

## Questioning orthodox tradition: A scrutiny of the teacher in Chandra Prasad Saikia's *Maharathi*

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Epics in a society work as the cultural repository and the bearer of tradition which provides an identity marker and a sense of repute to it. When we look at 'Indian tradition' the two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* offer the bedrock through which the 'Indian way of life' defines itself. No doubt India is a land where different religions co-exist and a place with multitudinous tribal cultures, yet these two epics have made inroad into the psyche of the Indian masses in one way or the other.

There has been a culture of re-writing and re-interpretation of the epics by different authors based on the present concerns which have lent them a life of their own, to quote an Eliotean phrase "presentness of the past" and have prevented them from being lost in dead archives. When we look at the context of Assam, eminent littérateur Chandraprasad Saikia's novel *Maharathi* (Great Warrior) (1992) based on the life of Karna immediately draws our attention. Written in the first person narrative the novel depicts the inner life of Karna and offers his perspective on different characters and situations that moulded his life and being.

It was Chandra Prasad Saikia's multifaceted experience in life as freedom fighter, a novelist, journalist, book publisher and commentator from Assam that provided him with the creative and critical acumen to script such an outstanding novel like *Maharathi* which also earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award. Here, I would further like to add that Chandra Prasad Saikia (1927-2006) was the President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha between the years 1999-2001 and has also authored several books; prominent among them are *Edin*, *Meghamallar*, *Uttarkal*, *Suryasnan*, *Mandakranta*, *Janmantar*, *Maharathi* and *Tore More Alokare Yatra*. Acknowledging his contribution he was awarded many titles and recognitions in the state and national level. Prominent among them are the Williamson Magor Award, the Publication Board Award for his novel *Torae Morae Alokare Yatra* and the Katha Award for three consecutive years from 1996 to 1998 for *Gariyoshi*, a monthly magazine in Assamese. He was also conferred the Padma Bhushan Award by the Indian Government in the year 2007 for his outstanding contribution to the society.

By penning the novel on Karna, Saikia made a unique contribution to the tradition of literary works on Karna, one of the fascinating and complex characters of *Mahabharata*. When we survey the field of literary creations on Karna the prominent works which draw our attention are Rabindranath Tagore's poem, *Karna Kunti Sangbad* based on the meeting of Karna and Kunti before the war which played a decisive role in structuring the course of events in the Mahabharata. Karna's private and personal life which have intrigued writers and readers is keenly dealt in the Marathi books of *Radheya* (1973) authored by Ranjit Desai and *Mrityunjay* (1967) authored by Shivaji Sawant. Mention must also be made of Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's epic poem *Rashmirathi* (1952), also been adapted as play later on, which narrates Karna's life.

Before addressing the issue that my paper seeks to explore I think it will be pertinent to take a bird's-eye view on the character of Karna as depicted in the epic *Mahabharata*, especially his birth and parenting so that it can offer a backdrop against which *Maharathi* can be studied. Impressed by her service and attention, Kunti, the young princess of the Kunti Kingdom, was granted a boon by sage Durvasa enabling her to invoke any deity to give her a child. Out of inquisitiveness and without understanding the ramifications of such a boon, (while she was still unmarried) she invoked Surya (the solar deity) who handed her a son Karna, wearing armour (Kavacha) and a pair of earrings (Kundala). Kunti knew that the child will be considered a bastard as she was an unwed mother, and to pre-empt any infamy she placed the baby in a basket and set him afloat on a river. The child finally was found by Adhiratha, a nondescript charioteer of King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapur who along with his wife Radha raised the boy as their own son. Karna was the closest friend of Duryodhana, fought on his behalf against the Pandavas (his brothers) in the Kurukshetra War and was killed by Arjuna. Right from the time of his birth Karna had to fight against misfortune throughout his life yet kept his word under all circumstances. Recognised as one of the greatest warriors, Karna's martial exploits and prowess are well recorded in the epic, and the only warrior believed to have the ability to defeat Arjuna in the battle.

