

KR̥ṢṆA'S SHADOW OVER KARṆA'S FALL: REORDERING THE KR̥ṢṆA– KARṆA, KAVACA-KUṆḌALA, AND KUNTĪ EPISODES IN REGIONAL MAHĀBHĀRATA TRADITIONS

Mr Varun Gupta^{1*}

^{1*}IMS Engineering college , Dr.A.P.J.Abdul Kalam Technical University,Lucknow

ABSTRACT

The Mahābhārata preserves three major pre-duel diminutions in Karṇa's narrative: Kṛṣṇa's confidential revelation of Karṇa's Kuntī-birth, the loss of the congenital kavaca-kunḍala to Indra in disguise, and Kuntī's extraction of a battlefield restraint ensuring the survival of four Pāṇḍavas. In the Critical Edition, these episodes remain textually dispersed and semantically autonomous, functioning primarily as independent expressions of Karṇa's political loyalty, donor-heroism, and filial restraint. This article suggests that several regional Mahābhārata traditions take a radical approach to this inherited material in the process of transforming it into a tightly controlled narrative of pre-duel weakening, from failed revelation to bodily disarmament and bodily disarmament to final ethical restraint. In the Tamil Villi Bhāratham as well as the Jain Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa attempts to secretly convince Karṇa to revert to the original moral restraints and fails, only to neutralise him in the body by performing the kavaca-kunḍala ritual, and finally remove another moral restriction, the Arjuna dueling ritual, from Kuntī, so that the sequence of restrictions progresses before the Arjuna duel. The Kannada Kumaravyāsa Bhārata has the same trilogy, but in an intentional narrative sequence, the Bengali Kāśīdāsī war narration retroactively reconnects Karṇa's earlier loss of body as a precondition for his eventual defeat. When studied together, these witnesses give evidence of a particular vernacular reception-history, in which the celebrated virtue of Karṇa no longer serves as a moral emblem but as the very mechanisms of his progressive vulnerability to Kṛṣṇa's progressive shadow-play. The study argues that this tragic reinterpretation is produced not primarily through interpolation, but through the strategic rearrangement of inherited epic chronology.

KEYWORDS; *Karṇa; Kṛṣṇa; Kuntī; kavaca-kunḍala; Villi Bhāratham; Kumaravyāsa Bhārata; Jain Mahābhārata; regional Mahābhārata traditions; vernacular epic reception; narrative reordering*

1. INTRODUCTION

The fall of Karṇa at Kurukṣetra is one of the most studied tragic ends in the Mahābhārata, but the epic prepares for that end only on day 17 of the battle. In the tradition, Karṇa has already been reduced in several previous contexts: As a privileged disclosure that challenges his royal dignity, as surrender of his inherited defensive weapon that protect his body from the attacks, as a maternal promise that restricts the arsenal of his fighting ability on the field. In the popular rendition of the Sanskrit epic, these scenes are considered to be both narratively and morally significant, but not one and the same. In the popular interpretation of the Sanskrit epic, these scenes are seen as both narratively and morally important, but not identical. Their ethical greatness is seldom called into question; what has not so often been studied is whether some traditions of the text isolate them from an ethical perspective.

The regional Mahābhārata witnesses can be compared to see that they do. Instead of these three occurrences being distinct monuments of Karṇa's character, a few vernacular retellings increasingly tie them up into a much shorter pre-duel continuum. The secret meeting between Kṛṣṇa and Karṇa is no longer a revelation scene, but the initial attempt at Karṇa's political recontextualization, which fails. The next kavaca-kunḍala episode no longer serves as an independent donor story but is rather a story of body neutralization after the failed reclamation. Kuntī's later appeal no longer appears merely as a scene of maternal lament; rather, it becomes the removal of a final moral limitation from an already constrained warrior. What emerges from this sequence is not merely additive pathos, but a clear logic of compensatory constriction: Karṇa is increasingly a player who is doomed to lose even before the match begins.

The present study suggests that it is not a mere by-product of one anomaly of one retelling, but a large current of vernacular reinterpretation in Karṇa's literary afterlife. A strong regional witness, the Tamil Villi Bhāratham, explicitly reduces Kṛṣṇa from confidential revealer to the ongoing architect of Karṇa's pre-duel reduction: Once Karṇa refuses dynastic reclamation, Kṛṣṇa turns to the problem of making him conquerable. The Jain Mahābhārata reaffirms this tactical logic by verbalizing Karṇa's invulnerability; the Kannada Kumaravyāsa Bhārata preserves the same trilogy of revelations-disarmaments-restraints in a deliberate sequence of narratives; and the Bengali Kāśīdāsī war narration seems to retroactively reactivate Karṇa's earlier loss in the body within a military explanatory structure. These texts together are not simply the memory of Karṇa's noble deeds from before the war, but rather they work to present these events in a carefully crafted sequence of defeatability.

