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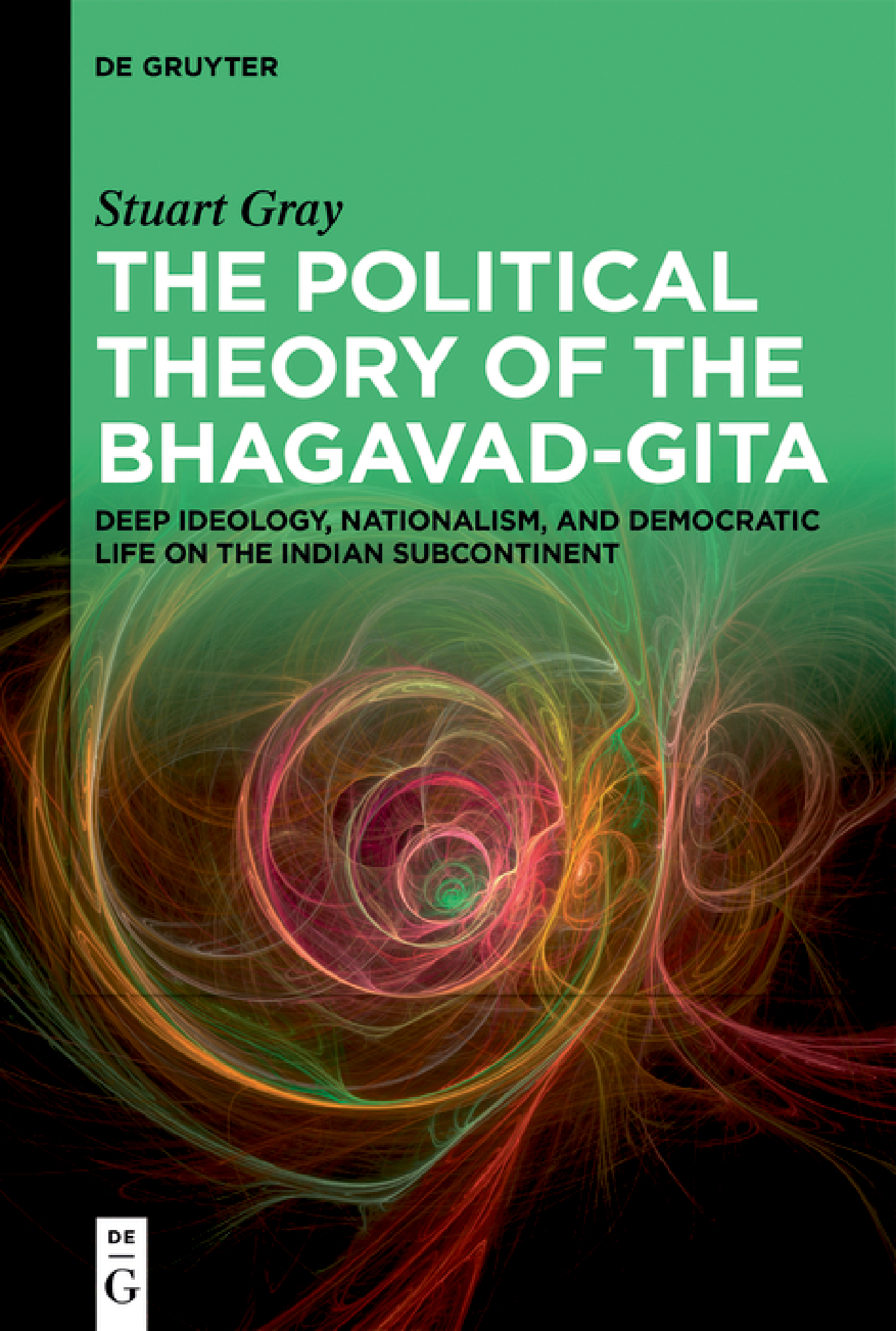
Stuart Gray

THE POLITICAL THEORY OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

DEEP IDEOLOGY, NATIONALISM, AND DEMOCRATIC LIFE ON THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT



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Introduction
Rethinking the *Bhagavad-Gītā* as Political Theory

Why is a philosophical dialogue between an incarnated godhead and an epic warrior, taking place on an ancient battlefield long ago in northern India, of interest to political theorists? How is a text from India's ancient past, which constitutes a minuscule portion of a much larger epic, one of the most globally recognized and significant texts in the history of Indian thought? Regardless of its incredible historical journey extending from its Classical composition to a contemporary political context, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (hereafter, *BhG*) remains almost entirely neglected as an essential work of Indian political theory and has failed to receive the attention it deserves in the field of political theory more generally.[1] This book aims to rectify this problem.

In the early 2000s, as a graduate student training in Indian and comparative political theory, I faced several challenges. To begin with, much of the scholarly literature in the history of Indian political thought was written in the early to mid-20th century, evidence that scholarship in this area had not significantly advanced in decades. Moreover, this literature was colored with interpretations and analyses clearly influenced by nationalist political interests of the time, especially the search for an indigenous tradition of political thinking that might distinguish India's own history from the one being created and shaped by British colonialism and Orientalism. Finally, the literature on the history of Indian political thought was incredibly expansive and one could easily find oneself swimming in broad-ranging histories that introduced a vast ocean of names, texts, and thinkers extending over millennia, without a particular argumentative thread tying it all together.[2]

The resulting lack of consistently articulated theoretical frameworks to ground scholarship in the history of Indian political thought has made it difficult to solidify scholars' understanding of important pre-modern concepts and thinkers, which have helped shape Indian political history and its own traditions of political thinking. Traditions of Indian political thought predating Britain's incursion on the sub-

1 Here I do not wish to claim the *Bhagavad-Gītā* can or must be read *solely* as a work of political theory, as it is an essential work of religious and philosophical thought within various Indic-Hindu traditions. The book's argument does not intend to exclude alternative readings, whether religious/spiritual, philosophical, or otherwise. As I will argue throughout, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*'s political theory entails a complex conceptual network of philosophical and religious ideas, showing how any political reading cannot exclude such ideas and dimensions of the text.

2 For a short summary of this literature, see Gray (2010).

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continent have remained something of a "black box" in the field of political theory, as very few political theorists in recent decades have engaged pre-modern traditions in any systematic way. One will still struggle to find books and articles written by political theorists on major pre-modern Indian thinkers and their works, including the *BhG.* One obvious reason for this neglect is the well-known Eurocentrism in the field of political theory/philosophy in western academia, and while attention to modern and contemporary Indian political thought (18th century onward) has increased gradually since the early 2000s, important pre-modern texts like the *BhG* remain sorely neglected. Put simply, for scholars of South Asian and Indian political theory to lack a proper grounding in the *BhG* and its situatedness within the epic *Mahābhārata* (hereafter, *MBh*), would be like western thinkers remaining ignorant of Plato and Aristotle.

