Rewriting Caste

Sumitra, Shambhuka, Karna, Eklavya

India is a country of multiple ethnic beliefs and multiple hierarchies. Within the Hindu society there lies manifold hierarchies which are believed to be necessary for the proper and smooth functioning of the society by certain sections of society. These hierarchies are termed as ‘caste’. A Hindu society is divided in four categories, the Chaturvanya as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras. In a lecture note entitled “Caste and Social Justice”, D Raja, Secretary, National Council, Communist Party of India (2016) writes-

“The varnas (and caste) were imparted various mysterious, divine, canonical, and immutable characteristics, which could not be questioned or challenged. The official mythical-political rules of cannons, and law books were firmly behind them. It was all sanctioned by the God, the king and the priesthood, and ordinary humans could do nothing about it. The whole system was presented as a divine creation, and therefore was to be feared.”

(4)

Further, while elaborating the role of different varnas in the lecture, he says-

Brahmins were those who conducted religious, family and social rites, identified right and auspicious time for various functions and rituals,
including timing and weather for agricultural and other practices. Kshatriyas were basically warriors and rulers, who performed and organized the state machinery, armies, and ruling apparatus at various level. So the nexus of Brahmins and Kshatriyas together constituted ruling and dominant class. The Vaishyas engaged in agriculture, tended the cattle, looked after and conducted trade, market and ran shops. They were part of the laboring sections of society. The Shudras were at the lower most ladder of society. They did menial jobs like cleaning, loading/unloading, clearing the village of dirt and garbage, carrying night-soil, leather work, and so on. Almost treated as slaves they were rejected from the society and a big section was stratified as untouchables.(11)

The caste system in India is a system of social stratification which has pre-modern origins. Some scholars of caste have considered jati to have its basis in religion. For example, the anthropologist Louis Dumont in his work Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications (1980) has described the ritual rankings that exist within the jati system as being based on the concepts of religious purity and pollution. This view has been disputed by other scholars, who believe it to be a secular social phenomenon driven by the necessities of economics, politics, and sometimes also geography. Stratification of certain castes from the centre of social system was gradually detected as a means to keep certain sections of society away from power of policy making and decision making. Not only this, inheritance of caste by birth and endogamy was adopted by the Brahmins
and the Kshatriyas to ensure the “purity of blood.” By making Shashtra as the medium and quoting from certain religious and social documents this stratification has been justified.

The two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have many characters who are victimized in the name of caste. Some rewritings counter their victimization and the chapter illustrates how through rewriting they retort the injustice as well as draw a parallel between mythological stories and contemporary reality. Rewritings do not only question the injustice meted to some character in the name of caste but also show that such problems still persist in the society. Through new narratives the contemporariness of the issue based on marginalization in terms of caste is shown and it also discusses how the nexus of intellectuals (policy makers) and authoritative forces still try to maintain the status quo of the downtroddens in contemporary times, socially as well as economically. Gail Omvedt in his work “Caste, Class and Land in India: An Introductory Essay” summarizes the relationship between caste and class and says- “Caste is a material reality with a material base; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today.” (14) Karna and Eklavya from Mahabharata and Shambhuka from Ramayana are the characters which discards and questions the existing social order of their times.

As the chapter is central to the marginalization of certain characters in the name of caste from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and how rewritings give
voice to the socially deprived characters of the epic, it is important to know the caste structure and its role in both the epics. Both of them revolve around the deeds and valor of Kshatriya leaders and royal families. The Ramayana is composed by Valmiki, likely to be a Dalit. In the Ramayana, the tribesman Guha is treated by Rama as his own brother as Rama shares his life with him while crossing the Ganges. Guha's qualities are often celebrated by the admirers of the Ramayana.

Another celebrated Nishada women is Shabari - who moves Rama with her devotion while Shambhuka’s knowledge and devotion does not please Rama and he kills Shambhuka for not behaving appropriately according to his caste. In the epic, the “hero” from a Kshatriya caste kills a “villain” from Brahmin caste.

The Mahabharata is narrated by Ved Vyasa – born of an intercaste union. None of the Pandavas are pure Kshatriyas. Krishna of Mahabharata is no Brahmin but revered as God. In both the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the adivasi Nishad tribes find strong presence. Anulom or Pratiloma marriage is frequent in the epic Mahabharata. (Anuloma, or Hypergamy is a marital practice where a high caste man marries a low caste woman. For eg. Shantanu and Matsyagandha or Bhima and Hidimba. It was a common practice seen in the epic. While in Pratiloma, or Hypogamy a high caste woman marries a low caste man. For eg. Devyani and Yayati). Mahabharata’s Ekalavya is acclaimed as the ideal disciple and Karna’s valor and virtue is glorified while Dronacharya, a Brahmin teacher of war skills, is vilified. So the issue of caste in both the epics is a problematic one.
Beginning with the epic *Ramayana*, it narrates a utopian world where truth, duty and loyalty towards the throne supersede personal relations and emotions. It is the story of a royal kshatriya clan whose truthfulness, valor and dedication is the hallmark of the family. There is an apparent division between good and evil. Rama is the celebrated and revered hero of the epic. His humbleness, truthfulness and loyalty are valued beyond enquiry. Sita as his better half is also projected as a loyal and dutiful wife who sacrifices her comfort and status for her love and duty as a wife towards Rama. The epic projects Rama as the ideal king, Ayodhya during ‘Ramrajya’ as the ideal state and *Ramayana*, the text reciting their story as the model text. But writers/narrators with different and novel ideological commitments have interpreted and narrated this traditional rendering with a fresh and radical approach by questioning the notion of the ‘Ideal State’, ‘ideal hero’ and ‘model text’ and aim at looking for the marginalized voices of the narrative who deconstruct these revered notions.