This regional tendency merits scholarly attention for two related reasons. First, it changes the function of the celebrated nobility of Karṇa in the narrative. Loyalty, generosity and filial restraint are not just signifiers of character but causally active mechanisms of vulnerability. In the process of being a noble loser, in retrospect, Karṇa is just as much, if not more, a storybook winner in the here-and-now of his actions. Second, these texts illuminate a wider aspect of the creativity of vernacular Mahābhārata texts. Traditional redactions of the region's epics have only been recently acknowledged by modern scholarship to create new meaning: devotional color, local legend, and speeches are all elements of the vernacular

redaction that do not create new meaning. They can also effect deep reinterpretation in the less obtrusive but equally important way of chronological strategy. An alternative heroic logic can be formed when the episodes of an inheritance are rearranged in a new cause and effect sequence.

The modern scholarship provides two essential sources for the present enquiry. First, the epic has been studied on numerous occasions, with occasional contributions from Alf Hiltebeitel, and it has always been found that Kṛṣṇa is by no means a bystander, a divine eye-witness or a philosopher after the event, but is instead the morally complex master manipulator of the Pāṇḍavas' success, repeatedly creating circumstances in which seemingly unbeatable enemies can be made vulnerable to defeat. Second, comparative scholarship on the transmission of the Sanskrit epic has shown that the vernacular Mahābhārata poets are not merely translators of a stable original, but rather active recoders and redistributors of inherited meaning of the narrative via variation in sequence, emphasis and causality. What is yet to be explored is the exact moment at which these two scholarly issues intersect; Karna's pre-duel losses are regionally reorganized as a Kṛṣṇa-shaded sequence of progressive defeasibility.

The present article examines three inherited Karna episodes—revelation, disarmament, and restraint—as a sequential prelude to vulnerability. It suggests that these texts contain a unique shift in interpretation: Karna's good qualities are not just extolled in the lead-up to the battle; they are instead mobilized against him.¹

This article therefore examines how selected regional Mahābhārata traditions transform three inherited Karna episodes—revelation, disarmament, and restraint—into a sequential prelude to defeasibility. It proposes that these texts preserve a distinctive interpretive shift: Karna's virtues are not merely praised before battle; they are narratively mobilized against him.

2. The Dispersed Baseline: Semantic Autonomy of Karna's Three Pre-Duel Diminutions in the Critical Edition

If one views "constriction arc" as a post-war concept, one first has to compare the narrative approach to the same materials in the Sanskrit critical baseline to determine what Mahābhārata traditions mean by the losses of the Karna hero. The Critical Edition certainly does preserve all three of the crucial Karna-limiting episodes for the purposes of the present enquiry: Kṛṣṇa's secret mention of Karna's secret birth, his surrendering of the congenital kavaca-kunḍala to Indra in disguise, and Kuntī's picking up of a battlefield promise that only Arjuna will be the legitimate object of Karna's hostilities. But what is remarkable in the critically composed Sanskrit text is that they are not missing, but rather, they are relatively independent of one another. The three episodes are in existence, but not yet integrated as a coherent strategic panorama.

The first of the three is the episode of Indra–kavaca that occurs in the story's Āraṇyakaparvan. In this, the current prevailing narrative energy is entirely with the testing and the victory of Karna as a donor-hero. Sūrya tells Karna beforehand that Indra is fearful of his own destruction, and he will disguise himself as a brāhmaṇa to ask for his armour and earrings which give him his natural invulnerability. Karna fully understands the military cost of the exchange but nevertheless chooses donor-fame over bodily security and severs the kavaca-kunḍala from his own flesh. In turn, Indra, affected by the severity of the gift, gives him the śakti that can be used only once. That there is rhetoric of the martial implication is not just there but the subtle lesson in the background, but donor ethics is the semantic foreground, not strategic prelude. Karna is remembered for his ability to return no one empty-handed, even a disguised god who seeks his life. Its main power is not yet the ongoing neutralization on the battlefield, but is dāna – the act of giving.

The second major diminution appears later in the Udyogaparvan, in the private peace embassy with Kṛṣṇa after the embassy of peace had failed in the public arena. Kṛṣṇa tells Karna that he is Kuntī's firstborn son and therefore the eldest Pāṇḍava by blood. He then goes over the political ramifications of this disclosure in full: Karna can cross over and claim dynastic seniority and inherit Yudhiṣṭhira's kingship. This is one of the epic's thickest expressions of gratitude and self-binding loyalty in the refusal of Karna. Karna is offered legitimacy, sovereignty, and dynastic restoration, yet remains bound to Duryodhana by gratitude and prior obligation. But this scene is not architecturally cumulative in its dramatic power—the power is existential and political. The episode is essentially a self-contained tragedy, but Kṛṣṇa's revelation throws into confusion the identity of Karna. It is not immediately apparent that the text begets a bodily, tactical sequel to it that is clearly connected.