A notable side of *Maharathi* (Great Warrior) (1992) is the questioning of orthodox tradition which rigidly adheres to caste and the role of a teacher who is unquestioningly revered in the Indian culture, a reality more or less evident even in the present world. Through the two characters Karna and Ekalavya and their effort to gain formal education from a guru, Saikia unravels the deep rooted caste-politics that dominated the educational scenario. We should equally note that Saikia was writing for a modern audience who were very well aware of the lore surrounding Karna, who has been a riveting character of the acclaimed epic *Mahabharata*. Being the chronicler of Karna's life Saikia not only acknowledges the cultural dimensions that inform the subject's circumstances, but must also justify the 'tradition' in at least these two ways: one, define the unique character and contribution of the subject and two, situate this development within the wider matrix that draws from and enhances the idea of the life. It is his novel take and artistic acumen that could remould the character of Karna to suit the interest of the informed reader.

To corroborate this point we can quote here T.S. Eliot's notion about tradition well encapsulated in "After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy" (1934). Here Eliot offered a definition of tradition that seems quite similar to what we often designate by the term culture:

Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'. ...We are always in danger, in clinging to an old tradition, or attempting to re-establish one, of confusing the vital and the unessential, the real and the sentimental. Our second danger is to associate tradition with the immovable; to think of it as something hostile to all change; to aim to return to some previous condition which we imagine as having been capable of preservation in perpetuity, instead of aiming to stimulate the life which produced that condition in its time. (Eliot 1934: 18-19)

Eliot's prescription is symptomatic of a modernist ethic that carries forward the *sense* of a cultural ethos that places the subject in an ambit wider than its immediate context, while at the same time bearing its character in all its uniqueness. The fact that the format and the storyline of Karna and Ekalavya were already there made it easier for Saikia for work in their innovations, however the

project was also fraught with difficulties. Modernisation, could not, for instance, be taken as a ticket to overthrow the parameters that determined the life of the subject. The primary text that chronicles the lives of Karna and Ekalavya is the *Mahabharata* which has already established the terms of the canon. Saikia's aim was not to disengage the religious and the secular as such, nor was he intent upon investing in the figures of Karna and Ekalavya qualities that would wrest them from their original contexts. Yet *Maharathi* succeeded in situating them as relevant subjects that extended beyond the epical confines and invested them with a humane and psychological dimension.

Saikia adopts a two pronged strategy to make the already known story relevant and interesting to the modern readers. Firstly, he makes the narrator Karna offer his perspective after a gap of a substantial period which offers him a vantage point to view the events, this distancing strategy provides a kind of objectivity along with the ability to take wider issues into account. Secondly, the first person narrative mode gives a psychological insight into the already known story and the consideration of multiple narratives offer a balanced account of Karna's version.

At this point a perusal of the Ekalavya story is a necessity as he is the other character who is an integral part of my paper. The summary of it can stand thus: Ekalavya was a young prince of the Nishadha, a confederation of jungle tribes (Adivasi) in Ancient India and was the son of Vyadhraj Hiranyadhanu. He aspired to study archery in the gurukul of Guru Drona but was rejected by him because of his low birth. Undeterred by this act of rejection Ekalavya wholeheartedly pursued his resolute will to master archery. It was his unflinching devotion towards his guru (teacher) Drona that he amassed the mud on which his guru treaded without his knowing, modelled his statue and began a disciplined program of self-study over many years in a forest. He accepted the statue as his guru and practiced in front of it every single day. Ultimately, Ekalavya became an archer of phenomenal prowess, surpassing Drona's best pupil, Arjuna.

One day when Drona and his students went out into the forest, Arjuna saw a dog prevented from barking through an extraordinary construction of arrows in and all around his mouth which was harmless to it. This sight brought Drona's amazement as well as distress as he had promised Arjuna that he would make him the greatest archer in the world. Upon investigation it emanated that this remarkable feat was accomplished by Ekalavya. The moment Ekalavya saw Drona he bowed in front of him to him to pay his obeisance. Upon enquiry by Drona regarding his mentor Ekalavya revealed that it was none other but Drona himself from whom he had learnt archery and showed him his statue explaining what he had done. Drona reminded Ekalavya that to be truly Drona's pupil, Ekalavya would have to pay guru dakshina as per tradition. Without any second thought Ekalavya readily agreed to offer anything that Drona would ask. Stoically Drona asked for the right thumb of Ekalavya. Hesitant at first because of such a harsh demand Ekalavya implored Drona to confirm the command. When Drona did so, Ekalavya smilingly cut off the thumb and presented it to Drona.

