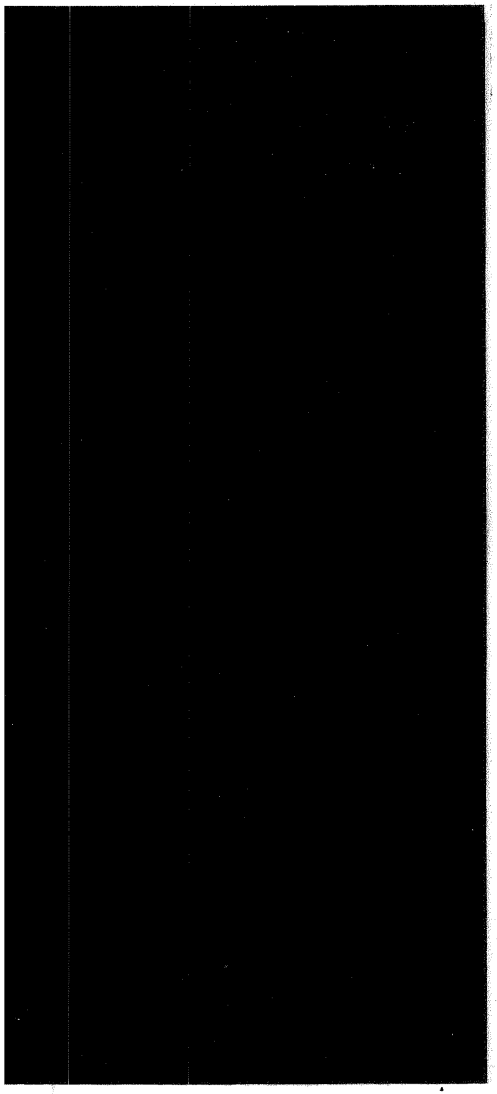

Creating a Dialogue: Text, Belief and Personal Identity

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all definitions of 'brahmin' based on caste status, yet maintain the category of 'brahmin' in the reconstituted form as one who adheres to the Buddha's teachings.

As Leslie points out in her book, the issue of defining the 'true brahmin' is especially important for the Valmiki community because the class status of Valmikis has been designated by appeals to the same tradition of religious texts that have defined brahmins as superior. However, when we see that the definition of 'brahmin' has changed significantly, and that different communities have defined the 'true brahmin' in different ways, we can see that 'brahmin' remains an open category that can be defined as much in terms of personal qualities as it is in terms of caste-related status. As Leslie suggests, 'the liberation of *dalit*s does not depend on caste-related status. Far more important are the qualities deemed necessary for liberation and who may therefore attain it' (2003: 192).

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The Story of Ekalavya in the *Mahābhārata*

Simon Brodbeck

In the Bhagwan Valmik Mandir in Featherstone Road, Southall, there is a painting of Ekalavya by Kiran Valmiki. Ekalavya is revered by many *dalit* communities as a heroic ethnic forefather. He was a martyr: his downfall was a result of the vicious prejudice and discrimination of others, in the face of which he himself remained dignified. In *ādivāsī* discourse the incident of Ekalavya's thumb is held up as an example of the systematic oppression of aboriginal Indians by a brāhmaṇical social ideology that is associated with Aryan newcomers. For Ekalavya was a prince of the *niṣāda*s, who were outsiders to the scheme of the four *varṇa*s. In the *Mahābhārata* the word *niṣāda* appears to function sometimes as an ethnic term denoting a specific tribe or group of tribes, sometimes as a generic term for any people who live by hunting and fishing.[1] As the epic context usually does not indicate which of these meanings is intended, I use the italicised, uncapitalised form of the word.