The third diminution appears in Kuntī's subsequent approach, which is recorded in the Udyogaparvan. Kuntī's meeting is through the appeal of a mother whereas Kṛṣṇa's was through political disclosure. Once again, Karna refuses to give up Duryodhana, but offers him the famous promise that, apart from Arjuna, the other Pāṇḍavas will not be killed by him; Kuntī will still have five sons. This scene clearly narrows Karna's battlefield freedom. Before the war begins, Karna voluntarily limits the full lethality available to him. But this time the Critical Edition is almost entirely pathos, and maternity and delayed recognition. It is cumulative in an emotional sense, but in terms of the story line not necessarily compressed into a contiguous sequence, a continuous chain, with the preceding Indra and Kṛṣṇa episodes.

This is the key factor: the dispersedness. The Critical Edition does give the perspective of a reader looking back on the history of events to see that Karna has lost his bodily invulnerability, his dynastic security, and the freedom he feels on the battlefield, having gone to Kurukṣetra after several defeats. These three losses are not, however, so tightly woven into

¹ On Kṛṣṇa as the ethically complex manager of Pāṇḍava victory rather than merely a detached divine witness, see Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), esp. 112–145; idem, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 233–276. On the narrative agency of vernacular Sanskrit epic traditions, see J. L. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 462–501.

a sequential program of pre-Arjuna neutralizations, as the Sanskrit text does not demand. The episodes have a high degree of semantic independence: the Indra one is donor apotheosis, the Kṛṣṇa one is a failed political reclamation, and the Kuntī one is a mother's vow extraction. Their cumulative tragic force is clearly present, but it isn't imposed on the narrative. It is a baseline that is important because the discomfort with this autonomy is found in the texts analysed below which are regional. They receive the same three Karṇa limiting episodes but they are more and more unwilling to keep them separate. They start to change semantic autonomy into strategic continuity through compressed adjacency, changed episode order, and retrospective reactivation of battlefields. Karṇa's celebrated virtues begin to shift at this point from moral emblems towards means of progressive vulnerability.

3. The *Villi Bhāratham*: Explicit Kṛṣṇa-Centered Sequential Compression

The Tamil *Villi Bhāratham* offers the clearest regional example of the Sanskrit epic's disjointed Karṇa episodes being folded together to form a single Kṛṣṇa shadowed stretch. The Critical Edition is here compactly compressed, strategically, into what remains semantically autonomous. The poem does not permit Kṛṣṇa's confidential revelation, Indra's acquisition of the kavaca-kuṇḍala, and Kuntī's extraction of restraint to remain detached moral tableaux.. Rather, it lays them out in a series of compensations, which occur sequentially as the story line continues to pull at Kṛṣṇa, who failed to win over Karṇa, again and again.

The story starts with the usual background scene of Udhogaparvan, where the peace embassy of the people collapses, and Kṛṣṇa calls Karṇa aside to reveal the secret of his birth. Karṇa is told that he is Kuntī's eldest son and senior to the Pāṇḍavas and thus is rightfully senior in the dynasty. In addition, Kṛṣṇa offers Karṇa kingship, restored legitimacy and admission into Pāṇḍava family. Karṇa refuses. His refusal is emphatically grounded in loyalty and gratitude toward Duryodhana, who raised him from humiliation, granted him sovereignty, and bound him by honour rather than blood. The overall story line up until now is similar to the Sanskrit diplomatic disclosure. The key difference is in the consequences. This sequence is particularly problematic for considering it accidental adjacency within the larger Udyoga narrative environment of *Villi*. In the diplomatic chapters, Kṛṣṇa repeatedly appears not as a detached envoy but as a strategic political actor engaged in negotiation, psychological pressure, and tactical containment, who works out the tangible strategic value of the Kauravas who remain and gradually displays himself as a player of a game that involves negotiation, psychological and tactical containment. His private message to Karṇa is then not a private aside, but a form of pre-battle threat management.

The Critical Edition keeps the private failure of Kṛṣṇa and the Indra donor legend apart textually. *Villi* is a powerful advocate for the elimination of that divide. As a sad, private confidante, Kṛṣṇa cannot withdraw from the battle when he is rejected by Karṇa on the point of his dynastic restoration and when he refuses to leave behind Duryodhana. The Tamil narrative immediately connects this failed revelation to the next strategic development, where Karṇa's innate kavaca-kuṇḍala are the first obstacle to his next conquest. Indra no longer appears as an autonomous donor figure detached from the larger narrative sequence, instead, he is drawn into Kṛṣṇa's unresolved post-refusal strategic dilemma. The bodily donation of the kavaca-kuṇḍala becomes an act of compensatory disarmament in the text. Kṛṣṇa now is no longer simply the bearer of the painful truth but the continuous builder under whose shadow Karṇa is made bodily conquerable.²

The ethical restraint is then extracted by Kuntī to further narrow the three-fold. Karṇa's three greatest noble acts are thus transformed into three successive stages of vulnerability.

