Scapegoat, Sacrifice, or Saviour:

An Examination of the Outsider in the *Mahābhārata*

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines part of the cultural history of social exclusions through a study of the portrayal of the Niṣādas, a tribal group, in the Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata.* Three factors contribute to the social exclusion of the Niṣādas in the epic: social construction of identity, caste and *dharma*, and geography and liminality. The three *Mahābhārata* narratives that are the focus of the thesis's analysis (the narratives of Ekalavya, the House of Lac, and Nala and Damayantī) portray six Niṣādas, and one king, Nala, who undergoes a period of social exclusion. Outsiders are portrayed as scapegoat, sacrifice, and/or savior for the epic's heroes. However, when Niṣādas fulfill these roles, they are either exterminated or mutliated as a result of acts of those very heroes. The thesis argues that the factors of social exclusion work together to accomplish marginalization, and that violence facilitates the process of social exclusion in the epic.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines the nature and roles of the Niṣādas as depicted in two narratives by the Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata* (the Great Bhārata [Epic]).[1] Niṣādas are a tribal group and they are generally considered social outsiders by the epic, evident by their overall lack of inclusion by the dominant culture.[2] My research has found several factors that contribute to the *Mahābhārata*'s assignment of social outsider status to members of this group. These factors include: social construction of identity, caste and *dharma*, and geography and liminality. Despite their status as outsiders, Niṣādas serve various functions in the epic. While several of the epic's narratives feature Niṣādas, this thesis examines two: the narrative of Ekalavya and the narrative of the House of Lac. Additionally, the narrative of Nala and Damayantī is analyzed because Nala, who is a king from the dominant culture, experiences a period of social exclusion that is marked with Niṣādan tropes. Nala's narrative allows for a complete exploration of the factors that influence social exclusion as he cycles from social insider to social outsider. In the Niṣāda narratives, Niṣādas must contend with violence from the protagonists and are victimized. When relevant, theoretical perspectives on the social outsider are used to help unpack these narratives. These theoretical perspectives are derived from studies of Asian, and non-Asian, cultural and

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[1] The *Mahābhārata* will be abbreviated to MBh in textual references.
[2] The dominant culture in this context is Vedic and/or Hindu culture. For the purposes of this thesis, Vedic/Hindu culture will simply be referred to as "the dominant culture."

historical contexts. This thesis will therefore draw upon the work of Aloka Parasher-Sen (1998, 2004, & 2006), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2006), Edward W. Said (1979), Michel Foucault (1965), Robert Goldman (2001), M. N. Srinivas (1989), and Thomas Parkhill (1984 & 1995).

1.1 The Epic

The *Mahābhārata* is a Hindu religious text. This text focuses on the trials of the Pāṇḍava brothers as they struggle to achieve sovereignty over their kingdom in a manner consistent with *dharma*.[3] There is general agreement among secular scholars that the epic was composed over many centuries and most agree that much of the composition occurred between 300 BCE and 300 CE. The epic was therefore written during a period of tremendous political and social change: the decline of the first northern Indian empire, the Mauryan, and the rise of the Gupta dynasty, whose rule is often described as a golden age of Hindu traditions (Doniger 2009, 261-62). Not only were there political and economic changes during these centuries, there was social change with the development of the caste system. According to Hindu and Vedic thought, political, economic, and, especially, social structures (such as the caste system) are religious (Rodrigues 2006, 4-5). The religious tone of the epic is inherent in the political and social

[3] *Dharma* is a complex concept that is central in Hinduism. It might be roughly translated as sacred law which prescribes social obligations and responsibilities (Rodrigues 2006, 4-5).

struggle of the Pāṇḍava princes, as they attempt to live and rule in a *dharmic* manner.

The *Mahābhārata* is the longest epic in the world, consisting of 75,000 verses, which amounts roughly to fifteen times the length of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament combined (Doniger 2009, 261-63). Over the course of its creation, the epic has had at least three major revisions, which helps account for its impressive length (Gupta & Ramachandra 1976, 1-4). The *Mahābhārata* was compiled by brahmanical scholars (van Nooten 1971, 59), though it claims to be written by the sage, Vyāsa (Gupta & Ramachandra 1976, 1-4). Whoever the author(s), the epic continues to be relevant and important to those who practice Hinduism. This may be due to its instructional nature: it teaches key Hindu concepts, such as the importance and subtlety of *dharma*. Plays, dramas, songs, poems, films, television series, comic books, as well as religious celebrations and observances continue to be inspired by the epic and its characters (Rodrigues 2006, 150; van Buitenen 1973, xxv-xxviii; McLain 2009, 15, 18, & 212-213).

The *Mahābhārata* claims to be encyclopedic. It states, “whatever is [present] here [in the *Mahābhārata*] may be found elsewhere; what is not [present here] cannot be found anywhere else” (MBh 18.5.38 as quoted in Gupta & Ramachandra 1976, 3-4). Since this epic claims to be an exhaustive representation of Vedic culture, it is the perfect source to use when analyzing perceptions of groups of outsiders from this time period.

The following synopsis of the epic focuses on plot points relevant for the narratives that are the focus of analysis for this thesis. The *Mahābhārata's* main narrative features the Pāṇḍava princes as protagonists. As the epic narrates events of the Pāṇḍavas' youth, it describes a meeting between the princes and Ekalavya, who is a member of the Niṣāda tribe. The epic states that the Pāṇḍava princes learn martial sciences from Droṇa, the *brāhmin*. Ekalavya approaches Droṇa and requests that Droṇa teach him the science of archery, Droṇa refuses because of Ekalavya's Niṣādan heritage. Ekalavya retires to the forest, creates a small clay statue, named Droṇa, and learns archery by himself, or rather, from the replica of Droṇa. The epic states that one day during their training the princes meet Ekalavya. They are surprised when they learn that Ekalavya is a better archer than Arjuna, for Droṇa had promised Arjuna that he would be the best archer in the world. Their encounter with Ekalavya leads Droṇa and Arjuna to act in ways that force Eklavya to cut off his own thumb and with this loss, he loses his superior archery skills.

A central plot element in the epic is that the Kauravas are in conflict with the Pāṇḍavas, as both sides lay claim to the throne of their ancestral kingdom. The dangerous nature of their rivalry is illustrated by the narrative of the House of Lac. The Kauravas arrange for the Pāṇḍavas to live in this house with the intention of setting it on fire and killing the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira becomes suspicious of Purocana (a coconspirator of the Kauravas), and decides to trap him in the house and burn it. To disguise their intentions, the Pāṇḍavas hold a

feast and invite many *brāhmins*. A Niṣāda woman and her five sons also come to the rite in search of food. They become intoxicated and fall asleep. When everyone except the Niṣāda family has left and Purocana is sleeping, Bhīma, one of the Paṇḍava princes, sets fire to the house. Purocana and the Niṣāda family are burned alive. The Pāṇḍavas escape to the forest and the bodies of the Niṣāda family are mistaken for the Pāṇḍavas and their mother, Kuntī, ensuring their temporary safety from the Kauravas.

After this, the Pāṇḍavas marry Draupadī and return to their kingdom, Hastinapura. They rule half of the kingdom while the Kauravas rule the other half, and the Pāṇḍavas' half flourishes. The Kauravas become jealous of their cousins' prosperity and ask Yudhiṣṭhira to gamble with them. This gambling results in the loss of the Pāṇḍavas' half of the kingdom and the freedom of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī. The five brothers and Draupadī are forced into a thirteen-year exile, with twelve years to be spent in the forest and the last year spent incognito in a kingdom of their choice. If the brothers successfully complete this task, they will regain their kingdom. Their forest stay includes many experiences, including hearing the tale of Nala and Damayantī, a narrative that closely parallels the lives of the Pāṇḍavas. Nala is a respected and *dharmic* king. The events of this narrative begin shortly before he is chosen to be the husband of the beautiful Damayantī, a princess from Vidarbha. Like the Pāṇḍavas, Nala loses his kingdom while gambling with a family member and must spend time in a forest. Nala's forest experience is filled with many hardships, for instance, he is inflicted

with madness. Nala is able to eventually leave the forest with the help of a serpent. When Nala emerges from the forest, he is in disguise as a hunchback charioteer. As charioteer he serves a king and, by learning the secret of the dice, he eventually transforms back into his original form and regains his kingdom and his family.

The epic goes on to detail the lives and struggles of the Pāṇḍavas. The princes eventually go to war with their evil cousins, and regain their kingdom. However, this war results in the death of many of their family members and loved ones. The epic closes by following the Pāṇḍavas into their afterlives.

1.2 The Three Factors of Social Exclusion

I have identified three main factors that contribute to social exclusion in the epic. These three factors are: social construction of identity, caste and *dharma*, and geography and liminality. Although other factors can contribute to social exclusion, these three factors appear to be primary and are inter-related, as discussed below. Niṣādas, who are socially excluded by the epic, are almost always affected by these three factors.

The first factor, which is social construction of identity, can be best understood as a sort of stereotyping. That is, the dominant culture constructs an identity for socially excluded groups and applies this identity to members of these marginalized groups. This identity does not need to be an accurate representation of the members of the social group, and is often composed of

characteristics that are deemed undesirable by members of the dominant culture. Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (1979), explores the social outsider and how the outsider's identity is constructed. In the context of Said's examination, the Egyptian, or Oriental, is the social outsider, whose identity is constructed by the European, who is dominant and defines what is socially accepted. Reflecting on the Europeans' depiction of the Egyptians, Said states: "The Oriental is irrational, depraved, childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'...what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West" (40). Said argues that depictions of social outsiders are dependent on forces that are external to them. More specifically, the dominant culture decides how the social outsider ought to be portrayed (i.e., as possessors of precisely those qualities the dominant group finds unacceptable), and then proceeds to depict them in this manner (21-22). Beliefs about the social outsider are represented, disseminated, and preserved through written work, such as literature, scholarly work, and travel books (23).

Discussion of the social construction of identity in this thesis shows that social outsiders tend to be attributed with traits that the dominant culture deems undesirable. This thesis' investigations consider the possibility that social outsiders, as presented in the epic, are fabrications. These inventions are provided for the reader by the dominant culture. Social construction of identity

affects and entails the other two factors of social exclusion: caste and *dharma*, and geography and liminality. That is, as the *Mahābhārata* constructs the outsider's identity, the epic places the outsider outside of or at a low rank within the caste system and outside or at the margins of the civilized world of the dominant culture. Thus, the outsider is denied caste identity and is geographically distanced from the dominant culture.

The second factor of social exclusion, caste and *dharma,* concerns India's evolving and ever changing caste system,[4] which defines the *dharma*, or socio-religious duties, of all members of society (Rodrigues 2006, 4-5). In theory, the caste system divides society into four castes: *brāhmin* (priests), *kṣatriya* (kings, warriors), *vaiśya* (merchants), and *śūdra* (labourers, servants). In its classical form, the caste system assumes that caste is determined by birth, and therefore there is little room for upward mobility. There is a belief that persons of lower castes and especially those who are considered *avarṇa* (lacking caste) can 'pollute' members of higher castes, thus further alienating marginalized members of society (Rodrigues 2006, 57-66). Each caste is attributed a *dharma*. *Dharma*,

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[4] J. H. Hutton's theory for the formation of the caste system (presented by Das, 2009) elucidates the purposes of this system. According to Hutton, the caste system began as a way to accommodate the various social groups from different backgrounds in India, "the caste system made it possible for people of great diversity to live together in a single social system over thousands of years. Caste was thus a natural response to historic migrations and folk wanderings of many peoples and tribes who came to India over thousands of years and made it their home" (2009, 160-61). Thus, caste was useful for the functioning of society, however it also created lasting divides between different groups who came to be incorporated unequally into the dominant culture.

or duty, is what allows an individual to contribute to and participate in society. Thus, if a man lacks caste he lacks a *dharma*, which would prevent him from being socially included. It is important to note that this is a simplified explanation of caste and *dharma*, as these two systems that regulate action, define duty, and organize society are very complex. The analysis of the treatment of outsiders in the epic points to this complexity and to the ever-evolving status of both caste and *dharma*.

The final factor, geography and liminality, involves the liminal status that is attributed to social outsiders and the geography that they inhabit. Liminality might be understood as undefined and unordered, it is an 'in-between' space or state. That is, liminality, for the purposes of this thesis, projects the absence of social structure. Victor Turner furthers this definition, stating that liminality is "necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremon[y]" (Turner 1982, 95). In the epic, liminal spaces and people, such as those with no caste and thus no defined *dharma*, are marginal to the geography and people of the dominant culture. As such, social outsiders tend to inhabit

geography that is peripheral to the abodes of the dominant culture.[5] This, as well as their own liminal identity and status, serves to distance them from members of the dominant culture.

Social outsiders are liminal in the epic because the epic is a product of the dominant culture. Thus, Niṣādas are portrayed as liminal by the epic due to their undefined and transient relationship with the members of dominant culture. Therefore, it is not the geography, nor the identity, that social outsiders actually inhabit and possess that affects their perceived liminality. That is, it is because the social outsiders found in the epic are portrayed by members of the dominant culture that they are depicted as inhabiting liminal spaces and as possessing no fixed role or identity. It is the dominant culture's perception of social outsiders which renders liminal. Similarly, the geography of social outsiders is liminal because it is represented as such by the dominant culture.

Parkhill (1984) argues that any geography outside of 'the village' (the homes of the dominant culture) is to be considered liminal (338). In particular, Parkhill (1995) argues that the forest in Hindu epics is to be considered a liminal space. These unordered spaces are liminal because they exist outside of structure of the dominant culture, their liminal quality makes them undefined and non-structured causing them to be everywhere and no where in particular.

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[5] For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'geography' may be considered synonymous with geographic location.

However, liminal spaces and people allow for new states of being, and, so can have positive effects. Because social outsiders are considered liminal, their identities afford them unlimited potential; they are not bound by fixed social roles (Parkhill 1995, 58) nor do they inhabit places that are regulated by social/cultural structures. Sometimes the unlimited potential of the liminal state allows for transformative processes to occur, as is demonstrated by the Nala narrative (chapter 4).

1.3 The Niṣādas

This section provides background information about the Niṣādas, as well as a discussion of the three factors of social exclusion in relation to this tribal group. It is worth noting that the sources I have consulted are unclear if a tribal group existed that self-identified as Niṣādas. However, that Niṣādas are described in Vedic and Hindu literature (e.g., Laws of Manu X.48) points to the likelihood that the dominant culture was describing a group of people, and that Niṣādas are not simply a fabrication, as I will discuss further below. The term Niṣāda, therefore, is most likely a term used by the dominant culture to describe a tribal group or groups that did not belong to their culture. The scholarly work of Thapar and Parasher-Sen also appears to point to this assumption (Thapar 1971, & Parasher Sen 1998, 2004, & 2006). The tribal group or groups described by the dominant culture as Niṣāda will simply be referred to as Niṣāda for the purposes of this thesis.

According to Parasher-Sen (2006), Vedic literature notes the existence of the Niṣādas, indicating that they were a well-known indigenous tribe that lived throughout India during the Vedic period (427 & 431).[6] Although it is clear that the dominant culture knew about the existence of the Niṣādas, or rather groups that the dominant culture labelled Niṣāda, this tribal group was able remain out of the control of the dominant culture for several hundred years. However, the Niṣādas are later identified as having a low ritual status, indicating that they came to be under the influence of Vedic/Hindu culture (432).

Vedic and Hindu literature uses a number of terms when discussing forest dwelling tribes. These terms, including *mleccha, kimpuruṣa,* and *puruṣa mṛga*, are sometimes used in conjunction with the term *niṣāda* or for people who live in the forests. As these terms describe groups of people who are often implicitly connected to Niṣādas, their usage contributes to the Niṣāda identity as constructed by the dominant culture.

Mleccha is an umbrella term that designates groups of outsiders on the subcontinent. It is most commonly translated as “barbarian” (Thapar 1971, 409) or “non-Aryan” (Parasher-Sen 2006, 418). Some scholars state that the term *mleccha* does not stand for one specific tribe or foreign group: “*mleccha* [was used] as an overarching terminology exclusively subsuming the outsider but

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[6] The Vedic sources referenced by Parasher-Sen are: Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā XV.27;Taittirīya Saṃhita IV.5.4.2; Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa XXV.15; Pāñcaviśa Brāhmaṇa XVI.6.8.

without any allusion to the particular group thus designated" (Parasher-Sen 2006, 427). The *Arthaśātra* calls forest tribes *mleccha* (Parasher-Sen 1998, 179), which might encompass the Niṣādas as they are elsewhere said to live in forests and mountains. Sometimes Niṣādas are believed to be the ancestors of *mlecchas* (Parasher-Sen 2006, 433) or considered to be *mlecchas* themselves (Parasher-Sen 2006, 434).

According to Smith, a clear dichotomy existed in the minds of the dominant culture, functioning to differentiate between what the dominant culture considered true humans and pseudo-humans. This binary understanding of people was used in order to uphold the status of the members of the dominant culture. Smith argues that the descriptions of sub-humans were most likely used to describe forest tribes, he states:

> It seems probable, however, that in the Vedic texts it is the tribal people living outside of the Aryan settlements to which all the Sanskrit terms refer [*kimpuruṣa* 'pseudo-man', *puruṣa mṛga* 'wild man' etc.]. These beastly men are the 'other' of civilized Vedic society, just as the outcast wild animals are the opposites of the domesticated village animals. Because they are not 'food' because they are excluded from sacrifice, and because they dwell in the jungles, these 'pseudo-men' can be regarded as ontologically inferior versions of 'real' humans (as quoted in Parasher-Sen 2006, 436).

Thus, the stereotyping of forest tribes includes attributes such as 'wild' and 'pseudo-human,' demonstrating that these groups, and so Niṣādas, are understood as less than human. These sub-human attributes are part of the Niṣādan trope. These expressions confirm the social exclusion of non-Vedic

tribes and contribute to the identity that Vedic culture constructed for the forest dwelling Niṣāda people(s).

Thapar (1971) argues that a polarity is established between the dominant culture and the Niṣādas due to attributed identities. The socially constructed, impure identity of the Niṣādas makes the superior, pure identity of the dominant culture possible, “It was this dichotomy of purity-impurity which gave added significance to the role and status of the ritually pure - the Ārya and preeminent amongst the Āryas, the brāhman. If mlecchа epitomizes the barbarian, then Ārya includes all that is noble and civilized” (Thapar 1971, 411). Therefore, according to the establishment of a dichotomy by way of stereotyping discussed by Smith (in Parasher-Sen 2006) and Thapar (1971), the Niṣādas underwent a process that is similar to Said’s Orientals. Their socially constructed identity, which includes the impurity abhorred by the dominant culture, shows that they are understood as less than, and as opposite from, the members of the dominant culture.

Traditionally, the Niṣādas did not possess a caste, and so, according to the dominant culture, they did not have a *dharma*. However, some texts state that Niṣādas are hunters and, more specifically, the *Laws of Manu* state that they are responsible for catching fish (X.48). Fick discusses the profession of this tribe as described in Indian sources including the Buddhist *Jātakas*:

> ...the Nesādas [Niṣādas] lived by hunting, we can suppose that fishing and hunting formed their exclusive sources of earning. Through this professional work they fell into contempt, for the

> occupation of fisherman or hunter which represents in itself the earliest and lowest stage of evolution of human culture, could not in India come to be held in respect, for this reason, that it necessarily presupposed killing of a living being. In various ways the despised position of the hunter is indicated in the *Jātakas*; it is narrated that Brāhmaṇa youth adopts the occupation of a hunter when he cannot maintain himself by following any other art ([The Jātakas] II.200) (2004, 87).

The *Laws of Manu* supports the low status that is considered, by the dominant culture, to be inherent to the Niṣāda lifestyle and corroborates the characterization of the texts presented by Fick, “Those who are traditionally regarded as outcasts (born) of the twice-born and as born of degradation should make their living by their innate activities, which are reviled by the twice-born” (Doniger & Smith 1991, X.45-46). Thus, the Niṣādas’ occupation influences their social status. Because the Niṣādas are hunters and fishermen, their profession deals with death. This direct association with violence leads to their position as social outcasts, according to Parasher-Sen (2006, 438).