Dasharatha, desperately longing for a son who could be the heir to his throne married thrice. His first two queens Kaushalya and Kaikeyi who were of a royal clan could not fulfill his wish. So on the advice of some wise people of the court he married Sumitra, the daughter of a charioteer (low caste) as a low caste was believed to be more productive and potent and thus could be a solution to his problems. Interestingly, when Kaushalya and Kaikeyi begot sons, Sumitra’s sons were never a contender to the throne and dedicated their lives in the service of their elder brothers. Many writers see it as a case of caste discrimination where a son
born out of the union of a high-caste father and low caste mother could not be a king. There are many other instances in the narrative where caste discrimination is evident. For instance, the killing of Shambhuka by Rama is an act against a low caste man that is justified by the state as well as moral ethics. Writers and activists across age have questioned this act of Rama as brutal and supporter of caste discrimination. The text when disseminated at multiple levels by contemporary critics and writers engages the reader towards many camouflaged questions and issues that did not get attention in mainstream renditions and is clouded in the name of reverence and duty.

Rama’s large heartedness and secular outlook is promoted by foregrounding incidents like Ram-Shabri episode and Rama’s friendship with Nishadraj. On the other hand, Shambhuka’s episode does not get popularized as it establishes Rama as an unjust king, the trait that does not fit into the idealized image of him. Jesting with Shoorpanakha and not restraining Lakshmana from attacking her in a humiliating manner is another lively question the narrators highlight in order to question the ‘maryada purushottam’ image of Rama. Thus, within the frame of an idealized story is present an undercurrent of tyranny and selfishness and writers through their rewritings have tried to bring to the light the facet of the caste atrocities in the text.

Select rewritings have narrated the issue of caste discrimination in the Ramayana through the characters of Shambhuka and Sumitra to discuss the
marginalization and retaliation (if found) based on caste in the epic. Let us begin with the character of Sumitra.

**Sumitra**

Sumitra is the youngest queen of Dasaratha. Her role is limited as the mother of Lakshmana and Shatrughna and she does not hold any significant status in the family or epic. Kavita Kane in *Sita’s Sister* throws light on Sumitra’s status in the Raghu clan. Her position among other queens is not of much significance as she does not belong to any royal lineage and has been married to Dasaratha only to provide Ayodhya a heir to the throne. Her view is not sought regarding any decision of the court and interestingly she never protests against it or claims for her position. Both her sons are never a claimant to the throne. Mandvi and Manthara continuously pin down this and give the “low-caste” lineage from the mother’s side a cause behind the servile attitude of Lakshmana and Shatrughan. When Lakshmana speaks against Dasaratha’s decision of sending Rama to exile and decides to go to him and beg him to reconsider his decision, Sumitra reminds him of his status. This particular incident indicates that Sumitra knows about her and her son’s position in the family and the worth of their plea as well. All she requests him is to accompany Rama to the exile and rather provide him strength.

Devdutta Pattnaik’s retelling of the *Ramayana* also narrates the story of Sumitra and her position in the Raghu clan. Rishyashringa through yagna helped Dasaratha to get a potion which would provide the queens sons. Pattnaik writes, “Dasaratha gave half the potion to Kaushalya, the wife he respected, and half to
Kaikeyi, the wife he loved.”(15) But Sumitra was not given any potion by her husband. It was Kaushalya who gave one quarter of his share to Sumitra followed by Kaikeyi as she didn’t want her to feel ignored and left out. This particular gesture of Dasaratha shows that he was not concerned about Sumitra if his queens of royal lineage could provide him sons. Sumitra’s status as a queen did not have much significance and so she was never in the race of being queen mother. She was neither loved nor respected but just needed at a moment in Dasaratha’s life. But none of the narratives present her as a radical woman questioning her status in the family or royal court. She remains a silent character in the entire course of epic as well as a number of rewritings.

Sumitra’s marginalization is a strange theme as it never gained popularity among masses. She was never seen as a victim of ‘caste discrimination’. These narratives provide space for her character and attract attention towards her in a novel manner in the rewritings. Though both the narratives do not put Sumitra’s status and question as the central theme of the work but they do raise the question of caste and lineage through her.