Then the poem moves into its third constricting movement without getting the chance to relax the narrative. After Karṇa's bodily invulnerability has been reduced, Kuntī approaches him. Importantly, Kuntī does not enter a semantically fresh scene, as she does to a large extent in the Critical Edition. She comes to a Karṇa who has already undergone two significant experiences guided by Kṛṣṇa's shadow: his hidden identity has been revealed and his congenital invulnerability has given way. She pleads with him and he gives her the reassuring promise that all the Pāṇḍavas, except for Arjuna, will survive. This is not just maternal pathos alongside earlier tragedy, but the removal of an ultimate ethical constraint from a warrior already progressively constrained.

The sequence of the *Villi* is thus architecturally very clear: Kṛṣṇa initially tries political reclamation and then fails, which leads to disarming his own body in the Indra episode, which in turn leads to Kuntī getting ethical restraint by her procurement.

Karṇa's persistent nobility is no longer the only element connecting the three episodes. These are connected by the ongoing story pressure of Kṛṣṇa, to make Karṇa eventually defeatable, despite the fact that he wasn't.

The *Villi Bhāratham* thus provides the most vivid regional testimony that the Karṇa cycle does not necessarily need to be three independent noble episodes leading up to war, but a single escalating prelude to defeasibility.

4. Beyond *Villi*: Jain Explicitness, Kumaravyāsa Structural Corroboration, and the Bengali Retrospective War Logic

² *Villi Bhāratham*, Udyoga Paruvam, Iruttiṇan Tūtu Carukkam (1959 ed., Acc. No. 19178): Kṛṣṇa privately discloses Karṇa's Kuntī-birth, seniority, and kingdom entitlement; Karṇa refuses out of loyalty to Duryodhana; Kṛṣṇa then proceeds to Vidura's residence where Indra is brought into consultation; Karṇa's kavaca-kuṇḍala are identified as the impediment to conquest; Indra approaches in brāhmaṇa disguise and receives the bodily donation; Kuntī subsequently extracts the survival assurance for four Pāṇḍavas. The argument of the present article rests on this deliberate narrative succession.

The Villi Bhāratham provides the most architecturally explicit expression of the three pre-duel diminutions of Karṇa compressed in the service of Kṛṣṇa, but is not unique to this region. Other oral traditions, although not exactly the same in terms of literary style, repeatedly show the same uneasiness at making these episodes autonomous in terms of their meaning. Some do so by making the concern of Kṛṣṇa in the war story clearly evident; others by maintaining the same order of the three in the war story, the triadic story, intentionally as the order of the losses of the same character; still others by strategically re-evoking the three losses of the character Karṇa in the war story as the conditions of failure. They show that the form of the Villi is more than a Tamil invention and they form a more significant reception-history current than one could have predicted on its own.

4.1 The Jain Mahābhārata: Kṛṣṇa's Strategic Concern Made Verbal

The Kṛṣṇa-centered reading is best supported by the Jain Mahābhārata, which doesn't simply shorten inherited episodes; it keeps repeating Kṛṣṇa's concern about Karṇa's continued invulnerability. In both versions, Kṛṣṇa goes on a private meeting with Karṇa after their public peace mission fails, but in this version, the encounter takes place secretly. It is revealed to Karṇa that he has a hidden maternal identity, an explanation of his new position (in the family line) and a choice of political realignment. Karṇa stubbornly refuses on the grounds of obligation to Duryodhana. The general outline of the story is still identifiable as epic.

This crucial transition seems to be in the next Karṇa kā Dān unit, where the Jain witness goes beyond merely "compressing" time to its explicit strategic logic. Karṇa's congenital armor is treated as the principal obstacle to his defeat. The disguised celestial petitioner therefore does not come in, simply because he is needed in the name of donor-fame to be tested; he comes in because bodily neutralization is the next operation that is needed, and Kṛṣṇa's unsuccessful confidential diplomacy is not enough. Karṇa's heroism survives, but it is not a self-contained, semantic entity. It has been swallowed up in a series of compensatory reductions of Kṛṣṇa³.