This book is fueled by the same curiosity and impetus that drove my initial interest in the history of Indian political thought—that is, a desire to find some orientation in the vast yet underexplored field of Indian political theory understood in a more historical fashion. Regarding the present study, there are a few general questions that led me to examine Classical texts such as the *BhG*, such as: who were the major or most influential thinkers in this longer history of Indian political thought? What sorts of texts did they compose? What motivated these compositions, in response to what historical circumstances? Like many students interested in the intersection between Indian religion, philosophy, and politics, especially Hindu traditions, I found the *BhG* to inhabit a special place in the pantheon of Indian texts. To be sure, this privileged status has a complicated history itself.[3]

Nevertheless, this project begins with an even simpler question, the answer to which remains deceptively complex: what sort of political theory does the *BhG* express? What are its central meanings and messages as a work of *political theory?* I begin with the observation that while the *BhG* has been thoroughly examined as a work of religious thought, philosophy, and literature, it has not been examined primarily as a work of political theory on its own terms.[4] One of my central claims is that neglecting the *BhG* as a distinctive work of political theory is a mistake, and one with both intellectual and political consequences.

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3 For a discussion of the complicated history concerning the text's modern reception and interpretation understood in the context of British colonialism and Orientalism, see Sinha (2013) and Gray (2021).

4 This is not to say, of course, that political theorists have not examined how other (predominantly modern and contemporary) political thinkers, activists, and politicians have read or used the *BhG* and its ideas for various political purposes. For example, see eds. Kapila and Devji (2013) and Gowda (2011).

As some readers may know, a bevy of major political figures over the past 150 years have drawn upon the *BhG* for inspiration, Mahatma Gandhi among the most notable.[5] However, I find that any approach to understanding the *BhG*'s political thought must begin with a ground-clearing question hinted at above: if this text has been so influential throughout the pre- and post-colonial periods, then why has it been relatively neglected by political theorists? Put differently, why does such an important text remain opaque to a broader audience of political theorists across the globe, especially to those in the proverbial "West"? This is an incredibly broad question, and while I do not purport to provide a comprehensive answer in this Introduction, I would like to lay out a few reasons for this neglect to help set up the context and argument for the book moving forward.

Reputation: Political and Academic

A poor reputation, especially when politically charged, can be difficult to shake. Over the past 150 years, the *BhG*'s reputation has sometimes been tethered to or associated with Hindu nationalist causes of both the peaceful and militant sorts. Unfortunately, these associations have often cast the text and its main ideas in an unflattering light, especially by "modernists" who challenge those they see searching for and clinging to a problematic religious past—a past that resists modern secularism and the development of a truly democratic society.[6] On the more peaceful nationalist side, we find those such as Gandhi reading and appealing to the text during India's fight for independence, as he found both spiritual and political inspiration in the text. We also see more strident figures such as Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak and political groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) using the text to justify more militant forms of Hindu (ethnic) nationalism. In general, the *BhG*'s national and global notoriety exploded within a historical context that witnessed some of the most significant political events shaping the modern Indian state, both pre- and post-independence. Insofar as the *BhG* is viewed as a paradigmatic Hindu text and the text becomes associated with various forms of nationalism, the *BhG* can easily be framed as an ethnocentric or anti-secular text with dangerous political potential, especially in an age witnessing horrific violence perpetrated by ethnic majoritarian groups that seek to stamp a single, ex-

5 I will address what could be called the "Gandhi question" in greater detail later in this Introduction. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the importance of highlighting how political theorists have not fully marked out the more problematic and "non-liberatory" aspects of the *BhG*.
6 For example, see Parekh (1992: 542, 553).

clusivist identity onto an entire nation. As I will explain in Chapters 5 and 6, this concern is not without warrant.

Also related to this reputation is a crucial term for understanding and framing this book's analysis, namely, "Brahmanism." Associated with different sects under the diverse category of "Hinduism," Brahmanism often takes on a pejorative meaning since the term designates traditions and texts composed and passed down over generations by a socially privileged group, namely brahmins. Historically, this particular social group has claimed a divinely ordained connection to sacred texts stretching back to what would later be categorized as the earliest Hindu texts, especially the Vedic Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas. Traditional Brahmanism holds that brahmins derive their ancestral authority over sacred texts through their familial connection to ancient seers (*ṛṣi*s) who cognized the primordial blueprint of cosmic creation. These *ṛṣi*s purportedly cognized the cosmos' metaphysical makeup and brought it to an audible level of reality that could be orally transmitted among human beings. Following this cosmic revelation, generations of brahmins, especially serving in the role of sacrificial officiants for various household and political rituals, passed down sacred texts through oral transmission and eventually through the written word. This historical and familial authority over Brahmanical-Hindu texts has strongly shaped the identity and reception of texts such as the *BhG*. Due to such associations the *BhG*'s reputation is closely connected to the history of Brahmanism, a tradition that has also propounded the hierarchical system of caste. This book elaborates on this Brahmanical narrative and tells a new story about the *BhG* as it relates to Brahmanism, explicating resources for combating Brahmanism's hold on texts such as the *BhG* by exposing unforeseen or underappreciated aspects of its ideological structure. Accordingly, I explicate the ideological structure of its political theory to help undermine its ideological political force.

The *BhG*'s reputation also remains deeply intertwined with structures of Orientalism and colonialism. Locating these structures involves examining the Indian subcontinent's relationship to political entities outside itself in addition to the historical-domestic relations between Brahmanism and contending traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism. For example, on the colonialist front Brahmanism and Brahmanical legal texts such as the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* ("Manu's Code of Law") received preferential treatment by the British as the British began to establish a colonial infrastructure in India beginning in the 18th century, taking greater hold with the formal establishment and rule of the British Raj from the 19th (1858) to early 20th (1947) century. The *BhG* became a globally recognized "sacred" Hindu text due largely to forces associated with British colonialism and Orientalism of

both English and German varieties.[7] Any reading of the *BhG*'s political thought must highlight the role that British colonialism and Orientalism have played in shaping Indians' conception of their own histories of political and philosophical thought preceding the 18th century. In fact, western distinctions between pre-modernity and modernity applied on the Indian subcontinent can be viewed as a product of India's more recent interactions with foreign political oppressors, including studies by Indologists interested in making Indian religious traditions intelligible to a broader audience familiar with Semitic religions.

The second aspect of the *BhG*'s reputation that has led to its neglect in the field of political theory concerns its categorization within academic circles. The text has been primarily viewed as a religious text, and again, not without good reason. Scholars in Religious Studies, South Asian Studies, Philology, History, and Philosophy have studied the *BhG* and *MBh* in detail, but much of this work has gone unnoticed or understudied by those working in political theory. Oftentimes, the *BhG* is only viewed as distinctly political when in the hands of political thinkers or activists such as Gandhi and Tilak, or poet-nation builders such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. In this sense the text becomes political in a second-hand sort of way, with little attention being paid to a careful examination of the central political ideas and compositional context of the text itself. Contending these disciplinary distinctions and the boundary policing that helps keep them in place, I will build upon the growing work of scholars in South Asian Studies that have begun intimating how the primary text itself is deeply political, and perhaps even ideological.