The etymology of the term *niṣāda* further elucidates the low status of Niṣadas. *Niṣāda* comes from the causative form of the root verb $\sqrt{}$*sad* and so translates as "one who is caused to be seated or kneeling, one is who caused to be pushed down, or one who is caused to suffer affliction." These possible meaning are relevant to the social position of the Niṣādas as they suggest that this group was forced into submissiveness by the dominant culture. Monier Williams (1964) states that the Niṣāda are non-Aryan tribes of India, they are regarded as a degraded tribe, and they are generally considered outcasts. Julia

Leslie furthers this, stating that the term *niṣāda*, like *caṇḍāla* and *śvapaka,* comes to be understood as derogatory by the 4th century CE and that "all three words - *niṣāda*, *caṇḍāla* and *śvapaka* - became highly derogatory terms used to convey the brahminical view of those who lived beyond the village boundaries" (2003, 27-28). The etymology and connotations of the term *niṣāda* suggest that this term came from the dominant culture and was subsequently applied to groups that were not accepted by this culture.

The epic presents a genesis myth that elucidates the existence of the Niṣādas. The myth recounts the tale of King Veṇa who is punished by the sages for doing evil deeds that were not in agreement with his *varṇaśramadharma.* The left thigh of Veṇa is churned by the sages and a man "like a charred log with a flat face who was extremely short" (Parasher-Sen 2006, 434) emerged. This man was told to sit down - niṣāda. The myth goes on to state that the Niṣādas came to be known for their professions of hunting and fishing, as well as for their evil deeds. This myth present in both the *Mahābhārata* (7.59.101-103) as well as several Puranas[7]. This myth might also further explain how the Niṣādas come to inhabit such a low caste.

When the Niṣādas are attributed with a caste it is a low caste. Because the epic was compiled over a period of roughly six hundred years, my discussion

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[7] This myth is found in several Puranas such as: Br.P II.36; MP X.4-10; ViP I.13.37; VāP I.120-122; BP IV.14.42-46.

of caste and *dharma* as a factor of social exclusion includes consideration of Niṣādas with low and no caste status. This consideration is necessary because the caste system developed during its history and changed regularly to accommodate various populations (Das 2009, 160-61).

Traditionally, it was believed that the Niṣādas lived in the forests and mountains of the subcontinent, outside the areas inhabited by the dominant culture. There are several theories as to why, historically, the (so-called) Niṣādas lived in these places. Fick (2004) states that their social position as a despised caste influences the location of their homes. Because the Niṣāda are despised, they must live in villages outside of Vedic towns (88). Manu states that the Niṣāda should live in areas that are marked by wilderness, “These (castes) should live near mounds, trees, and cremation-grounds, in mountains...” (Doniger & Smith 1991, X.50). Thapar specifies that, according to Hindu literature, “[the Niṣāda lived] in the region of the Narmada river or among the Vindhya and Satpura mountains” (Thapar 1971, 422). Niṣādas inhabit areas that are all outside of the scope of Vedic civilization. These living locations are, perhaps, a conscious choice on the part of the (so-called) Niṣāda. However, it is also possible that this tribe/these peoples once lived on the borders of Aryan society and were pushed into the forests and mountains by expanding Aryan agrarian practices and economy (Thapar 1971, 414). Because the Niṣāda lived on the thresholds of the lands of the dominant culture, their geography is understood as liminal (Parkhill

1984, 338): they are outside or on the margins of structured Vedic culture and society.

The Niṣādas' origins are depicted as liminal. According to the *Laws of Manu*, a Niṣāda is the offspring of a *brahmin* male and a *śūdra* female (X.8). This mixing of castes gives the Niṣādas an unstable place in society. Therefore, both the Niṣādas' caste identity and their geography are generally considered liminal by the dominant culture.

1.4 Thesis Statement

This thesis explores the three factors of social exclusion that work together to render Niṣādas social outsiders in the *Mahābhārata*.[8] Furthermore, the treatment and function of Niṣādas is examined. Despite their frequent outsider status, Niṣādas play various roles within the epic; they are saviours, scapegoats, and victims, sacrificed for the benefit of the Pāṇḍavas and/or their allies.[9]

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[8] In order to narrow the focus of this thesis, only Niṣādas and the Nala narrative have been considered. However. this thesis originally intended to examine other groups of social outsiders that are found in the epic. These groups included: the Nāgas, a semi divine, sometimes anthropomorphized, race of serpents, and Rākṣasas, a demon race. These groups of social outsiders, like the Niṣādas, have an ambivalent place in the epic; they are sometimes victims of genocide, they often assist the princes in various ways, and they are sometimes spouses to the Pāṇḍavas, who give birth to their children. Although these groups will not be examined, their narratives parallel experiences of the Niṣādas. For instance, the House of Lac narrative (MBh 1.135-137) parallels the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest (MBh 1.214-225) and the killing of Ghaṭotkaca (MBh 7.155) echoes the tale of Ekalavya (MBh 1.123).

[9] The terms scapegoat, sacrifice, and saviour do not come from a particular theory, these terms come from my own reading of the epic. The term scapegoat is operationally defined as receiving negative consequential treatment that is due to a member of the dominant culture. Sacrifice might be understood as a social outsider being sacrificed or making a sacrifice to benefit the dominant

Although the Niṣādas are generally classified as outsiders to the dominant culture, they are important to the progression of the epic. The sacrifices of these outsiders allow the Pāṇḍavas to complete their *dharma* and defeat their evil cousins, the Kauravas.

Given their status as social outsiders it is bizarre that the Niṣādas, as they are depicted by the epic, are influential and affect the outcome of the protagonists in the *Mahābhārata*. Thus, this thesis goes beyond binary that Thapar (1971) presents. It is true that in the epic sometimes Niṣādas are used by and contrasted with members of the dominant culture, but the importance of Niṣādas goes beyond this dichotomy. In spite of their social exclusion, Niṣādas serve various functions and play both positive and negative roles in the epic. For instance, the role of saviour is common to both Ekalavya (MBh 1.123) and the Niṣāda family from the House of Lac narrative (MBH 1.135-37). While these Niṣādas are treated as social outsiders and are sacrificed for members of the dominant culture, they also, curiously, become saviours when their sacrifices save the lives of the Pāṇḍavas. This unique portrayal of social outsiders, presented as savior and sacrifice simultaneously, demonstrates that Niṣādas and factors relating to them warrant further investigation. The importance of this

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culture. Finally, there are instances when social outsiders are saviours to members of the dominant culture, which is how the term saviour is meant to be understood.

investigation extends to the present because issues relating to social outsiders remain relevant today in India and Hinduism.

Christophe Jafferlot (2011) examines current politics and caste in India. In his research, subordinate castes and their political history are discussed. There is a transition of political power taking place in India, with the subordinate castes gaining more power. Although there is progress for lower caste groups, a new outsider is emerging; according to Jafferlot, Muslims are currently marginalized in India (2011, 172-183 & 485-511). Similarly, Das (2009) discusses the issue of Untouchables in India today.[10] Although labeling someone as an Untouchable became illegal in India in 1947, Das states: "One cannot legislate away thousands of years of bad behaviour. Prejudice persists in contemporary India" (2009, 162). Marginalization of social outsiders continues to be an important issue in India and in Hinduism and further research is required to fully understand this discrimination. Exploring the issue of social exclusion in an important and a prominent text, such as the *Mahābhārata*, may well offer insight into current marginalization issues in India.

There is a lack of research relating to the social outsider in the *Mahābhārata*. Many scholars who study marginalized groups or social outsiders generally state that these groups are victimized and are used by dominant social

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[10] Untouchables are those who are part of Hindu culture that are viewed as so socially low that they are not assigned a caste.

groups to serve the dominant group's agenda (Foucault 1965, & Spivak 2006). My research on the role of the outsider in the *Mahābhārata* confirms this general conclusion while also showing how, in the case of the , outsiders are made to serve the needs of the culturally dominant group. Niṣādas are certainly victimized by the hegemonic social group. But, they are also used by the epic to save the lives of the protagonists in the epic and allow them to complete their quest. Additionally, as this stream of inquiry is relatively unexplored, my approach, such as using the work of scholars like Said (1979), Foucault (1965), and others to interpret the epic's narratives, is novel. Furthermore, this research is warranted because the epic is instructional in nature. Thus, narratives relating to social outsiders teach the reader how to treat and view social outsiders. It can also be argued that these narratives teach social outsiders how to properly behave.

The scope and method of this thesis must contend with three concerns from the outset. First, as noted, the *Mahābhārata* is encyclopedic in nature. There are many groups of outsiders in this epic that will not be included in this thesis, such as the Nāgas and Rākṣasas (see footnote 8). However, the Niṣādas are a prominent socially excluded group and their narratives offer a variety of situations to explore.

A second concern is that there are many narratives involving Niṣādas in the epic, this thesis explores two.[11] However, the two Niṣāda narratives and foil that the Nala narrative offers, ensures that this thesis studies a wide range of circumstances and provides a well rounded study of social exclusion within the *Mahābhārata*.

A third area of concern is the use of theoretical perspectives that are not grounded in studies of ancient Indian culture. To address this concern, I study the epic within its historical context and apply any theoretical discussion to a contextualized understanding of the epic. Furthermore, several of my theoretical perspectives are based on studies of Indian culture or its texts (Parasher-Sen 1998, 2004, & 2006, Chakravorty Spivak 2006, Goldman 2001, Parkhill 1984 & 1995, Srinivas 1989) and some of these show the relevance of the work of Said, and Foucault, for example, in such contexts.

1.5 Literature Review

The source I primarily use to work with the English/Sanskrit text of the epic is J.A.B. van Buitenen's (1973-78) partial translation of the epic. This translation is unabridged and is based on the critical edition but it is incomplete. Van Buitenen died after completing only one third of the epic but several scholars, led

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[11] That is, the narrative of Ekalavya (MBh 1.123), and the House of Lac narrative (MBh 1.135-137 Another narrative involving Niṣādas is the Garuḍa narrative (1.24), Garuḍa who is a semi-divine eagle, is told to consume all the Niṣādas to satiate his hunger.

by James L. Fitzgerald, are currently working to finish this translation. The narratives I examine are found in books one and three of the epic, books already translated by van Buitenen.

John Smith's (2009) abridged translation of the *Mahābhārata* was used during my research to gain a sense of the epic as a whole. Smith's translation is based on the critical edition of the epic and so its reading aligns with van Buitenen's work.

Another useful translation is provided by P.C. Roy (1962-63), who has completely translated the epic into English. However, Roy's translation is not based on the critical edition of the epic, and so, his translation is used only when necessary.

1.5.1 Critical Edition

The critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* was compiled by scholars led by V.S. Sukthankar at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and published between 1918 and 1970. These scholars compared various renderings of the epic to construct this edition of the Sanskrit text (van Buitenen 1973, xxxi). The intent of these scholars was to produce a widely attested and grammatically sound document. My use of the critical edition is appropriate because it presents a corroborated manuscript representative of the entire subcontinent, unlike versions known only to a small region of the subcontinent.

1.5.2 Secondary Sources on the Social Outsider and Indian Social Structure

I have utilized the works of several scholars who examine social outsiders and the nature and historical development of social structure in India. These scholars include Srinivas (1989), Goldman (2001), Foucault (1965), Said (1979), Spivak (2006), and Parkhill (1984 &1995). A brief summary of the ideas presented by these scholars that are pertinent to this thesis is presented below under Method. Additionally, the works of Parasher-Sen (1998, 2004, & 2006), and Thapar (1971) have been invaluable in understanding the cultural and historical context of the Niṣādas in the subcontinent before and during the compilation of the epic.

1.6 Method

A detailed analysis of the specific narratives in *Mahābhārata* is undertaken in this thesis. When analyzing the text as a whole, English translations of the epic are used. However, when examining specific narratives and/or passages, the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* is consulted. The Sanskrit is presented for various key sentences and specific terms to uncover nuances in the Sanskrit text.

My analysis is grounded in the historical cultural context of the *Mahābhārata*. During the period of the epic's composition, Indian social structure was undergoing many changes and the caste system was developing, though it would continue to develop in the centuries following the epic's composition. Caste is a factor throughout the epic, though it operates differently in various narratives,

and its changing features can often be traced to the historical development of the caste system as the epic was composed (Doniger 2009, 266-69 & 284-92).

Narratives are used to comprehend how the *Mahābhārata* perceives and treats Niṣādas. Because of the ongoing changes to social structure during the composition of the epic, many theories about social outsiders are required to analyze the narratives. These theories are used as lenses, to view and better understand the narratives that involve Niṣādas. The narrative analysis applies only those theoretical perspectives that most effectively further understanding of the epic's treatment and portrayal of the Niṣādas, as understood within the epic's cultural and historical context.[12]

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work is useful because of her analysis of the modern Indian subaltern and his apparent inability to speak or represent himself. This is applied to the epic's treatment of social outsiders. Special attention is paid to instances where the dominant social group represents the words or actions of the social outsider. Spivak's work shows the need to carefully examine the actions of social outsiders, since these individuals are "represented" and do not represent themselves. However, since the epic is sometimes ambiguous in its attitudes towards outsiders, not consistently portraying them in a negative

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[12] The parts of theories that are used to help this thesis' analysis focus on the aspect of social outsiders and social exclusion. Some theories, such as Said's Orientalism, also consider the mainstream group. Although this thesis does not examine these aspects of social exclusion, as doing so would require a thorough analysis and another thesis, these are areas that ought to be considered by future research.

manner, it is possible that the epic preserves outsiders' actions and/or words that preserve the voices of outsiders. Possible messages, instances where the subaltern does speak through word or action in the epic's narratives, might therefore be successfully uncovered through the lens of Spivak's theory since the epic is not consistently exclusionary toward the social outsider (2006, 28-37).

Michel Foucault's work is useful because of his analysis of the social forces in place that lead to the inclusion or exclusion of social groups in mainstream society. He states that the process of social exclusion remains the same over time while the groups labeled as social outsiders change. Attention will be paid to instances where his analysis is helpful for understanding what possible social forces determine who is excluded and who is included in the epic. Also, his work examines several centuries of social exclusion, which makes his work particularly relevant for the *Mahābhārata* as it was written over the course of approximately six hundred years (1965)[13]

Edward Said's theory of social outsiders, whom Said terms 'Others,' is helpful when analyzing narratives in which the identity of the social outsider is constructed by the dominant culture. Said states that a process of sanitizing occurs when the social outsider is represented by the hegemonic group. The

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[13]Foucault's thoughts on power and resistance (1997), might also be appropriate to use in this thesis. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1979) is used for this thesis because of its consideration of social outsiders throughout the course of several centuries, the fluidity of their perceived identity by the dominant culture, and the effects that their exclusion has on their segregation from and relationship with members of the dominant culture. To fully consider Foucault's would be an avenue for future research, as its scope would warrant another thesis.

social outsider is rendered safe (i.e., safe to the dominant culture) through this process, which, in part, entails the projection of the dominant group's values onto the outsider and the representation of the outsider as the embodiment of culturally negative characteristics. Said's theory is applied to the *Mahābhārata's* portrayal of social outsiders. Said's theory also highlights the importance of geography, showing that physical location is a contributing factor in the process of "Othering." When an individual or group is geographically removed from a social situation they may be viewed as abnormal and exotic, becoming Other to the culture that is viewing them. Instances where geography contributes to an individual's identity as a social outsider will be examined with the help of Said's theory (1979).

Although Spivak, Foucault, and Said all examine social and historical contexts different from the context of the *Mahābhārata*, their work demonstrates that representation of social outsiders and theories regarding how and why this process takes place have been successful in a variety of other contexts. Their success supports the premise of this thesis. Additionally, the approach that Said uses suggests that the direction that this thesis is taking when examining the social outsider is justified because theory regarding social structure is derived through close examination of narrative (and literature) as well as events that take place during the composition of this literature. Said (1979) says, "...my study of Orientalism has convinced me...that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together" (27).

Robert Goldman's work is particularly relevant given that the socio-historical context of his work is quite similar to that of this thesis. His work is based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a Hindu Sanskrit epic composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE.[14] Goldman studies the construction of identity of social outsiders. Following Said and others, he argues that social outsiders are represented by the dominant culture as possessing traits that are viewed unfavourably by members of the hegemonic group. His theory is useful when examining the representation of members of social outsider groups in the *Mahābhārata* (2001, 105-116).

M. N. Srinivas' theory deals with the process of Sanskritization, which might be thought of as assimilation to dominant Vedic culture. One aspect of Sanskritization is the social outsider's adoption of Vedic habits and beliefs in order to join mainstream Vedic culture. Instances of possible Sanskritization are noted and analyzed with the help of Srinivas' theory. When social outsiders are accepted by the dominant culture in the epic, this theory is helpful. Forces controlling this process (i.e., forces within the hegemonic power) can also be studied with the help of Srinivas' theory (1989).

Aloka Parasher-Sen's theory is based heavily on Indian literature. She studies changes in the ways that various groups of social outsiders are treated by dominant culture in ancient India (from circa 200 BCE to 50 CE). Examining why

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[14] Doniger states that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, might have been starting to take shape as early as 750 BCE, but that the *Rāmāyaṇa* did not reach its current form until 200 BCE to 200 CE (Doniger 2009, 218).

some groups are accepted and others remain excluded, she identifies reasons for social isolation including: geography, lack of caste assignment, and low status. Narratives that deal with social outsiders who are affected by these factors will be examined through the lens of Parasher-Sen's historical work. Parasher-Sen reminds us that for ancient and early Indian society, social roles and caste structure were changing. At this time the relationship between tribe and civilization was not fixed; it had not always been the rigid system it became (2004, 277-313).

Thomas Parkhill's analysis of the forest in the Hindu epics draws on Victor Turner's notion of liminality. His work is helpful when determining how geography that possesses liminal and transient qualities (i.e., forest, ocean, non-ordered places) relates to the social outsider in the narratives of the *Mahābhārata* (1995). Parkhill also argues that unlimited potential comes with liminality (1984) in the two Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*

1.7 Organization

The remaining chapters analyze three narratives: two Niṣāda narratives and the Nala narrative. Chapter two focuses on the Ekalavya narrative (Mbh 1.123). It explores how processes of social exclusion, such as naming and stereotyping, affect the portrayal of Ekalavya. His geography and place as a liminal character are examined. The epic's disregard of his status as a tribal prince is also analyzed. It seems that this narrative serves as a warning to those

who might overstep their social rank. Ekalavya's roles in relation to the protagonists are also discussed in this chapter: he is scapegoat, sacrifice, and saviour.

The third chapter focuses on the House of Lac narrative (MBh 1.135-37). This narrative tells the tale of an unnamed Niṣāda family. Processes of social exclusion which affect this family include the social construction of identity, silencing, and anonymity. This narrative portrays the Niṣāda family as less than human, but nevertheless, as argued in chapter three, the Niṣāda family plays the roles of sacrifice, scapegoat, and saviour.

The fourth chapter focuses on the narrative of Nala and Damayantī (MBh 3.50-78). Although Nala is not a Niṣāda, his narrative allows for a unique opportunity to explore how the three factors of social exclusion operate in the epic. Initially, Nala is portrayed as a socially included king however throughout the course of the narrative he becomes a socially excluded mad man and later a low ranking charioteer. This chapter argues that descriptions of Nala are reminiscent of Niṣāda tropes when he is considered a social outsider.. Parkhill's work with the tripartite process of transformation is useful when unpacking this narrative. In this narrative, Nala plays the roles of scapegoat and saviour.

The fifth chapter explores the treatment of the Niṣādas. The variety of treatment that the Niṣādas receive is examined. Niṣādas are often excluded, but there are some instances in which Niṣādas are accepted by the dominant culture and treated positively. Foucault's work is particularly useful when understanding

how violence is used to facilitate the marginalization of Niṣādas in the epic. Theories regarding the social exclusion of the Niṣādas that have been put forth by other scholars are considered. The possible purposes of the epic's varying treatment of the Niṣādas is examined, and I question if the epic validates the treatment of the Niṣādas. Finally, a discussion regarding future research is provided.

