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

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[2 sentence summary of story] 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 examine the role that the Ekalavya episode plays in the *Mahabharata*, and the broader themes of marginalized peoples and Dharma that it addresses. I explore some of the other ways that Nishadas appear in the Sanskrit epics. Then I examine 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.

**Ekalavya and Nishadas in the Epics**

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 Sanskrit epic literature, the Nishadas are nearby-outsiders. They are forest people (*aṭavī-vāsin*), to adopt Ashoka’s term.[[3]](#footnote-3) They are not part of the conventional system of the four varnas, and they are also different from *mlecchas*, or foreigners. The Nishadas govern themselves with chieftains or councils of male elders. They practice livelihoods like fishing and hunting, at which they often excel. As the Nishada chieftain Guha says of himself, “I have wandered the forest all my life and nothing happens here without my knowing of it.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Frequently in the epic they are referred to in pejorative terms. For example, in Bhishma’s account of the origin of kingship, Nishadas arise from one of the king-making efforts gone bad. Vena turns out to be filled with passion and hatred, and must be rejected. The Brahmin sages churn his thigh and out comes an ugly little man. He has red eyes and black hair, and looks like a charred post. The sages tell him to stay down, and from him comes into being the awful Nishadas, who take to the forests and mountains.[[5]](#footnote-5) They may enter the narrative as victims. So in the episode of the burning of the Varanavata lacquer palace, Kunti and the five Pandavas escape the conflagration through a tunnel, while an innocent Nishada woman and her five sons come to the feast, get drunk, and fall asleep in the palace. The next morning, when the townspeople search the ashes, they find the charred remains of the Nishada family, which leads them to report mistakenly that the Pandavas have perished in the fire. While the Pandavas travel on in exile and disguise, the Nishadas are collateral damage.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the *Ramayana,* when Valmiki curses an anonymous huntsman for shooting a krauncha bird in the act of making love, which in turn leads him to invent the shloka verse, that cursed archer is a Nishada.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Nishadas live close by the urban civilization of the Indo-Gangetic plains. Valmiki’s ashram, where the Nishada shoots the krauncha, is just ten miles or so from the city of Ayodhya. When Rama is expelled from Ayodhya and heads south, the first person he meets is the Nishada chieftain Guha, living with his tribe on the banks of the Ganges. In the *Mahabharata*, the Nishadas are said to live in various locations: in the northern regions, in the west along the Sarasvati, to the southwest of Indraprastha, and still other locations.[[8]](#footnote-8) This suggests that the term “Nishada” in the epics may sometimes be used to refer to a single ethnic community, sometimes as a general term for all forest-peoples, and sometimes as a descriptive term for occupational groups whose livelihoods depend on hunting or fishing.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Nishadas are also known for their expertise with elephants. They domesticate the elephants of the forests and train them for heavy labor and battle.[[10]](#footnote-10) Living near but not in Indo-Aryan society, these forest people 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. They fight on both sides, but most often as allies of the Kauravas.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Ekalavya’s Story in the *Mahabharata*

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. [quote 1.123.10-11] 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. (It is possible that Ekalavya simply makes an “earthen pot”—*droṇaṃ mahīmayam*--that he considers to represent Drona, taking the teacher’s name literally. But subsequent readings always understand “Drona” to be an image of the teacher.) Eventually Ekalavya 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 son of the Nishada chieftain, and the pupil of Drona.

Arjuna is a jealous guy. Drona has promised to make him the greatest archer of them all. Back in the capital, Arjuna confronts Drona. How has his teacher taught this other student, a Nishada, 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 and unburdened mind, 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 us 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 American 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. As James Fitzgerald has succinctly put it, “The central narrative of the *Great Bharata* recounts the progressive polarization of the entire royal Kshatriya caste and the annihilation of it through the great war which stands at the center of the text.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Many others are also part of this general polarization and deterioration in Dharma. The Brahmin teacher Drona has taken on his instructor’s 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, especially embodied within the Bharata royal lineage.

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 is assigned to follow the horse on its wanderings, the horse and the Kshatriya warrior enter the region of the Nishadas. Ekalavya’s son (simply named Ekalavya-suta) comes out to oppose Arjuna. The Kshatriya defeats the Nishada, but not without difficulty, in a hair-raising combat. [[13]](#footnote-13) Arjuna’s failure to treat Ekalavya respectfully forecloses the possibility of forming an alliance that might have been beneficial to both, and instead creates two enemies.