**Shambhuka**

The other victim of caste oppression from the *Ramayana* is Shambhuka. Shambhuka is also a lesser know character of the epic *Ramayana*. There may be cited multiple reasons (social and religious) which lead to his disappearance in popular discourse. Sumitra in the epic is silent about her subjugation while Shambhuka’s attempt at doing something inappropriate to his caste invites death
sentence for him. Shambhuka’s story is a small incident from the *Ramayana* found in Uttara-kanda of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. Inspired by Valmiki, Shambhuka, a low caste man, becomes a hermit and starts doing tapasya. Simultaneously a brahmin boy dies untimely in Ayodhya and the father accuses Rama’s failure as a king for the death as no brahmana can die untimely in the reign of a just king and he is not able to control his people because Shambhuka, a low-caste man performs tapasya in Ayodhya, a task inappropriate to his caste and considered highly sinful. To maintain the social status quo Rama as a king, persuades him to return to Ayodhya and when Shambhuka defies his request, Rama punishes Shambhuka by pouring lead into his ear and killing him. Devdutta Pattanaik in his retelling gives a twist to the tale and also comments how the upper class idealises sacrifices. Here after killing Shambhuka Rama glorifies that death and calls it a sacrifice in the name of Ramrajya. Shambhuka’s story has been turned into plays that show the caste bias of the *Ramayana*. E. V. Ramakrishnan in *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translations* considers it as a tale that reveals that Rama was not a good king everyone claimed he was. Further, he also emphasises that B. R. Ambedkar also believed that the tale of Shambhuka was not so much about his character but instability of Rama’s character because it established the notion that the caste system needed violence for enforcement.

This incident is important not only to highlight caste discrimination in the epic but also important to show the response of Rama towards ‘low-caste’ people in two different situations. Rama in exile, happily eats dates offered by Shabri and
blesses her while Rama as king of Ayodhya punishes Shambhuka for violating caste codes. Thus Rama’s attitude towards caste differs in different situations. Duty towards throne and loyalty towards the state and clan always superseded personal relations and emotions in the family. This also highlights the brahmin-kshatriya nexus to maintain their power in society and also signifies how the knowledge of Shastra’s were limited to Brahmans. When a shudra tries to acquire knowledge, a Brahmin boy dies. This symbolizes the social fear arising out of a belief that it was inauspicious when a low-caste tries to gain power and knowledge.

The Mahabharata, as discussed in Chapter two, is an epic with multiple layers of significance. Every character, including God, is endowed with both good and bad qualities. It is not an idealized text like Ramayana, but revered in parts (like Srimad Bhagwat Gita or Harikatha). Being a story central to the kshatriya clan, many characters in the epic are victims of caste hierarchy. Karna, Eklavya, Vidur and Yuyutsu are victims of this hegemonic system and this victimization also affect the course of the epic.

**Karna**

“Karna is an enigmatic figure” (5), says Iravati Karve in Yuganta. He emerges as one of the greatest warriors and archers in the battle of Kurukshetra. He is the most generous and large hearted man who gave people whatever they demanded as alms. That is why he is famously called ‘Danveer Karna’. But his life had a lot of turbulence right from his birth. He is the first son of unmarried Kunti who could not get recognition as a legal heir because of social taboos. Born as a
kshatriya and son of sun-god but brought up as a charioteer’s son the topsy-turvy fate of him makes him a self learnt warrior and achiever. Facing discrimination from early age to the last moments of life, he lives his life all alone. There is very less known about his family and children because most of his life was dedicated to prove his worth of not being called merely as a charioteer-son but a capable warrior who could defeat Arjuna. The character has received mixed responses including sympathy and hatred at the same time. He is also a pitied and controversial character because of consequences he faces in life. Writers have looked for multiple dimensions of his character. One of the best poetic creations on his character is Ramdhari Singh Dinkar’s Rashmirathi which has focused on the gloomy and poignant aspect of his character where Karna’s kindness, magnanimity and valor is described in a fascinating manner. Dinkar has narrated the struggles of Karna’s life in poetic way. The book not only presents him as the hero of the epic but raises certain contemporary questions related to the prevalent caste system in society. Karna is a victim of caste system. Born of Kshatriya mother as a boon of Sun-God he is doomed to live his life as a charioteer’s son who despite being endowed with great archery skills could not get trained by Dronacharya as he did not belong to the royal family. The poem, by bringing to the centre the character of Karna, opens a debate about caste system and through Karna he has attempted a critique of caste system.

The character of Karna grows with the epic struggle between Pandavas and Kauravas. His rejection as well as his commendation is based on his struggle to
prove his worth as a warrior and rejection of his identity as a charioteer’s son by himself. *Rashmirathi* establishes him as a noble and generous character of the epic. Condemned, cursed and demoralized at every step of his life, he, at the end of the narrative emerges as generosity personified. But certain flaws of his character are also exposed through the poem. The first allegation the poet has against him is, that his personal rivalry against Arjuna surpasses his duty towards truth and honesty. His rejection of Kunti’s plea to join Pandavas is not just based on loyalty towards Duryodhana but also to establish himself as the better warrior than Arjuna in the battlefield which he could not do being in the Pandava’s side. Jealousy thus becomes a fatal flaw in his character. This personal jealousy that he inculcates is not just to prove himself as a better and more skillful master of the art of archery but also to denigrate Arjuna along with Drona. Drona’s fondness for Arjuna and disapproval of him as his disciple irks him and he knows that by defeating Arjuna he would not only prove his worth as the best warrior but also give a knock at the prevalent social order which did not allow him his share of honor. His personal rivalry pushes him to suspend his reason and sense of justice.