Chapter 2: The Ekalavya Narrative (MBh 1.123)

The narrative of Ekalavya portrays a socially excluded tribal boy, Ekalavya, who interacts with prominent members of the dominant culture. Ekalavya is a Niṣada prince who attempts to learn archery from the Pāṇḍavas' archery guru, Drona. His attempt results in a denial of education and eventually a required self-amputation that robs Ekalavya of his exceptional skill as an archer. This chapter will analyze the factors that influence the marginalization of Ekalavya: the social construction of the identity that the epic provides for him and the emphasis on his status as a Niṣāda; Ekalavya's lack of caste and *dharma*, and negation of his position as tribal prince; and, finally, the young prince's geography, his forest abode, and its liminal quality. There are multiple interpretations for the events that occur within this complicated narrative. For instance, Ekalavya's amputation might be due to his acquisition of the Vedic knowledge of archery (Shankar 1994). Alternatively, following Parkhill's (1984) arguments, Ekalavya's loss of ability could be indicative of his liminal status. This chapter will unpack the social exclusion in narrative of Ekalavya. An examination of the roles played by Ekalayva and the functions that are served by this narrative is also offered.

2.1 Synopsis

The events of the narrative take place while the Pāṇḍavas are training with Droṇa in the forest. Ekalavya, a Niṣāda, approaches Droṇa and asks him to instruct him in archery. Droṇa refuses to teach Ekalavya out of respect for the

Pāṇḍavas. After being refused, Ekalavya goes into the forest and creates a clay statue that bears the likeness of Droṇa. Ekalavya begins to train in archery and treats this clay image as a teacher. Because of his determination and dedication to archery, Ekalavya becomes a very adept archer.

One day, the Pāṇḍavas are hunting in the forest with an accompanying dog. The dog wanders off and comes across Ekalavya and begins to bark incessantly at him. Ekalavya shoots the dog in the mouth seven times. The dog, his mouth full of arrows, wanders back to the Pāṇḍavas. Upon seeing the dog, the Pāṇḍavas wish to meet the one responsible. They conclude that the archer who shot the dog must possess great skill in archery, noting that the archer must have been shooting blind.[15] The Pāṇḍavas go off in search of the archer and come across Ekalavya, who is continuously shooting arrows. Noticing that this man possesses a wild nature, the Pāṇḍavas ask the man who he is. Ekalavya replies that he is the son of the chieftain of the Niṣādas, a student of Droṇa, and that he is working on mastering archery.

The Pāṇḍavas go back to Droṇa and tell him the story of the archer they met in the forest. Arjuna, one of the Pāṇḍavas, cannot stop thinking of Ekalavya

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[15] Presumably because it was dark in the forest where Ekalavya was standing. The epic states that the dog smells Ekalavya, not that the dog sees him; thus, it may be concluded that the forest was dark. Because of the dark forest, all that Ekalavya had to guide his arrows was the sound of the dog's barking, indicating that Ekalavya is an incredibly talented archer. Alternatively, the Pāṇḍavas might have concluded that Ekalavya possessed great skill as he is able to quickly shoot seven arrows into the dog's mouth during the second which the dog's mouth was open and barking.

and approaches Droṇa. Arjuna reminds Droṇa of a promise, saying: "'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 the world - the son of the Niṣāda chief?'" (MBh 1.123.28-29). Hearing this, Droṇa goes into the forest to find Ekalavya. When Ekalavya sees Droṇa, he happily approaches his teacher and respectfully touches Droṇa's feet. Ekalavya then declares that he is the pupil of Droṇa. Droṇa says that if Ekalavya is his pupil that he will have his guru's fee. Ekalavya states that he is happy to give Droṇa anything for his guru's fee. Droṇa requests Ekalvya's right thumb. Without hesitating, Ekalavya cuts off his right thumb and gives it to Droṇa. Consequently, Ekalavya is no longer capable of shooting as fast as before, and Arjuna becomes the best archer in the world.

2.2 Analysis

The epic depicts Ekalavya as a social outcast. This is apparent from the descriptions of his appearance and overall lack of acceptance by the dominant culture. His rejection appears to hinge on several factors: the social construction of his identity, his apparent lack of caste and *dharma*, and the geography that the young tribal prince inhabits and his status as a liminal character. Despite Ekalavya's status as a social outsider, he interacts with several members of the dominant culture. However, he is ultimately violated by the dominant culture because it serves its needs. This narrative can be interpreted in multiple ways but

one thread these interpretations share is that Ekalavya is understood, above all else, as a social outsider. In many ways, Ekalavya's status as a Niṣāda is important to this narrative. This status is influenced by the socially constructed identity that is provided for him by the epic, which is discussed in this chapter.

The epic shows that Ekalavya is rejected by the dominant culture because he is understood as a social outsider. When the reader first encounters Ekalavya, Droṇa has just declined his apprenticeship. The epic states:

> But Droṇa, who knew the Law [*dharma*], declined to accept him for archery, out of consideration for the others, reflecting that he was the son of a Niṣāda
>
> *na sam taṁ pratijagrāha naiṣādiriti cintayan*
> *śiṣyam dhanuṣi dharmajñasteṣāmevānvavekṣayā*
> (MBh 1.123.11)[16]

Droṇa's succinct reasoning indicates that because Ekalavya is a Niṣāda there is no need to consider him as a student; his Niṣādan heritage disqualifies him as a potential pupil. The brevity of Droṇa's thought could suggest that within the context of the epic, it is understood that the Niṣādas are not to be privy to martial knowledge. This special set of information is to be reserved for members of the dominant culture. That the epic notes Drona's knowledge of *dharma* here, suggests that the social regulations of the dominant culture do not permit

[16] All English translations of the epic are from van Buitenen's work, unless otherwise specified. All Sanskrit verses have been transliterated from the critical edition of the epic.

Ekalavya to learn archery because of his social standing: “he was the son of a Niṣāda” (MBh 1.123.11).

Drona’s reasoning for not instructing Ekalavya suggests that Niṣādas are not to keep company with princes from the dominant culture. Doniger (2009) corroborates: “For such a person [Ekalavya] to stand beside the Pandava princes in archery classes was unthinkable; that is what Drona, who “knew dharma” realized” (289). Thus, Ekalavya’s rejection has nothing to do with his potential as an archer or his dedication. Indeed, Ekalavya is later described as a master archer, and is thoroughly dedicated to his education in archery (MBh 1.123.13-14). Because his rejection has nothing to do with skill, the narrative suggests that he is declined because he is a Niṣāda whose discipleship under Droṇa would cause offense to the Pāṇḍavas and would fall outside *dharma*, the Law. Thus, the reader’s first introduction to Ekalavya shows him as one who is rejected because of his Niṣādan identity. This initial meeting sets the tone for the rest of the narrative.

Ekalavya is constantly recognized by the epic as a Niṣāda. There is no mention of Ekalavya without a follow up descriptor that identifies him as a tribal or a Niṣāda. There are many words that describe Ekalavya: he is the son of a chieftain, a prince among his own people; he is a phenomenal archer; finally, he is very truthful and honest. Ekalavya could be identified in any of these ways. However, Ekalavya is rarely mentioned without the follow up descriptor of “the Niṣāda.” In this short 40 verse narrative, Ekalavya is referenced 17 times and 10

of these references simply refer to Ekalavya as “the Niṣāda.” This excessive referencing indicates that the epic does not wish the reader to forget that Ekalavya is of the Niṣāda tribe.

In the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1964) Monier Williams states that, historically, the Niṣādas are regarded as a degraded tribe, and are generally considered outcasts. Parasher-Sen (2006) discusses the importance of names in social rankings in India. She states that the name Niṣāda was not only an occupational identity, but was also a way to identify someone as a social outsider. Parasher-Sen argues: “...an important point, that inherent in the name was not only occupational identity...but also a sense of meaning illustrating the nature of their position in society. More than explanation, it was the language of naming that defined social exclusion instantly” (438). The occupation of the Niṣādas influences their social status because the Niṣādas are fishermen, their profession deals with death. Because their profession is directly associated with violence and death, it is deemed impure. This perceived impurity leads to the Niṣādas’ position as social outcasts (Parasher-Sen 2006, 438). Thus, when the epic identifies Ekalavya as a Niṣāda, it is accomplishing much more than identifying him as of the Niṣāda tribe. The epic’s use of the term Niṣāda projects all of the connotations of the word onto Ekalavya.

The epic describes Ekalavya as self-identifying as a tribal. The first time that Ekalavya speaks in his narrative is when he is addressed by the Pāṇḍavas. Ekalavya identifies himself,

> Know me for the son of the Hiraṇyadhanus, chieftan of the Niṣādas, and also for a pupil of Droṇa, who toils on mastering archery
>
> *niṣādādhipatervīrā hiraṇyadhanuṣaḥ sutam*
> *droṇaśiṣyam ca māṃ vitta dhanurvedakṛtaśramam*
> (MBh 1.123.24)

When given the opportunity, Ekalavya first identifies himself as a Niṣāda, secondly as a student of Droṇa's, and finally as someone who attempts to master archery. The order of these identifiers is important; not only does the epic use the term 'Niṣāda' to describe Ekalavya, but based on Ekalavya's statement, Ekalavya himself wishes the Pāṇḍavas to know him first as a Niṣāda. Why not introduce himself as a master archer? He clearly possesses the skill for he is able to shoot blindly and shut the dog's mouth (MBh 1.123.19). If Ekalavya introduced himself as a master archer first, it might make him more relatable to the Pāṇḍavas, as they are of the *kṣatriya* caste. It is possible that the order of this introduction is intentionally presented by the epic, reminding readers that Ekalavya is, above all else, a tribal. This tribal identity is loaded with preconceived notions, or stereotypes, and presents Ekalavya in an unfavourable light.

The epic portrays Ekalavya as a dirty tribal boy, who dresses in tatters. His physical appearance seems to be of great import in this short narrative as it is described twice:

When the dog smelled that black Niṣāda in the woods, wrapped in deerskin, his body caked with dirt[17]

sa kṛṣṇaṃ maladigdhāṅgam kṛṣṇājinadharaṃ vane
naiṣādim svā samālakṣya bhaṣaṃstasthau tadantike
(MBh 1.123.18)

He found Ekalavya, his body caked with dirt, hair braided, dressed in tatters

dadarśa maladigdhāṅgaṃ jaṭilaṃ cīravāsasam
ekalavyaṃ dhanuṣyāṇimasyantamanisaṃ sarān
(MBh 1.123.30)

This narrative juxtaposes Ekalavya with the Pāṇḍavas, who have elsewhere been described as radiant, lustrous, and sunlike (MBh 1.114-115). Both Ekalavya and the Pāṇḍavas are described by the epic as princes. However, the disparity in their physical appearance further suggests Ekalavya's lack of acceptance by the dominant culture, despite Ekalavya's royal position among his own people. Ekalavya may be a prince, but he is not a prince of the dominant culture. He is a Niṣāda, and so he does not share the positive portrayal that is attributed to the Pāṇḍavas. The physical contrast between Ekalavya and the Pāṇḍavas serves to further Ekalavya's social exclusion and negative portrayal of his identity.

Doniger links Ekalavya's physical appearance to his low social standing. She states: "His outward appearance invokes all the conventional tropes for

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[17] The deerskin reference potentially alludes to ascetics, who are also believed to inhabit the forest, and are described as sitting on deerskin while practicing yoga, "Select a clean spot, neither too high no too low, and seat yourself firmly on a cloth, a deerskin, and kusha grass" (Bhagavad Gita ,6.11, Easwaran trans.).

tribals: he is described as black, wrapped in deerskin, hair all matted, dressed in rags, his body caked with dirt. He is made of the wrong stuff (or, as we would say, has the wrong genes). He is physically dirt" (2009, 289). Doniger states that Ekalavya fits the stereotype of the tribals. By describing Ekalavya as dirty and poorly clothed the epic further perpetuates this stereotype, which is, in fact, the constructed identity that the epic has attributed to tribals. Physical appearance and social position are linked in the case of Ekalavya.

Overall, the identity that the epic provides for Ekalavya the Niṣāda is composed of several key factors: his inherent inferiority to the dominant culture, his poor hygiene and dress, and his honest and humble attitude. Ekalavya's low social position hinges on the socially constructed identity that the dominant culture provides for him. Although he is referred to as the son of a chieftain, his royal status is not only ignored, but replaced with either a lack of caste or, as suggested below, a caste that is not reflective of his royal status.

Ekalavya is identified as a black Niṣāda twice in this narrative. This colour reference potentially relates to a caste position.[18] According to Chakravarti, each caste is assigned a colour and the lowest caste is allotted the colour black (2006, 44). Because the lowest caste is assigned the colour black, when the epic describes Ekalavya as black, it may imply that Ekalavya has a low social status.

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[18] MBh 1.123.19 &1.123.30

This narrative seems to indicate that Ekalavya wishes to assimilate and become part of the dominant culture. Sanskritization, a term for several processes of assimilation into orthodox or dominant brahmanical culture, helps to unpack this narrative. Ekalavya's desire to learn archery as well as his respect for Droṇa (both the clay statue and the Pāṇḍavas' instructor) indicate that he wishes to be accepted. It is possible that Ekalavya attempts to master archery in this narrative so that he can mimic the Pāṇḍavas, becoming part of the caste system via emulation. According to Srinivas (1989), sometimes low caste members endeavor to become integrated into a higher caste by mimicking members of the higher caste:

> the emulation of a particular dominant caste is widespread in the areas where it is dominant. But such emulation does not always, or even usually, lead to the upwardly mobile castes in successfully passing themselves off as the dominant castes. In fact, the dominant castes strongly disapprove of the emulation of their customs, ritual and life-style by the lower castes, and especially by the Harijans (1989, 18-19)

That Ekalavya attempts to mimic the dominant culture in this narrative is apparent by his tutelage in archery, his worship of the clay statue, Droṇa, and his respect for members of the dominant culture. On this topic, Doniger states: "The Nishadas here [Ekalavya] embrace Hindu dharma and Hindu forms of worship but are still beneath the contempt of the caste system" (2009, 289). Supporting that, although Ekalavya has attempted integration to the dominant culture, he is not accepted, and thus, does not possess a caste.

Ekalavya's lack of caste assignment and consequent lack of *dharma* are partially due to his links with the forest in this narrative. Insufficient contact with the dominant culture due to geographical distance could cause a lack of caste assignment. Lack of contact is illustrated when Ekalavya is referred to as a forest dweller: "The Pāṇḍavas then went out into the woods (*vana)* to look for the forest-dweller (*vananivāsin)* [Ekalavya]" (MBh 1.123.22) and the narrative states several times that Ekalavya is found in the forest (MBh 1.123.12 & MBh 1.123. 17-18). Ekalavya's status as forest-dweller not only psychologically distances him from the dominant culture (due to his physical appearance and identity, and lack of caste assignment), but also physically/geographically distances him from dominant society and its city-dwellers. Parasher-Sen (2004) suggests that, historically, lack of contact due to geographical distance was a main reason for social exclusion of tribes on the subcontinent: "The fact that many of these groups continued to remain isolated in the forest and mountain regions of the subcontinent for long periods of time, was perhaps the main reason for their exclusion from the varna-jāti system" (299). Similarly, Ekalavya's geography disqualifies him from having a caste, he is not permitted to participate fully in the dominant culture. He becomes a liminal character, whose purpose and identity fluctuate.

Ekalavya's status as a forest-dweller contributes to his liminality. Shankar (1994) notes that because Ekalavya is considered a prince among his people but has a marginal identity in Hindu society, he inhabits an 'in between' place in the

social hierarchy of the Mahābhārata, as well as within himself: “When Ekalavya appears before Drona as a prospective student, he appears as a bearer of both privilege [he is the son of a chieftain] and subalternity [he is a tribal]...Neither subaltern not privileged in any simple sense, Ekalavya may perhaps be best understood as a liminal figure, having his origins in one world, resident in another” (Shankar 1994, 483). This ambiguity leaves one wondering: Is Ekalavya a prince or an outcast (or outcaste, as the case may be)? The epic ultimately decides that Ekalavya is to be considered a social outsider. His outsider identity and apparent inferiority is confirmed when Ekalavya must amputate his own thumb.

Ekalavya’s liminality arguably ends when the young tribal accepts his place as a social outsider and cuts off his thumb (MBh 1.123.37). After cutting off his thumb, Ekalavya is no longer able to match the Pāṇḍavas in archery. His act of self-amputation potentially marks an acceptance of his low social status and is a permanent marker of the end of Ekalavya’s liminality.

We have established that Ekalavya is understood as a social outsider in this narrative. However, there are several other issues to consider when exploring this narrative: Ekalavya’s ability as an archer, functions of the narrative within the epic as a whole, and, an examination of Ekalavya’s actions.

The epic shows that Ekalavya is a skilled warrior. It is perhaps due to Ekalavya’s temporary liminality that he has the ability to become such a distinguished archer. In what other context could a tribal boy, believed to be

inferior, become a masterful archer? Because Ekalavya's role is undefined he can be anything he wishes. However, it can also be argued that Ekalavya's liminal status is what permits his loss of ability. Liminality allows for the potential to be anything, but also enables a loss of everything. That is, because liminality does not allow for fixed roles or social positions, nothing can be taken for granted, including Ekalavya's archery skill. With no fixed role as a warrior, according to dominant culture, Ekalavya has no right to possess this skill and so he loses his ability. Parkhill explores these themes using the Nala narrative. Parkhill states that liminality allows Nala to make several encompassing changes, however, it also causes him to lose his former roles and identities (1995, 57-62).[19] For Ekalavya, liminality works in a similar way, the changes he endures throughout this narrative are enveloping.

From the perspective of the dominant culture, a possible explanation for Ekalavya's education in archery is that he hopes to one day declare war on the Pāṇḍavas, and gain a higher social status through violent methods. According to Srinivas, social mobility was possible through warfare until British rule, " it was always possible, though not easy, for an official or soldier, or the head of a locally dominant caste, to acquire political power and become a chief or king" (1989, 41). However, because Ekalavya is not shown to be violent toward the Pāṇḍavas and

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[19] A further discussion of liminality and Nala can be found in chapter four.

he respects Droṇa, a motive of social mobility by means of warfare seems unlikely.

Ekalavya's loss of ability in this narrative could be interpreted as a consequence for resisting the identity that epic provides for him (see introduction for a further discussion of Said, 1979). Ekalavya, as a social outsider, as a caste-less tribal, could be understood by the epic as ineligible for the role of proficient warrior. Based on this identity, he is not worthy of gaining archery instruction from members of the dominant culture. When Ekalavya learns the art of archery he is fighting against this constructed identity. Learning the skill of archery does not fit with the limitations that the dominant culture has placed on Ekalavya and his identity as a tribal, and Ekalavya soon loses his gift when he amputates his own thumb.

Doniger (2009) argues that Droṇa requests a guru's fee in order to maintain the status quo: "In order to protect both dharma and the reputation of his own world-class archery student, Drona claims his retroactive tuition, the *guru-dakshina*. Of course we are shocked; to add insult to injury, Drona really didn't teach Ekalavya at all and hardly deserves any tuition fees" (289). According to Doniger, Droṇa's request is selfish and although he receives his macabre guru's fee, she argues that Droṇa has no right to Ekalavya's thumb.

Shankar's (1994) argument supports Doniger's claim that Droṇa deserves no fee from Ekalavya. Shankar argues that Ekalavya is self-taught (even though Ekalavya believes a clay statue of Droṇa was his teacher). Shankar asserts that it

is Ekalavya's hard work and perseverance that grant him his incredible skill as an archer, not the clay statue. Ekalavya either does not acknowledge that he is self-taught or does not know that he is an autodidact. Shankar suggests that Ekalavya believes that a member of dominant culture must have taught him archery because the knowledge of archery *belongs* to the hegemonic society. Ekalavya's beliefs appear to be confirmed when Droṇa, a member of dominant culture and thus one who could impart such knowledge, comes to collect a guru fee from the young tribal prince. After Droṇa requests Ekalavya's thumb, Ekalavya's knowledge is taken, suggesting that Ekalavya should never have reached his level of mastery. According to Shankar, Ekalavya believes that he does not possess ownership over his skill in archery, "Ekalavya's foolishness and tragedy is that he does not recognize his theft as theft ... He has ... taught himself. If he has gained access to what may be termed elite knowledge, he owes nothing to the elite institution articulated in the figure of Drona" (Shankar 1994, 484). Shankar argues that when Ekalavya gives Droṇa his thumb, Ekalavya is acknowledging that the knowledge of archery never belonged to him. His actions show that Ekalavya agrees that this knowledge belongs to Droṇa and the dominant culture.