Closely related to its academic categorization as a primarily religious and philosophical text, one must also consider the academic training necessary to engage the *BhG* beyond a surface level. In the field of political theory, students at the undergraduate and graduate levels in academic institutions outside India are not generally exposed to the *BhG*, or to the larger epic in which it is situated. As a result, universities and colleges in places like the United States and United Kingdom have not produced enough scholars capable of analyzing the text in depth, nor have many senior scholars trained younger scholars—whether at the undergraduate or graduate levels—to read the text in Sanskrit, analyze its political ideas accordingly, and assess the text within a pre-modern historical context. Because western history has been the dominant backdrop for academic training in political theory in countries such as the U.S., the lack of opportunities for political theorists to engage with South Asian history has actively limited the intellectual horizon for un-

7 While the German variety of Indology and Orientalism lie outside the scope of discussion here, see Pollock (1993) for an informative analysis of this topic.

derstanding texts such as the *BhG*, especially prior to its translation into English and gradual global popularization that began in the 18th century.

In recent decades projects that seek to justify a serious engagement with premodern Indian texts viewed as primarily religious or philosophical have tended to gravitate toward one of two types of programs. The first tends to focus on modern movements, such as the Indian nationalist and independence movements, or major figures such as Gandhi, that used the *BhG* for projects identified as overtly political or possessed clear contemporary relevance to a global audience.[8] A second program has focused on cross-cultural comparison between Indian and well-known western texts, often using western texts to justify (implicitly or explicitly) the engagement with Indian sources. Research fitting into this area in recent decades has often proceeded under the banner of "comparative political theory," or some like designation. Unsurprisingly, such comparative projects have benefitted from the legitimating cover granted by comparative political theory's rise in academic interest and popularity. These observations are not meant to criticize such programs *tout court* but rather to make their justifications explicit, to question them, and open new theoretical terrain in the study of Indian political theory. Admittedly, one challenge this book confronts is that it does not fit neatly into either of these programs since it focuses solely on a particular non-western text, its historical context, and its contemporary relevance to Indian politics without any legitimating comparative references to a canonical western work of political theory.

This book is part of a larger research agenda that seeks to develop Indian political theory on its own terms and using its own texts, as much as possible, without ultimate reference or justificatory comparison to major western works. However, a metaphorical "ladder" of western theory can be helpful at certain junctures to climb toward greater understanding of Indian texts. Climbing the Indian or a Brahmanical conceptual ladder remains essential, but we can set this ladder aside when it runs out of helpful steps to climb, especially for purposes of critique. Here I find it useful to supplement my analytic framework with particular western ideas and scholarship to help advance our understanding of Indian political thought. Climbing the proverbial ladder-steps requires intellectual humility on the scholar's part, knowing when to set some frameworks aside and adopt others. Building an Indian framework for understanding the history of Indian political thought may sometimes require noticing when to pivot to theories or concepts that may help one continue to climb toward a greater understanding of the texts at hand. Nevertheless, these western tools must be viewed as provisional.

8 Again, see eds. Kapila and Devji (2013) for a good example of such work.

One such tool, as I explain in the next section, is the concept of "ideology." Introducing western concepts for some analytic assistance can be useful, I argue, in theorizing ideology in Brahmanical texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG* because such theories are not present in the texts themselves. Not all traditions necessarily possess adequate internal resources for critique, especially when one moves away from the historical past and begins examining contemporary issues such as those I address involving Hindu nationalism in Chapters 5 and 6. When a tradition or text may not possess sufficient internal resources for forceful critique, external sources can be useful. That said, the Brahmanical tradition does possess some valuable tools for critiquing and even subverting other internally problematic ideas.[9] In the case I examine in the present book, however, I believe the best way to move forward now requires using some western concepts to gain critical perspective on aspects of Brahmanical thinking. This layered, intercultural approach seems helpful at the present historical juncture and something worth pursuing, even if it falls short of the ultimate goal of developing Indian political thought entirely on its own terms.

The Problem of Ideology

While a central aim of this book is to provide the first systematic reading of the *BhG*'s political theory, it will also argue that this theory is ideological in orientation. Someone might object that the Brahmanical motivations and interests driving the text and its composition are so ideological, in fact, that the *BhG* must be approached with great suspicion if not rejected outright as valuable work of political thought. This sentiment, however, represents a version of the genetic fallacy, which holds that a text's origins can provide an inherent justification for accepting or rejecting its claims and "form of consciousness." But as Raymond Geuss puts it, "Why should anything we might learn about the origin, motivation, or causal history of a form of consciousness give us (rational) grounds for rejecting it?" and while we may plausibly remain *suspicious* of a particular form of consciousness, "that doesn't in itself give us good grounds to reject the form of consciousness" (Geuss 1981: 20). Just because the *BhG* emanates from brahmins and may express their interests and worldview, which may of course remain problematic in several respects, this doesn't mean it is *necessarily* ideological in a pejorative sense, or *automatically* deserving of outright rejection as a worthwhile object of study in political theory. As Geuss also points out, only a theory or "form of conscious-

9 For example, see Gray (2020).

ness's" inappropriateness seems to provide reasonable grounds for rejecting it. Such (in)appropriateness will remain highly contextual and depend on any number of factors when considering a text's value, whether normative or otherwise. Therefore, I will not challenge the Brahmanical-Hindu ideology expressed in the *BhG* simply because of its Brahmanical origins, but rather because accepting or acting on this ideology might differentially disadvantage particular groups of people. This is what makes the theory inappropriate in its ideological form and provides us with grounds for rejecting it in the contemporary period.

Following from this, a primary aim of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 is to provide a critique that exposes a particular set of ideological illusions. For example, the Brahmanical ideology expressed in the *BhG* exhibits what I call a "will to unity" and false universalism that must be challenged because of their destructive consequences for Indian democracy. Following Geuss's analysis of two viable purposes for ideological critique, the term "ideology" used in a pejorative sense is meant to criticize a form of consciousness because "it incorporates beliefs which are [epistemically] false, or because it functions in a [normatively] reprehensible way…" (Geuss 1981: 21). As I will argue in the final chapters of the book, the *BhG*'s Brahmanical ideology is not only false, insofar as it does not communicate what it purports to communicate in the form of objective Brahmanical authority and claims as universally applicable and beneficial, but it also functions in a normatively and politically reprehensible manner, insofar as accepting some of its core claims would threaten the health of Indian democracy itself.

