**Ekalavya in the *Mahabharata* and His Modern Followers**

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The story of Ekalavya takes up less than 40 verses in the 100,000 verse *Mahabharata*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet it is a brief episode that has found resonance among multiple modern audiences in contemporary India. In this paper I will examine the role that the Ekalavya episode plays in the *Mahabharata*, and the broader themes of Dharma that it addresses. Then I will look at several ways that contemporary audiences in India have retold Ekalavya’s stories, and the way this episode has continued to live, or perhaps been resurrected, in relation to modern social concerns and cultural anxieties.

My initial perspective in this paper is drawn from the writings of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. I begin with a quote from one of his late essays, collected in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Speaking of literary works, he writes:

Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* and frequently (with great works, always) their lives there are more intense and fuller than their lives within their own time. . . In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Whether the modern lives of the *Mahabharata* are really richer and fuller than the life it led in classical India is impossible to evaluate. But the fact that the epic has been enriched in subsequent centuries up to the twenty-first with new meanings and new signficances is undeniable. I will emphasize here how those new significances are themselves grounded in social realities of the time and place of the new readers.

In the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya is the ambitious son of a chieftain of the Nishadas. As we know, the *Mahabharata* is an epic that deals almost entirely with the elite classes of early India, namely the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins. So it is noteworthy when other classes do appear in the narrative. Who are the Nishadas?

In epic literature, the Nishadas are nearby-outsiders. They are forest people, who are not part of the conventional system to the four varnas, but they live close at hand. For example, when Valmiki (who is living in an ashram just ten miles or so from the city of Ayodhya) curses a huntsman for shooting a krauncha bird in the act of making love, which in turn leads him to invent the shloka verse, that cursed huntsman is a Nishada.[[3]](#footnote-3) When Rama is expelled from Ayodhya and heads south, he meets the Nishada chieftain Guha on the banks of the Ganges. The Nishadas govern themselves with chieftains or councils of male elders. They practice livelihoods like fishing and hunting, at which they often excel. As Guha says of himself, “I have wandered the forest all my life and nothing happens here without my knowing of it.”[[4]](#footnote-4) They are also known for their expertise with elephants. They domesticate the elephants of the forests and train them for heavy labor and battle.[[5]](#footnote-5) Living near but not in Indo-Aryan society, these forest people (to adopt Ashoka’s term) engage in trade and provide valuable resources and services to the more settled communities. Kings in particular depend on the nearby forest people. Their skills as hunters and elephant-trainers make Nishadas valuable allies in times of war. In the great battle at Kurukshetra, the *Mahabharata* lists numerous elephant-corps led by Nishadas and other forest groups.

In the *Mahabharata,* the Nishada youth Ekalavya wishes to be a great archer. He goes off to the capital city, Hastinapura, to apply for admission to the best training school for warriors. The great Drona, a Brahmin, has been hired by the elders of the Bharata clan to teach the military arts to the young Kshatriya princes of the Kaurava and Pandava families. Drona turns Ekalavya down. He refuses to teach a Nishada. Perhaps it is a simple matter of varna-prejudice, or perhaps a matter of reserving a monopoly on the most effective military technologies to the state. The determined Ekalavya is undeterred. He returns to the forest, fashions a clay image of the teacher Drona, and practices assiduously in front of this image. Eventually he becomes a master archer.

One day the Pandava princes go out hunting in the forest. Their hunting dog comes across Ekalavya, who is busy with his archery practice. The dog begins to bark annoyingly at the dirty Nishada, disrupting his practice. Finally he gets so frustrated with the yapping dog that he fires off seven arrows, almost simultaneously, that close up the dog’s mouth like stitches. The dog returns to its masters with the arrows protruding from its mouth, and they are amazed. Who could have done this, something not even Arjuna would have been able to do. They search and find Ekalavya. Who is he, they ask, and where has he gained such skill. He replies that he is the pupil of Drona.

Arjuna is a jealous guy. Drona has promised to make him the greatest archer of them all. So back in the capital, Arjuna confronts Drona. How has his teacher taught this other student, who now excels him? Perhaps it rankles even more that this other student is not even a Kshatriya. Drona and Arjuna go out to pay a visit to Ekalavya. As soon as Drona appears, Ekalavya falls to the ground and embraces Drona’s feet. He declares himself Drona’s humble pupil. If you are my pupil, Drona replies coldly, then you should give me my guru-dakshina. Ekalavya immediately agrees to any honorarium that Drona might ask. Drona demands Ekalavya’s right thumb as his teacher-gift. With a happy face Ekalavya unhesitatingly cuts it off and hands the severed digit to his teacher. Ekalavya will never again be so quick a shot, the narrator concludes. Arjuna’s jealousy and competitive anxiety are mollified, and Drona has kept his promise to Arjuna.