Another perspective of Ekalavya's role as student emerges against the background of Indian understandings of doubles such as the clay statue, which is presented as a double of Droṇa the archery guru. In *Splitting the Difference* (1999), Doniger examines mythology's process of doubling (or sometimes

tripling) characters in order to serve the needs of the myth. Although she does not examine the narrative of Ekalavya specifically, her work shows us that there are many implications in narratives when doubles are present. It is generally an accepted belief in Hinduism that doubles are complex entities that are, in some ways, very similar to their origin.[20] Dold (2005) observes that within a Hindu context there is an assumption that a double "somehow shares the same essence as its source" (162). In the narrative of Ekalavya then, it could be argued that the clay statue of Droṇa is not simply an inanimate object, but actually possesses the essence of Droṇa. The epic states that Ekalavya treats the statue like a guru,

> This image he treated religiously as his teacher
>
> *tasminnācāryavṛttiṃ ca paramāmāsthitastadā*
>
> (MBh 1.123.13)

Thus, it is possible that this clay statue (which is also Droṇa, the teacher), is to be understood as a teacher who actually imparts knowledge to Ekalavya. The Sanskrit *vṛttiṃ paramām* (taken from the epic's quote above), translated by Monier Williams as highest or most excellent (*paramām*) respect (*vṛttiṃ*),

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[20] For instance, Doniger discusses Sita's double from the *Rāmāyaṇa*; in some versions, this double takes the place of Sita before she is kidnapped. However, this double embodies Stia and is treated by Rama as his wife. Rama often forgets, although he has prior knowledge about the double, that his real wife has been taken elsewhere and that a double has taken her place (1999, 10-21).

indicates that Ekalavya truly reveres his clay instructor.[21] The respect that Ekalavya has for Droṇa, is first noted once Ekalavya has been rejected as a student. After Droṇa refuses to teach Ekalavya, the young tribal leaves to go the forest but not before bowing to touch the feet of Droṇa with his head (MBh 1.123.12), indicating that Ekalavya reveres Droṇa. Ekalavya's attempted assimilation to the dominant culture, and the role of the clay double is further supported the epic's description of Ekalavya's practice,

> while he spent all of his efforts on archery, observing the proper discipline. 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.
>
> *iṣvatre yogamātasthe paraṃ niyamamāsthitaḥ*
> *parayā sraddhayā yukto yogena parameṇa ca*
> *vimoksādānasaṃdhāne laghutvaṃ paramāpa saḥ*
> (MBh 1.123.13-14)

The Sanskrit reveals that Ekalavya observes the proper discipline according to the dominant culture. *Niyama* is translated by Monier Williams as rule, necessity or obligation. Thus, the Sanskrit, *paraṃ niyamam* indicates that Ekalavya properly follows the dominant culture's prescribed discipline, suggesting that Ekalavya is engaging in the dominant culture's mode of study. This is, arguably, made possible because of the clay statue, Droṇa, who would have been capable of imparting knowledge, such as training in the manner of the dominant culture, to

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[21] Van Buitenen translates *vṛttiṃ* as religiously, elucidating the religious nature of the student-guru relationship in the dominant culture.

Ekalavya. The clay statue's role as educator is also supported by Ekalavya's self-introduction as a student of Droṇa's to the Pāṇḍavas.[22] Droṇa's role of instructor to Ekalavya is further supported by Droṇa's recognition of Ekalavya as his student, at the end of the narrative the *brāhmin* requests a guru fee from the young tribal prince.[23] Ekalavya willingly pays the guru's fee, indicating that the young tribal is paying Droṇa for his education.[24] The narrative, therefore, provides further evidence that Droṇa's statue, carrying the essence of Droṇa, actively educates Ekalavya.

Spivak (2006) suggests that meaning can be, and must be, derived from the actions of social outsiders. There is little dialogue attributed to Ekalavya in this narrative, however, his actions speak volumes. Ekalavya's actions suggest that he wishes to be accepted by the dominant culture, as he clearly wants to learn and master archery. Ekalavya wishes for Droṇa to teach him. This is illustrated by his desire for Droṇa's instruction, later construction of the clay statue 'Droṇa,' and his own self-identification as a student of Droṇa. One might observe that Ekalavya wishes to create a relationship with the Pāṇḍavas. He clearly does not wish to harm the Pāṇḍavas, as he could have easily hurt them with his superior ability as an archer, but Ekalavya does not injure them. Instead

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[22] "Know me for the son of the Hiraṇyadhanus, chieftan of the Niṣādas, and also for a pupil of Droṇa, who toils on mastering archery" (MBh 1.123.24).
[23] "Thereupon, sire, Droṇa said to Ekalavya, "If you are my pupil, then give me at once my fee!"" (MBh 1.123.34).
[24] "Ekalavya happily said, "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!"" (MBh 1.123.35).

he approaches the Pāṇḍavas, and explains that he too is a student of Droṇa's, a possible attempt at forming a connection.

Ekalavya's dedication shows that mastering archery is a priority for him but he would not abuse this skill. When Ekalavya shoots the dog's mouth, it becomes obvious that Ekalavya does not wish to kill the dog, but silence the dog. It could also indicate that he is fearful of being discovered, or that he wishes to impress the Pāṇḍavas. Ekalavya's honesty is demonstrated by his payment of Droṇa's guru fee, without hesitation. This part of the narrative could also suggest that on some level, Ekalavya has been accepted by members of the dominant culture. Droṇa's guru fee is a double-edged sword; Ekalavya is accepted at the expense of his ability. However, the young tribal prince does not seem concerned about his loss of ability (or if he is, the epic does not indicate any such concern). Instead, the text says that Ekalavya:

> 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
>
> *tathaiva hṛṣṭavadanastathaivādīnamānasaḥ*
> *chicvāvicārya taṃ prādāddroṇāyāṅgusthamātmanaḥ*
> (MBh 1.123.37)

The narrative of Ekalavya serves multiple functions. The epic is considered instructional, thus, as suggested by Doniger (2009), the epic could be attempting to show that violent actions, even towards tribals, are not acceptable (289). Alternatively, the epic could also be trying to show that tribals have a 'place.' An attempt to overstep this place and reach for a higher social position could result in

devastating consequences. This narrative could serve as a warning: one does not attempt to move up the social ladder without ramifications.

2.3 Roles Played by Ekalavya

2.3.1 Sacrifice

One of the predominant roles played by Ekalavya is that of sacrifice. Ekalavya's ability, thumb, life, and, arguably soul, are sacrificed. Ekalavya willingly sacrifices his thumb to Droṇa and Arjuna to satisfy the guru's fee. The other sacrifices that Ekalavya makes are a consequence of the first. Ekalavya appears in the epic several other times after this incident, but he does not possess the same conviction that he had pre-amputation, indicating that his soul has also been sacrificed. Many scholars equate the loss of Ekalavya's thumb with the loss of his soul. Brodbeck states, "Ekalavya's *Mahābhārata* appearances after the thumb are rather ghostly" (2006, 3). Ekalavya's life is ultimately sacrificed as well. After the loss of Ekalavya's thumb, the epic states that Karṇa kills him on three separate occasions (MBh 5.47.71, 7.155.29, & 16.7.10). Ekalavya does not possess his ability as an archer after his amputation, "When thereafter the Niṣāda shot with his fingers, he was no longer as fast as he had been before" (MBh 1.123.38). Had Ekalavya retained his ability as an archer, it is fair to assume that he would have been able to defend himself, and Karṇa might not have killed him. Droṇa and Arjuna have taken away his ability as an archer, his spirit, and consequently, his life. Ekalavya's sacrifice serves the needs of the

members of the dominant culture. That is, Arjuna's place as a superior archer is secured, while Ekalavya becomes permanently distinguished from members of the dominant culture.

2.3.2 Scapegoat

Ekalavya is a scapegoat for Arjuna and Droṇa; the treatment that this young tribal prince receives is unwarranted. In the narrative, Arjuna becomes upset with Droṇa because Ekalavya, who claims to be a student of Droṇa's, has surpassed Arjuna in archery. Because Arjuna is upset he reminds Droṇa of his promise to him, Arjuna states: "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?" (MBh 1.123.27-28). Droṇa requests Ekalavya's thumb in order to placate Arjuna. Ekalavya has not acted in a way that merits this demand, and thus, when from Droṇa requests his gruesome fee, Ekalavya becomes the whipping boy for the dominant culture.

2.3.3 Saviour

Ekalavya is placed in the role of saviour in the epic. Ekalavya becomes a saviour to Droṇa and Arjuna in an indirect way. Using the narratives which frame the narrative of Ekalavya, Brodbeck (2006) examines the narrative of Ekalavya. Brodbeck states that several promises made between the protagonists in the epic

are dependent on Ekalavya losing his ability as an archer. Ekalavya cuts off his thumb because he has made a promise to Droṇa (that he would pay anything for the guru's fee). Droṇa promises Arjuna that no student of his will ever pass Arjuna in skill. Arjuna owes Droṇa a guru's fee, which will be to attack and subjugate Drupada. Drupada was once a friend to Droṇa until becoming king and rejecting him, despite promising Droṇa that they would share his kingdom. "Drupada's keeping his promise depends on Arjuna keeping his, which depends on Droṇa keeping his, which depends on Ekalavya keeping his" (Brodbeck 2006, 6). Therefore, once Ekalavya cuts off his thumb, Arjuna becomes the best archer that Droṇa has ever taught. Arjuna then raids and defeats Drupada, which enables the fulfillment of Drupada's promise to Droṇa, since Droṇa halves the kingdom with Drupada (Brodbeck 2006, 3-6). Brodbeck shows that these actions (and their consequences) depend on Ekalavya. Ekalavya's sacrifice allows him to become an indirect saviour to Droṇa, Drupada, and Arjuna. Brodbeck's perspective also helps explain the necessity of Ekalavya's sacrifice and the loss of his ability.[25]

Ekalavya's roles as sacrifice, scapegoat, and saviour seem to merge in this quote from the epic: "When thereafter the Niṣāda shot with his fingers, he

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[25] However, the theory does not explain why it is necessary for Ekalavya to lose his thumb. That is, there are other ways to ensure that Arjuna is a superior archer. For instance, Ekalavya could have agreed to never practice archery again. This negation of ability would have, arguably, led to similar results - Ekalavya would remain a tribal and Arjuna would be known as the world's best archer.

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" (MBh 1.123.38-39). Ekalavya's sacrifice, catalysed by Arjuna's scapegoating of the tribal prince, saves Droṇa. The loss of Ekalavya's thumb proves Droṇa to be truthful and also satisfies Arjuna's need to be the most accomplished archer.

One can deduce, based on the narrative and the above discussion, that being a Niṣāda in the epic comes with stigma and stereotype. An identity is provided for Ekalavya, and he is pigeonholed by this identity, which draws upon traditional tribal tropes (Doniger 2009, 289 & Thapar 1971, 410). Understanding the construction of identity (see Said, 1979), the influence of liminality, and the effects of caste are helpful in the unpacking of Ekalavya's prescribed identity. Because, in the epic, Ekalavya is clearly meant to be a rejected social outsider he is provided with characteristics that force him to participate in the stereotype of the negatively perceived tribal. According to this narrative, Ekalavya is a dirty, inferior, tribal boy, who is a great archer, but has no right to retain his skill.

Despite the negative qualities that the epic attributes to Ekalavya, he is also represented in positive ways and appears to wish to be a part of the dominant culture. Ekalavya's attempt at assimilation is made evident by his respect for both Droṇa and the Pāṇḍavas. He is shown to be honest; because he had agreed to pay Droṇa anything to satisfy the guru's fee, he cuts off his own thumb without hesitation.

The ambiguity of this narrative suggests that several revisions, over time or by different compilers from the same time period, have been made to this narrative.[26] That is, there are possibly a variety of opinions present in the narrative of Ekalavya. The differences in Ekalavya's characteristics might imply that some compilers simply viewed this character as human and as such, Ekalavya is shown to be a combination of both 'good' and 'bad' qualities. A more detailed investigation of these issues is discussed in chapter five.

[26] Brockington (1998) states that the Ādiparvan is thought to be a later edition to the *Mahābhārata.* He cites Buitenen, who argues that the first book was compiled gradually and thus different chapters could have been added and compiled at very different times (135).

Chapter 3: The House of Lac Narrative (MBH 1.135-137)

The House of Lac is a complex narrative dealing with the murder of a Niṣāda family and should not be discounted because it is the shortest narrative that this thesis examines. In the epic, the Niṣāda family is sacrificed in order to save the lives of the Pāṇḍavas. This chapter seeks to understand the social exclusion of the Niṣāda family and analyzes the processes that underlie their marginalization. These processes include silencing, anonymity, and ultimately, an erasure of identity. Although little detail is provided about the Niṣāda family, they serve important functions as scapegoat, sacrifice, and saviour in this narrative.

3.1 Synopsis

The House of Lac narrative begins when Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the uncle of the Pāṇḍavas, decides that the Pāṇḍavas should go to Vāraṇāvata. The Pāṇḍavas learn that the Kauravas (their evil cousins), with the assistance of Purocana, have plotted to have them stay in a combustible house, a house of lac. The Kauravas plan to have the house set on fire in order to kill the Pāṇḍavas. Before this can occur, the Pāṇḍavas decide to take action, and so they will save themselves while deceiving the Kauravas (MBh 1.135). Noticing that the Pāṇḍavas have been happily living in the house of lac, Purocana believes that the time has come to kill the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira becomes suspicious of the cheerful Purocana and states, “That crooked Purocana thinks that we have shed all our suspicions. We have deceived the cruel man. I think the time has come to escape. We shall

set fire to the armory and burn Purocana to death. We'll put six people here and escape unobserved" (MBh 1.136.3-4).

One night, Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, holds a feast, pretending to have a donation rite

> [f]or the brahmins, O king, and women came too. The women ate and drank and made merry as they pleased, until the Mādhava princess [Kuntī] allowed them to go and they went home. A Niṣāda woman had also happened to come to that feast with her five sons, hungry for food and prompted by Time. She and her sons drank wine until they were drunk and besotted; they lost consciousness and slept like the dead in the house, O king (MBh 1.136.5-8).

During the night, when everyone is asleep, Bhīma, one of the five Pāṇḍavas, lights a fire next to the sleeping Purocana. The fire soon consumes the house of lac and wakes the townspeople. The citizens exclaim,

> That evil blackguard had that house built and burned on Duryodhana's orders, to his own perdition! A curse on the perverse mind of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who made his minister burn to death the young and pure children of Pāṇḍu! But as luck would have it that evil-minded crook has now burned himself alive, when he burned those innocent and trusting good men (MBh 1.136.11-13)

While the house of lac burns, the Pāṇḍavas escape, unnoticed, into the forest with their mother. The epic states that the following day, the townspeople removed the remains of the house of lac, attempting to locate the Pāṇḍavas. They find the bodies of the Niṣāda family, but mistake them for the Pāṇḍavas and lament the death of the princes, who are in fact still alive.

3.2 Analysis

Within the epic's depiction of the Niṣāda family there is evidence of the social construction of identity. When unpacking this narrative, it becomes clear that the members of the Niṣāda family, as described by the epic, are meant to be viewed as social outsiders. The intended marginalization is achieved in several ways. Firstly, the Niṣāda family is shown as possessing excessive behaviours, which, according to the dominant culture, are undesirable. While the members of the Niṣāda family are depicted as being unable to control their consumption of alcohol, members of the dominant culture, who are present at the same rite, are shown to be capable of moderating their appetites. Goldman (2001) explores the excessive appetites of social outsiders present in the *Rāmāyaṇa.* Because the context between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* is similar, Goldman's theory is particularly helpful when considering the Niṣādas in the House of Lac narrative. Goldman argues that in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is only social outsiders that are attributed with gluttonous behaviours while members of the dominant culture are shown to be controlled. In the *Mahābhārata,* the Niṣāda family is portrayed in a similar fashion. The epic describes them thusly:

> She [Niṣāda mother] and her sons drank wine until they were drunk and besotted; they lost consciousness and slept like the dead in the house.
>
> *sā pītvā madirāṃ mattā saputrā madavihvalā*
> *saha sarvaiḥ sutai rājaṁstaminneva niveśane*
> *suṣvāpa vigatajñānā mṛtakalpā narādhipa*
> (MBh 1.136.8)

This depiction shows a family without self-control. The behaviour of the Niṣādas is contrasted with the guests of the Pāṇḍavas who are described as drinking in a moderate fashion. Unlike the Niṣāda family, they are never described as drunk or unconscious:

> Kuntī held one night a large donation feast for the brahmins, O king, and women came too. The women ate and drank and made merry as they pleased, until the Mādhava princess allowed them to go and they went home.
>
> *atha dānāpadeśena kuntī brāhmaṇabhojanam*
> *cakre niśi mahadrājannājagmustatra yoṣitaḥ*
> *tā vihṛtya yathākāmaṃ bhuktvā pītvā ca bhārata*
> (MBh 1.136. 5-6)

Thus, the behaviours of accepted members of society are demonstrated to be completely different from those of the Niṣādas. The Niṣāda family's gluttonous behaviour distinguishes them from the other guests at the rite. The socially excluded Niṣāda family are the only ones at the rite described as out of control and inebriated, while other guests are portrayed as restrained. Following Goldman's argument that social outsiders are depicted as excessive, the distinction made by the juxtaposition of the guests and the Niṣādas teaches the reader that the Niṣāda family is to be treated and viewed as social outsiders. Goldman (2001) furthers his argument by stating that portrayals of excessive gluttony mark the Rākṣasas (social outsiders in the *Rāmāyaṇa*) as the opponents of the controlled members of the dominant culture (105-110). Considering Goldman's argument, the Niṣāda family's excessive actions further marks them

as the unrestrained force that opposes the controlled dominant culture. This contrast ultimately shows that the Niṣādas do not belong.

Further, it is noteworthy that the Niṣāda family is not invited to this event. The epic states that the *brāhmins* and women were invited to the rite, but simply says that the Niṣāda family came to the rite. Moreover, Kuntī allows the invited guests to leave, but does not permit the Niṣāda family to depart.[27] This difference in treatment further shows the difference in depiction and treatment from the socially accepted guests to the socially excluded Niṣāda family. Even though the Niṣāda family attends the same rite as the invited guests, they continue to be perceived and are treated as ones who do not belong and do not have the same status.

Following Spivak (2006), it is especially important to consider the *actions* of the Niṣāda family; they do not speak, and thus there is no dialogue to examine from this marginalized family. The only information the epic provides is that the Niṣāda family comes to the rite because they are hungry, and that they become inebriated and lose consciousness. As Goldman (2001) has shown with respect Rākṣasas, the extreme behaviours of social outsiders seem to fall under one of two types of excess: gustatory or sexual (110-112). Therefore, the excessive behaviour of social outsiders is limited to basic, animal, appetites. The epic notes that the Niṣāda family comes to the rite because they are hungry, "A Niṣāda

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[27] MBh 1.136.5-7

woman had also happened to come to that feast with her five sons, hungry for food" (MBh 1.135.7). Thus, like the Rākṣasas, the family is driven to act by its appetites. Their base motivations lessen the family's humanity; these primary drives suggest that the members of the Niṣāda family, like beasts, are concerned only with fulfilling their basic needs. The passage from the epic (MBh 1.135.7) provides proof that the Niṣāda family's constructed identity is meant to portray them as *less than* human.

