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Gurukula Exclusion and Indigenous Subaltern Learning: An IKS Reading of Ekalavya

Kanchan Mishra, Editor NCERT
kanchanvidhimishra@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Mahabharata is an epic of vast proportions and also a fabulous repository of concepts related to society, ethics, and knowledge. While other works may be espousing one point of view, Mahabharata is a treasure trove of diverse viewpoints, thus making it an essential ingredient in the Indian Knowledge System. The tale of Eklavya engages us in concepts related to learning, domination, exclusion, and finally ethics. Placed in Adi Parva, Dronacharya's refusal of Eklavya uncovers the reality that formal education under the gurukula system depended to a great extent on one's social background, family, and access to power. The gurukula, while being a highly revered place of education, also acted as a gatekeeping institution where being legitimate mattered more than being capable. However, Eklavya's tale is not only about exclusion and unfairness. It equally points to the potential of education beyond the formal structures. By self, study (svadhyaya), discipline (tapas), and the deep faith in the guru's idea, Eklavya achieves extraordinary mastery all by himself.

These modes of learning are in the Indian thought alternative educational traditions, especially those nestled in forest, based and non, institutional spaces of knowledge. They were parallel to formal gurukulas, though they have often been overlooked. Yet there is more to the tale of Eklavya than the denial or injustice. There is also the possibility of learning outside of formal education. Through self-study or svadhyaya, tapas or discipline, and a deep commitment to the ideal of the guru, Eklavya acquired great skills on his own. These forms of learning point to alternative educational traditions within Indian thought, especially those associated with forest-based and non-institutional spaces of knowledge.

Such traditions have also co-existed with institutional gurukula, even though there is a tendency to look down upon them. Eklavya, as per the IKS, was an individual learner whose success defies the concept of acquiring knowledge through institutions. Though Drona's deed is mostly justified as his faithfulness to social order and fulfilment of royal duties, it

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equally reveals the scarcity of a system that values hierarchy more than justice. Such an incident in fact mirrors the internal contradictions of the ancient educational system and it still serves as an illustration when we talk about exclusion and inequality. Instead of using only Western ideas to explain marginalization, this research paper uses Indian philosophical ideas such as dharma, guru–shishya tradition, and svadhyaya to understand Eklavya's situation. By doing this, the paper shows that resistance, personal agency, and moral questioning have always existed within Indian thought itself.

Methodologically, the paper combines textual reading with historical and philosophical reflection, aligning with interdisciplinary approaches encouraged by Indian academic institutions. Eklavya's case is also linked to contemporary debates on inclusive education, particularly through the lens of the National Education Policy 2020 which acknowledges diverse learning modes and gives importance to informal and experiential knowledge. Eklavya's situation is similar to the struggles of first-generation learners, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and self-taught individuals, whose abilities are often ignored because they do not have formal qualifications. Through its reading of Eklavya as a figure of subsidiary learning and its embeddedness in Indian tradition and culture, it is my argument that what this paper hopes to show is that the Mahabharata not only reinforces social hierarchy but that there is also a reflection on it through its narrative on Eklavya that reveals its capacity for self-examination and dialogue; and indeed, there is still much that can be learned from his story that is relevant today.

Keywords: Eklavya; Indian Knowledge System (IKS); Gurukula Education; Svadhyaya; Inclusive Education

1. The Mahabharata as a Civilizational Knowledge Text

The Mahabharata is an epic of vast proportions and also a fabulous repository of concepts related to society, ethics, and knowledge. While other works may be espousing one point of view, Mahabharata is a treasure trove of diverse viewpoints, thus making it an essential ingredient in the Indian Knowledge System. The tale of Eklavya engages us in concepts related to learning, domination, exclusion, and finally ethics. Placed in Adi Parva, Dronacharya's refusal of Eklavya uncovers the reality that formal education under the gurukula system depended to a great extent on one's social background, family, and access to power. The gurukula, while being a highly revered place of education, also acted as a

gatekeeping institution where being legitimate mattered more than being capable.