Kuntī's subsequent appeal completes this progressive constriction. Born with no certainty of his body, and his certainty of birth stripped from him, Karṇa is requested for one last concession: the survival of four Pāṇḍavas at the end of the war. The Jain text does not simply rehearse the trilogy in sequence; it multiple times makes the strategic logic between them visible. Kṛṣṇa's failed political reclamation leads to bodily reduction, which is then followed by ethical narrowing through Kuntī's appeal.

4.2 The Kumaravyāsa Bhārata: Deliberate Triadic Succession under Kṛṣṇa's Narrative Shadow

The Kannada Kumaravyāsa Bhārata is particularly significant because it shows that the same Karṇa constriction logic did not just exist within the Tamil or the Jain literary context. The internal contents architecture of the Udyoga narrative is clearly intentional, and retains the Karṇa trilogy. The first episode is a standalone one, whose explicit title is "Kṛṣṇa disclosed the secret to Karṇa" (karṇanige kṛṣṇanu bhēdavanu hēḷidudu). This is not followed by unrelated diplomatic material, but by the next discrete Karṇa-centred unit: Indra's request for the kavaca-kuṇḍala., but the next discrete Karṇa-centred one, "Indra in brāhmaṇa form asked for the kavaca-kuṇḍala." This is followed immediately by "Kuntī came to Karṇa and spoke."

The sequence is essential and very crucial. The poet obviously rejects the dislocated semantic autonomy in a Sanskrit baselines. The three narratives of the inherited episodes are not isolated in the donor's legend, the diplomatic disclosure, and the maternal plea in the separate emotional worlds but are presented as a compact series of successive tales, the Karṇa cluster. The implied sequence is clear: Kṛṣṇa's confidential reclamation fails; Karṇa is bodily reduced through the Indra episode; and he is then ethically restricted through Kuntī's appeal. The poem thus does not contain any explicit verbal order but a clear structural Kṛṣṇa-shadow.

The significance of Kumaravyāsa is that he shows that the strategic impact of an explicit verbal dispatch can be achieved in other ways as well. The poem is structured in a similarly focused manner, grouping the revelation of Kṛṣṇa, the kavaca of Indra, and the last constriction of Kuntī into a logically continuous and tightly adjacent Karṇa unit. Indra no longer appears as an autonomous examiner of donor-heroism, but as the next figure in a Karṇa sequence already shaped by Kṛṣṇa's failed revelation but is now the next instrument in a Karṇa already under Kṛṣṇa's pressure after his revelation⁴.

4.3 The Bengali Kāśīdāsī Droṇa Parva: Retrospective Battlefield Reactivation of Prior Bodily Loss

A similar but distinct confirmation tradition is also found in the Bengali Kāśīdāsī tradition particularly in the Droṇa Parva war narration. The trilogy here is not the same architectonic structure as Villi or Kumaravyāsa, but rather a battlefield re-actualization in retrospect of the loss of Karṇa's body. In the war context reception of the Kāśīdāsī tradition, the earlier foregone kavaca-kuṇḍala is retroactively considered as militarily significant: if he had not experienced this earlier diminution of his body, he would be hard to handle in battle. The earlier donor episode is thus remembered, not as a remote

³ Jain Mahābhārata, *Karṇa kā Dān* narrative unit, where Karṇa's congenital armor is treated not merely as an object of miraculous generosity but as the practical obstacle to Arjuna's future survival, thereby converting the donor episode into tactical bodily neutralization after Kṛṣṇa's failed confidential diplomacy.

⁴ *Kumaravyāsa Bhārata*, Udyoga Parva contents cluster: "karṇanige kṛṣṇanu bhēdavanu hēḷidudu," followed by Indra's kavaca request and Kuntī's subsequent appeal, preserving the revelation–disarmament–restraint trilogy in immediate succession. Compare also Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata, Droṇa Parva, where Karṇa's prior kavaca loss is retrospectively recalled as a military necessity because ordinary combat could not otherwise contain him

biographical detail, but as war-books' explanatory logic, in military terms. The war narrative retrospectively foregrounds the kavaca episode, insisting that Karna's bodily diminution had to precede battlefield confrontation.

This retrospective narrative move is highly significant. Even if the entire triadic sequence isn't freshly dramatized, the Bengali narrator shows the same unease at the prospect of a morally inactive previous loss by Karna. The gift of Karna has to be significant in terms of war and must be recalled when the occasion arises, as a prerequisite of being vulnerable. The war book itself then goes in reverse to reactivate the body's reduction in a state of ultimate failure.