The *Mahābhārata* associates *niṣāda*s with outlying regions away from Kurukṣetra. It describes how they originated from the right thigh of the wicked king Vena,[2] and it tells us that the river Sarasvatī went underground in order to avoid being seen by them.[3] When Duryodhana plots to burn his Pāṇḍava cousins in a firehouse, they make it appear that the plot has been successful by arranging for a *niṣāda* family to be burned in their stead, a ruse which the text does not criticise.[4] *Niṣāda* lives seem to be cheap. When Garuḍa goes to get the *soma*, his mother says that on his journey he may eat *niṣāda*s but never brahmins. So Garuḍa devours thousands of *niṣāda*s by the sea, but he regurgitates a *niṣāda* woman who is married to a brahmin.[5] Garuḍa's massacre is structurally similar to Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, which threatens to burn up all snakes but which is interrupted by Āstīka, product of a brahmin father and a

[1] Brockington writes that *niṣāda*s 'were accorded some respect in the earliest stages of the epic', but that they were 'later seen as a despised occupational group of hunters as much as a tribal society' (1995, pp. 104-105).

[2] *Mbh* 12.59:100-104 (my translation): 'With *mantra*-purified blades of *kuśa* grass the *brahman*-uttering *ṛṣi*s killed [bad king Vena], that servant of desire and hatred who was adharmic to creatures. The *ṛṣi*s drilled his right thigh with *mantra*s, and from it was born on earth a short-limbed person, a changeling like a burned log, with red eyes and black hair. The *brahman*-uttering *ṛṣi*s said to him, "Sit here (*niṣīda*)". From him arose the fierce mountain-and-forest-dwelling *niṣāda*s, and whatever other *mleccha*s live in the Vindhyas in hundreds and thousands. Again the great *ṛṣi*s drilled his right hand: from it was produced an unsurpassed person, like Indra in form, [good king Pṛthu].' *Mahābhārata* references are to the Poona critical edition of the text, which was compiled by comparing many existing manuscripts and partially translated by van Buitenen. The complete translation by Ganguli is not of the critical edition; chapter numbers from the Ganguli edition are given in square brackets where they differ from those of the critical edition. Translations are adapted from van Buitenen 1973 except where stated otherwise.

[3] *Mbh* 3.130:3-4.

[4] *Mbh* 1.132-137 [G146-152].

[5] *Mbh* 1.24-25 [G28-29].

snake mother.[6] The context of both of these stories seems to be the expansion of agricultural society into lands previously peopled by hunter-gatherers. Those tribes who resisted acculturation into the new economy had to be either shifted or killed, their womenfolk taken as wives.

Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava celebrates a ritual called the *rājasūya*, which effectively declares his ambitions for an empire. In preparation for the *rājasūya*, his four brothers between them extract tribute from the four directions. Bhīma's raid to the east includes the defeat of an unnamed *niṣāda* king;[7] Sahadeva's, to the south, also involves conquest over *niṣādas*, and then over cannibal *niṣādas*.[8] Shortly thereafter, at the *rājasūya* itself, Ekalavya presents Yudhiṣṭhira with some special sandals.[9] Many years later, when the Pāṇḍavas are mustering allies for the recapture of their former kingdom, their father-in-law Drupada recommends that they ask Ekalavya's son for support;[10] in the event, *niṣādas* fight in the war on both sides.[11]

The subordination of *niṣādas* to the Pāṇḍavas can be traced to the story of Ekalavya and his thumb, which we find in chapter 123 of the *Ādiparvan*, the first book of the *Mahābhārata*. The Appendix contains a complete translation of the episode. Droṇa is the martial tutor of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas; Ekalavya, son of Hiraṇyadhanus, a *niṣāda* king,[12] also comes for tuition, but Droṇa refuses him because of his background. Undeterred, he fashions a clay model of Droṇa, practises under its unseeing eye, and becomes an expert archer. One day the Pāṇḍavas discover him in the forest and witness his skill; when questioned, he claims to be Droṇa's disciple. Later Droṇa comes and asks for his right thumb as disciple's fee: he severs and gives it willingly, thus sacrificing his archery skills. 'Ekalavya' means 'one to be cut', and so is a good name for a character who cuts off a single digit. The characters themselves do not use this name; but the narrator does, thus telling us what is going to happen in advance.

By way of introduction to the thumb story, the text tells us about the relationship between Droṇa and Arjuna. Arjuna, the best archer Droṇa has ever seen, begins to practise at night.