How should we interpret this episode? First, let’s consider it within its own literary and historical context. What might it have said to its audience at the time of the composition of the *Mahabharata*? Why does Vyasa include this small side story in his master narrative?

As modern readers, we may respond most immediately to the pathos of the lower class character Ekalavya. But the Sanskrit epics are much more concerned with the lives and the Dharma of the upper class Kshatriyas and Brahmins. In its own compositional context, the Ekalavya episode says much more about Arjuna and Drona than it does about Ekalavya. The first part of the epic, where this episode is located, depicts the Kshatriya class as increasingly corrupt and divided by competitive animosities. These particularly center around the two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, whose bitter competition leads ultimately to the great war. But many others are also part of this general deterioration in Dharma. The Brahmin teacher Drona has taken on his role in the Hastinapura court out of a desire to gain revenge on a Kshatriya ruler who he feels has disrespected him. Arjuna’s anxious competitiveness and Drona’s aloof cruelty to a lower class character are brief illustrations of the broader theme, the Dharmic decline of the Kshatriya class, centered on the Bharata royal lineage.

We can contrast this conduct with Rama’s treatment of the Nishada chieftain Guha in the *Ramayana*. If Arjuna is Goofus, demonstrating incorrect or unwise behavior, Rama is (almost always) Gallant, the exemplar of Kshatriya Dharma. When Rama departs with Lakshmana and Sita into exile, his first human encounter is with the Nishadas. While the *Mahabharata* episode illustrates Kshatriya prickliness over any challenge from an outsider, Rama’s encounter with Guha demonstrates a more friendly, mutual, and Dharma-based model of interaction between Kshatriya elites and forest people at the margins. Rama arrives at the river’s edge, and Guha quickly approaches and embraces him. The Nishada chieftain has food, drink, and a welcome-gift brought for the weary travelers. Guha may be leader of his tribe, but he immediately proclaims Rama’s overlordship: “I bid you welcome, great-armed prince. This entire land belongs to you. We are servants, you the master. Come, our kingdom is yours to rule.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Guha’s statement here is more than hospitable hyperbole, but less than a gift of direct sovereignty. Guha’s Nishada tribe maintains its effective dominion within its river-bank territory, but it also recognizes the potential domination of a city-based kingdom like Ayodhya, and so Guha rhetorically places his own “kingdom” as subordinate within the broader overlordship of Rama’s more powerful one. Rama is moved by Guha’s show of affection and asks politely about the welfare of Guha’s kingdom. He adds that he is now an ascetic and cannot accept all Guha’s offerings. He will only take some fodder for the horses. Guha weeps when Lakshmana later explains the full situation of their exile, and grieves for them “like an elephant afflicted by a raging fever.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Rama is both his master and his friend. In a society of hierarchies, friendship need not imply equality.

The following morning Rama asks Guha to fetch some sap from a banyan tree. He uses it to mat his hair and that of Lakshmana. The brothers have now taken another step in transforming themselves into ascetics. Guha provides a boat and oarsmen to ferry Rama and his party across the Ganges. At this moment of transition in Rama’s life, as he moves from the settled kingdom of Ayodhya towards the uncharted lands to the south, his gracious interactions with the Nishada chieftain demonstrate his mastery of Dharma. Rama and Guha observe a mutually-respectful hierarchy. Guha provides what services he can to the Kshatriya overlord, and Rama extends to the forest ruler a dignified consideration.

Arjuna’s conduct towards Ekalavya has consequences. In the battle at Kurukshetra, Ekalavya fights on the Kaurava side. And later, when emperor Yudhishthira performs a Horse Sacrifice and Arjuna follows the horse on its wanderings, Ekalavya’s son (simply named Ekalavya-suta) comes out to oppose Arjuna. The Kshatriya defeats the Nishada, but not without difficulty. Arjuna’s failure to treat Ekalavya respectfully forecloses the possibility of forming an alliance that might be beneficial to both, and instead creates an enemy. In Vyasa’s larger epic design, I believe we should see the Ekalavya episode as a brief foreshadowing of Arjuna’s later, and much more consequential, disrespectful treatment of Karna at Drona’s commencement tournament. He too Arjuna indulges his jealousy, and stands on the principle of the exclusive rights of Kshatriyas. Karna’s alliance with the Kaurava leader Duryodhana, of course, is one of the conditions that leads most directly to the final confrontation at Kurukshetra.

In the past few decades the Ekalavya episode has become a popular and contested story in India. One finds retellings of the episode in all kinds of formats: comic books, graphic novels, novellas, cartoons, films, illustrations, and school dramas (which one can readily find on YouTube). We have always to keep in mind that modern “India” is not a single culture, just as it was not in ancient times. And (if we return to Bakhtin’s formulation) the new meanings and new significances that the *Mahabharata* has been enriched with in contemporary India, these are multiple, and they vary with the different situated audiences who engage in dialogue with the Ekalavya episode. Who does the audience identify with? What values can be drawn from the narrative? Here I’d like to discuss three broad groups of situated readers: middle-class Hindus (who may or may not be sympathetic to Hindutva politics), Dalits, and members of the modern Nishad community.