Karna is not just an ordinary warrior. Denied of a teacher, he becomes a self trained warrior. The tag of a low-caste or a ‘sut-putra’ burdens him to prove his ability and identity as a warrior and overthrow his caste identity. Rejection becomes a consistent motif in his life. Initially rejected by his mother he is refused tutelage for being a low caste. Rejected, humiliated and cursed by two teachers
(Dronacharya and Parashuram) he finally declares himself a disciple of Sun god and starts training under him. Dinkar in his poem Rashmirathi writes-

\[
\text{Gyan-dhyān, shastrārth, shastra ka kar samyak abhyās,}
\]

\[
\text{Apne gun ka kiya Karna ne aap swayam suvikas. (1)}
\]

(Karna, by thoroughly practicing thousand arms and learning, self trained himself.) (my translation)

Shivaji Sawant’s Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror (1989), a bildungsroman and written in the first person narrative also highlights the psychological state of a child who faces the discrimination for the first time and who is unable to comprehend and cope with it. When Adhiratha takes Karna to school for military training he is mocked for his ‘foolishness’. Drona, when asked by Adhiratha to train his son, replies-

With the princes? Adhiratha, war-skills are a Kshatriya’s prerogative. You can get your son admitted here, but you cannot expect him to learn with the Kshatriyas princes. (42)

Another conversation between Adhiratha and Karna makes Karna understand the prevalent atrocities of caste.

“Pita-ji, why can’t I get training along with princes?”

“Because my son! You are not a Kshatriya.” He replied.

“What’s ‘Kshatriya’?” Karna asked.
“Anyone born in a royal family is a Kshatriya. You are born to a charioteer,

my child”- replied Adhiratha.

“Lineage! Are the royalty born blessed with hundred of arms…” (43)

This instance shows that Karna was a rebel and could not take anything derogatory in the name of oppressing custom. Dinkar’s Rasmirathi also echoes with the same theme when he writes,

_Jaati! haye re jaati! Karna ka hriday kshobh se dola,_

_Kupit surya ki or dekh wo veer krodha se bola,_

_Jaati-jaati rat-te jinki poonji keval paakhand_

_Main kya jaanu jaati? Jaati hain ye mere bhujdand._ (15)

(Karna perplexed by the mention of his caste, looked at Sun-god, and spoke that caste is the property of hypocrites only, and my strength represents my caste.) (my translation)

Both the texts Rashmirathi and Mrityunjay: _The Death Conqueror_ show how Karna after being humiliated by the refusal of Drona self appointed Sun-God as his teacher. This is not only a refusal of hierarchal system which prevents an able man to prove his worth because of his birth but also a belief that Karna could make his own way and did not need anyone to prove himself. Further Karna says,

_Poocho meri jaati shakti ho toh mere bhujbal se_
(Ask my caste, if you have guts, by seeing my strength, my forehead and my shield and earing). (my translation)

Karna despite being a Kshatriya is brought up as a charioteer’s son. He does not know about his identity till the battle of Kurukshetra starts and Krishna and Kunti disclose to him the story of his birth. He is always resentful because he is dissatisfied with his identity. Though his foster parents, Radha and Athiratha, love him immensely, he always resents his identity. Out of his competence and the will of fate, he becomes Angaraja – the king of Anga. He gets many things and is given a position and place in the palace. He has everything that life could offer. He is always unhappy and miserable because he does not come to terms with what he was being labeled as. Wherever he goes, people refer to him as a suta or “low-born” because of his ambitions. Throughout his life he complains about this. All the time, he nourishes bitterness within himself about his so-called low birth. Then why does he feel agitated at the mention of his caste every time? Did he also believe in the hierarchal system and felt offended at the mention of his identity? Why is he not contended by only being a notable and gifted warrior and being a charioteer’s son? These are certain recurrent questions which consistently haunt the narratives based on his character.

Dissatisfied by his caste, Sawant in his narrative points out certain occasions where Karna himself resents about his identity. Talking to his wife Vrishali, he asks her, “Doesn’t it ever come to you, how wonderful it would have been if your
husband were not a charioteer’s son?” (266). Vrishali asks, “Why is it that you have no pride in your caste? Why don’t you announce it with all public fanfare that you are a charioteer’s son. What is the insult in being called as the one?” He perplexed, replies, “Vrishali, for twenty five years I have been trying to collect all my energies to accept the truth. But I have not succeeded. I should be proud of the fact that I am a charioteer’s son, but I am not.” This remark speaks of his own view about caste system. Despite being a victim of caste discrimination, these instances prove him a believer of it.