> Droṇa heard the twang of his bowstring, and he rose and came and embraced him, and said, 'I shall do anything to see that no archer on earth shall ever be your equal, I promise you!'[13]

After the Pāṇḍavas discover Ekalavya, it is Arjuna who makes Droṇa intervene:

> Kunti's son Arjuna kept thinking about Ekalavya...and when he met alone with Droṇa, he said to him affectionately, 'Didn't you once embrace me when I was alone, and tell me fondly that no pupil of yours would ever excel me?'[14]

[6] *Mbh* 1.41-53 [G45-58].
[7] *Mbh* 2.27:10b [G29].
[8] *Mbh* 2.28:5a, 44c [G30].
[9] *Mbh* 2.49:9 [G52].
[10] *Mbh* 5.4:23.
[11] *Mbh* 6.46:47 [G50], 6.112:108 [G118].
[12] *Mbh* 1.123:10, 24 [G134].
[13] *Mbh* 1.123:5-6.
[14] *Mbh* 1.123:26-27.

Finally, after Ekalavya has lost his thumb, we hear that

> Arjuna's fever was gone and his heart was happy; and Droṇa's word was proved true: no one bested Arjuna.[15]

This frame story dramatically contextualises Droṇa's treatment of Ekalavya. Droṇa was bound by his promise. Previous utterance is very powerful in the *Mahābhārata*. Spoken words serve as a kind of explanation of events, as if they put a spell upon the text's world, which then fits into shape. We see this working through vows, boons, curses, or simply through off-the-cuff remarks. So Droṇa's viciousness is turned into truthfulness. But by making this promise he laid himself open to Arjuna's manipulation.

Droṇa's promise to Arjuna and its fulfilment are nested within, and balanced by, a promise of Arjuna's to Droṇa and its fulfilment. Both parties use the promise of the other to their own advantage. As a boy, Droṇa was friends with Drupada, who has since become a king and rejected him (see Figure, chapters 121 and 122). Droṇa is piqued, and his intention all along in tutoring the princes is to gain forces to attack his old friend. As soon as he receives pupils, he tries to extract a promise that, when trained, they will aid him in a secret military task—a promise which only Arjuna gives. In chapter 128 Droṇa claims his second disciples' fee, demanding that his pupils humiliate Drupada for him. Though this raid is largely presented as a group expedition, Arjuna is the difference between the two sides. So Drupada's humiliation is a product of both promises. The account ends:

> Thus was the city Ahicchatrā with its countryside conquered in battle by [Arjuna] the son of Pṛthā, and made over to Droṇa.[16]

Droṇa and Arjuna's mutual attachment is shown by their promises. Arjuna is subordinate to Droṇa because he is Droṇa's pupil; Droṇa is subordinate to Arjuna because he depends on Arjuna. Arjuna is truly extraordinary, and as Droṇa sees him progress, his dedication to Arjuna becomes a kind of *bhakti*, eclipsing even his love for his own son Aśvatthāman. Arjuna is Indra's son, and he is also a former Indra reborn, so *bhakti* is clearly due. Droṇa's wish is granted through his *bhakti* towards Arjuna. We may recall that Arjuna is also the name of a sacred tree.[17] Now, according to the *Harivaṃśa*, Kṛṣṇa uprooted the Arjuna tree when he was a child.[18] The absorption of the Arjuna cult into Vaiṣṇavism is celebrated repeatedly in narrative *smṛti* literature,[19] most notably in the *Bhagavadgītā*, where Arjuna acknowledges that Kṛṣṇa is the highest Lord. Soon afterwards, in the Kurukṣetra war, Droṇa is defeated by one of Kṛṣṇa's

[15] *Mbh* 1.123:39.
[16] *Mbh* 1.128:18 [G140].
[17] The word *arjuna* suggests white or silver colour: it is a suitable name for a Pāṇḍava, since Pāṇḍu means 'pale'.
[18] *Harivaṃśa* 51:13-32.
[19] Interestingly, the *Mahābhārata* also credits Kṛṣṇa with having killed Ekalavya (*Mbh* 5.47:71 [G48], 7.155:29 [G180], 16.7:10 [G6]). The story is elaborated in the *Harivaṃśa*: there seem to be two traditions concerning Ekalavya.