2. Education Beyond Institutional Structures

However, Eklavya's tale is not only about exclusion and unfairness. It equally points to the potential of education beyond the formal structures. By self, study (svadhyaya), discipline (tapas), and the deep faith in the guru's idea, Eklavya achieves extraordinary mastery all by himself. These modes of learning are in the Indian thought alternative educational traditions, especially those nestled in forest, based and non, institutional spaces of knowledge. They were parallel to formal gurukulas, though they have often been overlooked. Eklavya, from an IKS stand point, symoolizes...

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3. Institutional Dharma and Ethical Tension

Though Drona's deed is mostly justified as his faithfulness to social order and fulfilment of royal duties, it equally reveals the scarcity of a system that values hierarchy more than justice. Such an incident in fact mirrors the internal contradictions of the ancient educational system and it still serves as an illustration when we talk about exclusion and inequality.Instead of using only Western ideas to explain marginalization, this research paper uses Indian philosophical ideas such as dharma, guruâshishya tradition, and svadhyaya to understand Eklavyaâs situation. By doing this, the paper shows that resistance, personal agency, and moral questioning have always existed within Indian thought itself.

1. Methodological Orientation and Contemporary Relevance

Methodologically, the paper combines textual reading with historical and philosophical reflection, aligning with interdisciplinary approaches encouraged by Indian academic institutions. Eklavya’s case is also linked to contemporary debates on inclusive education, particularly through the lens of the National Education Policy 2020 which acknowledges diverse learning modes and gives importance to informal and experiential knowledge. Eklavyaâs situation is similar to the struggles of first-generation learners, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and self-taught individuals, whose abilities are

often ignored because they do not have formal qualifications. Through its reading of Eklavya as a figure of subsidiary learning and its embeddedness in Indian tradition and culture, it is my argument that what this paper hopes to show is that the Mahabharata not only reinforces social hierarchy but that there is also a reflection on it through its narrative on Eklavya that reveals its capacity for self-examination and dialogue; and indeed, there is still much that can be learned from his story that is relevant today.

2. Knowledge in Indian Intellectual Tradition

To understand the story of Ekalavya, it is important to consider how knowledge was valued by people in India in the past. This story is part of the Mahabharata, an important text in India that holds great depth. The Mahabharata is not about families fighting with each other. It is a collection of ideas about how to live, teach, and think deeply about big questions. Ekalavyas episode is a part of the Mahabharata, which is a key part of Indian Knowledge Systems. The story of Ekalavya is important because it makes us consider who gets to act, who is in charge, and who can make decisions. We can look at Ekalavya. See what it tells us about access and authority and eligibility and agency. The episode of Ekalavya offers a way to understand these things.

In Indian thinking, knowledge was understood as more than simply knowing facts or learning a job. It was meant to change you. Knowledge was meant to change your thinking, make you a better person, and guide you to act according to dharma. Learning involves more than just using your brain; it also includes being a good person and forming a connection to something bigger than yourself. Education and becoming a person are closely connected. The teacher was someone who taught you things and also helped you control yourself.

4. Adhikara and Eligibility

In this way of thinking, the question of who gets to have knowledge is not a simple matter of yes or no. Knowledge is complex as I mentioned. The issue of access to knowledge is more complicated than simply saying that some people can have it and others cannot. This concept is closely related to being prepared, which is also referred to as adhikara. It involves being disciplined and taking responsibility for our actions. We need to take accountability for our actions. That is a big part of it.

The idea of initiation plays a crucial role when discussing adhikara and the state of being prepared. Adhikara refers to the legal concept of eligibility in rights and duties. It

identifies who has the authority to make claims or perform actions under the law. Understanding adhikara is crucial to resolving disputes about who is entitled to certain benefits or obligations. This concept plays a central role in legal systems by ensuring that only those eligible can assert rights or responsibilities, maintaining order and fairness in legal proceedings.