The critique of Brahmanical ideology advanced in this book aims to delegitimize forms of Brahmanical-Hindu repression because the *MBh* and *BhG* have played key roles in attempts to legitimize such repression. To whom, then, might this reading of the *BhG* be directed, and this critique of the text's political ideology be addressed? Firstly, it aims to clarify not only the text's central political ideas for political theorists and historians of political thought, especially those interested in South Asian traditions, but also a broader audience of non-specialists who may be interested in challenging a form of political authoritarianism on the Indian subcontinent. Aside from an academic audience, this broader audience could comprise any individuals or communities that have suffered at the hands of Hindu nationalist causes. Among this broader audience the book's analysis and argument might even possess some value for those in the Hindu ranks, especially those who would otherwise be deluded into adopting essentialist Hindutva ("Hinduness") beliefs or principles that continue to erode India's fragile democratic institutions and practices to the present day. In other words, the critical edge of this book is not only intended as a resource for oppressed groups, both real and potential, but also the would-be oppressors that might be easily swindled into adopting what I will call a "deep ideological" form of thinking. In the tradition of critical

theory, this deep ideology could be categorized as a "false consciousness" of sorts that lingers over long periods of time, promoting a political vision antithetical to a contemporary nation seeking to bolster its democratic institutions and practices. Adopting the Brahmanical-Hindu attitudes and beliefs that extend from the *BhG* into contemporary Hindu political discourse is not appropriate for Indian citizens or their political interests as democratic citizens.[10] In this regard, I attempt to show how deep into the past a contemporary ideology extends in order to expose its historical contingency, to challenge its claims to universalism, and to provide new conceptual resources for rethinking the *BhG*'s significance in contemporary society in both India and abroad. To summarize, this book seeks a critical re-reading of the *BhG*'s political thought using both conceptual and historical forms of analysis. In explicating what I call the deep ideological structures prevalent both within the text itself and contemporary Indian politics, I attempt to highlight the text's significance within the history of Indian political thought more broadly and do so in ways that allows scholars and activists alike to challenge the text's co-optation by those who would otherwise use it for political purposes corrosive to Indian democratic pluralism. To reiterate my earlier point about the genetic fallacy, this book's analysis and argument should not be understood as claiming that the *BhG* is inherently problematic as a text due to its origins. While it does express deeply ideological interests, it does not follow from this that the text's ideological elements exhaust its potential meaning(s) for any given audience, nor does the ideology limit its theoretical and normative potential to inspire new ideas and/or practices that are non-ideological in orientation.

Moreover, I will not claim that the *BhG* is somehow inherently nationalistic as a text. I will argue that the text expresses political principles that emphasize unity and political integration at the cost of embracing political plurality and civil contestation. The text's core political principles undoubtedly criticize political pluralism as valuable, and modern forms of Hindu nationalism have thus found this text to be a useful resource for their purposes. But again, it does not follow from this that some of the text's core principles, as connected to its origins and its authors'

10 Here, someone might ask what Hindu nationalists and their supporters, as a dominant political group, might gain from embracing any critique of the ideological basis of their own position, especially since the ideological acceptance by the largest number of people differentially benefits their interests. Unless such nationalists and their supporters would like to transform India into an authoritarian, ethno-nationalist state, they should be made aware and critical of the Brahmanical-Hindu ideology examined in this book. To the extent that even Hindu nationalists of various sorts claim to support Indian democracy, my project in this book should hold at least some value. Admittedly, committed Hindu theocrats are likely going to be turned off by this project. I have no qualms with this, since this is the logical consequence of critiquing any such ideology.

intentions, are exhaustive for the text's potential meaning or application in the immediate socio-political world. Here one can draw a productive cross-cultural comparison with criticism that Plato and various Platonic dialogues such as the *Republic* have received. One recalls Karl Popper's trenchant criticism of Plato and his *Republic* as totalitarian in nature. Nevertheless, more recent scholars such as Melissa Lane have found valuable resources in the same text as useful for thinking about sustainable living in times of ecological crisis (Lane 2012). Lane's book is one example among many, but the point should be clear. Any problematic authorial intentions or principles expressed in a Classical text should not resign such texts to a historical graveyard of political thought, sent out to die slowly through benign neglect or historicized irrelevance. Rather, such texts can express or possess potentially valuable normative ideas for the present, and their authors' historical intentions do not exhaust their potential value as works of political theory. Historical meaning and authorial intention should not impede us from valuing such Classical texts as works that may provide us with a better understanding of our respective histories of political thought, since they can also provide us with conceptual resources for thinking in new ways about present issues facing political communities. As such, I will argue that the *BhG* can be productively reread as an important work of political theory as well as a powerful work of political ideology. It is my contention that we can use this critical reading of the *BhG* to challenge modern and contemporary Hindu nationalists' (mis)use of the text and its epic context to fend off ideological ideas that threaten Indian democracy.

The *BhG* is a work of political theory worthy of our attention, due not only to its influence and importance within the history of Indian political thought, but also because it is a political text whose theories of metaphysics, ontology, and cosmology teach us something about how power and sovereignty can be generated from different yet mutually reinforcing conceptual frameworks that operate in an ideological fashion. In short, the *BhG* gives us a totalizing political theory as internally sophisticated as any in the history of western political thought. If one would like a contemporary hook for a broader audience, this book provides a partial explanation as to how and why the world's largest democracy is giving way at the seams. The power of totalizing worldviews and ideologies threatens the acceptance and celebration of pluralism—religious, social, political—to its very core. A careful study of the *BhG*'s political thought helps to show us how such a threat can take root and kill democratic aspirations. In this regard, the text represents not only a theory but also a timely warning for any democracy. While the *BhG* has been generally neglected as a work of political theory, one might ask: what is the text's standing within India's own traditions of political thought? Is there a reason why it has not received as much attention in recent years as texts such as Kauṭilya's infamous realist text, the *Arthaśāstra?*

Indian Political Thought and the (Non)Standing of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*

Studies examining the history of Indian political thought before the modern period almost always possess a trans-historical and expository structure, covering a vast number of traditions and texts over very long periods of time. In so doing, such studies often employ conceptual clusters—for example, theories of the origins of kingship and the state, or theories of political obligation—to tie a diverse array of texts together while attempting to construct coherent historical narratives for material authored over the course of roughly two millennia (ca. 1500 BCE–500 CE). These large-scale studies have generally failed to isolate and focus on single works of political theory, thus preventing the growth of scholarship in the history of Indian political thought. The resulting lack of development in specified debates centered around essential political ideas or concepts in particular texts has hindered our understanding of Indian political theory and key moments in its history that have spurred the production of works representing India's unique historical past. Not surprisingly, then, political theorists and historians of political thought have not provided sustained engagements with the *BhG* as a work of political theory. Rather, when examining the genre of epic political thought, particularly the *MBh*, scholars have focused on the *Śānti Parvan* (Book 12), especially the *Rājadharma-parvan* and *Āpaddharma-parvan* of Book 12. These sections contain what could be considered more familiar ideas in political theory, containing several political mythologies and didactic material concerning how to rule during times of peace and political turmoil, among other things. But again, references to the *BhG* are generally absent or conspicuously sparse in most scholarly studies of epic political thought.