tricks: Arjuna plays no part in this, and complains bitterly about it afterwards.[20] But at the time of the Ekalavya story there has not yet been any sign of Kṛṣṇa. We could compare the removal of Ekalavya's thumb with Kṛṣṇa's removal of the Arjuna tree, and see both events as indicators of cultic assimilation.[21]

Opposite Droṇa's *bhakti* towards Arjuna stands Arjuna's proper devotion towards Droṇa, his *guru*. It may seem that in surrendering his thumb to Droṇa, Ekalavya has bested Arjuna in discipleship as well as in archery. Yet the idea of discipleship here is rather strange, because Ekalavya has in fact taught himself: his skill is due to his own self-discipline, the statue of Droṇa having played no more than an incidental role. Perhaps here there is some criticism of the supposed necessity of the *guru*, an assertion that exclusive institutions do not have a monopoly on excellence, however low they may stoop in their attempts to have it appear that they do. In this case it is an ironic tragedy that Ekalavya, who has no need of Droṇa's institution, loses his skills by claiming allegiance to it. Such an interpretation is developed by S. Shankar, in an article entitled 'The thumb of Ekalavya: postcolonial studies and the 'third world' scholar in a neocolonial world'.[22] This article draws comparisons between the position of Ekalavya and the position within 'western' academia of scholars from marginalised backgrounds. Shankar highlights recent academic developments, such as postcolonial and subaltern studies, which began by criticising established approaches and methodologies. In this interpretation, the loss of Ekalavya's thumb represents the watering-down process which tends to accompany the accommodation of theoretically radical perspectives into mainstream academic discourse. The crucial moment here is when Ekalavya identifies himself to the Pāṇḍavas as Droṇa's disciple. Why does he do this? Because of the power of the culture that is fed by institutions such as Droṇa's. But however brilliant Ekalavya becomes, he will not be allowed to compete within that culture.[23] In connection with this point, it is worth recalling that *niṣāda*s are hunters and fishers, and thus they may be expected to have a facility with projectile weapons.[24] If Ekalavya's ethnic heritage explains his rapid progress, there is even less of a role to be played by Droṇa, and it is thus all the more ironic for Ekalavya to call Droṇa his *guru*.

The thumb story is framed by the relationship between Droṇa and Arjuna, which in turn is framed by the relationship between Droṇa and Drupada. The narrative block that deals with this relationship is outlined in the Figure as a ring composition. A symmetrical structure appears, but only when chapter 123 is separated into two parts, A

[20] *Mbh* 7.164-168 [G191-198].

[21] In this regard it might be fruitful to explore possible connections between Ekalavya's thumb and termite mounds: see Irwin 1982, Leslie 2003, Shulman 1978-1979. *Mbh* 3.82:5-8 [G84] connects the river Sarasvatī with a termite-mound *tīrtha*.

[22] Shankar 1994.

[23] We may only speculate what might have happened if, when questioned about his skills, Ekalavya had announced that he had taught himself.

[24] This may perhaps furnish an alternative explanation of why Ekalavya is rejected in the first place: because he would be too good. We are told that 'Droṇa, who knew *dharma*, declined to accept him for archery out of consideration for the others, reflecting that he was the son of a *niṣāda* (*Mbh* 1.123:11).

and B.[25] This chapter is more than twice the average length of the other chapters in the section, and divides exactly into two self-contained halves. Either one chapter division has been lost during textual transmission, or some attempt has been made to obscure the symmetrical pattern. The key to releasing the pattern is contained in the name Ekalavya, 'one to be cut', or 'to be cut once'. The name is a textual signal, telling us to bisect the chapter; once this is done, thematic parallels are visible between linked chapters, as shown in the Figure: 121 parallels 128, and so on, down to 124 at the centre.