The concept of adhikara, or being eligible, played an important role in deciding who could learn in traditional systems. Adhikara was not based on personal identity, but social groups did have an impact on who could attend schools. It involved being mature enough to be strong in your values, having a mind, and being committed to learning. Old books often mention students taking tests to check if they were ready before learning more advanced material. You needed to control your wants, focus on your work, and keep your promises to be ready for the knowledge of adhikara.

7.Dronacharyaâs Refusal and Institutional Rules

Dronacharya did not want to teach Ekalavya because the rules limited who could learn from him. Dronacharya had a connection to the Kuru court. He was required to follow what they wanted him to do as a teacher. He was allowed to teach only those approved by the royal court. Dronacharya was expected to follow the rules set by the kingdom and society where he lived. Understanding the reasons behind Dronacharyaâs actions does not change the fact that these rules often benefited those already in power. When rules about who can do something depend on power and money, they often serve to exclude others. Dronacharya's decision not to teach Ekalavya was based on these rules. These rules were based on the social rules of the kingdom. The episode shows two things that do not really go together. On one hand, the importance of institutions being honest and fair is clear. On one hand, there are people who want to achieve something because they believe they deserve it. The episode reveals a tension between institutional integrity and aspirational merit.

8.Decentralized Ecologies of Knowledge

Decentralized ecologies of knowledge describe systems where information and understanding are spread across multiple sources instead of being controlled by a single authority. This structure allows diverse perspectives to coexist and interact, supporting a more inclusive and dynamic exchange of ideas. Such ecologies support collaboration and adaptability, enabling knowledge to evolve through collective input and local contexts. They challenge traditional hierarchies by valuing multiple forms of expertise and encouraging participation from various communities, which enriches the overall intellectual

landscape.

To understand this more deeply, it is important to contrast decentralized knowledge systems with centralized ones. In centralized systems, authority is concentrated in a single institution, individual, or canon. Knowledge is validated and transmitted from the top down. Educational institutions, state authorities, or dominant intellectual traditions often determine what counts as legitimate knowledge. While such systems can create uniformity and standardization, they may also marginalize alternative viewpoints and local experiences. Decentralized ecologies, by contrast, distribute authority. Knowledge emerges from multiple nodes—communities, practitioners, traditions, and lived experiences. No single center monopolizes truth.

In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), knowledge has historically developed in a decentralized manner. Although there were established traditions and respected teachers, knowledge production was not confined to one institutional framework. Philosophical schools such as Nyaya, Samkhya, Mimamsa, Vedanta, and Buddhism coexisted, debated, and critiqued one another. This plurality created an intellectual ecology rather than a rigid hierarchy. Competing interpretations were not necessarily erased; instead, they formed a dynamic network of dialogue. Such multiplicity reflects a decentralized approach to understanding reality.

Decentralized knowledge systems are also evident in India's diverse regional practices. Agricultural techniques vary across states depending on climate, soil, and cultural traditions. Traditional medicine, including Ayurveda and various folk healing systems, adapts to local ecosystems. Knowledge of herbs, water management, architecture, and craftsmanship is often embedded within specific communities. This local knowledge is not inferior to formal scientific knowledge; it is context-sensitive and evolved through generations of practice. A decentralized ecology recognizes the value of such situated expertise.

One of the strengths of decentralized knowledge lies in its adaptability. When knowledge is distributed across communities, it can respond quickly to changing circumstances. Local farmers, for example, can adjust crop patterns based on immediate environmental observations. Artisans innovate techniques according to available materials. Knowledge evolves organically rather than waiting for approval from a central authority. This responsiveness fosters resilience, especially in times of crisis or uncertainty.

Moreover, decentralized ecologies encourage participation. When knowledge is not restricted to elite institutions, more people can contribute. Oral traditions, storytelling, apprenticeship models, and community gatherings become important sites of transmission. In such systems, elders, practitioners, and local leaders' function as knowledge holders. Their expertise arises from lived experience rather than formal certification. By acknowledging these forms of knowledge, decentralized systems democratize learning.
The digital age provides a contemporary example of decentralized knowledge. Online platforms, open-source communities, and collaborative networks allow individuals across the world to share insights and skills. Although these platforms are not free from power dynamics, they illustrate how information can circulate horizontally rather than vertically. Contributors collectively refine ideas, correct errors, and expand understanding. This participatory model mirrors older decentralized traditions in which knowledge emerged through dialogue and shared practice.