Like Duryodhana he is also presented as an opportunist. As Duryodhana could foresee that only Karna could help him to stand against Pandavas likewise Karna also exploits the enmity between Kauravas and Pandavas as his weapon to supersede Arjuna in the battlefield only to be acknowledged as the best warrior of all times. His urge to become a better warrior than Arjuna is fuelled by Dronacharya’s rejection as well as Draupadi’s refusal to marry a sut-putra (later Draupadi marries Arjuna). Arjuna recurrently becomes the reason of his resentment. He always wants to prove his worth as a warrior despite being a charioteer’s son. In Sawant’s narrative, these two incidents make him a wounded warrior whose sole aim is to defeat Arjuna, and his alliance with Duryodhana provides him an opportunity to achieve his goal. Even in the concluding moments of his life, he reminds Arjuna that he should not attack an unarmed person while he assassinates Abhimanyu in the same way. This classifies him as an opportunist.
His desire to avenge makes him an irrational person at times. But Sawant in his work justifies Karna’s stand by portraying him as a tragic hero. Sawant justifies Karna’s moves and motives by showing him as victim of circumstances. He also depicts an uncanny similarity between Krishna and Karna and hints at a mystic link between them, investing his protagonist with a more-than-human aura to offset the un-heroic and even unmanly acts which mar this tremendously complex and utterly fascinating creation of Vyasa.

Karna is a self made man. Through this character Dinkar and Sawant look into the traditional history of discrimination and show how individual capability is overlooked by the social order in the name of culture and tradition. Dinkar through Karna’s words in Rashmirathi writes-

Paate hain samman tapobal se bhootal par shoor,

Jaati jaati ka shor machate keval kayar kroor. (16)

(Brave men are revered by their valor, ‘caste’ is the shield of cowardice and ruthlessness.) (my translation)

Written as a reply to the dominating Brahminical system where caste is always hooked with individual’s work and performance Karna is not accepted as a warrior and rejected and humiliated because of his caste, initially. He himself detests his identity. His resentment is a proof of how deeply the notion of ‘caste’ is embedded in the social and cultural psyche of India.
Ekalavya

Another character in the epic, the *Mahabharata* who is the victim of caste discrimination is Ekalavya. The *Tribune* on January 5, 2013 published a news with the headline “Dronacharya did injustice with Eklavya”. Commenting on the incident of the conviction of four persons for stripping a tribal woman and parading her naked in a Maharashtra village in broad daylight the bench described the incident as “shameful, shocking and outrageous”. The court of Bench of two Justices, Markandey Katju and Gyan Sudha Misra in their verdict even went to the extent of holding Dronacharya guilty of meting out injustice to Eklavya, a tribal, by extracting his right thumb as ‘guru dakshina’ for teaching archery. “This is a shameful act on the part of Dronacharya. He had not even taught Eklavya, so what right had he to demand guru dakshina,”(1).

The Ekalavya-Dronacharya episode in the *Mahabharata* is an ever-pulsating question even in contemporary Indian society. Not only an episode of caste discrimination, but the two characters, Karna and Ekalavya, are also victims of academic favoritism where only to keep his promise to establish Arjuna as the greatest archer in the world and being loyal in his duty towards the throne, Drona denies them training. Appearing in the epic for a short instance, Ekalavya is proclaimed as the ‘ideal disciple’. He is a Nishada prince who once was rejected by Drona for tutelage, like Karna, and self-trains in the skill of archery. But unlike Karna, he does not bear any hard feeling against Drona and respects him as a Guru. After carving the idol of Drona he starts his practice and excels at the skill of
archery. But Drona by his shrewdness prevents him from exhibiting his excellent archery skills to the whole world by asking him his right hand thumb as a ‘guru-dakshina’. He and his kshatriya students are not pleased to discover that a tribal can excel them, especially Arjuna. Then onwards, revered and praised as the one who could give everything to his Guru as *Guru-Dakshina* he becomes an epitome of respect and sacrifice and is proclaimed as the ideal disciple. But his sacrifice has the undertones of subjugation and victimization in the name of caste.

Hansa Pathak’s *The Offering*, Shiv Shankar Pattnaik’s *Eklavya* (in Hindi translation) and Shankar Shesh’s *Ek Aur Dronacharya* are the texts chosen to illustrate the character and look how rewritings have demonstrated and interpreted this character. *The Offering* is a small graphic narrative to illustrate the character of Eklavya from Narada Muni’s perspective. The sage who is an objective viewer of Eklavya’s life and Drona’s treatment to him is the silent viewer of the events that lead to the battle of Mahabharata. In this text Ekalavya’s story begins before war. Narada narrates it in flashback to engage the bodyguards of Drona in his story and let Ekalavya’s son meet Drona, and ask about the injustice Drona did to his father. Narada narrates how Drona’s commitment to give tutelage only to kshatriya princes led to the rejection and injustice towards Karna and Ekalavya. The story also presents Arjuna a jealous prince who could not accept the supremacy of any other archer and therefore tries to misguide Eklavya. Eklavya, not much affected by this rejection starts his self-training and spends his life in a forest practicing archery. Everything goes fine until one day when Ekalavya denies the princes their
right to hunt. His skillful archery scares Arjuna and Drona, and he falls prey to their plan of robbing him of his skill. Drona with all his tricks takes away Ekalavya of his talent by asking him his right hand thumb as his fee. This incident lies deep embedded in Dronacharya’s subconscious which becomes afresh in his mind after Eka’s (Ekalavya’s son) sudden entry in Drona’s camp. Eka asks about his father which evokes guilt in Drona’s mind.