Since understanding Classical Indian and Hindu political thought requires at least some understanding of the *MBh*, a brief summary of the larger epic for the unacquainted may prove useful. This book's analysis will proceed with the text as we now have it in the form of the Pune Critical Edition (eds. Sukthankar et al. 1933–1972), which helps contextualize my analysis of the *BhG.* Accordingly, I will explicate an epic conceptual framework for reading the *BhG* in Chapter 1. For purposes of introduction just about any summary of such an extensive text will never do it justice, especially since the critical edition clocks in at almost 90,000 verses, but it is nevertheless valuable to sketch out the main storyline and highlight some key junctures within the narrative to familiarize readers with the overarching structure of the epic. One way to organize a general summary of the *MBh* is to divide it into three major segments: the events leading up to and causing the major war at the heart of the epic (Books 1–5); the "battle books" that recount the events of the war, named after each successive commander

that leads the antagonist (Kaurava) forces (Books 6–9); finally, the aftermath of the protagonists' (Pāṇḍavas') victory leading to their ascent to heaven at the end of the epic (Books 10–18).

The epic begins by providing a list of its contents and genealogies of some of its chief actors, introducing the text's "author" and compiler, Vyāsa, as well as the primary narrators to whom the story has been passed (Sauti/Ugraśravas, Vaiśaṃpāyana). As the bard Sauti (or Ugraśravas) narrates the story to a brahmin community in the mythical Naimiṣa Forest, numerous sub-stories and characters abound, so I will stick to some of the essential threads in this general overview. In the first few books we work our way through family lineages and stories leading to the events causing the two major sets of actors, the righteous Pāṇḍavas led by their eldest brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, and their evil Kaurava cousins led by Duryodhana, to the cataclysmic war standing at the heart of the epic. Before the war commences the Pāṇḍavas experience two distinct exiles from political power, partly fueled by the animosity and frequent combative interchanges between themselves and the Kauravas. While efforts are made to reach a peaceable agreement between the two parties, these efforts fail and war becomes inevitable. The *BhG* is situated directly before the war, during which time the central hero, Arjuna, loses his resolve to fight and the incarnated Godhead, Kṛṣṇa, must convince Arjuna that it is his duty to engage in battle. Ten days after the war commences the grandfather figure leading the Kaurava side, Bhīṣma, is fatally injured during battle and this leads to successive generals adopting leadership roles on the Kaurava side. As the battle rages on, Arjuna eventually defeats his arch-nemesis, Karṇa, through duplicitous means following Kṛṣṇa's advice. Eventually, prince Duryodhana, who stands at the head of the Kaurava forces, falls at the hands of Bhīma-Pāṇḍava through questionable means as well. These events lead to the Kauravas' demise and the Pāṇḍavas' victory.

Following the Kauravas' defeat on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, we witness the grief and lamentations of bereaved women surviving the male combatants (Book 11). The twelfth book comprises the fallen Bhīṣma's kingly advice to the eldest brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, to relieve Yudhiṣṭhira's grief so that he will assume the role of a righteous king over the contested kingdom of Hāstanipura. Bhīṣma's discourse outlines key elements of proper ruling, including the various duties of a king, counsels on morality and the nature of good governance, and proper conduct in times of calamity. These counsels help pacify Yudhiṣṭhira's grief following the incredibly destructive war and lead to his rule as king for 36 years before he and his brothers relinquish political power, retreating from the world and ascending to the heavenly realm in Book 18.

It is also helpful to say something about the epic's authorship as it relates to the text's internal conception of history. The epic's author, Vyāsa, is portrayed as

a participant-witness of the figures and events that he narrates within the text's storyline. Vyāsa therefore serves as a major character-witness to the events within the story he narrates to other figures, who in turn narrate the epic's events to readers beginning in Book 1 (namely, Sauti/Ugraśravas and Vaiśaṃpāyana). This authorial positioning highlights two distinct conceptions of history that frame my analysis moving forward: etic and emic.[11] Following Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, an etic idea of history takes an "outside perspective such as is generally adopted by modern historians, archeologists, and philologists," versus an idea of history "that is traditional and conforms to concepts developed within the ambient culture of the text itself" (eds. Goldman and Goldman 2021: 34). As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 1, the text's own conception of history is inherently cyclical and provides the proper context in which to situate an emic reading of the *BhG*'s political theory on its own terms. The present book's chapters can also be read along this etic/emic distinction, with the Introduction and Chapters 4–6 following an etic approach to the text, while Chapters 1–3 take an emic approach.

I do this for the following reasons. To start, one might ask whether any non-native interpreters of the text could help employing their own temporal categories and analytic lenses—e.g., a linear conception of etic time and conceptual tools such as ideology critique—to unfairly impose these on pre-modern Indian texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG.* Scholars would rightly suppose that such texts possess their own categories and concepts appropriate for understanding their traditions of religious and political thinking. In response to such concerns, by making this etic/emic distinction and parsing my analysis and arguments accordingly, I can offer an analysis of the *BhG* on its own terms by explicating its cyclical conception of time and conceptual context within the emic framework of the larger *MBh* (Chapters 1–3), on the one hand, yet also bring critical-analytic tools to bear from a western tradition capable of identifying ideological elements within the text and explaining how these bear on present circumstances in Indian politics through an etic lens (Chapters 4–6), on the other hand.

With this summary in tow, one can identify at least two reasons why the *MBh* has been neglected by political theorists in recent decades, even as the field has increasingly expanded beyond the study of western traditions of political thought. The first has to do with the epic's formidable size and complexity. Comprising eighteen books and almost 90,000 verses in the Pune Critical Edition, the *MBh* resists quick summaries and presents a multiplicity of philosophical and theological

11 For a helpful summary of this distinction as it applies to both epics (*Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*), see eds. Goldman and Goldman (2021).

frameworks that do not always sit in coherent relationship to one another. Sometimes considered to be more of an encyclopedia than a singular work, this epic is notoriously difficult to treat as the unified work of a particular authorial hand, or even a set of hands. These basic facts make traditional approaches to the *MBh* as a single, unified work difficult for any political theorist. A second reason for the epic's neglect relates to increasing scholarly interest in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* in recent decades, which has been cross-culturally designated as a realist political treatise comparable to Machiavelli's *The Prince.* With the growth of comparative political theory, this comparison has done wonders for drawing greater attention to the *Arthaśāstra.* Moreover, this text has become relatively low-hanging fruit for those interested in locating pre-modern texts that could be neatly slotted into the category of "political theory" or "political philosophy." While scholarship on the *Arthaśāstra* has advanced significantly in recent years,[12] the *MBh* and *BhG* require greater attention if we are to better understand this incredibly important period of political thought in ancient India stretching from about 400 BCE–400 CE, during which time we can situate the composition of texts such as the *Arthaśāstra* and *Dharmaśāstra*s.