However, decentralized ecologies are not without challenges. Without coordination, information can become fragmented or inconsistent. The absence of a central authority may create difficulties in standardization and verification. Therefore, decentralized systems require mechanisms of dialogue, mutual critique, and shared ethical frameworks. In traditional Indian debates, for instance, philosophical schools followed established rules of argumentation. Decentralization did not imply chaos; it meant distributed authority within a structured environment of discourse.

Another significant feature of decentralized knowledge is its respect for plurality. Instead of insisting on a single universal narrative, it allows multiple truths to coexist. Different communities may interpret similar phenomena in distinct ways. For example, water can be understood scientifically as HO, spiritually as sacred, and culturally as a symbol of purification. A centralized framework might prioritize one interpretation over others. A decentralized ecology acknowledges that each perspective offers meaningful insight within its context.

This pluralistic orientation has ethical implications. By valuing diverse voices, decentralized systems promote inclusivity. Marginalized communities can articulate their experiences and contribute to broader conversations. Knowledge is no longer the exclusive property of dominant groups. Instead, it becomes a shared resource shaped by collective participation. This inclusivity strengthens social cohesion and mutual respect.

In educational settings, adopting a decentralized approach means recognizing students as active contributors rather than passive recipients. Classroom discussions, collaborative projects, and experiential learning allow multiple viewpoints to surface. Teachers become facilitators rather than sole authorities. Such pedagogy nurtures critical thinking and creativity. Students learn to appreciate differences and negotiate meaning collectively.

Decentralized ecologies also align with ecological metaphors. Just as biodiversity strengthens natural ecosystems, intellectual diversity strengthens knowledge systems. When multiple perspectives interact, they generate innovation. Monocultures, whether in agriculture or ideas— are vulnerable to collapse. Diversity ensures adaptability and long-term sustainability. Knowledge thrives when nourished by varied experiences, disciplines, and cultural backgrounds.

In the context of governance and policy, decentralized knowledge can inform more effective decision-making. Policies crafted solely by central authorities may overlook local realities. Incorporating community input ensures that solutions are grounded in lived conditions. Participatory governance, public consultations, and grassroots initiatives reflect the principles of decentralized ecologies. They integrate local wisdom with broader frameworks, creating balanced and context-sensitive outcomes.

Furthermore, decentralized knowledge systems challenge rigid hierarchies of expertise. Expertise is not dismissed, but it is redefined. A scientist possesses specialized training, yet a farmer may hold intricate knowledge of soil patterns that scientific models have not captured. A craftsperson understands material behavior through tactile familiarity. Recognizing these varied forms of expertise enriches collective understanding. It prevents the marginalization of practical wisdom in favor of abstract theory alone.

The sustainability of decentralized ecologies depends on dialogue and trust. Open communication allows knowledge nodes to connect and exchange insights. Trust ensures that contributions are respected and considered. Without trust, fragmentation may lead to conflict. Therefore, cultivating ethical norms and mutual accountability is essential for maintaining balance within decentralized systems.

In addition, decentralized ecologies foster creativity. When individuals are free to experiment and share ideas, innovation flourishes. Cross-disciplinary collaborations

become possible. A musician may draw inspiration from local folklore while incorporating modern techniques. A technologist may integrate indigenous design principles into contemporary solutions. These hybrid forms emerge naturally in decentralized environments where boundaries are porous.

At the same time, decentralization encourages responsibility. When knowledge is shared across communities, individuals recognize their role in sustaining it. Preservation of language, rituals, and crafts becomes a collective effort. Communities actively transmit traditions to younger generations. Knowledge is not merely consumed; it is nurtured and protected.