Note that Ekalavya and Karṇa are parallel figures. Both threaten to surpass Arjuna, but are disallowed from competing with him directly. In chapter 126 Duryodhana gives Karṇa the kingdom of Aṅga to qualify him to fight Arjuna. Karṇa's instant kingdom is parallel to Ekalavya's clay model of Droṇa. Both are introduced after the candidate's eligibility has been put into doubt by an apparent deficiency in ancestry; both attempt to mark the candidate as eligible, but neither is able to do so convincingly. The question at issue is whether acceptance into *kṣatriya* institutions should be by birthright or by merit. The text seems to favour the birthright position: Ekalavya is excluded, and the audience already knows that Karṇa is in fact a *kṣatriya* by birth. Interestingly, other passages in the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Vāyupurāṇa* also make Ekalavya a *kṣatriya* by birth, fostered into a *niṣāda* family.[26] But Duryodhana argues in chapters 126 and 127 that ancestry is not the only relevant factor.[27]

Equality is present at the margins and at the centre of the symmetrical pattern. Calls for social equality of various kinds are present here, but are not the dominant voices. Instead, it seems easier to understand the context as one of *yoga*. When Arjuna's achievements are described in chapters 123B and 125, it is clear that martial distinction is equivalent to yogic distinction.[28] Arjuna's yogic success flanks the central equality on both sides, and so it would seem that the central equality is the equality between one *ātman* and another, as emphasised in the *Bhagavadgītā*:

[25] In some *Mahābhārata* manuscript traditions it already appears as two separate chapters.

[26] For references see More 1995, p. 41.

[27] 'In the scriptures it is ruled that there are three ways for one to be a king: to be born one, to become a champion, or to lead an army... The origins of both *kṣatriya*s and rivers are obscure... Men born from *kṣatriya* women are known to have become brahmins. Our teacher [Droṇa] was born from a trough, master Kṛpa from a reed stalk. And the princes all know how you yourselves were born...' (*Mbh* 1.126:34 [G138], 1.127:11cd, 14 [G139]). On non-*kṣatriya* kings in Dharmaśāstra texts and their commentaries, see von Stietencron 1997, pp. 504-507, broadly agreeing with Duryodhana's view. The Pāṇḍavas were fathered by deities: see *Mbh* 1.113:24-1.115 [G122-124].

[28] This equivalence is commonplace, with success in *yoga* being compared with good chariot driving and accurate archery. See *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.3-9; *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2.9; *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.2:2-4; *Mbh* 12.228:8-12 [G236]; *Mbh* 12.289:31, 36-37 [G301]. With particular reference to the bow-and-arrow symbol used by Valmikis, see also the paper by Lekh Raj Manjdadria in this volume. Arjuna passes the test with the bird in the tree because of his power to concentrate on one object alone (chapter 123B). Arjuna's divine weapons may be compared to the yogic *siddhi*s (on which see *Mbh* 228:15c-27b): at the tournament he demonstrates powers which have no martial application (chapter 125).

> The one whose self is yoked with *yoga*, who views all places equally, sees the *ātman* residing in all creatures, and sees all creatures in him/herself.[29]

If we read the story in terms of *yoga*, we must reinterpret the thumb incident. Ekalavyā is pursuing high-level *yoga* without supervision. The text implies that this is dangerous: before playing with the fire of *yoga*, initiation by a living *guru* is necessary, for one's own safety as well as everyone else's. A clay model will not do. From this point of view, Ekalavya's being a *niṣāda* serves only to explain why he does not have a living *guru*. His thumb is demanded not because it is acceptable to be cruel to *niṣādas*, but because it is unacceptable to do what he is doing unsupervised.

Valmiki readers will judge for themselves what the implications of this research might be in terms of their sense of their own communal and individual identity, history and opportunities. But at the very least I hope to have shown that, while the story of Ekalavya in the *Mahābhārata* is indeed about ethnic subjugation, it encompasses far more than this. Although *niṣāda* identity is clearly intended to indicate second-class status, the text's authors use this inequality (amongst others) as the starting point for a sustained but subtle meditation on interpersonal relations.