The epic states that the Pāṇḍavas have other guests at the rite, however the epic does not show these guests conversing with the Niṣāda family. Because the family is Niṣādan, they would not have traditionally been assigned a caste. If their existence was recognized by the dominant culture they would be considered Untouchables and given a low ritual status (Hanumanthan 2004, 126). Audiences who read or heard the epic narratives would understand that *brāhmins* (who are present at this narrative's rite) do not traditionally associate with low or no caste members.[28] Thus, one interpretation of the implied lack of interaction between the Niṣāda family and the other guests might be that the Niṣāda family are impure social outsiders who are not to be contacted, either physically or verbally, by members of the dominant caste, lest they risk contracting some of the impurity of the family.

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[28] Lack of association includes reasons such as purity (Srinivas 1989, 27-38).

The Niṣāda family loses what little they possess as an identity by the end of the narrative when their physical identity is, quite literally, destroyed. While their bodies burn in the fire, the townspeople lament the loss of the Pāṇḍava family. Even after discovering the bodies of the Niṣādas in the ruins of the house, the townspeople continue to grieve for the loss of the princes. This misplaced grief indicates that the corpses of the Niṣādas are burnt beyond recognition.

> Thereupon, the townfolk sent word to Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the Pāṇḍavas and Minister Purocana had been killed in a fire
>
> pāṇḍavānagninā dagdhānamātyaṁ ca purocanam
> śrutvā tu dhṛtarāṣṭrastadrājā sumahadapriyam
> (MBh 1.137.9-10)

Although the Niṣādas make the ultimate sacrifice (unwillingly) for the Pāṇḍavas, nobody notices their absence. They are mistaken for the "innocent and trusting" (MBh 1.136.13) Pāṇḍavas. The very bodies of the Niṣāda family have been deformed by the blaze in house. It is as if the Niṣādas were never present at the rite; the erasure of their identity becomes complete.

Finally, the Niṣāda family is not referred to as anything but "the Niṣāda woman and her sons" (MBh 1.136.7, 1.136.8, & 1.137.7). The epic does not provide the reader with the names of the members of this family. Lack of individuality combined with an erasure of identity mark their low social position. These factors could suggest that the epic does not perceive the Niṣāda family to be human. Julia Leslie argues that in the Hindu context (the epic's dominant culture), the term Niṣāda is derogatory: "whatever their original meanings, all

three words - niṣāda, caṇḍāla, and śvapaca - became highly derogatory terms used to convey the brahminical view of those who lived beyond the village boundaries" (2003, 27-28). Thus, the family is simply known by a term that is considered derogatory by the dominant culture, arguably lessening their humanity and value. The family's lack of individuality and their identification with the derogatory term 'Niṣāda' suggests that to the dominant culture and the epic, this family is subhuman. Although the family dies to save the lives of the Pāṇḍavas, they are not deemed *human* enough (or perhaps worthy enough) to be named. Lack of naming is another way in which the Niṣāda family is socially alienated from the Pāṇḍavas and their culture.

Portraying the Niṣāda family as uncontrollable, inebriated, social outsiders serves multiple functions: it not only marks the family as outsiders, but strives to teach a lesson. Because the members of the Niṣāda family die as a direct result of their excessive behaviour, the epic's message seems to be that choosing to act in socially unacceptable, extreme, manners (i.e., becoming inebriated) is not without potentially deadly consequences.

Goldman (2001) has argued that the *Rāmāyaṇa* allows reader to experience forbidden behaviour by giving elaborate descriptions of Rākṣasas' unacceptable behaviour (108-110). However, the description of the Niṣāda family's behaviour lacks these elaborate details. The brevity of the description of the drunkenness of the Niṣāda suggests that the function of this narrative is not to allow members of the dominant culture to experience forbidden behaviour in a

voyeuristic manner, rather it is to warn others to moderate their behavior. Alternatively, the purpose of the inebriated description of the Niṣāda family could be to reinforce the tribal tropes that are present in the dominant culture.

Therefore, the socially constructed identity that is provided for the Niṣāda family depicts them as tribals who are driven by their appetites, their base needs. Their voicelessness and drive to fulfill base urges ultimately renders them subhuman. The erasure of their identity confirms that this family lacks the qualities necessary to be considered worthy of being perceived as human to the dominant culture, as they are completely forgotten, and their sacrifice goes unnoticed.

3.3 Roles Played by the Niṣāda Family

3.3.1 Sacrifice

In the House of Lac narrative, the lives of the Niṣāda family are sacrificed to save the lives of the Pāṇḍavas. The Niṣāda family is never asked to save the lives of the Pāṇḍavas, by giving up their own, rather they are used as a means to an end by the Pāṇḍavas in this narrative.

The narrative shows that the Niṣāda family becomes the surrogate for the Pāṇḍava family; the Niṣādas burn in the house while the princes escape. Doniger confirms that this family might be regarded as sacrificial stand-ins for the Pāṇḍavas, “They are sacrificial substitutes, whom the author of this text treats as expendable because he regards them as subhuman beings. Perhaps their

drunkenness (one of the four vices of lust) is meant to justify their deaths" (2009, 288). Even though Doniger argues that the compilers of the epic view the Niṣāda family as less than human, she states that the text offers some solace for the tragedy of this family, calling the Niṣādas innocent or "without wrongdoing" (*anāgasam)* (Doniger 2009, 288).[29] The consolation offered by the epic does not negate the Niṣāda family's role as sacrifice. However, Doniger suggests that it might cause readers to question the actions of the Pāṇḍavas.

Nuances from the translation to English of the critical Sanskrit edition of the text offer further support for the theory that the Niṣāda family play the role of sacrifice in the epic. The epic states that the Niṣāda family arrives at the rite of the Pāṇḍavas because they were "hungry for food and prompted by Time [*kāla*]" (MBh 1.136.7, van Buitenen trans.). According to Monier Williams, *kāla* can be defined as proper time, destiny, or fate; it may also be translated as time of death, and is sometimes identified with Yama, the Hindu god of death. Thus, the term *kāla* suggests that the family had to die at the rite as their sacrifice was prompted by *kāla,* the time of their death or by their destiny. The use of the term *kāla* indicates that the sacrifice of the Niṣāda family was pre-ordained, and confirms their role as stand-ins for the Pāṇḍavas.

The death and sacrifice of the Niṣāda family is foreshadowed by the epic's description of their sleeping state,

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[29] MBh 1.137.7

They lost consciousness [*vigatajñānā*] and slept like the dead [*mṛta*] in the house

suṣvāpa *vigatajñānā mṛtakalpā narādhipa*
(MBh 1.136.8)

At the time of this description, the Niṣāda family is still alive, however, shortly after this portrayal, the fire is started and the Niṣāda family perishes. Thus, the epic's final portrayal of the living Niṣāda family is that they appear to be dead; confirming their role as sacrifice.

Another indicator of the Niṣāda family's role as sacrifice is the lack of socializing that occurs between this family and the actual guests of the Pāṇḍavas. Evidently, the Niṣāda family did not come to the rite for social purposes, their presence is ultimately required so they can be sacrificed.

3.3.2 Scapegoat

In the narrative of the House of Lac, the Niṣādas receive treatment that is meant for the Pāṇḍavas. The Kauravas, the evil cousins of the Pāṇḍavas, have planned to kill the Pāṇḍavas, and thus eliminate any competition for the right to rule. The Pāṇḍavas learn that the Kauravas' ally, Purocana, will set fire to their house and kill them and their mother, "On the fourteenth of this dark fortnight Purocana will set fire at the door of this house of yours. I have heard, Pārtha, that Duryodhana [a Kaurava] has resolved to burn alive the bulllike Pāṇḍavas with their mother" (MBh 1.135.5). In an attempt to escape the Kauravas, the

Pāṇḍavas decide to seek substitutes (or scapegoats) to take their place in the house fire and deceive the Kauravas. Thus, the Niṣāda family dies, in part, because the Pāṇḍavas want to escape from the Kauravas. In order to escape, the Pāṇḍavas come up with a scheme that will allow them to flee while others, taking their place, perish. Yudhiṣṭhira states:

> That crooked Purocana thinks that we have shed all our suspicions. We have deceived the cruel man. I think the time has come to escape. We shall set fire to the armory and burn Purocana to death. We'll put six people here and escape unobserved
>
> *asmānayam suviśvastānvetti pāpaḥ purocanaḥ*
> *vañchito'yaṃ nṛśaṃsātmā kālaṃ manye palāyane*
> *āyudhāgāramādīpya dagdhvā caiva purocanam*
> *ṣaṭ prāṇino nidhāyeha dravāmo'nabhilakṣitāḥ*
> (MBh 1.136.3-4)

The Pāṇḍavas commit pre-meditated murder. The scheme requires a group to receive treatment that is intended for the Pāṇḍavas; the members of the Niṣāda family become scapegoats for the Pāṇḍavas.

3.3.3 Saviour

The Niṣāda family are saviours to the Pāṇḍavas, their deaths allow the Pāṇḍavas to deceive the Kauravas and prevent the Pāṇḍavas from dying in a fire in the house of lac. In order to fool the Kauravas into believing that the Pāṇḍavas had perished, the burnt house had to have the remains of a mother and five sons (the Niṣāda mother and her sons). If the Kauravas had not truly believed that the Pāṇḍavas were dead, they may have pursued the Pāṇḍavas and continued to

pose a threat. Because the death of the Niṣāda family ends the hunt for Pāṇḍavas, the Niṣādas become the saviours of the Pāṇḍavas.

The members of the Niṣāda family from the House of Lac narrative are depicted by the *Mahābhārata* as social outsiders. Although there is little information presented about the Niṣāda family, it is evident, by the construction of their identity, their silencing, anonymity, and ultimate loss of identity, that the Niṣāda family are social outsiders. It is clear that the Niṣāda family serves multiple functions in the narrative and there are many interpretations to account for their depicted excessive behaviour: it confirms their outsider status by proving that the family is viewed as subhuman, it attempts to garner sympathy for this family, or, perhaps, it serves to teach a lesson in moderation. The pre-ordained fate of the Niṣādas is confirmed by the Sanskrit, *kāla,* and the purpose of this family appears to be the save the epic's protagonists. The Niṣāda family receives treatment that is meant for the Pāṇḍavas, confirming their role as scapegoat. Calling the family innocent, shows the ambiguous attitude of the epic, but the Niṣāda family is meant to, ultimately, be viewed as social outsiders. Their death is necessary in order to save the Pāṇḍavas and the fate of these social outsiders is of little concern to members of the dominant culture.

Chapter 4: The Nala and Damayantī Narrative (MBh 3.50-78)

The tale of Nala and Damayantī helps illustrate the process of social exclusion and acts as a foil to the two previously explored narratives, Ekalavya and the House of Lac. Nala is a king of the dominant culture, Niṣadha region is his kingdom, and as such Nala is socially included. However, Nala's narrative becomes complicated when he becomes possessed and loses his kingdom. During this time he becomes a social outsider. Nala experiences three different identities in this narrative, he is a king, a madman, and a charioteer. His experiences closely mirror those of the Pāṇḍavas, but Nala's story offers an interesting opportunity for examining how the three factors of social exclusion (social construction of identity, caste and *dharma*, and geography and liminality) operate. Nala, like Ekalavya and the House of Lac family, is a character in a sub-narrative rather than the main epic plot and, as this chapter will demonstrate, his fall from social insider to outsider is marked with some of the same tropes the epic employs with regard to Eklavya and the House of Lac family, *even though* Nala is not a Niṣāda. In addition to Nala's experience of marginalization, functions of this narrative are discussed and Nala's roles as saviour and scapegoat are explored. This narrative illustrates the precarious nature of social status in the epic.

4.1 Synopsis

The narrative of Nala and Damayantī is recounted to Yudhiṣṭhira during the

twelve year forest exile of the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira is complaining that there is no king more unfortunate than he, stating:

> my treasure and my kingdom have been stolen from me in a game at dice, when I was challenged by gamblers who know how to cheat and were experts at dice. I did not know the dice, and evil-intentioned persons cheated me and dragged my wife, who is dearer to me than my life, into the hall. Now is there a king on earth more unlucky than I, barring one you may have seen or heard of? There is no man, I think, unhappier than I (MBh 3.49.32-34)

Hearing Yudhiṣṭhira's speech, Bṛhadaśva, a sage, comments than he knows of a king whose luck is worse than Yudhiṣṭhira's, and then recounts the tale of Nala and Damayantī.

The tale begins by describing Nala, who is the king of Niṣadha, and is described as virtuous, learned in the Vedas, and handsome. Damayantī is the daughter of King Bhīma and princess of Vidarbha, she is described as incredibly beautiful and truthful. These two hear rumours about each other and, although they have never met, they quickly fall in love.

Damayantī becomes lovesick for Nala and is not acting like herself. Seeing her condition, Damayantī's father decides that it is time to hold a bridegroom choice for her. Nala hears of the bridegroom choice and sets out to Damayantī's kingdom. On his way, Nala is enlisted to help the Vedic gods, Agni, Indra, Yama, and Varuṇa. These gods wish to marry Damayantī. The gods instruct Nala to announce them to Damayantī and to tell her to choose one of them for her husband. Nala does this but Damayantī states that she loves Nala and if Nala does not return her feelings she will die.

Damayantī devises a plan; she will chose Nala in front of everyone at the bridegroom choice, despite the presence of the Vedic gods, confirming her feelings for Nala. However, at the bridegroom choice, the gods take on Nala's appearance in order to trick Damayantī. When Damayantī sees that there are five Nalas, she states that if she has truly chosen Nala to be her husband to let him be revealed to her. Hearing this, the gods take their true appearances. After Nala and Damayantī are married, the gods grant Nala several boons (such as the ability to not be burned by fire and the ability to produce water whenever necessary) and they give the couple twin children. Nala and Damayantī live happily.

Shortly after the bridegroom choice, the reader learns that Kali, who is accompanied by Dvāpara, desires Damayantī as a wife. Kali becomes enraged when he learns that Damayantī has chosen to marry Nala, a human. Kali decides that he will seek vengeance on Nala. He waits for Nala to be vulnerable by making a mistake in ritual. Twelve years later, Nala makes such an error and Kali, who had been waiting for this moment, immediately takes possession of Nala. Possessed by Kali, Nala agrees to play dice with his brother, Puṣkara. They play continuously for months until Nala has lost his wealth and kingdom. Watching her husband gamble away their wealth and kingdom, Damayantī wisely tells Vārṣṇeya, Nala's charioteer, to take her children to stay with her family in Vidarbha.

Disgraced, Nala leaves his kingdom and goes into the forest, Damayantī

follows. One night, Nala, driven mad by Kali, leaves Damayantī and goes deeper into the forest. When Damayantī awakens she realizes that Nala has deserted her and becomes incredibly distressed. She curses the creature that caused Nala to act in this manner, knowing that he would never leave her of his own volition.

The narrative now focuses on Damayantī's forest experience. She is attacked by a snake, and is saved by a hunter, only to have the hunter lust after her. She curses the hunter and he dies. Damayantī wanders around the forest until she comes upon a hermitage, where ascetics give her hope that she will be reunited with Nala. She eventually comes to the kingdom of Cedi. In Cedi, Damayantī disguises herself as Sunandā, a chambermaid to the mother of the king.

At this point, the narrative returns to Nala. Shortly after deserting Damayantī, Nala comes upon a Nāga king, Karkoṭaka, who is trapped in a forest fire. Nala, using his boon of invincibility to flame, saves the Nāga. By way of thanks, the Nāga bites Nala. The bite does not harm Nala but poisons Kali, nullifying Kali's influence, and changes Nala's appearance such that Nala becomes a hunchback with stocky arms. Karkoṭaka gives Nala a magic garment, which, when worn, will restore Nala to his former appearance. Karkoṭaka tells the hunchbacked Nala to go to Ayodhyā because the king of Ayodhyā, Ṛtuparṇa, knows the secret of the dice. Nala enters Ayodhyā and takes on the identity of Bāhuka, the low caste hunchback charioteer to the king.

The narrative now turns to king Bhīma, the father of Damayantī. He has

sent several *brāhmins* out to search for his daughter and son-in-law. The *brāhmin*, Sudeva finds Damayantī and brings her back to Vidarbha. The search now focuses on Nala. In an effort to locate Nala, Damayantī requests that *brāhmins* travel and recite a poignant verse in various cities. One *brāhmin* believes that he has found Nala in the city of Ayodhyā, though the man who has reacted to the verse does not look like Nala. Hearing about the man found by the *brāhmins*, Damayantī decides to hold another bridegroom choice, hoping to lure out Nala. The king of Ayodhyā, Ṛtuparṇa, hears of Damayantī's bridegroom choice and decides to attend. Ṛtuparṇa enlists the help of Bāhuka, his charioteer (but really Nala in disguise) to ensure that he reaches Vidarbha in time for the event. On the way to Vidarbha, Nala convinces the king to share the knowledge of the die. Once Nala learns the secret of the dice, Kali issues forth from Nala's body:

> The fire of Kali's curse came out of the king who had been suffering from it; he had been worn thin from it and had for a long time lost control of himself. Kali was now himself freed from the poison and he took on his own body. Nala, sovereign of Niṣadha, angrily wanted to curse him. Frightened, trembling, and folding his hands, Kali said to him, 'Restrain your anger, sire, I shall give you the greatest fame...'(MBh 3.70.28-31).

Once Nala enters Vidarbha, Damayantī arranges several tests to determine if Bāhuka is Nala. After discovering Bāhuka's true identity, Damayantī, along with Vedic gods, urges Nala to resume his true form and they are reunited. In time, Nala and Damayantī return to their kingdom, which is now ruled by Nala's brother, Puṣkara. Nala, having learned the secret of the die, challenges Puṣkara

to a game of dice and wins back his kingdom. Nala and his family live happily.

After hearing the narrative of Nala and Damayantī, Yudhiṣṭhira learns the secret of the dice. Bṛhadaśva councils Yudhiṣṭhira to realize that it is possible for the Pāṇḍavas to regain their kingdom from their cousins, the Kauravas (MBh 3.78.10). Furthermore, Bṛhadaśva berates Yudhiṣṭhira for his self-pity. Bṛhadaśva says, "'You on the other hand [in comparison to Nala] are accompanied by your brothers and by Kṛṣṇā [i.e. Draupadī], O Pāṇḍava, and enjoy yourself in the greatest forest while observing the Law. You are daily attended on by lordly brahmins, steeped in the *Vedas* and their branches, king - what have you to complain about?'"(MBh 3.78.8-9).

4.2 Analysis

Although Nala is not a Niṣāda, the epic's rendering of this tale is useful for the purposes of this thesis. Nala's tale acts as a foil to the Niṣādan narratives that this thesis examines. By comparing Nala's experiences to those of Ekalavya and the Niṣāda family the consequences of social exclusion and the factors that lead to it become clearer. Nala's initial portrayal offers a sharp contrast to the representation of the Niṣādas and his descent into the role of a social outsider elucidates the process of social exclusion. It is for these reasons that the narrative of Nala is analyzed here.

There are three distinct identities that Nala embodies during this narrative, he is King Nala, Mad Nala, and Bāhuka. Except for his initial identity as king,

Nala's changes in identity are not voluntary. Each successive identity is caused by an external agent. These changes in identity are central to Nala's experience of social exclusion. Nala is included by the dominant culture when he is king, when he is Mad Nala he is excluded by the culture completely, and when he is Bāhuka he participates in the dominant culture but holds an inferior position as a charioteer.

There are several agents of change that affect Nala's experience of social exclusion. The first agent is Kali, or the personification of the die. Kali possesses Nala and causes him to lose his kingdom. In the forest Nala is driven mad by Kali (and will be referred to as "Mad Nala"). The second agent of change is Karkoṭaka, the Nāga (serpent) king. Karkoṭaka's bite nullifies Kali's possession and also causes Nala to become Bāhuka, the hunchback charioteer. This change is not meant to be permanent; Karkoṭaka gives Bāhuka a garment which, when worn, will restore his appearance to his original form as King Nala. Nala's final change occurs when he resumes his role as king. The agent of change for this final transformation is Damayantī and the Vedic gods, who implore Nala to don the garment given to him by Karkoṭaka.