In conclusion, decentralized ecologies of knowledge represent a vibrant and inclusive framework for understanding how ideas circulate and evolve. By distributing authority across multiple sources, they enable diverse perspectives to coexist and interact. Such systems promote adaptability, participation, and resilience. They challenge rigid hierarchies while valuing varied forms of expertise rooted in local contexts and lived experience. Although they require dialogue and ethical coordination to function effectively, decentralized ecologies ultimately enrich the intellectual landscape. They remind us that knowledge is not a fixed commodity controlled by a single center, but a living network sustained by collective engagement and shared responsibility.

Indian Knowledge Systems were created to be accessible to everyone, not only to those studying in major schools. There were other places where people could learn, including in the forest with a teacher, by listening to family stories, or by working alongside skilled workers who taught a trade. People also learned at temples and from their community. People shared what they knew by doing things, telling stories, performing rituals, and becoming skilled at making things. People learned through living their lives and interacting with others. Indian Knowledge Systems were an integral part of life.

1. Anubhava and Embodied Learning

The idea of embodied knowledge challenges the common assumption that knowledge exists only in the mind. In many modern educational systems, learning is often reduced to reading, memorizing, and reproducing information. However, embodied knowledge suggests that true understanding emerges when the body participates in the process of learning. The body is not merely a passive instrument directed by the intellect; it

is an active site of cognition. Movements, sensations, repetitions, and interactions with the environment shape awareness in ways that abstract reasoning alone cannot achieve.

Indian philosophical traditions have long recognized this intimate connection between body, action, and knowledge. The concept of anubhava is central in various schools of thought, including Vedanta and Yoga. Knowledge is not considered complete until it is realized through lived experience. Scriptural study (śravaa) and reflection (manana) are important, but they must culminate in direct realization (anubhava). Without this experiential dimension, knowledge remains incomplete, superficial, or second-hand.
This emphasis on experience reflects a broader epistemological framework within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), where knowledge is validated not merely by logical reasoning but also by direct perception and practice. For example, the practice of yoga is not understood by reading about postures or breathing techniques. One must perform the asanas, regulate the breath, and observe bodily sensations. Through repeated practice, the practitioner develops an inner awareness that cannot be transferred fully through words. The body becomes both the medium and the repository of knowledge.

Embodied knowledge also plays a crucial role in traditional Indian arts and crafts. Classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam or Kathak require years of rigorous bodily discipline. A dancer cannot master rhythm, expression, and gesture simply by understanding theory. The body must internalize each movement until it becomes spontaneous and effortless. Similarly, traditional artisans learn their skills through apprenticeship. Knowledge is transmitted through observation, imitation, correction, and repetition. The guru guides, but the student's body must perform the action repeatedly for true mastery to emerge.

Returning to the example of Ekalavya, his story illustrates the power of embodied learning in a striking manner. Denied formal instruction, he did not abandon his aspiration. Instead, he created his own path of practice. He observed, imitated, and repeated. His daily engagement with the bow and arrow allowed his muscles, posture, breathing, and reflexes to align in harmony. Over time, archery ceased to be an intellectual task and became a natural extension of his body. This transformation demonstrates that knowledge does not depend solely on institutional access; it can arise from disciplined and sustained bodily practice. The transformation from conscious effort to automatic skill is an important aspect of embodied knowledge. When a beginner learns a new action, such as driving or playing a

musical instrument, the mind is heavily engaged. Each step requires deliberate attention. However, with repetition, the body begins to remember. Movements become smooth and coordinated. This process shows that memory is not confined to the brain alone; it is distributed throughout the body. Muscle memory, posture alignment, and spatial awareness are all forms of embodied intelligence.

From a philosophical perspective, embodied knowledge challenges the rigid separation between mind and body. Many Western philosophical traditions, especially those influenced by Cartesian dualism, treat the mind as superior to or separate from the body. In contrast, Indian thought often sees the human being as an integrated unity. The body, senses, mind, and consciousness are interconnected layers of existence. Knowledge flows through these layers. Sensory perception feeds into mental processing, and mental clarity refines bodily action. This dynamic interplay creates a holistic understanding of learning.