[29] *Bhagavadgītā* 6:29 (my translation). The *Bhagavadgītā* makes up *Mbh* 6.23-40 [G25-42]. See also Sulabhā's point to Janaka (*Mbh* 12.308:126-127 [G321], translation from Fitzgerald 2002): 'Since you see your self within yourself by means of your self, why do you not, in exactly the same way, by means of your self, see your self in someone else? And if you are firmly resolved upon the sameness in your self and in another, why do you ask me "Who are you?" and "Whose are you?"? Why, king of Mithilā, does someone who is freed from the pairs of opposites (such as 'this is mine and this is not mine') ask "Who are you, whose are you, and where do you come from?"?' Sutton remarks that 'from the position of spiritual realisation men and women as well as high and low castes are to be regarded as equal for the same spiritual entity lies at the heart of each being. Differentiation in terms of gender and caste is an inferior realisation to the higher wisdom taught by Hinduism that demands a recognition of the spiritual unity of all beings' (1999, p. 61).

Figure: *Ādiparvan* 121-128 [G131-140] as a ring composition (chapter summaries adapted from van Buitenen 1973)

121
The seer Bharadvāja sees the *apsaras* Ghṛtācī nude; he catches his seed in a trough; Droṇa is born from that. Bharadvāja teaches him the *āgneya* missile. Drupada, son of king Pṛṣata, is Droṇa's schoolmate. Drupada succeeds to the throne of Pāñcāla. Droṇa weds Kṛpā; Aśvatthāman is born. When Rāma Jāmadagnya retires, Droṇa obtains his miracle weapons. (23 verses)

Equality (between Droṇa and Drupada)

128
Droṇa demands from his pupils his teacher's fee, *viz.*, the capture of king Drupada; they storm his city and capture him. Droṇa returns the king's earlier insults, but sets him free and lets him have the southern half of the kingdom. The account ends: 'Thus was the city Ahicchatrā with its countryside conquered in battle by [Arjuna] the son of Pṛthā, and made over to Droṇa.' (18 verses)

122
Droṇa visits king Drupada, who disclaims his friendship. Insulted, Droṇa goes to Hāstinapura. He lifts a toy of the princes from a dry well with a chain of arrows. Bhīṣma receives him. Droṇa complains of Drupada's hypocrisy. Bhīṣma engages him as a teacher. Droṇa demands of his pupils assistance in a secret task; only Arjuna gives his promise. Droṇa also teaches the Vṛṣṇis and Karṇa. (47 verses)

Dispute over relative status (Droṇa/Drupada) (Arjuna/Karṇa)

127
Enter Adhiratha, foster-father of Karṇa, who embraces him. Bhīma derides Karṇa for his low birth. Duryodhana defends him, telling Bhīma: 'The origins of both *kṣatriyas* and rivers are obscure... Men born from *kṣatriya* women are known to have become brahmins. Our teacher [Droṇa] was born from a trough, master Kṛpa from a reed stalk. And the princes all know how you yourselves were born'. At sundown the affair breaks up. (24 verses)

123A
Droṇa teaches Arjuna and promises that no archer will be his equal. The *niṣāda* Ekalavya comes for tuition; Droṇa refuses him; he goes into the forest and practises before an image of Droṇa. When the princes go hunting, their dog discovers Ekalavya, who shoots it expertly; he is recognised. Arjuna complains to Droṇa that he has a better pupil than Arjuna; Droṇa goes to find Ekalavya, who honours him as his teacher. Droṇa demands his right thumb as his fee; Ekalavya cuts it off and is no longer as fast an archer. (39 verses)

Arjuna in danger of being bested (by Ekalavya) (by Karṇa)

126
Karṇa enters and says that he will match all of Arjuna's feats. He does so. Duryodhana embraces him and offers him his friendship; Arjuna berates him as an intruder. Karṇa challenges Arjuna to a duel. Indra rains on Arjuna; the sun shines on Karṇa. Family and public take sides. Kṛpa quotes Arjuna's lineage and asks for Karṇa's; Karṇa hangs his head. Duryodhana states that 'in the scriptures it is ruled that there are three ways for one to be a king: to be born one, to become a champion, or to lead an army': he quickly installs Karṇa as king of Aṅga. (39 verses)