Presently, Nala's transition from social insider to social outsider will be examined. His narrative is particularly useful when analyzing how processes of social exclusion within the epic work as his transitions between identities allow for an exploration of how the three factors of social exclusion (social construction of identity, caste and *dharma*, and geography and liminality) work together.

Nala as king, is accepted by the dominant culture, treated well, and privileged in the epic. King Nala has Vedic knowledge and is described as one who does his *dharma*. He is portrayed as a radiant and handsome king. Nala is lauded by Vedic gods, and is chosen for a husband by the beautiful Damayantī, a princess from the dominant culture:

> There was a king by the name of Nala, the mighty son of Vīrasena, endowed with all good virtues, handsome and a connoisseur of horses, who like the lord of the Gods stood at head of all the kings of men, rising like the sun far above them with his splendor. This hero, a friend to the brahmins and learned in the Vedas, was a king of Niṣadha; he loved to gamble, spoke the truth, and was a great commander of armies. Beautiful women loved him, he was generous and master of his senses, a protector and excellent bowman, a Manu come to flesh.
>
> *āsīdrājā nalo nāma vīrasenasuto balī*
> *upapanno guṇairiṣṭai rūpavānaṣvakovidaḥ*
> *atiṣṭhanmanujendrānāṃ mūrdhni devapatiryathā*
> *uparyupari sarveṣāmāditya iva tejasā*
> *brahmaṇyo vedavicchūro niṣadheṣu mahīpatiḥ*
> *akṣapriyaḥ satyavādī mahānakṣauhiṇīpatiḥ*
> *īpsito varanārīṇāmudāraḥ saṃyatendriyaḥ*
> *rakṣitā dhanvināṃ śreṣṭhaḥ sākṣādiva manuḥ svayam*
> (MBh 3.50.1-4)

King Nala is described in a manner that is flattering and inclusive. He belongs in the dominant culture and he is portrayed in a positive manner by the epic. The epic states that Nala is a “Manu come to flesh”. According to the epic, Manu was the progenitor of all men (MBh 1.70) and responsible for transmitting the *Vedas*. Stating that Nala is a Manu become flesh, indicates that he belongs within the dominant culture.

Despite Nala’s status as a king within the dominant culture, he experiences

a period of liminality, which marks him as a social outsider. Under the influence of Kali, Nala loses his kingdom and must enter the forest, no longer playing the role of king and taking on the identity of Mad Nala. During this time, the epic's description of Nala is considerably altered. Nala's depiction changes immediately after he has left the dominant culture and steps into the forest. Once Nala has been removed from the dominant culture the epic's description of the former king follows the same tropes that it uses for Ekalavya, the Niṣāda:

> Naked, dirty, balding, covered with dust, he [Nala] slept.
>
> *sa vai vivastro malino cikacaḥ pāṃsuguṇṭhitaḥ*
>
> (MBh 3.59.6)

Mad Nala does not possess the positive physical characteristics that King Nala does. Now, like Ekalavya, he is dirty and no longer properly clothed. His change in identity and loss of status have transitioned Nala into an outsider.

Nala's physical appearance is further altered by Karkoṭaka, the Nāga King, who turns the, formerly handsome, currently dirty and balding Nala (MBh 3.59.6) into a hunchback: "[Nala's] appearance changed instantly. Astonished, Nala stopped, looked at himself, and saw that he was deformed" (MBh 3.61.11). Thus it is clear that social construction of identity is greatly affected by social position as, Nala's identity and physical appearance greatly change after he loses his role as king. Nala is initially portrayed as a handsome, radiant king, however, upon entering the forest the epic describes him as dirty, poorly dressed (reminiscent of Ekalavya's description), and balding. Nala leaves the forest as a hunchback, he

is described as deformed, a further alteration of the epic's initial description of him as an attractive king.

It is not only Nala's physical appearance that is altered in the epic, but also, his demeanor and mental state. When Nala is a king, he is described as being assertive (for instance, he wishes to marry Damayantī so he attends her bridegroom choice). However, after his initial transformation, Nala, under the control of Kali, no longer possesses the same will. Under Kali's influence Nala is unable to stop himself from abandoning Damayantī, "Nala went and went, but came back to the lodge every time, drawn forth by Kali, drawn back by love. The suffering man's heart was cut in two: like a swing it kept going back and forth to the lodge. Finally, drawn forth by Kali and bemused, Nala ran away, deserting his sleeping wife, while he lamented piteously" (MBh 3.59.23-25). Thus, in the forest, Nala is portrayed as mad, confused and as unable to control his actions and emotions.

Even after Nala is transformed into Bāhuka and Kali's possession no longer affects him, Nala does not carry himself with the agency he once possessed. At the end of the narrative, when he enters the kingdom where Damayantī is staying, Nala does not present himself to his wife (as he did at the first bridegroom choice); instead, Damayantī must seek out her husband. It is Damayantī, as well as the gods, who require Nala to resume his place as husband by donning the garment that changes him back to King Nala. The gods say, "King, Damayantī has preserved her vast treasure of honor, we have been

her guardians for these three years. This stratagem that she devised for your sake was unmatched, for no man on earth but you can go one hundred leagues in one day...Harbour no suspicions in this matter, rejoin your wife!" (MBh 3.75.11-15). Nala, as Bāhuka, lacks agency; Nala is able to resume his position as king at any point after meeting Karkoṭaka as he is given a garment that would restore him to his former appearance. However, he does not don this garment until a member of the dominant culture, Damayantī, requires him to, suggesting an inability, or an unwillingness, to independently decide to become King Nala.

Social construction of identity greatly affects the portrayal of Nala. His identity reflects his social inclusion and exclusion. It could be argued that when Nala takes on the characteristics similar to the traditional role of a tribal (as Mad Nala) and then the role of a low caste charioteer (as Bāhuka), Nala does not feel sufficiently worthy to resume his former roles as king, husband, and father. It is clear that social construction of identity influences Nala's place in the dominant culture. Once he ceases to be a king with inlcusive, high social status, his identity changes to reflect his new status as a non-king social outsider and he is considered 'inferior'.

Interestingly, the name Bāhuka is translated by Monier-Williams (1964) to mean "the arm" or "servile, dependent". Servile and dependent are exactly the opposite of characteristics that Nala had while he was King Nala. His transformation to a charioteer is all-encompassing, he takes on the traditional characteristics and low social status of a charioteer in addition to the name.

Naming in the epic goes beyond differentiation, it elucidates the identity and social status of its characters.

Changes in, or lack of, caste and *dharma* serve to further distance Nala from his former socially included position as king. When Nala enters the forest he has no caste; he is no longer *kṣatriya*. With no caste or *dharma* to guide his actions, Mad Nala cannot and does not participate in the dominant culture but instead wanders in the forest, driven only by his madness. Nala's experience as Bāhuka is different than his experience as Mad Nala. As Bāhuka, he possesses a caste and can participate in the dominant culture, however his participation as Bāhuka is remarkably different than his initial social experience as King Nala; Bāhuka serves a king, Nala is a king. Nala's transitions show that caste and *dharma* greatly influence who is considered a social outsider or is marginal to society. Nala is the same man throughout the tale, however, when he lacks caste and *dharma*, he is no longer viewed the same way. The constant is Nala, it is his portrayal that is capricious. His portrayal varies based on his caste (as well as geography and liminality, which are discussed below).

Nala's experiences and transitions are greatly affected by geography and liminality. He is possessed by Kali at twilight, an in-between time and, thus, a liminal period of the day (MBh 3.56.3-4). After being possessed by Kali, Nala's geography greatly changes. Nala leaves his ordered kingdom for the wild forest (MBh 3.58.10 & MBh 3.59.25). Upon entering the forest, no longer possessing his role as king, father, or warrior, he loses his last role as husband to Damayantī.

Influenced by Kali, Nala abandons Damayantī in the forest (MBh 3.59.23-25). After the final tie to his former identity as king has been broken, Nala becomes Mad Nala, a transient figure. With no fixed roles or ordered geography to define himself, Mad Nala's identity takes on a liminal quality – indeed he cannot stay in any one place and thus is truly neither here nor there – and he is now one who is socially excluded. Geography and liminality influence the social exclusion that Nala contends with while he is in the forest as Mad Nala.

These factors are also at work while he participates with the dominant culture as Bāhuka. The effects of liminality and different geography are far reaching as Bāhuka has a lower caste, is a servant charioteer, and is described as deformed (MBh 3.61.11). Nala, the king (who is not affected by liminal geography), has a high caste, is depicted as handsome and radiant (MBh 3.50.1-4), and is confident. Liminality informs Nala's change in agency, role, and mental state.

Denial of agency is a key part of Nala's experience of social exclusion. Initially, as King Nala, Nala possesses an assertiveness and independence that is not present in his other identities. Mad Nala is possessed, he cannot control his actions; under the influence of Kali he gambles away his kingdom and abandons his wife. When Nala abandons Damayantī, the epic states that he has no choice (MBh 3.59. 23-25). Because Bāhuka possesses the magic garment he can, in theory, don the garment at any time and resume his role as king. However, he does not. Bāhuka waits until he is asked to come back to the dominant culture

(MBh 3.75.11-15) to wear the garment and become king Nala, suggesting that his lack of agency prevents him from returning to his former role as king. Lack of control is also present in narratives involving Niṣādas as social outsiders (i.e., the dominant culture decides that Ekalavya must lose his thumb and that the Niṣāda family must die). Interestingly in the case of the Nala narrative, lack of control is present only when Nala is considered a social outsider. Thus, denial of agency appears to be an integral aspect of social exclusion for social outsiders in the *Mahābhārata*.

Parkhill (1984) uses the tripartite process of transformation (initially used by Arnold van Gennep to unpack rituals of initiation/rites of passage) to explore Nala's experience of liminality. He suggests the separation phase of this process is at work when Nala loses the roles that bind him to dominant culture:

> Nala's separation from his normal state of existence as a royal gṛhastha [householder] is gradual and by degrees...she [Damayantī] entrusted their two children to Nala's charioteer and sent them to her father's palace in Vidarbha. This act separated Nala from his world by several degrees...he was no longer father to his children, and no longer a warrior ready to engage in chariot warfare (328)

As discussed above, Nala eventually loses all roles that tie him to the dominant culture, causing him to enter a transient state, Mad Nala, where he is truly separated from his former self.

It is in the forest that Nala may be considered a social outsider and a liminal character. Parkhill explores the effects that liminality, the second part of the tripartite process of transformation, have on Nala. He notes that liminality affects

Nala in many negative ways. Nala enters the forest as a handsome king and leaves as an ugly, squat, charioteer. Parkhill remarks that the loss of Nala's social role greatly affects his identity:

> Because a person's identity is so closely bound up with his or her social role, it is not surprising that, when the passenger has no social role, his or her sense of identity is called into question...Then, as they [Nala and Damayantī] ended the liminal phase of their adventures, their senses of identity would have been further eroded by the positions they accepted...the charioteer...[has a position] of servitude(1984, 333)

Parkhill states that a charioteer has a low ranking social role and is a liminal rank because it is a result of an intercaste marriage (a mixing of social worlds). He suggests that taking on the role of a much lower caste individual greatly affected Nala's sense of identity. It seems as though the forest and the experience of liminality for Nala are solely negative experiences, "That Nala['s]...forest adventures are characterized by violent changes and almost unendurable hardship seems to preclude the possibility of anything positive being there [the forest]" (Parkhill 1984, 333).

However, there are positive aspects of the liminal identity that Nala assumes while in the forest. Parkhill (1984) asks, if there is no positive aspect to being liminal, why did Nala not resume his identity as king once he reached civilization? Parkhill believes that Nala chose to remain Bāhuka, the charioteer, because it hid him, along with the embarrassment he incurred from losing his kingdom, family, and riches, from the public. It is also while Nala is a liminal entity that he gains the knowledge of the dice that eventually allows him to regain his kingdom (1984,

334). Parkhill (1995) elaborates,

> [the]positive results...include...the knowledge that skill at dice is a prerequisite for regaining kingly status, advice on where and how to proceed, immunity from predators, enemies, and sorcerers, and most importantly the knowledge that some being had 'out of anger and rancor' [MBh 3.63.17] possessed Nala and that he was now immune from that possession (60)

These are all positive outcomes of Nala's liminality. Thus, for Nala, temporarily being a social outsider is not purely a negative experience, but it is also a time of considerable growth. It is when Nala is a liminal entity that he gains the skills necessary to retake his kingdom and regain his former role as king.

The discussion of factors which determine social exclusion in the context of liminality should illustrate that liminality allows change to occur, because it is a undefined state of existence. Parkhill states:

> Within the threshold state of the tripartite process...the sojourner is betwixt and between states of existence...depiction of the liminal personae as possessing nothing, the reduction of these people to a common ground in a process which jumbled their sense of identity, and the paradoxical ambiance of the threshold wherein one experienced nothingness and all possibilities simultaneously (1995, 58-9)

Thus, because liminality allows for all possibilities, it is completely plausible that a king would become a servant, that a handsome man would become ugly, that a reckless gambler could become a master of the dice, and that a father and husband would become a bachelor.

Nala's experience of liminality ends when he reenters the dominant culture, experiencing the final phase of the tripartite process of transformation – incorporation (Parkhill 1984, 335-336). This final stage sees Nala return to his

former role, but not as the same King. His liminal experience in the forest and as a mixed caste charioteer have transformed him. Nala returns to his kingdom with a clean slate, Parkhill states, “his [Nala’s] incorporation into an unpossessed, sane, unpolluted state of existence...Nala... emerge[s] from the threshold into a new state of existence” (1984, 337). After Nala wins his kingdom back from Puṣkara, the epic states that he forgives Puṣkara and that the two brothers make amends. The narrative concludes by stating that King Nala lives happily with his wife and children, that he finds great renown among monarchs, and that he offers up many sacrifices (MBh 3.77-78). Thus, Nala finds a new, peaceful, state of existence, firmly in place within the dominant culture, after leaving his liminal period.

To summarize, Nala loses his kingdom and position (experiencing a lack of caste and *dharma*), he immediately goes to the forest, and eventually participates in a mixed caste (liminal geographic and social status). These changes affect Nala’s identity, he goes from handsome assertive king to a dirty, balding, mad man who lacks agency to an apprehensive, hunchback, charioteer (social construction of identity). The social exclusion that Nala experiences changes his place in the epic; without his inclusive role of Vedic-knowing king to anchor him to the dominant culture Nala begins to drift and takes on the characteristics of the traditional tribal trope before, eventually, taking on the guise of a charioteer. Nala’s time as Bāhuka allows him to participate in the dominant culture, but in a much different, inferior, way. It should be clear that, Nala’s social exclusion

changes the way he is portrayed and treated in the epic; social exclusion is achieved through his constructed identity, his liminal state and geography, and his caste and *dharma*, or lack thereof.

There are many similarities between Nala's narrative and the tale of the Pāṇḍavas (the heroes of the *Mahābhārata*). Both Nala and the Pāṇḍavas lose their kingdoms in a game of dice, both spend time in a forest and learn the secret of the dice, both spend time in disguise, and both, eventually and after many ordeals, regain their kingdom. Additionally, King Nala's description as handsome and strong is reminiscent of how the Pāṇḍavas have been described in other parts of the epic (1.114-115). However, the forest experiences of Nala and the Pāṇḍavas are not identical and, in many ways, Nala acts as a foil to the princes. Unlike the Pāṇḍavas, Nala is isolated when he is in the forest. The Pāṇḍavas' wife, Draupadī, remains with them, unlike Damayantī, who is abandoned by Nala. Additionally, the citizens of the Pāṇḍavas attempt to follow them into their exile, and only return to the cities when the Pāṇḍavas instruct them to do do (MBh 3.1.30-40), Nala's citizens are not permitted to follow him into the forest (MBh 3.58.9-10). Even after the citizens leave the Pāṇḍavas, *brāhmins* insist on staying with the princes and supporting them with prayer and meditation (MBh 3.2.10-11). The only support that Nala receives in the forest is from the Nāga king, Karkoṭaka, who, as a social outsider himself, is removed from the dominant culture (MBh 3.63). Therefore, although the Pāṇḍavas experience a forest exile, the presence of the *brāhmins* suggests that they are never entirely isolated from

the dominant culture, unlike Nala who experiences complete isolation from the dominant culture while in the forest. This isolation confirms Nala's place as a social outsider; he is removed and rejected from the dominant culture. These differences do not negate the similarities between Nala and the Pāṇḍavas, although Nala is isolated, his experiences are strikingly similar to the experiences of the Pāṇḍava brothers.

The Nala narrative also acts as a foil to the Niṣādas present in the narratives that this thesis examines. The stark differences in treatment for social outsiders and social insiders become apparent in the narrative of Nala. As discussed above, Nala's physical appearance and demeanor vary greatly depending on whether he is socially accepted or isolated in this narrative. When Nala is considered a liminal character, as Mad Nala, his portrayal is very similar to Ekalavya's. For instance the epic's physical description of Nala as filthy (MBh 3.59.6) echoes the epic's portrayal of Ekalavya, "When the dog smelled that black Niṣāda in the woods, wrapped in deerskin, his body caked with dirt" (MBh 1.123.18). Both Nala and Ekalvya are depicted as dirty by the epic. Furthermore, the similarities between Mad Nala and Niṣādas are furthered when one compares Mad Nala's demeanor to that of the Niṣāda family. As discussed above, Mad Nala lacks agency in this narrative, he, unable to control himself, abandons his sleeping wife (MBh 3.59.23-25). A lack of autonomy is also present in the House of Lac narrative, as the Niṣāda family is not made privy to the decision to die in order to save the Pāṇḍavas (1.135-7). Thus, the epic also depicts social

outsiders, whether they be Niṣādas or fallen kings, as lacking agency.

These similarities do not exist when Nala is King Nala and is an accepted member of the dominant culture. For example, while Nala is an included member of the dominant culture he is described as handsome (MBh 3.50.1-4), and he is also portrayed as an independent king who makes his own decisions (3.54). This differences sharply contrast with the portrayal of Ekalavya and the Niṣāda family, demonstrating the clear differences in perceptions of social outsiders and social insiders. Another difference between Nala and the Niṣādas is that they experience liminality differently. Because Nala only experiences liminality when he is considered a social outsider, his participation in liminality is temporary. However, it appears as though, Niṣādas experience a permanent liminality in their portrayal by the epic. This topic will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

As discussed above, this narrative functions as a foil to the Niṣāda narratives and the Pāṇḍavas within the epic. Nala's cyclical transformation in the epic, from king to madman to charioteer and then back to king, elucidates processes of social exclusion and also illustrates how the factors of social exclusion work together to cause someone to become excluded. Furthermore, Nala's transformations demonstrate that the portrayals of those who are influenced by social exclusion include physical and mental differentiations from those who are accepted by the dominant culture.

4.3 Roles Played by Nala

4.3.1 Saviour

Nala plays the role of saviour to the Pāṇḍavas. At the time of narration of the Nala and Damayantī story, the Pāṇḍavas have not yet regained their kingdom. Just before Yudhiṣṭhira hears this tale, he has lost hope of ever regaining what was lost; he complains that there is no king in the world that is more unlucky than he (MBh 3.49.33-34). Bṛhadaśva corrects Yudhiṣṭhira and states that is at least one king that is unluckier than the prince,

> In Niṣādha country there was a Prince Vīrasena. He had a son by the name of Nala, who had insight in both Law [*dharma*] and Profit [*artha*]. That king was cheated and defeated, so we hear, by Puṣkara and undeservingly lived in the forest, sire. You on the other hand are surrounded by your brothers, heroes the likes of Gods, and by eminent twice-born, the likes of Brahmā - you have no reason to grieve! (MBh 3.49.40-42).

After hearing the narrative of Nala and Damayantī, Bṛhadaśva reminds Yudhiṣṭhira that his brothers and *brahmins* surround him, a privilege Nala did not have while in the forest. In this respect, Nala takes on the role of a teacher for the Pāṇḍavas; showing the princes that their situation could be much worse, and that it is possible to regain what is lost in situations that are even more desperate than their own.