4.4 A Converging Regional Pattern

These three witnesses collectively more than just “supply” Villi's evidence, however: they are the most complete expression of a wider vernacular tendency. The Jain text makes it explicitly clear that Kṛṣṇa was concerned with tactics. In explicit, immediate succession, Kumaravyāsa maintains the same trilogy of revelation, disarmament and restraint. The Bengali Droṇa Parva in a retrospective way demands a connection of Karna's losing his body with the onset of war as an essential requirement of the war to be defeasible. None of these traditions is exactly the same in literary technique, but all include the same final rejection: the high-ranking of Karna's pre-war episodes will not be treated as semantically distant. They are repeatedly transformed into a progressive pre-combat sequence of constriction.

To appreciate the degree to which the regional witnesses converge despite differing literary techniques, the comparative sequence may be schematically represented as follows:

Table 1. Comparative Sequencing of Karna's Three Pre-Duel Diminutions across Textual Traditions

Textual Tradition	Kṛṣṇa's Confidential Revelation to Karna	Placement of the Indra-Kavaca Episode	Placement of Kuntī's Appeal	Degree of Kṛṣṇa's Strategic Shadow	Resulting Narrative Logic
Critical Edition (Sanskrit)	Present as a politically charged but self-contained disclosure scene	Preserved primarily as an earlier autonomous donor legend centered on dāna	Separate maternal supplication with independent pathos	Low discontinuous	Three semantically autonomous ethical episodes
Tamil Villi Bhāratham	Failed private political reclamation immediately preceding subsequent constrictions	Recast as compensatory bodily neutralization following Kṛṣṇa's failed diplomacy	Follows as final ethical narrowing of Karna's battlefield freedom	Very high explicit and architectonic	Continuous Kṛṣṇa-centered pre-duel weakening
Jain Mahābhārata	Failed confidential reclamation with direct tactical concern foregrounded	Strategically framed bodily reduction undertaken after Karna remains unreclaimed	Completes the same progressive constriction arc	Very high verbally explicit	Kṛṣṇa-led sequential neutralization
Kannada Kumaravyāsa Bhārata	First movement in a tightly successive Karna-centered triadic cluster	Immediately follows as the next Karna-limiting episode in narrative order	Immediately follows the Indra episode	High structurally implied through adjacency	Kṛṣṇa-shadowed progressive narrowing
Bengali Kāśīdāsī Droṇa Parva	Not freshly dramatized as primary episode in this war context	Earlier bodily loss retrospectively recalled as military necessity during war narration	Secondary / not primary focus	Moderate retrospective battlefield activation	Karna's prior diminution refunctionalized as defeasibility logic

If one examines the differences between the regional witnesses as they orally articulate Kṛṣṇa's agency, as shown in Table 1, one can observe that they do not agree in the extent to which they explicitly verbally articulate Kṛṣṇa's agency, but they do agree on one final point, namely that the events of Karna's revelation, his disarming, and his ethical restraint cannot be linguistically separated from one another as semantically isolated episodes as in the Critical Edition. Direct articulation, strategic articulation, deliberate triadic articulation, and battlefield reactivation in the past, progressively bring into a continuous sequence the qualities that are most known about Karna. Gradually, through direct, strategic, deliberate, and retrospective battlefield reactivation, the texts continuously move these most known qualities of Karna into a cumulative prelude of vulnerability.

5. From Virtue to Vulnerability: Comparative Implications of the Kṛṣṇa-Shadowed Sequence

But the most important role of the regional witnesses is not just the preservation of variant details — as Table 1 shows, it is the changed semantic work as a result of the order of the episodes that makes the greatest contribution. The Critical Edition preserves, ethically potent yet ironclad distinct, Karna's disclosure, disarming of the body, and maternal promise. To the retrospective reader they are a cumulative tragic force which can be felt, but they cannot force this reading of them as a single strategic strand. The regional traditions, on the other hand, recondense, reorient, or reenergize these very scenes in repetition, and by them render Karna's nobility into a progressive pre-duel reduction. To be brief, the Sanskrit baseline's dispersed virtue is the vernacular witnesses' sequential vulnerability.

This change isn't just a clever plot move; it also alters the nature of the logic of why Karna falls. Autonomous Sanskrit: Kṛṣṇa's revelation confirms Kṛṣṇa's loyalty, the kavaca proves his donor absolutism, and Kuntī's appeal proves his filial restraint. These are not dynamic illuminations of the Ethics. But, in the regional reconfigurations, the same three illuminations are dynamically cumulative losses. Loyalty means that political transfer does not occur at the point of potential recapture; donor absolutism takes away the natural fact of bodies; and filial restraint limits the permissible range of lethal force on the battlefield. It is thus no longer enough for the viewer to look up to Karna before he has been defeated; he is increasingly made vulnerable in the very actions that elicit admiration.

This is why the regional evidence should not be distorted into a “tragic Karna amplification.” The poets are doing something closer to the mark. They are turning moral goodwill into strategic payoff. Karna's greatness is not just there side by side with his fall, but it is one of the main narrative devices that sets the stage for his fall. There is a definite shift from the 'ethical commemoration' to tactical functionality that can be described quite literally.