123B
Arjuna excels over all other pupils. Droṇa places an artificial bird in a treetop and tests each pupil's concentration in aiming. Arjuna wins. Arjuna shoots a crocodile that has grasped Droṇa. Droṇa gives the *brahmaśiras* missile to Arjuna, who promises not to misuse it. Droṇa states that no-one will match Arjuna at archery. (39 verses)

Arjuna shows his superiority; Droṇa declares it

125
When the public beomes partisan, Droṇa has Aśvatthāman stop the match. Droṇa introduces Arjuna as the best of armsmen, and declares that he loves him more than he loves his own son. Arjuna demonstrates his superior skills, both martial and magical. At the gate the loud slapping of arms is heard. (32 verses)

Equality (between Duryodhana and Bhīma)

124
Droṇa proposes a weapon show and prepares the arena with Vidura. The family and the public assemble and watch the princes perform. Duryodhana and Bhīma start a wrestling match. (33 verses)

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Appendix: Translation of *Ādiparvan* 123A (adapted from van Buitenen 1973)

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

'Arjuna, however, did his best to honour his teacher and made the greatest effort at mastering arms. He became Droṇa's favourite. Droṇa summoned the cook and told him in secret, "Never give Arjuna anything to eat when it is dark." Then one day, when Arjuna was eating, a breeze rose and blew out the lamp by whose light he was eating. Arjuna went on eating, and his hand did not fail to find his mouth, so accustomed was it to the motions of handling food. Realising now what practice could accomplish, the Pāṇḍava started practising at night. Droṇa heard the twang of his bowstring, Bhārata, and he rose and came and embraced him, and said, "I shall do anything to see that no archer on earth shall ever be your equal, I promise you!"

'Thereafter Droṇa taught Arjuna the arts of fighting from chariots, on elephants, on horseback, and on the ground. He instructed the Pāṇḍava in combat with clubs, in swordsmanship, in hand-thrown weapons like spears, javelins and lances, and in battles with mixed weapons. Seeing his skill at them, kings and princes came by the thousand to master the science of weaponry.

'So, great king, a certain Ekalavya came, the son of Hiraṇyadhanus, a *niṣāda* chief. But Droṇa, who knew *dharma*, declined to accept him for archery out of consideration for the others, reflecting that he was the son of a *niṣāda*. Ekalavya, enemy-burner, touched Droṇa's feet with his head and went into the forest. There he fashioned a likeness of Droṇa out of clay. This image he treated religiously as his teacher, while he spent all his efforts on archery, observing the proper disciplines. And so great was his faith, and so sublime his discipline, that he acquired a superb deftness at fixing arrow to bowstring, aiming it, and releasing it.

'One day Droṇa allowed the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas leisure, and the warlike princes all went out hunting in their chariots. As it happened, sire, the Pāṇḍavas had one man who followed them with their gear and a dog. While they all roamed about, each bent on his own design, the dog wandered off in the woods, got lost, and came upon the *niṣāda*. When the dog smelled that black *niṣāda* in the woods, wrapped in black deerskin, his body caked with dirt, it kept about him, barking away. When the cur kept on barking, the *niṣāda*, displaying his deft skill, shot almost simultaneously seven arrows into its mouth. Its mouth full of arrows, the dog went back to the Pāṇḍavas, and on seeing the animal the heroes were greatly surprised. As they looked and noticed this supreme feat of fast, blind shooting, they became humble and praised its author in every way. The Pāṇḍavas then went out into the woods to look for the forest-dweller and found him, king, ceaselessly shooting arrows. They did not recognise the man with his wild aspect and questioned him, "Who are you, and whose?"

'Ekalavya said, "Know me for the son of *niṣāda* chieftain Hiraṇyadhanus, and also for a pupil of Droṇa's, who toils at mastering archery."'

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

'The Pāṇḍavas now in fact recognised him, and when they returned they told Droṇa the whole miraculous story as it had happened. But Kuntī's son Arjuna kept thinking about Ekalavya, king; and when he met alone with Droṇa, he said to him affectionately, "Didn't you once embrace me when I was alone, and tell me fondly that no pupil of yours would ever excel me? Then how is it that you have another powerful pupil who excels me, who excels all the world—the son of the *niṣāda* chief?"