Bṛhadaśva outlines the benefits of hearing this narrative, “misfortune will never befall [those who hear the narrative]. Riches will flow to him and he will become rich. After hearing this ancient eternal great story one shall find sons, grandsons, cattle and prominence among men, and without a doubt he will be

happy in health and love" (MBh 3.79.11-13). Yudhiṣṭhira also learns the secret of the dice after hearing the narrative, a skill he requires for his thirteenth year of exile. Thus, Nala and Damayantī become indirect saviours of Yudhiṣṭhira and the other Pāṇḍavas. It is also plausible that this narrative offers hope for Yudhiṣṭhira, who sees that a king, is able to overcome obstacles similar to the ones that Yudhiṣṭhira must face to regain his kingdom.

Throughout the narrative, Damayantī, refers to Nala as her protector, stating:

> 'Ah, my protector, here I am being devoured by this boa in the desolate jungle as though I had no protector - why don't you hurry?'
>
> *hā nātha māmiha vane grasyamānāmanāthavat*
> *graheṇānena vipine kimarthaṃ nābhidhāvasi*
> (MBh 3.60.22)

Even though Nala has abandoned Damayantī, she continues to recognize him as her rightful saviour. Thus, Nala is a saviour to a member of the dominant culture, even while he is considered a social outsider. King Nala is also a saviour to his own people because he is the king of Niṣadha and he rules in a manner that is *dharmically* correct.

Interestingly, Nala is saved by Damayantī. It is Damayantī's plan which forces Nala to reveal himself and to cease being Bāhuka, resuming his role as her husband. Often, the dominant culture will portray itself as helping those from disadvantaged social groups (see Said, 1979). Because Nala is considered a social outsider when Damayantī is trying to have Nala regain his former role as

king, it is possible that Damayantī's efforts to save Nala are a reflection of a member of the dominant culture helping a disadvantaged member of society. However, Damayantī's effort to save Nala might simply be a reflection of her desire to be reunited with her husband and a fulfillment of her role as devoted wife.

4.3.2 Scapegoat

Nala plays the role of scapegoat in this narrative because Kali possesses Nala to punish Damayantī:

> When he [Kali] heard Śakra's words, Kali was enraged. He addressed all the Gods and said to them, 'If she [Damayantī] has found herself a human husband in the midst of Gods, then for that she surely deserves a severe punishment!'
>
> *evamuktastu śakreṇa kaliḥ kopasamanvitaḥ*
> *devānāmantrya tānsarvānuvācedaṃ vacastadā*
> *devānāṃ mānuṣaṃ machye yatsā patimavindata*
> *nanu tasyā bhavennyāyyaṃ vipulaṃ daṇḍadhāraṇam*
> (MBh 3.55.5-6)

Nala is not the direct object of Kali's anger, but Nala is the one who is penalized. Kali is frustrated with Damayantī because she has chosen a human for a husband rather than a god. Taking this as an insult Kali, targets Nala, and misplaces his anger towards Damayantī, making Nala a scapegoat who is thus pushed outside the dominant culture and is physically, mentally, and socially transformed.

Nala's unique experience is informed by liminality. When Nala is considered a liminal character, as Mad Nala and Bāhuka, he is socially excluded. However, when Nala is non-transient character, as King Nala, he is accepted and valued by the dominant culture. The social construction of his identity, his allotted caste and *dharma*, and the geography that he inhabits greatly change based on his status as a liminal or non-liminal character. Demonstrating that these factors influence social exclusion in the epic.

The transitions that Nala undergoes are all-encompassing. For instance, when considering social construction of identity, it is insufficient to discuss only his physical changes, Nala's qualities and temperament are also changed by these transitions, at one point even resembling the traditional tribal trope. Parkhill (1995 & 1984) illustrates that liminality can be a powerful teacher, and that it is often accompanied by periods of growth and change. Nala's tale also acts as a foil to the Niṣāda narratives and serves to elucidate the process of social exclusion. Although Nala plays the role of saviour and scapegoat, his main role appears tbe that of a saviour to the Pāṇḍavas, especially Yudhisthira.

Chapter 5: Treatment of the Niṣādas in the *Mahābhārata* and Conclusion

Three narratives, two featuring Niṣādas and a third about King Nala, have been analyzed individually to explore the factors that lead to social exclusion and roles that social outsiders play. Another important factor to consider is the treatment of social outsiders, specifically Niṣādas, in the epic. Niṣādas are treated and portrayed in a variety of ways in the epic; some are described as competent archers (MBh 1.123) while others are portrayed as the victims of pre-meditated murder (MBh 1.36). This chapter will analyze treatment that results from social exclusion, the function of varying treatment, and, whether the epic validates this treatment or not. Furthermore, the theme of violence will be explored because Niṣādas are often the victims of abuse. This abuse is justified by the reduction of the Niṣādas to their physical bodies only, that is, Niṣādas are considered less than human. Historical examples of violence against social outsiders will be drawn upon to help unpack the two Niṣādan narratives. These themes will also be considered for the Nala narrative, since the epic's depiction of Nala as a social outsider parallels its depiction of Niṣādas. Ultimately, it will be argued that the three factors of social exclusion (social construction of identity, geography and liminality, and caste and *dharma*) cause social exclusion and that violence is a primary process that facilitates social exclusion.

5.1 Treatment that Results from Social Exclusion

In the epic, violence against Niṣādas is not only acceptable, it is necessary. Niṣādas must be maimed or killed to serve the needs of the dominant culture, including the Pāṇḍavas. This is demonstrated when Ekalayva must lose his thumb so that Arjuna may be the best archer, and when the Niṣāda family is expected to perish in a house fire so that the Pāṇḍavas are able to escape. Although Niṣādas frequently interact with members of the hegemonic group, they are not included in the dominant culture. The poor treatment of the Niṣādas is more than just physical violence; they are often portrayed in a manner that is physically unflattering, being described as dirty, poorly clothed, and as psychologically unable to moderate behaviours (MBh 1.123.18, 1.123.30, & 1 136.8). This multifaceted mistreatment of Niṣādas will presently be explored.

The exclusion of social outsiders validates the treatment of Ekalavya, the Niṣāda family, and Nala, when he is considered a social outsider as Mad Nala and Bāhuka. The three factors that cause social exclusion (social construction of identity, geography and liminality, and caste and *dharma*, or lack thereof) are at work in these narratives. The socially constructed identity of the Niṣādas marks them as inferior to the dominant culture; Niṣādas are viewed as subhuman and they come to be treated as such. The geography that the Niṣādas inhabit distances them, not only psychologically (as it contributes to their constructed identity), but also physically from the dominant culture. The final factor, caste and *dharma*, is apparent in the Niṣādas' lack of social role. As they have no *dharma*

or caste, they cannot contribute to the dominant culture and their lack of contribution makes them disposable.

According to the epic, Ekalavya is a young tribal boy who is dedicated and humble, but who dresses in tatters and is covered in dirt, which is a social construction of identity. Ekalavya inhabits geography as he lives in the forest which is not ordered and is not under the control of the dominant culture. Although Ekalavya is a prince among his own people, the epic does not recognize his royal status; he has no caste. When the epic's presentation of Ekalavya is compared to that of the Pāṇḍava princes, the differences are apparent. Both groups are dedicated and talented warriors, however the Pāṇḍavas are described as *kṣatriya* princes who are radiant and lustrous, coming from grand Hindu cities (MBh 1.114-115), whereas Ekalavya is relegated to living in the forest, given the status of a tribal, and is physically portrayed as dirty and poorly dressed. Ekalavya is further distinguished from the Pāṇḍavas by his physical mistreatment; Droṇa (who is a member of the dominant culture) requires that Ekalavya amputate his own thumb. In this narrative, it is only Ekalavya—and the dog belonging to the Pāṇḍavas' servants—who are a victims of physical violence. This episode illustrates that the dominant culture portrays Ekalavya as subhuman, a tool to be used as a means to an end. The three factors of social exclusion and the violation of Ekalavya work in unison to exclude Ekalavya from the dominant culture, while also reinforcing the polarity of social roles. The

Pāṇḍavas belong and are included, Ekalavya does not belong and he is excluded.

The epic initially presents Nala as a Vedic knowing king. However, when Nala is possessed by Kali, he is depicted as mentally unstable; he lacks agency and appears to have a gambling problem. These factors characterize Nala as a social outsider. Nala is juxtaposed with himself in this narrative, transforming from a handsome king to a madman to a hunchback, with each change resulting in a lower social rank. Nala experiences violence in this narrative, both physically and mentally, however, even as a social outsider, the ordeals that Nala faces appear much less serious than that of Ekalavya or the Niṣāda family, even if only because they are temporary. This is possibly due to Nala's overall positive status as a king from the dominant culture: he is redeemable, unlike the Niṣādas.

The Niṣāda family from the House of Lac narrative is described as needy and unable to moderate their appetites; they consume food and become so inebriated at the Pāṇḍavas' rite that they lose consciousness. Like Ekalavya, who is compared to and segregated from the Pāṇḍava princes, the Niṣāda family is juxtaposed with the guests of the Pāṇḍavas. The guests are described as consuming drink but not as losing control at the rite. These differences show the marginalization of the family.

Furthermore, a lack of individuality confirms the Niṣāda family's status as social outsiders. The perception that dominant culture has of the Niṣādas as subhuman is evidenced by the lack of individuality that the Niṣāda family

possesses. They are not given names, they do not speak, they have no agency, and, seemingly, no free will. The epic simply states that they come looking for food, get drunk and pass out. The only information that the reader is provided with is that the Niṣādas have basic needs to fulfill. There is no mention of any trait that the Niṣādas possess that would mark them as anything more than an animal; no human characteristic is attributed to them.

This same trend, to a lesser degree, is apparent in the narrative of Ekalavya. His personal identity is obscured by his identity as a tribal (as discussed in chapter three). The epic does not reference Ekalavya without stating that he is a tribal, effectively erasing his unique identity. Thus, even though he is presented as an individual when compared to the Niṣāda family, his individual identity is secondary to the tribal identity that is attributed to him. Although, human characteristics are attributed to Ekalavya, it appears that for the epic they are negligible, as the dominant culture treats him as less than human and uses him as a means to an end.

The epic's construction of the Niṣādan identity insists that Niṣādas could not be truly human. As Levy (1991) has discussed, it is the dominant culture that defines what characteristics are human, "Because to dominate...means to determine the right and wrong ways of being human, the power of the established group is therefore assured" (9). The Niṣādan narratives show, to varying degrees, that the Niṣādas display the *wrong way* of being human. Because the Niṣādas are not the correct kind of human they are not part of the dominant culture (if they

were, according to Levy, the definition of being human might be completely different). They are not shown to possess the dominant culture's values of moderation (for instance) and do not participate in the correct human identity.[30] Thus, they are discounted, assuring the power (or salvation in this case) of the dominant group. The Niṣādas have no value in and of themselves in these narratives; they have value only because they can be *used* by the dominant culture.

There is an obvious duality that frequently occurs in the construction of identity of the Niṣādas and it is evident in the Niṣādan narratives. Members of the dominant culture are presented as having characteristics that are valued by the hegemonic group; they can moderate behaviours, come from beautiful Hindu cities, are physically attractive, and are described as *kṣatriya* or *brāhmin*. Niṣādas, however, are attributed with qualities that are not highly regarded by the dominant culture. These qualities can be related to the three factors of social exclusion: their identity is socially constructed, Niṣādas are described as poorly dressed and as unable to moderate their behaviours; Niṣādas are affected by their geography and liminality, they live in socially undesirable locations and do not possess fixed roles; they are overall considered casteless, and, consequently,

[30] Ekalavya, too, is portrayed as displaying excessive behaviour by ceaselessly shooting arrows (MBh 1.123.23).

are rarely attributed with a *dharma*. Thus, social outsiders are distinguished from the dominant culture by the three factors of social exclusion.

One factor which simultaneously validates and is validated by social exclusion is violence. Niṣādas are frequently violated in the epic. Here, violence is not only a result of social exclusion, it is a process by which the marginalization of those considered social outcasts by the dominant culture is facilitated. As we will see, violence against marginal populations at once enables social exclusion while visibly reinforcing the social dichotomy between them and the members of the dominant culture.

Violence as a process of social exclusion is illustrated by the House of Lac narrative. The Niṣāda family are the only victims of violence at this event (other than Purocana). There are, however, many guests present who might also serve as stand-ins for the Pāṇḍavas. The family's victimization and marginalization is validated in a two step process. The epic first creates a polarity between the Niṣādas and the guests at the rite; the epic describes the Niṣādas as inebriated and the guests as controlled. After establishing a difference between these two populations, the epic states that the Niṣāda family are left to perish when Bhīma sets fire to the house of lac. Thus, after giving the Niṣāda family a marginal identity, the epic confirms their marginalization with violent methods. In this narrative, it is appropriate and necessary for the Niṣāda family to be murdered. This (mis)treatment serves the needs of the dominant culture and also reinforces

the Niṣādas' status of social outsiders. For out of everyone present at the rite, it is only the Niṣāda family who are chosen to die in place of the princes.

The facilitation of social exclusion through violence is also evident in Ekalavya's narrative. Droṇa asks Ekalavya to cut off his own thumb, however, asking Ekalavya to cease practicing archery would have satisfied Arjuna's demands. The violence that is present in this narrative shows the reader that Ekalavya is actively being socially excluded. Furthermore, the disregard of Ekalavya's person and violence associated with the amputation demonstrate that he is viewed as subhuman.

Although Nala is generally considered part of the dominant culture, he also experiences violence that furthers his marginalization. However, the violence he experiences is less severe than that of Ekalavya or the Niṣāda family. Nala suffers when he is under the influence of Kali. Nala is psychologically violated, as Kali bends Nala's will to his own. This is demonstrated when Nala attempts to stay with Damayantī in the forest. The epic states that Nala left and returned to Damayantī several times before Kali's will triumphs and Nala is forced to leave his wife, abandoning her in a wild forest (MBh 3.59). This passage shows Nala's unmistakable mental anguish. Additionally, while Nala is in the forest, and is considered a social outsider, his meeting with Karkoṭaka results in a physical transformation through violent means. Nala is bitten by Karkoṭaka in order to render Kali's influence null and also to transform Nala into a hunchback. Although the epic suggests that the intentions of Karkoṭaka are good, the means by which

he accomplishes them are violent. Furthermore, this violent change ultimately results in a significant reduction of social status, suggesting that violence facilitates social marginalization.

Thus, necessary and acceptable violence is due, in part, to the social construction of identity (which is also influenced by geography and liminality, and caste and *dharma*). Social construction of identity allows the dominant culture to reduce Niṣādas to their physical bodies, and allows the dominant culture to negate the humanity of the Niṣādas. Because Niṣādas are not, generally, portrayed as possessing human characteristics, they are viewed as beasts, and treated as interchangeable and disposable, which is apparent in the House of Lac and Ekalavya narratives. This is confirmed by Doniger (2011), who states, “They [Niṣāda family] are sacrificial substitutes, whom the author of this text treats as expendable because he regards them as subhuman beings”. Thus, lack of humanity and reduction to a physical body likely contribute to the poor treatment of Niṣādas.

While the context in which this thesis examines the treatment of the Niṣādas is an epic text, history (as presented and analyzed by several scholars) provides several examples of mistreatment of the marginalized other who is viewed as less than human. Using historical examples is useful when interpreting the narratives of Ekalavya and the House of Lac. These examples show that the treatment of the Niṣādas is not isolated to one context or culture; poor treatment of the social outsider, is, largely, universal.

Foucault's (1965) *Madness and Civilization* is entirely relatable to the trends in treatment that Ekalavya and the Niṣāda family endure. Foucault discusses the treatment of the mad in Europe from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance and the Classical period. Foucault notes that the mad are viewed as less than human and that a conscious effort is made to distinguish between the mad and the 'civilized': "madness was shown, but on the other side of bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of a reason that no longer felt any relation to it and that would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance" (Foucault 1965, 70). The polarity between these two social groups leads to a reduction of one group for the sake of the other; the dominant group *would not compromise itself* by indicating that there is any similarity between themselves and the mad, who are social outsiders. The dominant culture remain worthy of being human while the mad are reduced to creatures, they are less than human: "In the reduction to animality, madness finds both its truth and its cure; when the madman had become a beast... man himself is abolished" (1965, 76). Once the madman is no longer considered human, and is completely separated from the civilized dominant culture, poor treatment and abuse becomes acceptable. Foucault states, that the "obsession with an animality perceived as the natural locus of madness...created the imagery responsible for all the practices of confinement and the strangest aspects of its savagery" (1965, 77). The trends in the treatment of the mad, due to their perceived differences and bestial

characteristics, are reminiscent of the portrayals of the identity of Ekalavya and the Niṣāda family, helping to explain their (mis)treatment in the epic.

Foucault argues that because the dominant culture believes that the mad are not 'human' but animals, the mad must be segregated. They are kept in houses of confinement and asylums with poor living conditions. This is acceptable because the *mad are not like humans*; they are beasts and so, like beasts, they can withstand the cold, and do not need to be treated like a human: "It was common knowledge until the end of the 18th century that the insane could support the miseries of existence indefinitely. There was no need to protect them; they had no need to be covered or warmed" (Foucault 1965, 74). These houses put marginalized populations to work and served to isolate the excluded populations from the dominant culture. Thus, the mad inhabited a separate liminal geography. They were sent to houses of confinement, where no members of the dominant culture lived. This same trend can be seen in the narrative of Ekalavya, who inhabits the forest, a geography that is wild and feral; the dominant culture does not live there, and there is no imposed order from the dominant culture in the liminal forest. Ekalavya is treated as inhuman while living in the forest, furthering the similarities between the treatment of Ekalayva and the mad. This treatment is also evident in the narrative of Nala. When Nala is driven mad by Kali's possession, and is considered a social outsider, he is relegated to the forest. Nala leaves the forest, and liminal geography, only when his possession has ceased affecting him.

The mad came to be hospitalized and the treatments they received reflected the constructed identity which had been attributed to them. Because the mad were viewed as animals, their treatment reflected their perceived bestial quality. For example, a Scottish farmer was believed to be capable of curing the insane. On this topic, Pinel notes “His method consisted of forcing the insane to perform the most difficult tasks of farming, in using them as a beast of burden, as servants, reducing them to an ultimate obedience with a barrage of blows at the least act of revolt” (as quoted in Foucault 1965, 76). Here again, the mad have been reduced to something other than human; they are quite literally treated like work animals who were valued for their physical ability. The mad have value because of their physical bodies only.

Thus, the mad, separated from the dominant culture, came to be viewed as subhuman and alien. Similar currents are recognizable in the narratives of Ekalavya and the House of Lac. These Niṣādas are treated as though they are inferior to the dominant culture, reduced to their physical bodies only because they are perceived as less than human, and they are not fit to instruct or include in dominant culture. They are, however, fit to maim and be killed especially since doing so serves the needs of the dominant culture and reinforces the belief that Niṣādas are inferior.

Another historical example comes from duBois (1991) who studies the treatment of slaves in Athens. She states that torture was acceptable and necessary to use against slaves in judicial proceeding to determine the guilt or

innocence of a slave's master. Slaves were believed to not possess reason (a social construction of identity) and Athenians believed that violent physical means had to be used against slaves in order to obtain the truth. duBois argues that torture in Athens, served two functions: to obtain truth from slaves (who are incapable of telling truth without force), and to distinguish slaves from the free men and women of Athens. She states, "Athenian citizens treasured their freedom from torture as a privilege of their elevated status" (42-3). Thus, the division between slave and free man is defined, in part, by acceptable torture. That is, for Athenians, torture, under any circumstance, is unacceptable. However, for slaves, violence is not only acceptable, it is deemed necessary. Therefore, violation of the body is another violent process of social exclusion.

The dominant culture's violation of the social outsider's body is another trend that is obvious in the treatment of Niṣādas. Ashcroft argues that, "the body itself has also been the literal text on which colonization [dominant culture] has written some of its most graphic and scrutable messages" (2007, 290). The House of Lac narrative shows the pre-meditated murder of the Niṣāda family, which demonstrates the dominant culture's use of the Niṣādas' lives as a means to an end. The Niṣāda family has their identity completely rewritten when their carcasses are burnt beyond recognition and the townspeople grieve the death of the Pāṇḍavas (as argued in chapter four). Perhaps the message is that the Niṣādas are not worth remembering.