It's to be noted how it is considerably easier to develop a satirical or a cynical version in the name of critical judgement. But Saikia's revisit of Karna and Ekalavya's story in *Maharathi* was not such an enterprise. His narrative did not display radical 'inventions' or fictionalised overwhelming of canonical versions; his modernity lay in scrutinizing the guru-sisya tradition which is based on the unquestioning loyalty of the sisya towards the guru, the pitfalls that the system entailed and the idea of unwavering respect towards one's guru.

Karna the narrator of *Maharathi* informs that Ekalavya has already gained tutelage in archery and warfare under his father Hiranyadhanu and was not devoid of talent. But Hiranyadhanu wanted

his son to be a matchless warrior in India, one who could even challenge the best of the princes. To fulfill his father's dream Ekalavya needed formal education under a renowned teacher who could hone his talent. As the narrator Karna points out, mere ability will not suffice until and unless it is certified by an authoritative authority:

“However according to the Indian society's eternal and timeless edicts it became indispensable for Ekalavya to gain the blessings of a superior guru. If one does not gain training under a guru, if one does not achieve a certificate from a guru, till the glorious blessings of a guru get showered upon one's head, it's a distant dream in our society for others to gain acknowledgement even an excellent and rare archer like Ekalavya will not be recognized.” (Saikia, 1992: 22-23)

This presents the indispensable role of a teacher without whom a student is a non-entity. Such a sacred role also enjoins the guru (teacher) with immense responsibility as he is the one who moulds a person's life, the carrier of a legacy and the beacon of enlightenment. The attribution of prestige and the adherence to hierarchy is foregrounded as Hiranyadhanu who literally was also a teacher, yet placed at the lowest rung of the echelon because of belonging to the tribal class.

In his novel *Maharathi*, the episode depicting Ekalavya's aspiration to be the student (sisya) of Drona and his rejection by the guru because of his low birth gives ample opportunity to Saikia to present the age old system of caste-politics prevalent in India, skillfully manifesting how humanism and casteism were at loggerheads. The conversation between Drona, Karna and Ekalavya is quite interesting:

“Drona opened his eyes, looked directly at me and said, ‘Karna, you know, except the progeny of royalty and the warriors Dronacharya does not offer education in archery and warfare to others. This fact is well-known in entire India.’

‘In spite of being aware about this fact Ekalavya has approached you.’

Drona: ‘Naïve and strange child! With what identity?’

Ekalavya: ‘I am a seeker of your discipleship.’

Drona: ‘Your lineage?’

Ekalavya: ‘My only lineage is that I am a human-child. Am I not eligible to gain education from the best teacher of India with this identity?’” (Saikia, 1992: 31)

The rhetorical question that Ekalavya poses shows his strength of character and the unequal treatment meted upon him. It unravels the less evident side of the guru-sisya tradition that should be based on respect and unconditional support to an aspiring and able student like Ekalavya. To present the other side of the tradition and not to offer a lopsided view Saikia astutely incorporates the story of Satyakam and his initiation by Maharshi Gautam as his student in spite of his unknown lineage in the novel to further drive home the point.

Karna is also pretty perplexed when he encounters such an inhuman treatment based on favouritism. He meditates: “this sky, this sun, this stream of fountain, this mountain, this air – all of them create an unearthly harmony, which is deathless, which cannot be touched by human limitations. In comparison to this endlessness, eternity and boundlessness humans are so puny, so worthless! Yet the egoism, the selfishness of humans! Humans do not consider others as fellow humans; only consider them on the basis of caste, family, class!” (Saikia, 1992: 33)

In a clinical manner Karna unfolds the motive behind Drona's rejection of an able student like Ekalavya. Without any gloss over Karna foregrounds how the matter was actuated by Drona's

selfish desire to take revenge on his former friend Drupad, the king of Panchal. Drupad had humiliated and hurled him out of his royal court when Drona had approached him to seek help. Drona planned to take merciless revenge on him in the form of guru-dakshina with the help of Pandavas and Kauravas, especially Arjuna, whom he trained to be the invincible warrior. As Karna mused, could he but move beyond his petty self-interest he could have prevented the disgraceful episode which would surely mar his character in eyes of the posterity.