The narrative shifts from Ekalavya’s plight to Drona’s personal experience of caste victimization. Drona here is also presented as a victim. Being a Brahmin it is uncustomary for him to have the knowledge of war skills and weapons. He is consistently poked by Drupad for not performing at par with him. There is an urge in him to perform better than Drupad. Drupad being a Kshatriya and prince is stout, well built and skilled in archery and other sports. Drona’s skill is not valued because archery and other war skills are customarily not meant for him. He spends his life in utter poverty when he lives as a Brahmin and is mocked and humiliated when he tries to acquire wealth and power and reminded of his status as a Brahmin who, according to social order has to spend his life begging alms from others. This is an instance of reverse-discrimination.

But this experience does not transform him and he treats Karna and Ekalavya in the same way by refusing them guidance. Moreover, to avenge his humiliation by Drupad, he uses his knowledge and skill and thus plots against Drupad.
*Ekalavya* (1986) by Shiv Shankar Pattnaik, written originally in Odia and translated into Hindi by the writer himself is an extensive work on the character of Ekalavya. Again a buildsroman, the novel written in first person narrative presents the story of Ekalavya’s birth, life and his take on the epic. He is the only son of a tribal (nishad) king. Ekalavya begins his story in a flashback. Yuyutsu, the illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra, comes to the court of Ekalavya to inform him about his felicitation in Kuru court. Ekalavya unwillingly accepts the invitation and ponders over the unfortunate battle of Mahabharata. He ponders over the validity and futility of the war and blames every character for the war.

In the novel, Ekalavya is presented, right from his childhood as adventurous and brave. Impressed by his valor, a tribal princess falls in love with him. But before getting married, he has to fulfil his father’s dream of seeing him as the best archer of the world. To make his dream come true he tries to learn archery from Dronacharya. Drona’s son Ashwatthama is his friend and his wife also treats him as a son. When Ashwattama comes to know about his friend’s dream he tries to help him and asks Drona to admit him in his school. But Drona, bound by the rule of a Raj-guru does not accept him as his school is funded by the state where a commoner cannot learn with the princes. So Karna’s unfortunate incident is replicated in the case of Ekalavya. But instead of holding any grudge against Drona, he learns archery by self-practice. More than the rejection by Drona, it is the attitude of princes which hurts him. He earns Arjuna’s wrath and jealousy only on the mention of his capability. So he starts his life aloof in the forest. Gradually, he
becomes a good archer and becomes famous. But being a tribal, he does not use his skill to kill for enjoyment. When the princes from Hastinapur try to disturb the calm of the forest and attack animals for their sports, he intervenes which annoys Arjuna. Arjuna on seeing Drona’s idol feels betrayed and questions Drona’s loyalty towards the throne. Drona in order to prove his loyalty and safeguard Arjuna’s position decides to meet Ekalavya (though the novel mentions that Drona was himself eager to meet his best disciple, but could not confess it). In this narrative, he declares and acknowledges Ekalavya as his best disciple in public and does not demand any ‘guru-dakshina’ out of his guilt and hesitation. But Ekalavya when he sees his guru’s dilemma cuts his thumb and willingly offers him. This gesture of Ekalavya makes him a revered character everywhere. But the fellow tribals do not idealize his act and blame him for future victimization of the downtrodden. His friends accuse him of over dedication and succumbing to the pressure of royals and high caste demands in the name of dedication which would lead to their victimization in future. Ekalavya’s act of dedication is thus not glorified but questioned here. But interestingly, Ekalavya’s story does not end here in the novel unlike popular belief and he does not disappear after this incident. He remains the head of his clan and makes his army strong. Out of respect and appreciation for his effort, Yudhishthira offers him to fight from his side in the battle of Mahabharata. But being skeptical about the motives of the war, he chooses to remain indifferent and does not accept the offer. The only time he enters the battle is when he comes to know his Guru’s assassination by Drishtadyumna and to take revenge calls for Bramhastra. But Krishna pacifies him and he again returns to his clan. After the
battle is over, on the invitation of Yudhishthira, he comes to Hastinapur and enjoys
his position as an associate of the king.

This narrative gives a detailed account of Ekalavya’s life with a tinge of
imagination. Ekalavya’s story is a small incident in the large frame of the
Mahabharata while Shivshankar Pattnaik gives a detailed account of his life and
gives him a new lease of life. Even after giving Drona his thumb his capability as a
warrior is not marred. He is a protector of his clan and later on, rises to the position
of the king’s associate. His marginalization is compensated with glorification and
acknowledgment, and his victimized representation is replaced with valor and
dignity. Even Dronacharya is not vilified but rather presented as a victim of state
policy.