Use of body as text is also apparent in the treatment of Ekalavya. The text that Ekalavya's body communicates is different than the message of the Niṣāda family's bodily text. Rather than a complete erasure of identity, Ekalavya's amputation serves as a warning to those who would surpass their allotted place in society. On the topic of tortured people, duBois states, "[they] offer examples of the pain to be suffered as a consequence of certain actions. They torture to send back out into the world, broken people, destroyed, to serve as living warnings" (1991, 148). Ekalavya is indeed a living warning. He reappears several times in the epic after his amputation, but he is always described in a ghostly manner (Brodbeck 2006, 3),[31] as if the violence the dominant culture required of him has robbed him of more than just his thumb. His ghostly presence and loss of assertiveness is arguably a warning to anyone who would dare to tread where they do not belong. The skills and roles of the dominant culture are to remain the property of the dominant culture.

The social exclusion of Nala also demonstrates the use of body as text when Nala is transformed into the hunchback, Bāhuka. Bāhuka's misshapen body does not look like an average human (and is quite different from Nala's original handsome *kṣatriya* form), his body is visibly different than members of the dominant culture who are of higher rank. This poorly formed body seems to

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[31] Brodbeck lists MBh 2.49.9, 5.47.71, 7.155.29, & 16.7.10 as other Ekalavya narratives in the epic (2006, 3).

communicate that Nala's new low status, and liminal identity, have rendered him less than human, and certainly, as less than higher ranking members of the dominant culture.

It has been shown that violence is considerably more than a simple by-product of social exclusion; it facilitates the mistreatment of social outsiders while creating a polarity between social outsiders and members of the dominant culture. This polarity then creates a visible binary which further encourages mistreatment. Appadurai (1998) argues that once one is no longer able to easily physically distinguish social outsiders from members of the dominant culture, physical violence, and physically altering social outcasts, is used to create an obvious polarity between who is accepted and who is not, "The maiming and mutilation of ethnicized bodies is a desperate effort to restore validity of somatic markers of 'otherness' in the face of the uncertainties posed by census labels, demographic shifts and linguistic changes which make ethnic affiliations less somatic and bodily, more social and elective" (21). Furthermore, Appadurai states, "the killing, torture and rape associated with ethnocidal violence is not simply a matter of eliminating the ethnic other. It involves the use of the body to establish the parameters of this otherness" (11). The Niṣādas in the narratives of Ekalavya and the Niṣāda family are violated only after crossing cultural barriers (Ekalavya learns archery, the Niṣāda family attends the rite). Nala's physical shape is dramatically altered only after losing his status as king and becoming a social outsider. Furthermore, Nala's violent physical change into Bāhuka occurs

only when Nala attempts to rejoin the dominant culture while he is considered a social outsider. His visible physical differences clearly mark him as 'other' as he returns to the dominant culture in a lower, marginalized, caste. Appadurai might argue that this physical change ensures the continuation of the polarity that is established between social outsiders and the dominant culture. Considering Appadurai's arguments, the violence against these Niṣādas and Nala might be the dominant culture's attempt to differentiate themselves from social outsiders.

5.2 Other Possible Explanations for the Exclusionary Treatment of Niṣādas

The ideas put forth in the section entitled "Treatment Resulting from Social Exclusion" account for reasons for the exclusionary treatment of social outsiders. However, there are other interpretations and points of view worth exploring. The narrative of Ekalavya is interpreted in different ways and point to different ways of understanding the events of this narrative. Some of these interpretations might also help elucidate the treatment of the Niṣāda family. Several of these perspectives are discussed below.

M.A. Mehendale suggests that the dominant culture's conduct towards Ekalavya might be explained by the importance of truth in the *Mahābhārata.* Mehendale states "One approach...is to see promises and curses as intended to spare certain characters from criticisms in terms of *dharma*, by contextualizing their *adharma* within the *dharma* of the truth" (as quoted in Brodbeck 2006, 7). Thus, although Droṇa's request is violent, Ekalavya must give Droṇa his thumb

because he has already told Droṇa that he will pay the guru's fee.[32] Not giving Droṇa his thumb would make Ekalavya a liar.[33] No matter how violent Droṇa's request might seem Ekalavya must pay it. In the *Mahābhārata* truth is the highest *dharma* and narratives that deal with truths that must be upheld appear frequently in the epic.[34] In the case of Ekalavya, Mehendale might argue that truth would be a higher *dharma* than *ahiṃsa* [non-injury].

Shankar (1994) offers another perspective. He argues that when Ekalavya learns archery, without the blessing of Droṇa, he is taking something from the dominant culture that he has no right to possess. As argued in chapter three, Shankar posits that Ekalavya's procurement of the knowledge of archery could be skewed as an attempt to gain martial knowledge in order to harm the dominant culture. For instance, Ekalavya could use this knowledge to engage the Pāṇḍavas in battle. Shankar states,

> In this detail [Ekalavya paying with his thumb], the story of Ekalavya does indeed continue to point unerringly to the practical risks of stealing knowledge from elite pedagogical institutions. It is foolishness to believe...that elite pedagogical institutions will disseminate knowledge...without consciously attempting to ensure

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[32] "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!" (MBh 1.123.35).

[33] It is also true that Droṇa is obligated by truth in this narrative. Other perspectives might suggest that Ekalavya must give Droṇa his thumb so that Droṇa is not made a liar and Droṇa's promise to Arjuna may be kept (MBh 1.123).

[34] For instance, all five Pāṇḍavas marry Draupadī because their mother tells them to share their reward (Draupadī). Because the mother of the Pāṇḍavas cannot be made a liar, the Pāṇḍavas transgress Vedic social norms and all five brothers marry Draupadī (MBh 1.187.23-24). Showing that truth is a higher *dharma* than social norms.

> at the same time that such knowledge cannot be turned back upon them again (1994, 485)

Thus, the treatment that Ekalavya receives, according to Shankar, is necessary to ensure that the Niṣāda will not be capable of using this knowledge against Droṇa and the Pāṇḍavas.

Yet another interpretation suggests that the reader needs to contextualize the mistreatment of Ekalavya with Ekalavya's treatment of the dog who accompanies the Pāṇḍavas, as well as the violence that is understood to be inherent to Niṣādas' lifestyles as hunters and fishermen.[35] Brodbeck (2006) contends that, "Ekalavya's losing his thumb might also be contextualized by his prior cruelty to the Pāṇḍavas' [servant's][36] dog - indeed, the cruelty inherent in the niṣāda lifestyle contextualizes their cruel treatment in general" (7). Thus, a perceived innate association with violence is a justification put forth to explain the events of the narrative of Ekalavya. This same reasoning might be applied to the Niṣāda family that is presented in the House of Lac narrative. Because they are Niṣāda, they are believed to be associated with death and violence, thus, suffering death and violence personally is part of the experience of being a Niṣāda.

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[35] "When the cur kept on barking, the Niṣāda, displaying his deft skill, shot almost simultaneously seven arrows into its mouth" (MBH 1.123.19).

[36] Brodbeck erroneously states that the dog belongs to the Pāṇḍavas. The epic states that the dog belongs to the Pāṇḍavas' servant who follows the princes while they hunt (MBh 1.123.15-16).

In a similar vein, Doniger (2011) suggests that the poor treatment of the Niṣāda family might be justified by the family's drunkenness. Doniger proposes that the epic might defend their deaths by contextualizing it with their previous excessive drinking: "Perhaps their drunkenness (one of the four vices of lust) is meant to justify their deaths" (2011, 288).

There are, of course, other interpretations that might account for the events in the Niṣāda narratives. The above section is not meant to be an exhaustive representation. It is intended to demonstrate the variety of interpretations suggested by other scholars that might also fit into my own theme of socially excluded Niṣādas in the epic.

5.3 What is Accomplished by the Treatment of Niṣādas

Because the *Mahābhārata* is instructional in nature and is still widely popular in India and Hinduism, messages that are being transmitted by these narratives must be investigated. The narratives accomplish many things: they elucidate the social climate during the time of the epic's compilation; they attempt to stabilize the social hierarchy (with *brāhmins*, the compilers, at the top of this hierarchy); they teach the readers the 'correct' way to view and treat Niṣādas; they may be cautionary in nature; and, finally, they might be an attempt to gain empathy for the Niṣādas. These possibilities are discussed in greater detail below.

Overall, the treatment that the Niṣādas receive in the *Mahābhārata* ensures that they remain a group that is perceived as inferior by the dominant culture. Because the epic is considered an instructional text, representations of the Niṣāda in the epic arguably indoctrinate the dominant population with beliefs of, and relating to, tribals. These narratives, overall, appear to preach that Niṣādas are to be treated and thought of as subhuman. Establishing stereotypes of tribals for members of the dominant culture would ensure that the status quo of the Hindu social hierarchy remained stable. Therefore, the *brāhmins* (consequently, also the compilers of the epic) maintain their high social status, while the Niṣādas continue to be relegated to low, or no, caste.

The reinforcement of social roles becomes important in periods of social change and instability. Because the epic was written during a time of great social change in India, stabilizing social roles was a likely goal of the epic compilers. duBois states that in ancient Athens, when the social roles of the dominant culture were challenged, differentiating members of the dominant culture from slaves became more crucial to the hegemonic social group (1991, 64). A similar trend is found in the portrayal (and treatment) of Niṣādas. That is, Niṣādas are possibly mistreated to differentiate them from the dominant culture and secure the social positions of the members of the dominant culture. This process would take place if the members of the dominant culture felt that their social roles were no longer stable. Thus, increasing the marginalization of the Niṣādas would further distinguish them from members of the dominant culture while also

protecting the social hierarchy. Reich confirms that, during the compilation of the epic, Niṣādas became a highly marginalized social group, possibly due to social instability (2001, 149). Differentiating the dominant culture from the Niṣādas (thus, marginalizing the Niṣādas) is an occurrence that is grounded in the historical context of the epic and is presumably reflected in the narratives of the epic as, in the majority of narratives dealing with this tribe, Niṣādas are distinguished from the dominant culture. This polarity is established by describing Niṣādas in physically unflattering ways and treating members of this group differently than members of the dominant culture.

One stark difference that has been explored between Nala and the Niṣādas is their experience of liminality. Chapter four suggests that Nala's experience of liminality is temporal while Niṣādas appear to be permanently liminal characters in the epic. Permanent liminality is an oxymoron – the very definition of liminality argues against permanence. Thus, that Niṣādas appear to inhabit a liminal space and identity permanently speaks to the power of portrayal and the dominant culture's need to marginalize this tribal group.

As discussed in the narrative analysis chapters, the Niṣāda narratives might be cautionary in nature. The Niṣādas are violated only after interacting with the dominant culture in a manner that suggests an attempt at assimilation (e.g., Ekalavya learning archery, Niṣāda family attending the rite of the Pāṇḍavas), thus it appears that this sort of behaviour is not only discouraged by the epic, but

punished. The treatment that the Niṣādas receive in these narratives might be interpreted as a warning to those who would overstep their social positions.

Chapter three argues that the mistreatment of Niṣādas might serve as a tool to garner sympathy from the dominant culture. Doniger (2009, 290) suggests that the narratives of Ekalavya and the House of Lac call upon the dominant culture to see the humanity in the Niṣādas, and to understand that they are undeserving of the poor treatment they receive. However, Doniger (A Response) stresses that cases in which the dominant culture possibly empathizes with lower castes are not standard responses to the plight of the lower castes or those without caste. Therefore, the use of these narratives to encourage the dominant culture to sympathize with the Niṣādas is possible, but unlikely.

There are clearly a variety of functions that are served by these narratives. For a text as comprehensive as the epic, it is unlikely that these narratives serve only one purpose. Rather, Niṣāda narratives most likely serve multiple functions, and so, the function of these narratives may include all of those listed above, and possibly more.

5.4 Is the Treatment that Niṣādas Receive Validated by the Epic?

Interestingly, although the text allows members of the dominant culture to treat the Niṣādas in a hostile manner, it is unclear if the text approves of these actions or not. Members of the dominant culture do not face consequences as a result of their violent actions against the Niṣādas. It is possible that this lack of

consequence is justified by the 'necessity' of the actions of the dominant culture. Lack of repercussions for the dominant culture could also be accounted for by the portrayal of the Niṣādas. Niṣādas are largely perceived as subhuman, and so, actions against an 'inferior' race are not deemed punishable. However, strangely, certain parts of the text suggest that the behaviour of the members of the dominant culture is not necessarily endorsed by the epic itself.

The text provides opinions about actions that occur within its narratives. It comments on events from narratives and these comments suggest that the epic does not wholly support the events of the narratives and the mistreatment of the Niṣādas. Between the lack of consequence for those who mistreat the Niṣādas and the texts' comments, the reader is left to wonder if the actions of the dominant culture are validated by the text or not. Das (2006) and Doniger (2011) present arguments on this topic.

Das (2006) suggests that the epic honours Ekalavya and that it shows Droṇa from another perspective. Before the narrative of Ekalavya, Droṇa is portrayed as a mighty *brāhmin* and as a guru to the Pāṇḍavas. However, Das contends that Droṇa's treatment of Ekalavya blemishes the reader's perception of the guru:

> The epic's Ekalavya did not revolt against the caste system. While the *Mahābhārata* understands why Drona could not teach a person who was outside the society of its time, it also makes Ekalavya a charismatic figure. We are horrified at Drona's command, which the epic calls *daruna*, 'terrible', and it tarnishes the ruthless teacher forever in our eyes...When the dusky hunter cuts off his thumb, the *Mahābhārata* reveals Ekalavya's humanity,

> and in doing so it honours the lowers of the low born, who lives in tribes in the jungles outside the pale. It teaches us that they too are human beings who are owed dignity and respect (Das 2006, 171).

Das argues that readers are able to identify Ekalavya as a human who is deserving of high regard as he is willing to amputate his own thumb. Droṇa's actions elucidate, not only the treatment that Niṣādas receive in the epic but also, the perceptions that the dominant culture has of social outsiders. The epic calls Droṇa's actions *daruna* [terrible], suggesting that the text does not validate the behaviour of the guru, and possibly indicating that the text empathizes with Ekalavya.

Doniger notes that the epic calls the Niṣāda family "without wrongdoing" (*anāgasam)* (2011, 288).[37] This suggests, much like in the narrative of Ekalavya, that the epic sympathizes with the Niṣāda family and possibly also disapproves of the actions of the Pāṇḍavas. However, the epic's possible concern does not negate the poor treatment that Niṣādas receive throughout the epic.

Interestingly, during the events of book seven of the *Mahābhārata,* the epic claims that it was necessary for Ekalavya to be mistreated.[38] In fact, he is killed,

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[37] MBh 1.137.7

[38] During this time, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas are at war with each other, and the son of Bhīma, Ghaṭotkaca, a half-demon, has just been slain. The death of Ghaṭotkaca greatly affects Arjuna and he searches for an explanation for the death of his nephew. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that the death of Ghaṭotkaca, along with the killing of Ekalavya and several other characters in the epic was necessary to ensure the triumph of the Pāṇḍavas.

to ensure that the Pāṇḍavas would have the opportunity to rule in a *dharmically* correct manner. The *Mahābhārata* states:

> Indeed, O Arjuna, for thy good, with the aid of diverse contrivances I [Kṛṣṇa] have slain, one after another, Jarasandha and the illustrious ruler of the Chedis and the might-armed *Nishada* of the name of Ekalavya...If Jarasandha, and the ruler of the Chedis, and the mighty son of the Nishada king, had not been slain, they would have become terrible. Without doubt, Duryodhana would have chosen those foremost of car-warriors [sic] (for embracing his side). They had always been hostile towards us, and accordingly, they would all have adopted the side of the Kauravas...[they] would have succeeded in conquering the whole earth" (MBh 7.180-181, P.C. Roy translation).

Therefore, quite some time later, the epic offers a reason for the poor treatment of Ekalavya. If he had not been slain (by Karṇa, a member of Vedic society), the fate of the whole world would have been put in jeopardy.[39] According to the epic, the Pāṇḍavas must win the war so that proper *dharma* can be carried out in the world. Violence against Ekalavya is necessary and permissible when considering, as the epic does, that Ekalavya's mistreatment and death are for the 'greater good.'

A similar argument can be made for the treatment of the Niṣāda family in the House of Lac narrative. It was necessary for the Niṣāda family to perish in order for the Pāṇḍavas to escape unnoticed. Thus, the greater good requires the Pāṇḍavas to rule and anything that impedes this must be eliminated. It might be

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[39] Karṇa's ability to kill Ekalavya was, undoubtedly, aided by Ekalavya's amputation. It is likely that Karṇa was able to kill Ekalavya only because Ekalavya no longer possessed his superior ability as an archer, making Ekalavya vulnerable to Karṇa's attack.

argued that the death of the Niṣāda family is a small price to pay to keep the Pāṇḍavas safe.

Thus, overall, the text does not validate or invalidate the treatment of the Niṣādas. Its comments on action in the narrative suggest that it is not wholly supportive of the decisions made by the dominant culture. However, the arguments the text supplies in book seven show that it believes these actions are necessary. This ambiguity is possibly explained by the epic's oral origin. Because the epic was compiled only after being a part of the oral culture in India, it is possible that these differences come from the voices of various groups from this pre-compilation period. The ambiguity might simply ne different view points from the pre-compilation period regarding the correct treatment of Niṣādas.

5.5 Conclusion

The treatment that the Niṣādas receive ultimately facilitates and reinforces their social exclusion. The inclusion or exclusion of the Niṣādas is dependent on their perception by the dominant culture (social construction of identity), their homes and whether they exist within the cities of the dominant culture (geography and liminality), and whether they have accepted, defined social roles (caste and *dharma*). Social exclusion and its resulting treatment is complicated, and many factors other than the three discussed above influence the treatment of Niṣādas. For instance, the historical context of the epic most likely greatly influenced how Niṣādan narratives were written. Narratives involving Niṣādas serve various

functions, for instance, they reflect the social climate of the epic's compilation period, they might attempt to instruct how to perceive and treat tribals, or they may serve as warnings and demonstrate the consequences for those who tread where they do not belong. Violence is much more than a simple by-product of social exclusion; it facilitates social exclusion by distinguishing social outsiders from the dominant culture and enables further mistreatment of marginalized groups. While the arguments I have put forth help unpack the treatment of social exclusion, other scholars' efforts to understand the narratives of Ekalavya and the House of Lac have also been discussed. The epic's comments do not clearly represent its own opinion, the reader is left with ambiguity, never truly knowing if, according to the epic, the treatment of the Niṣādas is justifiable or not.

While the ideas presented in this thesis have begun the process of exploring social exclusion in the epic, more research is required to fully understand the function, treatment, and roles of social outsiders in the *Mahābhārata.* There are multiple areas for future research. Future research should explore other socially excluded groups in the epic. Possible groups of social outsiders include: Nāgas, Rākṣasas, and the Pāṇḍavas, who might be understood as social outsiders during their thirteen years of exile. Other narratives dealing with Niṣādas should be examined. For instance, part of the Garuḍa narrative describes the mighty bird feasting on Niṣādas (MBh 1.24). Narratives that involve more than one group of social outsiders should also be examined to begin to gain an understanding of the interactions between these

groups. Future research might also investigate how religious literature, such as the epic, influences the current treatment of India's socially excluded populations (see Jafferlot 2011 for a discussion about the subcontinent's current marginalized social groups).

The one conclusion that I can safely arrive at is that the mistreatment of social outsiders is multifaceted, and that social exclusion is a complex process that requires various factors to work together to achieve exclusion. This is illustrated in the epic itself by the varying treatment of social outsiders that is present in each of the narratives explored in this thesis. There are many reasons for the poor treatment of those who are perceived as less than human. An issue as habitual and complicated as the varying treatment and portrayal of the socially excluded is not answered with one theory, which is one reason why further research is necessary to understand this process.

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