From a quick search of Amazon, here is a sample of books:

*Ekalavya (Famous Biographies for Children)*—Manish Kumar

*Ekalavya: The Inspiring Tale of a Self-Taught Archer and Warrior* (the Hindi version)

*Ekalavya—The Tale of a Self-Taught Warrior: Unleashing the Power of Ekalavya*

*The Offering: The Story of Ekalavya and Dronacharya*

*Great Warriors of India* (including Ekalavya along with Karna, Lakshmana, Vibhishana, Abhimany, and Shivaji)

*Corporate Ekalavya: be a smart learner*

Similarly, a Google search turns up a range of animated cartoons and brief plays. The audience for all this literature is children and young students.

When told for children and students, the story of Ekalavya focuses overwhelmingly on Ekalavya himself. Arjuna barely figures in it, despite his key role in the *Mahabharata* version. Ekalavya appears as an admirable and heroic, an exemplary student. The retellings usually acknowledge his low birth status. He is variously figured as Advasi, Shudra, or tribal, and his visual appearance is dark-skinned. The moral of the story is often clearly spelled out in the versions for children. So in “The Story of Eklavya for Kids,” from the Mom Junction, we learn: “Ekalavya’s story teaches us about the importance of sacrifice, determination, and hard work. Nothing can stop you if you are truly determined to achieve something and devote yourself to it.” His hard work and dedication enabled him to overcome the barriers that faced him. This version also adds the important detail that Ekalavya did not harm the Pandava dog when he shot the arrows to prevent its barking.

What about Drona’s demand on Ekalavya? This is not seen in terms of caste of class discrimination. Rather, it can be turned into an enabling obstacle. It heightens Ekalavya’s determination and willingness to sacrifice. The play-script “The Story of Ekalavya” sets this out in its introduction: “This is a story about a student’s complete dedication to his teacher, and there is a special term for this in Sanskrit. The term is *Guru Bhakti*. It is the belief that one has to surrender oneself to the teacher and be completely immersed in the learning process to master any skill.” At the end of the play, the authorial voice again enforces the moral. Guru Bhakti coordinated with a passion for learning “is a wonderful enabler to attain the highest level of mastery in any skill.” Here, obedience to authority, in the “Sanskrit” and religiously valuable form of *bhakti*, becomes a key value in gaining mastery. Of course, one might consider Drona’s demand on Ekalavya to be overly stringent. The CBSE Guess “Story of Ekalavya” acknowledges that Drona’s request may have been out of bounds. But it concludes that the “Gods in heaven silently praised the greatness of Ekalavya’s sacrifice.”

It is not hard to see how adults and teachers might be happy to enforce this message of obedience. This might appear as foreign to American audiences. But cite the docu-series on Bill Gotherd and the Institute in Basic Life Principles.

What about the ethics of teachers and gurus? Should Drona be exonerated? Let’s consider one guru’s response to this conundrum. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is an extremely successful modern Hindu guru, and a “global peace ambassador,” with a massive following among middle-class Hindus. He is not an explicit advocate of Hindutva and claims to be non-political, but he has supported Prime Minister Modi in the past and takes positions on public issues that are not incompatible with BJP politics. He retells the Ekalavya story on his website. He acknowledges that the story is one of exemplary discipleship, but he also promises to reveal an unseen side of the story.

Ravi Shankar situates the Ekalavya story in indeterminate “those days,” and explains that Drona’s refusal to teach Ekalavya was in fact mandated by the state, for the safety of the region. Just as police and military now should have a monopoly on the exercise of legitimate violence, so in “those days,” Shankar suggests, Kshatriyas retained exclusive rights to bear arms. Later in the story, when Drona demands his guru-dakshina, Ravi Shankar admits that Drona is often viewed as cruel and self-centered. “But,” he goes on, “when one looks at it from the point of view of the wise, one finds, if it were not for this incident, nobody would have ever known of Ekalavya.” By his demand, Drona uplifted Ekalavya to immortality as the “epitome of discipleship.” This is Ravi Shankar’s historical version of the gods silently applauding. Ravi Shankar, the modern middle-class Hindu guru, exonerates the Brahmin guru Drona, while praising the disciple Ekalavya for his unquestioning acceptance of the teacher’s debilitating demand, suggesting that this makes him the remembered figure that he is. While I have no reason to question Ravi Shankar’s ethical behavior as a guru, it is not difficult to see how a version of this line of reasoning can justify abusive conduct from gurus and other authority figures over their devotees.