In Saikia's version this cruel act on the part of Drona made Karna apprehensive and he totally lost trust over him. He knew he could never mutilate himself like Ekalavya in the name of offering tribute (guru-dakshina) to the guru. He instantly left that place and went to Parasurama, Drona's own guru to learn archery. As Parashurama only taught to Brahmins, Karna appeared before him as such. Karna knew that he was resorting to falsehood, which would nonetheless be revealed in the future and bring dreadful results; yet Karna, the narrator opines: "But I had no other means, there was no alternative way but this" (Saikia, 1992: 47). Parashurama accepted him and trained him to such a point that he declared Karna to be equal to himself in the art of warfare and archery. On a day towards the end of his training, Karna happened to offer Parashurama his lap so his guru could rest his head and take a nap. But while Parashurama was asleep, a bee stung Karna's thigh. Despite the pain, Karna did not move, so as not to disturb his guru.

While blood was oozing from Karna's wound, Parashurama woke up and at once deduced that Karna was not a Brahmin. Enraged, Parashurama accused Karna of stealing knowledge, and cursed him that he would forget all the knowledge required to wield the Brahmanda astra. Upon Karna's pleading, Parashurama relented and modified his curse, saying that Karna would only lose the knowledge when he needed it most when fighting against an equal warrior. Yet Karna had that inner longing – "Had Parasurama wished he could have forgiven him completely" (Saikia, 1992: 55). This musing underscores the humane side of Karna who is not or cannot be infallible making the readers wonder if he was more sinned against than sinning.

Saikia's effort was to purge out 'the unessential' and 'the sentimental' elements which stained the relationship between a teacher and a student; however he was not against perpetuating 'the real' and 'the vital' part of it. Ekalavya's act of guru-dakshina presented his exemplary discipleship, even though Drona appeared cruel and self-centred, his act uplifted Ekalavya and lent him immortality. It further proved that even if a guru is wrong, through unwavering constancy a student can withstand any test. The conversation between the two friends, Karna and Ekalavya where they analyse Drona's act shows the irreplaceable role that a guru has in the Indian tradition and the unfaltering allegiance of a student:

"If the guru comes again and desires honorarium (*daan*), I am ready to offer it fulfilling his wish.

If that honorarium utterly annihilates you, maims you?

Even then I am obliged to pay the honorarium. I have no other way but this..." (Saikia, 1992: 58)

Yet Saikia does not play the role of a conformist and questions the dogmatic beliefs through the character of Karna in a very cogent way:

"I am startled when I observe such absurd rules and regulations of the human society. Conforming to the societal rules and to be well-known in this society one needs the blessing and certificate of a guru. Yet the same guru at every step becomes resolute to ruin the future of his *sisya*. What a fatal system!" (Saikia, 1992: 58)

It should be kept in mind that in traditional Indian culture the essence of the guru-sisya relationship is spiritual where teachings are imparted by a guru (teacher) to a sisya (disciple). This relationship is grounded on the genuineness of the guru, and the respect, commitment, dedication and obedience of the student. The guru accepts responsibility for the spiritual well-being and progress of the sisya and under his able guidance and supervision the sisya eventually masters the knowledge that the guru embodies. As a token of gratitude the sisya gives a gift to the guru called gurudakshina, often the only monetary or otherwise fee that the sisya ever gives.

To conclude, in *Maharathi* Saikia adroitly presents how the traditional guru-sishya relationship had different hues which were not monochromatic, additionally making the readers cogitate if they should not question orthodoxy, which gain acceptance in the name of "tradition". In the narrative Saikia had the sagacity to set up an ambience where the sceptic and faithful alike could approach the subject with their preferred structures of reading. He carefully worked out a plan that presented the figures of Karna and Ekalavya as both real and relevant. This, in fact, was his primary goal: to humanise and to re-introduce a familiar subject to the new audience who could engage with them in tune with their horizon of expectations.

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