Another significant work exploiting the myth of Ekalavya is Shankar
Shesh’s play Ek Aur Dronacharya. This is a contemporary rendition of infamous
Dronacharya-Ekalavya episode from the epic Mahabharata. Two stories run
parallel in the play and are interwoven. Arvind, a college professor and a man of
strong professional ethics catches the president’s son Rajkumar cheating in
examination and reports it to authorities. But extreme pressure from colleagues,
friends and family forces him to withdraw his complaint. Chandu, another student
of college is wrongly accused by another professor for cheating and asks for help
from Arvind. He believes that Arvind who is man of strong principles would not
succumb to any pressure and favor him and get Rajkumar punished. But Arvind,
scared of losing his job, and driven by ambition to become the college principal
steps back and Chandu is punished. To maintain his position as the college principal he once again does not take any action against Rajkumar when he attempts to rape a girl, Anuradha. Heartbroken, she commits suicide and Arvind feels guilty for her death. His condition reminds of Dronacharya’s position in the *Mahabharata* where he could not speak against any injustice meted out to Pandavas and Draupadi because as a beneficiary he was bound to the decision of the court. Moreover, to relish his position as ‘Raj-guru’ and beneficiary of the state Drona rejects Karna and Eklavya and robs Ekalavya of his skills only to favor Arjuna. In the other part of the play, the infamous Ekalavya- Dronacharya episode is shown where injustice is meted towards Ekalavya by his teacher whom he trusted most. Not only Ekalavya but Karna (who was denied tutelage for being a low-caste) and Draupadi (whose humiliation went unopposed by Dronacharya) are also victims of Drona’s strategical silence. This play throws light on the dilemma Drona faces when he succumbs to his monetary needs and position in the court and compares it with Arvind’s situation in contemporary reality. Driven by his ambition to gain the position of Principal of his college, he compromises with his ethics and principles.

The play focuses on the character of Arvind who symbolizes Dronacharya. It is also a comment on the growing commercialization of education. Arvind is a victim of societal pressure, monetary needs and fear. A man of strong ethics and commitment is transformed into an insatiable and coward man who scared of losing his job does not stand against injustice. But the significant aspect of the play is to
highlight the ‘new Ekalavya’. Ekalavya is often used as a synonym of marginalization of dalits and tribals in India. He is portrayed as the biggest victim of caste system in India and is also an acclaimed figure and eulogized as an ideal disciple who despite suffering did not hold any grudge against his tormentor. But this text talks about the new Ekalavya. Arvind is a representative of Dronacharya and his position is similar to the position of Drona. But Ekalavya has a new representation in the text. He is not a representative of marginalized caste but belongs to the economically undeprevileged class of the society. He is victimized because he is no son of a president and is not economically strong enough to allure people. Chandu, who is the new Ekalavya in the text is unjustly punished by college authorities. He looks up to Arvind for justice but Arvind turns down his expectation and he gets rusticated. By favoring Rajkumar and gaining the trust of the president, he rises to the position of college principal but is always haunted by his misdeeds.

But the victimization of Ekalavya/Chandu is not credited solely to Dronacharya/Arvind. The playwright here points out the factors which are eventually responsible for the making of Dronacharya/Arvind and victimization of people like Ekalavya/Chandu where the system creates a situation where many unfortunate Ekalavyas are created and made to suffer. People like Leela, president, Vimlendu etc pressurize on an honest teacher to adopt wrong means to be economically secure in life. They symbolize Dronacharya’s predicament.
The text gives voice to Ekalavya’s marginalization through Chandu. In the play, Chandu does not sacrifice willingly but asks Prof. Arvind to save him. But when Arvind due to certain pressure does not save him, he takes revenge and does not spare him. His resistance is given voice and Arvind who represents Drona’s situation and helplessness is accused of succumbing to economical gains and position. Moreover, like Chandu he is also a victim of commercialization of education. His ethical stand is attacked and he also becomes a corrupt man. Chandu’s retaliation and Vimlendu’s vision makes him see his fault by seeing his situation similar to that of Dronacharya. Funded by state both of them did not have chance to stand against authoritative forces and this leads to making and victimization of many Ekalavyas, Karnas and Chandu.

Like Shambhuka, Eklavya also aspires for something inappropriate for his caste. Though archery is important to survive in the forest, his excellence in it becomes the cause of envy for Drona and Arjuna (Brahmin-kshatriya nexus). As Ram by beheading Shambhuka attacks on the site of knowledge and he is revived with no knowledge (as a Shudra is not allowed to have vedic knowledge) Drona also destroys Arjuna’s rival and disarms a potential tribal prince. “Kshatriya power is ensured at the expense of tribal’s traditional means of defending themselves” - writes Uma Chakravarti in her book *Gendering Caste: Through A Feminist Lens*.

By placing at the centre these marginalized characters (in terms of caste) of the epics, many questions have been raised by contemporary writers in their renditions of the epic. Rewritings give scope to the writers to exercise their
imagination and look for solutions to many contemporary questions and try to draw parallel between epic and contemporary situation.

Apart from these popularly marginalized characters, two other characters from Mahabharata- Yuyutsu and Vidur are also victims of caste discrimination. Yuyutsu gets an appearance in Mahaswta Devi’s ‘Souvali’ as Dharmavir Bharti’s *Andha Yug*. It is about Yuyutsu, a son born to Dhritarashtra of a maid called Souvali. After loosing all hundred sons in the battle of Kurukshetra, Yuyutsu performs the last rites of Dhritarashtra who did not acknowledge him as a legitimate son in his lifetime as his mother was a maid. Like Vidura, despite being a capable leader he is denied the privileges for being a half-caste.