5.1 Ancient and Modern Literary Resonances: Bhāsa and Dinkar

The interpretative trend does not only occur at the level of vernacular epic sequencing. Already in Bhāsa's *Karṇabhāra*, an important Sanskrit dramatic parallel, is found, for Karna is not a pure heroic but a soldier who is already weighted down by past sins. The play is nothing like the entire regional revelation-disarmament-restraint cycle explored above, and it does not demonstrate the existence of an underlying Sanskrit form within the cycle. It has a value which is not the same but not insignificant: it is the fact that the imagination of a pre-battle burdened Karna is already found in the Sanskrit literary culture. Before the battle, there is already a psychological process of Karna's disaster⁵.

In Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's modern Hindi *Rashmirathi*, a similar afterlife can be observed, with the revelation of Kṛṣṇa, the call of Kuntī and the doubts of Karna each being a significant preparatory challenge prior to the final war. The epic recension to which Dinkar is not a philological witness but a modern literary continuation of the same intuition is the fall of Karna is prepared before it is fought⁶. Together with Bhāsa and the regional witnesses, this indicates that the Critical Edition's semantically autonomous arrangement of Karna's pre-battle diminishment was not an exhaustive statement of the broader Indic literary memory of Karna's pre-battle diminishment.

The point is not that Villi sequence was once present in an earlier Sanskrit archetype as proved by Bhāsa and Dinkar. The more robust and defensible position is that the tragic impulse of Karna is the same in Sanskrit drama, regional epic, and modern Hindi mahākāvya: he walks into the decisive battlefield already diminished by his own self-disclosure, obligation, gift, and limitation. That is the most evident chronological organization found in the regional witnesses that are the subject of this article; Bhāsa and Dinkar provide the wider literary continuity.

The shadow of the ongoing narration of Kṛṣṇa is the core of this movement. However, modern scholarship has tended to highlight that the role of the war books' Kṛṣṇa is not that of a passive, omniscient onlooker, nor a preacher of philosophy after the fact. In his work on battle ritual and strategic intervention, Alf Hiltebeitel has demonstrated that Kṛṣṇa has been the ethically ambivalent guarantor of victory for the Pāṇḍava, shaping circumstances for those who seemingly cannot be won. The Karna traditions of this region carry right through this Kṛṣṇa-strategic logic into an under-researched pre-duel narrative area⁷.

The importance is not that all of the vernacular sources represent Kṛṣṇa giving the same verbal instructions. They do not. Instead, they continue to put the trilogy of the Karna under a sustained pressure of Kṛṣṇa. In Villi and Jain, the pressure gets quite explicit, strategic, as one sorts of shaping: If reclamation is not done in private, then compensatory body and moral limitations are forthcoming. The same pressure is created structurally in Kumaravyāsa, with intentional triadic succession. It has survived in the Bengali war narration as a battlefield narration in retrospect, meaning that if there is no stripping, there is no ordinary warfare. The modes are different, the interpretive drive comes together⁸.

⁵ Bhāsa, *Karṇabhāra*. The play is useful here not as a direct witness to the Villi sequence but as an early Sanskrit dramatic expression of Karna's pre-battle burden.

⁶ Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Rashmirathi*. Dinkar's poem is cited as a modern Hindi reception witness, not as evidence for epic textual reconstruction.

⁷ Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 112–145, especially his treatment of Kṛṣṇa's repeated strategic management of seemingly unconquerable adversaries within the war books.

⁸ The present study treats chronology not as a neutral narrative container but as an active literary instrument of vernacular reinterpretation: inherited ethical episodes acquire newly causal tragic force when redistributed into a tighter sequential architecture.

The convergence is likewise remarkable in regard to the broader study of vernacular Mahābhārata creativity. Comparative research on regional epic traditions has long highlighted the function of the vernacular poet, as a more or less active carrier of inherited meanings. This is typically construed as an extension of speech, devotional content, sectarian teaching, and/or local folklore. Strategic chronology is another subtle, but no less powerful vernacular intervention, as illustrated by the Karna material. Regional poets can create a new heroic causality without necessarily coming up with new scenes or incidents, by simply narrowing the adjacencies, rearranging the episodes, and making the inherited scenes talk to each other in new sequences.

This understanding has far-reaching implications for the literary heritage of Karna. Many of the ideas that contributed to Karna's subsequent culture reputation are grounded in the idea that despite his many injustices, Karna himself is the noblest tragic loser of the epic. The texts in this region still maintain this nobility, but in this case they highlight a more overt tragic irony that the defeat was inevitable, but the event itself was a sudden though not unexpected one on the seventeenth day. Only narratively is it incubated at such an earlier time. Political by Kṛṣṇa's revelation, bodily by the loss of congenial protection and ethical through Kuntī's request, Karna has already taken the hits. This fall is actually overshadowed long before the duel itself.

