourth. Karna falls in these two categories. He joined Kauravas to win over the Pandavas through war, especially Dhananjaya. He was offered Anga kingdom by Duryodhana to equate him with the Kshatriya clan. ‘A king who is heedless is overpowered by others’, says Bhishma, the veteran in political discourses. Duryodhana was heedless, he trusted Karna completely. He had openly declared that he challenge the Pandavas to battle depending on Karna, his brother Dussasana and himself. This infallible trust on Karna fizzled Duryodhana. But Karna at his disclosure to Krishna eulogised and took sides with the Pandavas. “He that has Hrishikesa for his guide, and Dhananjaya and that mighty car warrior Bhima for his combatants, as also Nakula and Sahadeva, and the sons of Draupadi, is fit, . . . , to rule over the whole earth”(UdyogaParva CXLI 272). A person ‘who serves one and not both sides’ should be king’s friends.

Vidura talks of the social polity to Dhritarashtra: “One should behave towards another just as that other behaveth towards him One may behave deceitfully towards him that behaveth deceitfully, but honestly towards him that is honest in his behavior”(Udyoga Parva XXXVII 77). Except for Dusassana and Sakuni none was honest with Duryodhana. Though all his ministers and confidants stood for the Pandavas, they fought on Duryodhana’s side. Bhishma and Drona even before the war began had confided that they would not injure the Pandavas but only their army and allies. Karna, on the other hand, who bragged of his potentials and his allegiance to Duryodhana, connived with the Pandavas.

Karna hailed as benevolent, altruistic and just is only a partisan narrative. The deference Duryodhana showered on Karna was not reciprocal in nature. Despite all his failures in the warfront, never did Duryodhana suspect or accuse Karna. He sacrificed all his means and accepted to himself cantankerous adjectives for the sake of Karna. When Karna had augmented

the enmity with the Pandavas through his odious remarks at Draupadi during the dice game, the blame fell upon Duryodhana. Whenever Bhishma tried to shed light at the trumpeter nature of Karna, Duryodhana 'laughed a good deal and sailed out'. But Karna on his realization that he shared the Pandava lineage altered his outlook. Even when he declared that he would not behave falsely towards Duryodhana, he performed so. He declared that Yudhishtira was fit to rule the world and had he accepted the offer of Krishna to join the Pandava camp, Yudhishtira would detest from war and would bestow kingdom to him. If so, Karna would confer the throne to Duryodhana which is inappropriate. Hence he wanted "Yudhishtira of virtuous soul become king forever" (UdyogaParva CXLI 273).

The epic reasons war as to uphold dharma and hence the champions are envisaged as virtuous. The allies and even the foes who took side with the vanquisher are whistled as irreprehensible. They are rationalized and warranted of all their acts. Karna being the elder brother of the subjugators can only be vindicated as 'firmly devoted to truth' but forced to serve the 'wicked souled Duryodhana'. Intrinsic reading of the epic divulges the political labyrinths of the narrative. It assists in demystifying the recitals and a kempt deciphering of the power polemics that determine scruples.

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