'Droṇa thought for a moment, then came to a decision, and, taking [Arjuna] the left-handed archer with him, repaired to the *niṣāda*. He found Ekalavya, his body caked with dirt, hair braided, dressed in tatters, bow in hand, ceaselessly shooting arrows. When Ekalavya saw Droṇa approaching, he went up to him, embraced his feet, and touched the ground with his head. After

honouring Droṇa duly, the *niṣāda*-born boy declared himself to be his pupil and stood before him with folded hands. Thereupon, sire, Droṇa said to Ekalavya, "If you are my pupil, then give me at once my fee!" Hearing this, Ekalavya said happily, "What can I offer you, sir? Let my *guru* command me! For, great scholar of the *brahman*, there is nothing I shall withhold from my *guru*!"

'Droṇa replied, "Give me your right thumb!" And hearing Droṇa's harsh command, Ekalavya kept his promise: forever devoted to the truth, with a happy face and unburdened mind, he cut off his thumb without a moment's hesitation and gave it to Droṇa. When thereafter the *niṣāda* shot with his fingers, he was no longer as fast as he had been before, O king of men. Arjuna's fever was gone and his heart was happy; and Droṇa's word was proved true: no-one bested Arjuna.'

Valmikis and the Label 'Hindu'

Eleanor Nesbitt

Introduction

Fifteen years ago almost nothing had been written about Valmikis in the UK: there was no overview of the community such as I attempted (Nesbitt 1990, 1994) and such as Julia Leslie provides in her recent publication (2003: 64-74). As part of an ethnographic study of the religious socialisation of eight- to thirteen-year old Valmikis and Ravidasis in Coventry, I recorded what they had to say about their own identities. What particularly interested me were the ways in which they used the terms 'Hindu', 'Sikh' and 'Punjabi' and the reasons that they gave for using any or all of these labels. I should explain that all the young Valmikis' families attended the Jagat Guru Valmik Ji Maharaj Temple in Fisher Road in the north of the city, and all had agreed to be interviewed by me. The semi-structured interviews took place in their homes, and I owe a huge debt of gratitude to all concerned for their generous hospitality and their patience.

In this brief paper I shall report the ways in which the young people defined themselves. Next, I will suggest key considerations in relation to the label 'Hindu', and the ways in which individuals construct their identities. On each issue there has been considerable scholarly debate and there is an extensive body of literature. Inclusion of adequate reference to this—let alone discussion—is beyond the remit of this paper. The final section raises some issues for British Valmikis in the twenty-first century.

Sikh, Hindu and Hindu Punjabi

The Coventry interviewees' statements about themselves include a sense of being variously (1) either Sikh or Hindu, (2) both Sikh and Hindu and (3) Hindu Punjabi. One girl explained: 'I say to myself I'm a Sikh, but like really I'm a Hindu. I'm a Hindu Punjabi. I do many things that Sikhs do. We go to a *mandir*, but I call it a *gurudvārā*'. Another young woman said: 'I know what culture I am, Hindu, but it's not as if we're restricted to Hindu, because we believe in Sikhism as well. It's just one thing really'. Out of fourteen young Valmikis in Coventry—all related by blood or marriage—three brothers called themselves Sikh, four children used neither the term Hindu nor Sikh for themselves, four called themselves Hindu (one using the term 'Hindu Valmiki') and two using the term 'Hindu Punjabi', while the remaining three identified themselves as primarily Hindu but as also Sikh in some respects.

In order to understand these statements it is not enough to think in terms of two distinct religions, the 'Hinduism' and 'Sikhism' of so much religious education in UK school syllabuses. It is true that one fourteen-year old girl's explanation that 'my mum's Hindu, my dad's side are Sikhs' (which provided the title for one of my reports, Nesbitt 1991) could easily be understood in this way, suggesting a dual-heritage child, a young person from a mixed-faith family. Moreover, her elaboration does nothing to unsettle this understanding: 'She has 'Kaur' in her name. All the village were Sikh. They all believed in Sikh gods. In the city where my dad came from they were all Hindus'. However,