Although some scholars have overlooked the importance of this epic in the pre-modern history of Indian political thought almost entirely,[13] most working in this area have treated the *Śānti Parvan* as the paradigmatic political treatise within the epic and have spent very little or no attention to the *BhG* as a political text.[14] Within these large-scale studies one will find very few if any references to the *BhG.* For example, Charles Drekmeier (1962: 136) claims "the *Shantiparva* is the major source of political commentary in the *Mahabharata*," and in what could be considered the most comprehensive of these historical studies of pre-modern political thought, U. N. Ghoshal (1966) echoes Drekmeier's sentiment by claiming pre-eminence for Bhīṣma's discourses in the *Śānti Parvan.* Ghoshal focuses on what he calls the "major didactic extracts," especially topics of *rājadharma* (duties of a king or ruler) and *daṇḍanīti* (science of ruling or "wielding the rod" of punishment) covered in the *Śānti Parvan*, which he argues represent a blending of canonical *Smṛti* (e. g. the *Mānava-* and *Yājñavalkya-Dharmaśāstra*s) and *Arthaśāstra* principles (1966: 188–189). Ghoshal goes on to claim, "by far the most important of these didactic pieces are comprised in the first two sections of the *Śāntiparvan* entitled 'the section on royal duties' (*rājadharma*) and 'the section on duties in

12 For example, see McClish (2019) and transl. Olivelle (2013).

13 See Law (1960 [1921]), Saletore (1963), and Sharmasastry (1967).

14 For example, see: Altekar (1958); Bandyopadhyaya (1980); Bhandarkar (1988 [1925]); Bowles (2007); Drekmeier (1962); Ghoshal (1966); Jauhari (1968); Jayaswal (1967); Scharfe (1989); Sinha (1938); Spellman (1964).

times of distress' (*āpaddharma*)" (188). In sum, the *Śānti Parvan* has been treated as the political treatise *par excellence* within the *MBh*, leaving the *BhG* comparably neglected as an essential expression of core political ideas seen throughout the epic.

Over-emphasizing the *Śānti Parvan*'s importance gives rise to three problematic impressions, each of which prevents readers from appreciating the political significance of alternative portions of the epic. First, focusing on the *Śānti Parvan* can give the impression that Bhīṣma's kingly advice to Yudhiṣṭhira (the eldest of the five Pāṇḍava brothers) is the paradigmatic expression of the *MBh*'s political thinking in general. While Bhīṣma's advice is undoubtedly central to elements of Classical Brahmanical thought, his discourses on kingship are more straightforward from an interpretive standpoint, whereas the political ideas embedded in the *BhG* are more cryptic yet equally important to the ideological strain of Brahmanical thought that pervades the epic. Second, Bhīṣma's advice can suggest that Yudhiṣṭhira best represents the monarchical model of epic thought. While there is a plausible argument in favor of this interpretation, I will disagree with this suggestion, arguing that Kṛṣṇa represents a superior political model when it comes to unified forms of rule. Third, and following from the previous point, the existing literature diverts the reader's attention from viewing Kṛṣṇa as a central political figure, which then leads to a consistent underestimation of Brahmanical ideology's role in the epic's political thought. A closer examination of the *BhG* helps address this issue. These emphases on the *Śānti Parvan* and Bhīṣma's advice to Yudhiṣṭhira can easily lead us to overlook the centrality of ideological principles expressed in the *BhG*, which, if properly acknowledged and unpacked, can further show us how the epic and *BhG* remain relevant in contemporary Indian politics.

Perhaps most importantly, no political theorist has offered a systematic reading of Kṛṣṇa as an important political figure and monarchical model. My reading of Kṛṣṇa remains essential for locating and outlining the Brahmanical ideology expressed in the *BhG.* In contrast, scholars generally interpret Kṛṣṇa firmly within a religious or philosophical-theological register, emphasizing his theological status as an incarnation of the Supreme Godhead. In Chapter 3, I will argue that overlooking Kṛṣṇa's political status prevents readers from appreciating Brahmanical political ingenuity and their ability to cloak Kṛṣṇa's ideological meaning behind seemingly benign theological and philosophical doctrines.

Developing Indian Political Theory: The Case of Mahatma Gandhi and Role of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*

Aside from the reasons already mentioned above for taking the *BhG* seriously as a work of political theory, we should also do so to develop Indian political theory more generally. Text-specific studies of important works in Indian political thought are necessary for developing India's own traditions of political thought and action, especially in ways that consider the past in conjunction with present concerns.

To highlight the stakes of such concerns, I outline the case of Mahatma Gandhi and his interpretive usage of the *BhG* in a modern context. As is well known, the *BhG* played a large role in Gandhi's life as he became increasingly interested in how the text could be understood for both spiritual and political purposes, which were not separate in his mind. While his knowledge of the text was relatively limited leading up to the 1920s, at his Satyagraha Ashram (Ahmedabad) in 1926 he delivered a series of interpretive talks on the *BhG*, translating from Sanskrit to his native Gujarati and working through each chapter of the text to explain the *BhG*'s significance for his audience (Gandhi 1926; ed. Strohmeier 2009). In John Strohmeier's Introduction to *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, he notes how Gandhi refers to the *BhG* as a spiritual reference book, reading it as an allegorical duel "that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind," including how the *BhG* represented an inherent inner strife between good and evil (2009: xvi–xvii, 3). As I will explain in greater detail in Chapters 2–4, this reading of the *BhG* as a globally universal and transhistorical text applicable to all mankind is part of the authors' intentional (ideological) design. For Gandhi, the *BhG* is meant for humanity at large, explaining how "with every age the important words will carry new and expanded meanings" (xxiv). As we shall see, he could not be more correct in making this claim. Coincidently, on Gandhi's reading the *BhG* communicates that each human being is an avatar of God, eliding the distinction between individual, inner selves (*ātman*s) and the Supreme Being (54). He further references the category of temporality, which will play a large role in my analysis of the *BhG*, stating that human beings still inhabit the fourth and most morally decrepit age (Kali-Yuga) within the incredibly long, cyclical conception of time that contextualizes the political thought of the *BhG* more generally (55, 166). This cyclical temporality is a key component of the deep ideological structure I explicate within both the *MBh* and *BhG.* Relevant for our examination of the socio-political stakes of the *BhG*'s political theory, Gandhi references the fourfold *varṇa* (social group ~ caste) structure, remarking favorably on the perennial nature of *varṇa*-distinctions as they pertain to different people's social roles within society at large (59–60). These *varṇa* or traditional Brahmanical-Hindu social group designations represent yet another crucial element of the *BhG*'s expressed political ideology. Finally, Gan-

dhi highlights the importance of the devotional element of the text, and more specifically, how Kṛṣṇa is "right knowledge personified" and that faithful devotees of the text could become "like unto God through a process of self-realization (with)in the Supreme Godhead," claiming that the *BhG* was the most excellent means for attaining self-realization (xviii). Here Gandhi foregrounds the text's symbolism, claiming that we should "identify ourselves with Arjuna and have faith that Shri Krishna is driving our chariot," showing how Gandhi merges the individual with the universal through the divine figure of Kṛṣṇa and claims universal applicability that places Kṛṣṇa (as the avatar of the Supreme Godhead) in charge and ruling over each person and the world at large (16, 109, 113).[15]

As others have noted, Gandhi's commentary on the *BhG* is considered among the most important of the 20th century, which includes commentaries by those such as B. G. Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, and Sarvepalli Radakrishnan (xi). Faisal Devji further mentions how the *BhG* had been an important text for modern Hinduism since the 19th century, especially among nationalists and religious reformers such as Vivekananda, Tilak, and Aurobindo (2012: 104). Clearly, the *BhG* stands as highly influential within a modern Indian context, both pre- and post-independence. Not only has this text been influential, but much of this influence has been framed as positive or at least politically effective in nature, serving as a resource for helping Indian figures to better understand and develop India's own traditions of spiritual and political thought.