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. [expand] Here 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.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Rama, Guha, and the Dharma of Nishadas

We can contrast the conduct of Arjuna towards Ekalavya 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 good 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 male 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.”[[15]](#footnote-15) 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.”[[16]](#footnote-16) 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. With Guha’s help, the brothers have now taken another step in transforming themselves into ascetics. They leave Guha with a few words of advice, and go to the river where they see a boat and board it. (In some manuscripts, Guha orders that a boat be brought for Rama and his party.[[17]](#footnote-17)) 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.

In the overall narrative of the *Ramayana*, this brief episode provides a model against which one can view Rama’s subsequent interactions with other communities outside his own Indo-Aryan culture: the monkey kingdom of Kishkindha, and the Rakshasa empire with its capital at Lanka. In these more problematic encounters, issues of Dharma and sovereign power require greater negotiation, and in both cases Rama must intervene violently to bring these groups within the Ramarajya, the utopic imperial formation. But that is another story.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma provides one brief anecdote that addresses Nishadas and their Dharma in its relation to what he considers prevailing norms of Indo-Aryan civilization. In his instructions to Yudhishthira on the subject of *āpad-dharma*, the Dharma in times of distress, he tells the story of Kapavya, a Nishada chieftain with a Kshatriya father and Nishada mother. Like Guha, Kapavya was a master of forest knowledge. He understood the behavior of animals, and this made him a formidable hunter. But he was also learned, pious, deferential to his teacher and an upholder of Dharma. He was dedicated to his two blind parents, and to the Brahmins who lived in the woods. His excellent qualities attracted crowds of Dasyus. (The term Dasyu is often translated as demon or barbarian, but here it seems to denote “outsiders,” other autochthonous groups living in forested areas outside the Indo-Aryan order of classes.) The outsiders praised his wisdom and asked that he become their leader. Kapavya accepted the new followers, and set out guidelines for them. Brahmins must be honored, he instructed them. All members of the community must give as they are able, for the common good. Kapavya reserved the right to punish miscreants, but only in order to educate them, not just for the sake of punishment. “Some earn their livelihood by destroying the country—and for that they should be considered as worms feeding on a corpse,” he told them. “But outsiders who follow the Dharma treatises here will quickly gain success, despite the fact that they are outsiders.”[[19]](#footnote-19) And so, Bhishma concludes, the outsiders adopted Kapavya’s instructions and abandoned their sinful ways.

Bhishma here poses a distinction among outsiders, between good ones and sinful ones. Left to their own devices, the anecdote suggests, outsiders will follow sinful ways. He does not set out what those are, but we can guess. Leaders like the Nishada chieftain Kapavya can exercise agency (especially if they happen to be born half-Kshatirya). By instilling in their subordinates a modicum of restraint, a recognition of Dharma, and an acknowledgment of Brahmin sanctity, they can serve as exemplars of wisdom and Dharma. Thus the Nishada community led by Kapavya, much like Guha’s Nishada tribe along the Ganges, can live peacefully alongside the Indo-Aryan cultural order, while still retaining some autonomy.

Tulsi’s Version: Nishadas as Bhaktas

In Tulsidas’s sixteenth century Hindi retelling of the Rama-katha, the *Ramcaritmanas*, the relationship between Rama and the Nishadas shifts in emphasis. All the main narrative details remain the same. There remains a social hierarchy, with Rama placed in a superior position, while the Nishadas enact their subordinate status. The fundamental basis of the hierarchy is not political, in Tulsidas’s retelling, but rather religious. Tulsi places Guha in the role of exemplary devotee to Rama, who is understood here to be the supreme deity, and he gives new attention, and a name, to the Nishada ferryman, Kevat (“Boatman”), who rows Rama and his companions across the Ganges.

In the *Ramcaritmanas*, as in Valmiki’s narrative, Guha and his community receive Rama with honor and pleasure. Showing their forest hospitality, they present Rama and his party with fruits, roots, and tubers. Guha is, in this version too, deeply distraught to hear of Rama’s exile. He expresses his grief to Lakshmana when he observes Rama and Sita sleeping on the ground under a tree. It is a far cry from the luxurious palace to which they must be accustomed. This provides an opening for Lakshmana to deliver some religious instruction to the Nishada chieftain. We are all “sleepers in delusion’s night, watching dreams of countless kinds,” says Lakshmana. Rama is the embodiment of the Ultimate, the Vedic *brahman*, who takes on human form just for the sake of devotees. The highest goal, he tells Guha, is “to adore Rama’s feet in thought, word, and deed.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The next morning Rama calls for a boat to take his group across the river. The ferryman Kevat insists that, before Rama can board his boat, he must allow Kevat to wash his feet. Is the boatman concerned with the cleanliness of his boat? Tulsi calls him devious. Amused by this demand, Rama allows Kevat to wash his feel, which the boatman does with love and bliss. Then Kevat takes it one step more intimate.