There are some retellings which present an intersection of marginalization in terms of both caste and gender. Parishrami, Vidur’s mother and Souvali, Yuyutsu’s mother are victims of gender as well as caste discrimination. Being a maid they are forced to sleep with men and their consent is not sought. Their social status worsens their situation because they cannot retaliate. Their sons are also victims of this hierarchy. Some writers in their work have highlighted this nexus of dual discrimination. *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi belongs to this category which tells the story of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman encountered by state Special Forces. She is victimized not only for his rebellion against state but also punished for being a woman. Like Draupadi, she is also stripped but is not saved by Krishna.

Mahasweta Devi’s another collection of short stories *After Kurukshetra* is also a comment on the nexus between caste and gender as well as how lives and
aspirations of underprivileged go unnoticed. Citing three stories related to the events after the war of Kurukshetra, these tales make us to look at the Mahabharata with new eyes insisting on the inclusion within the master narrative viewpoints of those previously unrepresented women and the underclass. With the ancient epic Mahabharata as her source and the battle of Kurukshetra as a central motif Mahasweta Devi weaves three stories in which she looks at events from the eyes of women and dalits who are marginalized and dispossessed. Their eyes condemn the wanton waste and inhumanity of war. This Kurukshetra is not the legendary Dharmayuddha of the popular imagination but rather a cold blooded power game sacrificing countless human lives. The first story “The Five Women” is a comment how five women have suffered the futility of war and are compelled to spend their life as widows because of a war in which they have nothing to gain. Their position remain static but the war has burdened them with irrevocable loss. The second story is “Kunti and the Nishadin” where a Nishad woman reminds Kunti of her greatest crime. Kunti believed that her injustice towards Karna is her greatest crime while the woman reminds her of her ploy where she trickily puts a Nishadin woman and her five sons to death and it was popularly celebrated as an act of intelligence where she saved life of five princes. The widow of one of the sons reminds Kunti of her crime. This story also shows how the life of the underprivileged is considered insignificant by the upper class. The last story is entitled as “Souvali” based on the narrative of Souvali, the mother of Yuyutsu, the illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra. After the death of Dhritarashtra Yuyutsu decides to perform the last rite of his father who never acknowledged him as his son. These
stories apart from being the narratives of the dalits, tribals or underprivileged also comment on how the mainstream renditions have overlooked these stories or sung them as a glory to hail Mahabharata.

*Sita*, a novella by Ramnika Gupta, recreates the hierarchal old order by designating it anew. This Sita is a dalit woman, hardworking, robust and intelligent. When her husband and his second wife try to cheat her and even poison her, she proves stronger and more resourceful than them. This novella is a comment on women’s rights, class discrimination and caste discrimination. She is a dedicated wife till her husband gets a second wife. When reminded of her duties as a wife and importance of her name, she vehemently retorts and compares her situation with Devi Sita. She says-

Don’t you remember Sitaji had followed her husband to the forest?’

Someone from the crowds called out…. ‘You are teaching me Ramayana! You call him Ram. This man Yaseen who has another wife? Ramji did not marry again. Get me right- I am no Sita to follow her man to the forest.(95)

Sita is the daughter of a king. She is an incarnation of goddess Lakshmi. Ideally proclaimed as a devoted and truthful woman, she upholds so called ‘feminine virtues’. But this Sita is a dalit woman. Her husband is not faithful to her. She suffers dual marginalization. So she does not attempt to save her husband from social disgrace rather avenges injustice done against her. This Sita belonging to dalit class is more headstrong. She does not hand over her child to the father as
Ramayana’s Sita rather promises to use him to fight against her husband. By presenting her, she contrasts between two Sitas belonging to different sections of the society. The mythological Sita, who is from a royal lineage and subservient is contrasted with this image. This Sita is thus more outspoken and courageous. She has no fear of social disgrace like Sita of the Ramayana. She is also not bothered about the disgrace of her husband as well. So, her vengeance becomes important than Sita’s as she has overcome the hurdle of caste as well as gender.

With the help of the renarratives based on these four characters of the two epics, narrators have tried to show the that the even the revered and sacred texts which hold a privileged position and are beyond interrogation have the element of subjugation which is subdued by the dominating class. Their stories do not find a place in the dominant narratives and remain unsung for a long time because they might affect the harmony of the text. But these writers foreground their version to point out the loophole and sing the unsung tales of these characters. Their subjugation is a means to maintain the prevalent social order and the underprivileged away from the power positions.

Caste continues to enjoy a socially sanctioned privilege in India till now. The mythological and religious origin of this issue is also evident in many texts and social custom. Contemporary writers in the above mentioned rewritings try to resist the discrimination by pointing out the loopholes of the subjugating caste system in
the Indian mythology and epics which promote segregation in the name of purity.

Many rewritings, as mentioned above, not only provide space to the marginalized and segregated characters of mythology but also expose how popular renditions of the epic overlook these marginalization. Rewriting is a resistant writing and it continues to resist against various hierarchies.