The concept of karma (action) further reinforces the importance of embodied engagement. Knowledge in the Indian tradition is often linked with right action. One knows truly when one acts appropriately and skillfully in the world. Action is not secondary to thought; it is a vital expression of understanding. Through action, abstract principles are tested and realized. This practical dimension ensures that knowledge remains grounded in lived reality rather than becoming detached speculation. Embodied knowledge also has ethical implications. When learning is rooted in direct experience, it fosters humility and awareness. A person who has struggled, practiced, and refined a skill understands the effort required for mastery. This awareness cultivates respect for discipline and patience. In contrast, purely theoretical knowledge can sometimes lead to overconfidence without depth. Experience teaches limitations as well as possibilities.

In the context of education, recognizing embodied knowledge calls for pedagogical reforms. Learning environments should encourage experimentation, participation, and reflection. Students should not merely consume information but actively engage with it. Practical exercises, fieldwork, simulations, and hands-on projects can bridge the gap between theory and practice. For example, studying agriculture through textbooks provides information about soil, climate, and crops. However, working in the field—touching the soil, observing seasonal changes, and tending to plants—creates a deeper and more enduring understanding.

Embodied knowledge also connects learning to identity and community. Traditional learning systems in India, such as the gurukula, often emphasized close interaction between teacher and student. Knowledge was transmitted not only through lectures but through shared living, observation, and imitation. The student absorbed habits, discipline, and values through everyday interaction. Learning was therefore not an isolated mental activity but a relational and embodied process embedded within social life. The story of Ekalavya also reveals the social dimensions of embodied knowledge. Although he achieved excellence through practice, his exclusion from formal training highlights the inequalities within knowledge systems. His embodied mastery challenges the authority of institutional knowledge. It suggests that experience and dedication can generate competence even in the absence of formal recognition. In this sense, embodied knowledge can become a form of resistance against hierarchical structures that monopolize access to learning.

Furthermore, embodied knowledge fosters a deep connection between the learner and the environment. Archery requires awareness of wind, distance, posture, and timing. The archer's body must attune itself to natural conditions. Similarly, farmers, craftsmen, and performers develop sensitivity to their surroundings through repeated engagement. This sensitivity creates ecological awareness and sustainable practices. Knowledge is not extracted from nature but cultivated through respectful interaction.

Another important dimension is the transformative power of embodied learning. When knowledge becomes embodied, it shapes character and perception. A trained dancer carries grace in everyday movement. A skilled archer maintains alertness and balance. The discipline of practice influences posture, breathing, and attention. Thus, embodied knowledge is not confined to a specific activity; it gradually transforms the entire being of the learner. In spiritual traditions, this transformation is even more pronounced. Meditation practices, for instance, require steady posture, regulated breath, and focused awareness. Over time, practitioners report changes in perception and emotional stability. These changes are not achieved by intellectual reasoning alone but by consistent bodily discipline. The body becomes a gateway to higher awareness. Experience leads to realization. Modern neuroscience increasingly supports the idea that cognition is embodied. Studies show that movement influences memory, emotion, and problem-solving ability. Physical engagement activates multiple neural pathways, strengthening learning outcomes. Although ancient Indian traditions did not use scientific terminology, their emphasis on anubhava anticipated these insights. They recognized that the human being learns most effectively through

integrated bodily and mental participation.

In conclusion, embodied knowledge and anubhava highlight the essential role of lived experience in the process of learning. Knowledge is not merely accumulated information; it is cultivated through practice, repetition, and sensory engagement. The example of Ekalavya demonstrates how disciplined bodily practice can lead to extraordinary mastery, even in the face of exclusion. Indian philosophical traditions affirm that true understanding arises when thought is united with action and realized through direct experience. By valuing embodied learning, we move toward a more holistic, inclusive, and transformative vision of education—one that honors both the mind and the body as partners in the pursuit of knowledge.

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