He washed Ram’s feet and sipped that water,

together with his whole family,

thus ferrying his ancestors to salvation

and then gladly took the Lord across.[[21]](#footnote-21)

On the other bank of the Ganges, Rama and Sita wish to pay Kevat the fare. Sita removes a ring from her finger and offers it. Kevat refuses all material offering. And so, Rama takes his leave, “granting him the boon of purest devotion.” Kevat is the one who “adores Rama’s feet” in a literal sense. Despite his low Nishada status, Kevat becomes, in the words of one prominent reciter-interpreter of the *Ramcaritmanas*, “the first citizen of *Rāmrāj*.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

As Bakhtin might say, this episode in the story of Rama has been “enriched with new meanings,” through Tulsi’s devotional retelling. However, it is not that the Rama-katha has somehow “outgrown” what it was in Valmiki’s “epoch of its creation.” Rather, Tulsi has reconceived the episode as part of his own epoch, and in accord with his own religious purposes, to extol Bhakti towards Rama as the best and most efficacious mode of religious sensibility. As a result, the Nishadas may remain tribals in Tulsi’s version, but that only highlights the religious power of Bhakti to ennoble even those of low status.

**The Return of Ekalavya in Modern India**

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 (returning to Bakhtin’s formulation) the *Mahabharata* has been enriched with new meanings and new significances in the epoch of 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.

Ekalavya and the Indian Middle Class

To get a sense of Ekalavya’s new-found popularity in contemporary India and its favored themes, here is a short sample of book titles from a quick search of Amazon.com:

*Ekalavya (Famous Biographies for Children)*

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

*Eklavya: The Story of an Archer’s Loyalty and Devotion*

*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 primary intended audience for all this literature is children and young students.[[23]](#footnote-23)

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 youth, an exemplary student. The retellings usually acknowledge his low birth status. He is variously figured as Adivasi, Shudra, or tribal, and in illustrated versions and on covers 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. For Indian middle-class parents, in a highly competitive educational environment, this message of determination is a welcome one. 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. He obeys proper authorities. The religious value of Bhakti is mobilized to support this. 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 valorized 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 applaud this message of obedience.

[add discussion of one example: Renu Saran, *Eklavya* (Great Personalities of India)]

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: A Guru’s Version

What about the ethics of teachers and gurus? Can the Brahmin guru Drona be exonerated for his disabling demand on a student? Let’s consider one modern guru’s response to this conundrum. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, from a South Indian Brahmin family, 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 in India that are not incompatible with BJP politics. He retells the Ekalavya story on his website.[[24]](#footnote-24) 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 an historically 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 these days police and military should have a monopoly on the exercise of legitimate violence, so in “those days,” Shankar suggests, Kshatriyas retained exclusive rights to bear arms. Drona’s rejection of an applicant on grounds of caste identity, while perhaps not appropriate nowadays, was simply a matter of maintaining Dharma, which entailed preserving the prevailing occupational division of labor. According to the principles of the Dharma of classes, a tribal like Ekalavya should never enjoy greater military prowess than a Kshatriya like Arjuna.

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. “That is why, even if the Guru is wrong, if your devotion is there you can never go wrong. But the Guru is not wrong, it appears he was partial but he uplifted Eklavya and preserved his Dharma (duty) also.” 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.

The Dalit Ekalavya

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. He transcends his social origins, and represents all students, of any class. It is an up-by-the-bootstraps narrative: social inequalities and barriers can be overcome by individual dedication and effort. Communities that identify themselves as historically oppressed, by contrast, place inequality of status at the center of the narrative. Modern Dalits identify themselves as descendants of the original indigenous or marginalized communities, such as the forest-dwelling Nishadas of the epics, and therefore Dalits often claim a connection with Ekalavya as an ancestor. In north Indian Dalit cultural discourse, observes Badri Narayan, Ekalavya figures within a pantheon of heroes that situates epic heroes like Ekalavya and the Shudra ascetic Shambuka (from the Valmiki *Ramayana*) alongside medieval poet-saints Ravidas and Kabir and twentieth century leaders B. K. Ambedkar and E. V. Ramasami.[[25]](#footnote-25) In their comments, they embrace Ekalavya’s

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 this respect Ekalavya is not an apt model for a more assertive Dalit ethos in modern India.

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.