On Erik H. Erikson's psychoanalytic reading of Gandhi's conception of truth and the origins of militant nonviolence, the *BhG* helped Gandhi make sense of earlier life experiences, explaining how Gandhi recognized in the *BhG* a "grammar of action" that was politically efficacious (1969: 161–162). Devji corroborates this interpretation, arguing that the text helped Gandhi interpret the meaning of action in light of materiality, freedom, and morality, but also that the *BhG* served as an essential resource for Gandhi in legitimating or grounding a conception of authority; for example, Devji claims "its reading allowed Gandhi to pose authority itself as a question for all action," since "the text seems to have functioned as an authority alternative to that of politics seen in the traditional terms of *artha* or power" (2012: 102, 104). Important for the argument I will advance in the book, Devji highlights how the *BhG* helps Gandhi reconceive the relationship between the inner, individual, and spiritual realm from the outer, collective, and political realm:

15 See also Gandhi's interpretation of *BhG* 4.15: "The seekers of *moksha* [liberation from cycle of death and rebirth] in old days knew this truth and worked in such a spirit. To realize God means to work like God, with single-minded devotion and ceaseless vigilance. Though living in the human body, we should imitate God as much as possible" (61).

> [F]or the *Bhagavad-Gita* was not meant to be something inner or spiritual as juxtaposed with the outer or material world of the state. Indeed we shall see with Gandhi that morality addressed the politics of the state precisely by undoing these divisions of inner and outer, spiritual and material, which were all products of the latter's [i. e. the state's] modernity. (104)

This "undoing of divisions," as I will examine in Chapters 2 and 3, makes interpretive sense partly because of the text's ideological conceptual framework. I show how *BhG*'s political theory allows Gandhi to conceptualize and then eliminate the temporal boundary conditions set by the modern state, which envisages the fundamental divisions that Devji enumerates. In short, Gandhi's interpretation of the *BhG* is made plausible due to the text's intended design and the authors' ideological motivations.

As a corollary to these readings, political theorists have consistently drawn attention to the progressive and/or liberatory potential packed into Gandhi's political thought, partly influenced by his engagement with the *BhG.* As Veena Howard has commented, "Many Gandhi scholars refer to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* as a philosophical blueprint for Gandhi's ascetic activism … [and] Gandhi himself claimed that he derived his political, ethical, and renunciative ideas from the *Bhagavad-Gītā*" (2013, 41),[16] thus highlighting how scholars often privilege the *BhG*'s more positive or politically efficacious influences on Gandhi. Examples of such scholarship and influences include: Anthony Parel showing how Gandhi found support for progressive economic principles regarding work/labor (2008: 56); Howard arguing how the *BhG* influenced Gandhi's practice of *brahmacarya* [celibacy] within the political arena, which helped integrate ascetic practices with this-worldly aspirations of creating political unity among Indians and acquiring freedom from foreign domination (2013: 5, see also 40 – 49); Sanjay Palshikar showing how the *BhG* provided useful ideas for Gandhi regarding the balance of martial ideals associated with the *kṣatriya* (warrior *varṇa*/social group) and ideals of self-control associated with brahmins, along with the effacement of the ego more generally (2016: 414, 419); Farah Godrej identifying the *BhG*'s role in helping Gandhi develop ascetic practices of self-care accompanied by tactics for disrupting political injustices (2017: 914). Each of these studies supplies important insights into how Gandhi drew sustenance from the *BhG* for his political projects. As Howard nicely summarizes, Gandhi's interpretation of the *BhG* played an essential role in helping him develop a robust conceptual framework of ascetic activism, allowing him to attach new (often politicized) meanings to religious concepts drawn from the *BhG*'s religious and philosophical vocabulary (2013: 49). In fact, an entire edited volume has been

16 Here Howard cites Anthony Parel's claim that "the *Gita* was the single most important influence on his life" (Parel 2006: 180).

dedicated to examining the varying roles the *BhG* had played in modern Indian politics, with multiple chapters focusing on or highlighting the text's influence on Gandhi's thought and political effectiveness (eds. Kapila and Devji 2013). In sum, Gandhi's leadership role in the Indian independence movement, combined with the inspiration he drew from the *BhG*, has led to a narrative that tends to frame the text and its political life in modern India in a largely positive light.[17]

What often goes underappreciated is the more deleterious side of the *BhG*'s influence not only on Gandhi but also within modern and contemporary politics more broadly. While Chapters 5 and 6 will focus on the latter, here I simply wish to highlight the more problematic aspects of the "Gandhi question" as it pertains to the *BhG*, some of which foreshadows my analysis and critique in forthcoming chapters. The *BhG*'s political theory and its influence on both Gandhi and modern Indian politics more broadly may not be as positive, or at least as benign, as is often suggested in the scholarly literature. For example, Thomas Hughes and I have shown how Gandhi's political thought and the *BhG*'s influences gesture toward a "devotional" mode of political thinking with strong theistic strands—some of which are anchored in favorable references to a unitary, "monarchical" form of rule in Kṛṣṇa (and sometimes Rāma)—that stand in tension with liberal and democratic ideals (Gray and Hughes 2015). Relevant to my ideological reading and above reference to Devji's interpretation, we explain how Gandhi's reading of the *BhG* strongly influenced his political stance and is not primordially a public or civic matter but rather an activity that begins in the *ātman*, self, or soul, and thus dissolves modern liberal distinctions between the public and private sphere (Gray and Hughes 2015: 392). His devotional thought is also committed to a metaphysical Truth claim, often conceived along theistic lines, whereby "ruling begins with a devotional turn inward [not a democratic turn outward with acknowledgement of deep and legitimate political pluralism] and requires that the higher parts of ourselves rule over the lower parts" (392). Chapters 2 and 3 will systematically unpack this crucial element of the *BhG*'s political theory. In sum, we have reasons to be deeply skeptical not only of Gandhi's reading and use of the *BhG*, but also wary of essential ideas contained within the text itself. Without saying too much too far in advance about my analysis and central arguments, I would simply state: the *BhG* is not necessarily a liberatory text and contains an ideological conceptual framework that must be investigated in more depth than has been done within the existing scholarly literature in political theory.