Reception history as it has emerged as a result of this study shows an encounter with a more complicated interpretation of the Karna-tragedy than is usually acknowledged. Not only is the hero of the narrative a noble deceiver, but he was repeatedly portrayed as thus by vernacular poets as a character whose life is constantly put at risk by the persistent shadow of his own development, which is itself a constant development of Kṛṣṇa's.

6. Conclusion

What, of the regionally recorded evidence, stands out more and more is that the three pre-war noble episodes of Karna, most celebrated, are narratively innocent only in the wider Mahābhārata tradition. On the Critical Edition it is an ethically irreflectively glaring, somewhat lonely moment: a failed confidential disclosure, a donors' heroism, a mothers' pledge. In the vernacular witnesses, those same episodes, however, are continually pulled into a much more condensed pre-duel logic. Kṛṣṇa attempts to regain Karna but he is unable to do so, and then Karna's invulnerability is weakened and in the end Kṛṣṇa's freedom in battle is reduced due to Kuntī. The various regional versions supplement the memories of the Sanskrit baseline because what is spread out in the Sanskrit version is added to them.

Aside from alternate chronology, what is important here is the re-distributed tragic agency. The word 'nobleness' in the more popular sense of Sanskrit, that which comes from the gift of wisdom, body, and devotion that Karna shows his father, may be expressed in a rather diffuse way. Diffusion is denied by the strongest vernacular witnesses. They tie the three episodes together in a pre-duel continuum, slowly transferring the duty of eradicating Karna to Kṛṣṇa's constant strategy. Loyalty forbids reclamation, generosity takes away invulnerability, restraint lessens lethality. Karna is not only a noble warrior whose bad luck is that he must fight, but a warrior who is systematically made within the circle of failure.

Also significant is the changed role of Kṛṣṇa in this popular reenvisioning. In the Sanskrit basis he is, primarily, the secret messenger whose job is to disclose Karna's secret; in the most virulent regional types he becomes something more solid, the continual constructor, who is steadily to make Karna susceptible. This pre-duel constriction, too, anticipates later war-book, in which Kṛṣṇa meets with Karna as a friendly opponent, but Karna is a potential threat that must be addressed first before a battle can occur.

Revelation backs down, disarmament follows, and ethical narrowing follows. Karna's unbeatable strength is not only limited by the swordman's will on the battlefield, but also broken down in steps in the story.

The methodological implication is also very remarkable. Inherited epic chronologies are not the only places where vernacular traditions can add a legend or elaborate it devotionally to make new meanings in the epic; they can also make radically new epic causality by rearranging inherited chronology. A clear instance is in Karna's cycle. Again, in a more compact, Kṛṣṇa-oriented presentation, all three events provide an emotionalizer Karna and a scripted winner for the seventeenth day of the war, as well.

But when Arjuna kills him, then Karna's death is not merely a tragedy of one afternoon on a battlefield, but he's not just a silly little brother. In these regional traditions, it is preceded by a longer system of orchestrated diminutions. He has been already troubled by Revelation, he has been already intimidated by intimidation, he has been already constrained by constraint. In the opening of the duel defeat is rehearsed.

Bibliography

1. Brockington, J. L. *The Sanskrit Epics*. Leiden: Brill, 1998.
2. Hildebrandt, Alf. *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.
3. Hildebrandt, Alf. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
4. Richman, Paula, ed. *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
5. Fitzgerald, James L. "Negotiating the Shape of 'Scripture': New Perspectives on the Development and Growth of the Mahābhārata." In *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, by Alf Hildebrandt, appendix discussion and related interpretive debates on epic growth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

6. Hiltebeitel, Alf. "Kṛṣṇa at Kurukṣetra." In *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
7. Blackburn, Stuart, and Paula Richman, eds. *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
8. Sukthankar, V. S. *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*. Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957.
9. Sukthankar, V. S., S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, eds. *The Mahābhārata: For the First Time Critically Edited*. 19 vols. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1966.
10. Kāśīrāj, ed. *Kāśīdāsī Mahābhārata*. Bengali Droṇa Parva edition consulted.
11. *Kumaravyāsa Bhārata*. Udyoga Parva. Kannada edition consulted.
12. *Jain Mahābhārata*. Hindi edition consulted.
13. *Villi Bhāratham*. Udyoga Paruvam. Tamil edition consulted.
14. Bhāsa. *Karṇabhāra*. Sanskrit play. Edition consulted.
15. Dinkar, Ramdhari Singh. *Rashmirathi*. Hindi mahākāvya. Edition consulted.