Lament over the Dalit loss of history can shift into calls for insurgency. The well-known 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.[[26]](#footnote-26)

[comments on Kandasamy]

The Modern Nishads and their Epic Heroes

Nishads constitute a large caste community in the Gangetic region of modern north India.[[27]](#footnote-27) They are known also as Mallahs, but adopted the name Nishad to claim their ancient lineage. Now the two names are used interchangeably. 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. Over the past two centuries, at least, they have been a marginalized community. British colonial officials classified the Mallahs as a “criminal tribe” due to their itinerant occupations. In post-colonial India, they are designated as one of the “Most Backward Classes,” associated with service and artisan occupation-groups. They are above the “ritual pollution line,” and hence just above Dalits in the administrative hierarchy of classes.

Since Independence, the Nishads have pursued a changing political strategy.[[28]](#footnote-28) 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 that in many ways hearkened back to traditional models found in the Sanskrit epics and Dharma treatises. As Christophe Jaffrelot put it, “Hindutva ideology relies on an organic view of society where castes are seen as the harmonious limbs of the same body.”[[29]](#footnote-29) This traditionalist organic utopia was regularly identified by the Hindutva spokespersons as the Rama-rajya, and formed the idealized goal of the Hindu nationalist project. Within this Hindu-oriented imagined community, the Nishads initially sought inclusion, as one of the limbs of this nation-body. 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 during this period with the new prevailing political and cultural power of the BJP-RSS. The Nishad community was active in the Ayodhya Ramjanmabhumi mobilization of the early 1990s. And they received some social legitimacy and recognition. While the BJP held power in U.P., a large statue of King Guha was erected in a Nishad-dominant village near Benares, and a BJP minister attended its inauguration. [add on Benares Guha Raj temple?]

This strategy was not entirely successful. According to the Nishads, the state failed in its obligation to protect and provide for their community. By the time of the 1993 elections, 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. Along with this new political orientation, the Nishads began to shift the emphasis of their mythical lineage. The Guha model of subservient collaboration with the dominant political power seemed less suitable. Phoolan Devi (aka the Bandit Queen), a Nishad leader in Parliament, along with other Nishad leaders, began to highlight Ekalavya. His story fit better the “subaltern power” orientation of the rising Bahujan Samaj Party, led by Dalits and other lower class communities. 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.

When the BSP leader Mayawati served several terms as Chief Minister of U.P. between 1995 and 2012, she remade the regional landscape with statues and murals of Dalit heroes like Gautama Buddha, Ravidas, Kabir, Ambedkar and of course herself. As new Chief Minister in 1996, Mayawati renamed the new Agra cricket stadium, where aspiring Nishad athletes could compete on an equal footing with all others, the Eklavya Sports Stadium.

**Concluding Remarks** (to be expanded)

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. “Thirteenth Rock Inscription,” in Sircar 1965: 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Valmiki *Ramayana* 2.45.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mahabharata* 12.59. 100-104. This anecdote has had racist ramifications in colonial ethnography. In his *Ethnography of Ancient India* (1954), Robert Shafer connects this description with modern tribal groups like the Bhils, whom he describes (citing the colonial Rajputana Gazeteer) as “small, dark, broad nosed, and ugly.” (1954: 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mahabharata* 1.136 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Valmiki *Ramayana* 1.2.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mehendale 2004: 2. 757-758. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Parasher p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On Nishadas and elephants, the key source is Trautmann 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mehendale 2004: 2. 757-760 for references to Nishadas in the Kurukshetra battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fitzgerald 1983: 619. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Mahabharata* 14.84.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brodbeck 2006: 13-15 spells out in detail the parallels in these two episodes. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Valmiki *Ramayana* 2.44.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Valmiki *Ramayana* 2.45.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In the Southern Recension, this interpolation explains why the boat is at hand when Rama later sees it. See Pollock 1986: 406 fn 4, on *Ramayana* 2.46.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Davis 2009: 47-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Mahabharata* 12.133.21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Lutgendorf 2018: 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Lutgendorf 2018: 183. Doron 2010: 768 also notes that this episode features prominently in North Indian *Ramlila* performances. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pandit Ramkinkar Upadhyay, quoted in Lutgendorf 1991: 208. Lutgendorf points to the continuing popularity of the Kevat episode among modern *Ramcaritmanas* expositors. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See also Kanjilal 2021 for a discussion of some other recent treatments of Ekalavya and other Nishada themes drawing on the *Mahabharata*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ravi Shankar 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Narayan 2001: 3925. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kandasamy 2006: 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Jha 1974, Jassal 2001, Doron 2010 and Doron 2013. 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-27)
28. Doron 2010 traces the “dialogic relationship” between the Mallahs and the Indian nation-state, and I base much of this section on his rich ethnographic work. See also Doron 2013 for a full ethnography of the Nishad boatmen of Benares. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jaffrelot 2000: 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)