Middle-class retellings of the Ekalavya story tend to skim over issues of class. They may admit that Ekalavya was from a lower strata of society, but they do not treat that as the crucial part of the incident. Through dedicated effort he overcomes any such social barrier. However, communities that identify themselves as historically oppressed place inequality of status at the center. Modern Dalits identify themselves as descendants of the original indigenous or marginalized communities such as the Nishadas, and therefore some Dalits claim a connection with Ekalavya as an ancestor. In their comments, they embrace his determination. But they highlight Drona’s action as exemplifying the oppressive Brahmanism that has kept Dalits in a marginal social position And they lament Ekalavya’s “guileless sincerity” in accepting the unjust demands of an upper-class figure. In the article “Ekalavya and the Adivasi-Dalit Rejection of Brahminism,” in the web publication *Velivada* (Telugu for “Dalit Ghetto”), the Dalit poet Shashikant Hingonekar addresses Ekalavya directly, to convey his identification, his sorrow over Ekalavya’s history-making decision, and his resolve not to follow Ekalavya’s example of compliance:

Oh Eklavya,

If you had kept your thumb,

history would have happened somewhat differently

But you gave your thumb,

and history also became theirs.

Ekalavya, since that day they have not even given you a glance.

Forgive me, Ekalavya, I won't be fooled now by their sweet words.

My thumb will never be broken.

This article also refers to protests in the wake of the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit activist and graduate student at the University of Hyderabad. In these protests, marginalized students painted themselves as Ekalavyas and made a human formation of an arrow directed at the University administration building.

Another Dalit poet, Meena Kandasamy, identifies Drona as a fascist and urges Ekalavya to make use of new weapons of opposition, effective even without a right thumb.

Ekalaivan

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things

With your left hand.

Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant

Left-handed treatment.

Also,

You don't need your right thumb,

To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb.

Nishads constitute a large caste community in the Gangetic region of modern north India.[[8]](#footnote-8) They are also called Mallahs. They are not Dalits, but they are classified as one of the “Most Backward Classes,” just above the Dealits in the administrative hierarchy of classes. The modern Nishads follow the occupational specialties that are appropriate to a river-based economy, and that were familiar to the epic Nishada chieftain Guha, such as fishing, boat-work, and ferry-men. In later versions of the Rama-katha the ferryman who takes Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita across the Ganges enjoys his own distinct celebrity as Kevat. Before he allows Rama to enter his boat, he insists on washing Rama’s feet as a sign of devotion. And on the other side, when Rama does not have any money to pay the ferryman, Sita gives her ring to Kevat.

In post-colonial India, the Nishads have pursued a changing political strategy. Initially they emphasized their loyalty to the Indian nation. With the emergence of Hindu nationalism and the rise of the BJP politically in the late 1980s and early 1990s came new ideas about the nation-state. The BJP promoted the ideal of a Ramrajya and a Hindutva vision of an organic society of harmonious limbs of a single Hindu body. Within this Hindu-oriented national community, the Nishads initially sought inclusion. They utilized figures like Guha and Kevat, who showed respectful deference to Rama, and in turn received dignified treatment from the prince, albeit within a hierarchical relationship. This allowed the Nishads to establish ties with the new prevailing political and cultural power of the BJP-RSS.

This was not entirely successful, and by the mid-1990s, NIshads withdrew their support from the BJP, claiming that it was political movement dominated by upper classes. They sought new political alliances with Dalits and other lower classes within the region. Phoolan Devi (aka the Bandit Queen), a Nishad leader in Parliament, along with other Nishads, began to highlight Ekalavya. He was the virtuous and exploited Nishad, in contrast with the cowardly and selfish upper-class Arjunas and Dronas of the BJP. Phoolan Devi launched a group to teach self-defense to people of the lower classes, which she called the Ekalavya Sena. And until she was assassinated in 2001, she promised to establish an Ekalavya Raj—in contrast to the BJP Ram Raj—as a challenge to the elite dominated social order.

The simple but difficult and troubling Ekalavya episode from the *Mahabharata* has provoked a great variety of responses. We can observe our own interpretive responses, and we can also track some of the ways this episode is being re-read and re-deployed among multiple audiences in modern India. As Bakhtin would observe, this is all part of the continuing dialogue that a great work like the *Mahabharata* provokes, in Great Time, as a gradual unfolding or realization of its semantic possibilities.

1. *Mahabharata* 1.123.1-39 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bakhtin 1986: 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Valmiki *Ramayana* [cite] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Valmiki *Ramayana* 2.45.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On Nishadas and elephants, the key source is Trautmann 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Valmiki *Ramayana* 2.44.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Valmiki *Ramayana* 2.45.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Jassal 2001 and Doron 2010. I am grateful to Abhishek Amar, for alerting me to the literature on modern-day Nishads in northern India and their political engagements in Bihar. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)