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17 This is not to suggest, however, that Indian nationalists of the more militant varieties did not similarly employ ideas drawn from the *BhG* to justify acts of violence.

Moving beyond the case of Gandhi's use of the *BhG* in developing a modern tradition of political thought and action, at the time of writing this book we are over thirty years removed from the publication of Bhikhu Parekh's landmark essay titled, "The Poverty of Indian Political Theory" (1992). In this essay Parekh advances several points of continuing significance, and many of Parekh's observations remain crucial for contextualizing the present study of the *BhG*'s political theory and its potential contribution to Indian political theory more broadly. First and foremost, taking Indian political theory seriously requires a more sustained engagement with the *history* of Indian political thought. A key presupposition of this book is that future modes of Indian political theorizing should be informed by a more rigorous understanding of a longer history of Indian political thought, both Hindu and non-Hindu alike, a point that Parekh advances rather convincingly. This key assumption in western academic political theory regarding the need to understand longer histories has not been extended to the case of India. In this instance, as Parekh explains, "Since no state can be detached from the culture of the majority community, the independent Indian state had from its very beginning a distinct Hindu ethos," which includes the "national motto" of *satyameva jayate* (truth alone wins), the colors of the national flag, and India's constitution equating India with *Bharat*, among other things" (1992: 541). In other words, understanding modern Indian politics suggests that scholars better understand some of the deeper historical and cultural sources informing what Parekh calls the "distinct Hindu ethos" of India's ethno-religious majority population.

One of Parekh's central concerns in the essay is to highlight the lack of ongoing conversation in Indian political theory that would allow the field to advance on several fronts. For example, he explains how

> Indian political theorists often do not take each other's work seriously enough to comment on it, as the questions raised and the concepts developed by one scholar are not generally taken up by others. As a result, there is no co-operative engagement in a shared form of inquiry, and as yet no sign of the development of an Indian tradition of political theory. (545)

While some of Parekh's concerns have been increasingly addressed in recent decades, I am most interested here in what Parekh identifies as a "shared form of inquiry." I intend to both answer and amplify Parekh's call for such inquiry, especially one centered around pre-modern Indian political thought, which might inform modern and contemporary studies of Indian concepts, thinkers, and texts. To be clear, at stake here is a historical form of inquiry that accounts for pre-colonial ideas and traditions. Parekh also makes an excellent point in explaining how the Indian struggle for independence involved many Indian writers and activists taking considerable interest in Classical India, its ideas, and its institutions (548).

For independence writers, understanding the history of Indian political thought was both aspirational *and* inspirational. Parekh explains that these attempts at developing an intelligible account of a long-forgotten past helped to lay the foundations of a new and important discipline of the history of Indian ideas and institutions (548). Above I contended that this literature in the history of Indian political thought has over-emphasized some portions of the epic *MBh* at the cost of attending to other, equally important sections, but I wholeheartedly agree with Parekh that such inquiries must be revived and undertaken with renewed vigor and theoretical sophistication.

Such undertakings, I will argue, must account for political ideas expressed in the *MBh*, and the *BhG* provides a particularly useful place to start our inquiries due to its shorter length and representative sample of concepts and structures throughout the *MBh.* Relatedly, Parekh follows his earlier points by saying that "with very few exceptions there are no new books on classical Indian political thought. Kautilya's *Arthasastra* is the only text on which some work continues to be done. … No attempt has been made to reconstruct and produce scholarly editions of scores of ancient Hindu, Jain and Buddhist texts on politics" (548). As I have already intimated and will explain in greater detail below, the most significant developments and changes in this trend have taken place in disciplines and fields outside Political Science, especially in South Asian and Religious Studies. As a subfield of Political Science, political theory/philosophy has traditionally been the area undertaking deeper historical examinations of thinkers and texts from the past, so it is appropriate that political theorists interested in South Asia pay greater attention to this past. Therefore, this book addresses Parekh's concerns by providing the first systematic study of the *BhG*'s political theory, and does so with an eye toward history.

Here one might object that reviving studies in the history of Indian political thought, especially texts that are as religiously and politically charged as the *BhG*, represents what Parekh calls a "reactionary" force that has been fighting against efforts to modernize and secularize Indian culture and politics. To be sure, historical studies that value understanding the past can problematically valorize this past. For example, Parekh explains how Indian civilization has a deeply religious core and that many "secular-minded Indians have felt that they cannot be truly secular unless they reject their past, and that they must choose between their past and future" (542). This is a credible concern. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will explain how such feelings, while understandable, can easily lead to a false choice between outright rejection or naïve valorization. In other words, one need not feel like this is a zero-sum game, or that one must choose a static vision of either the past *or* the future. The past can help us better understand what is happening in the present, which can help us think more dynamically about where we might go or choices we

might make as we venture into an undetermined future. This book is not intended to be employed as a weapon for obscurantist or conservative religious causes, or political causes associated with Hindu nationalism. Studies such as mine, if argued in the vein that I am attempting, are not intended to support blind or overly apologetic forms of Hindu revivalism but rather critical forms of understanding to inform present and future political decisions. After all, what could it mean to revive something from the distant past that is already (literally) dead and gone anyhow? Understanding modern India's political "DNA," so to speak, requires serious engagement with the past, and neglecting the *BhG* and its religious or ideological impact on Indian politics will not negate this impact but only allow it to flourish, unchallenged by informed critique. We cannot simply wish away the impact and meaning of Classical works such as the *MBh*, *BhG*, or *Rāmāyaṇa.* We should also not assume that those identifying as Hindu will accept a wholesale rejection of their past, its traditions, and some of the texts that anchor these traditions—no matter how problematically they are employed in contemporary discourse. In short, this "modernist" versus "revivalist" debate can easily lead to a destructive impasse that benefits neither camp.

The concerns expressed by what Parekh calls the "modernist" and secularist camps remain timely. For example, he lists "caste and communal conflicts, battles surrounding the Hindu Code Bill, demands for linguistic reorganization of the country, anti-cow slaughter agitation, and so on" as evidence of powerful reactionary forces that one could argue have only gained steam with the political rise of the BJP since Parekh's article was first published (554). He goes on to say that such reactionary movements have made modernists nervous and intensified their fears for India's survival as a cohesive, progressive, and I would add, democratically pluralist, polity (554). This anxiety and fear have not facilitated as much open dialogue as one would hope. The modernist distrust of such reactionary and conservative forces has instigated countermoves on the Hindu Right and among Hindu nationalists, who may be driven by a sort of resentment of such modernist forces in the modernists' desire to reject India's past. One immediate lesson both sides could glean from engaging the *BhG* is that such conflicts, if not openly and civilly debated, are likely to end in conflict and potential violence. The modernists' project of breaking entirely with the past may have poured fuel on the fire, and the reactionary resentment with those wishing to make this break has fueled further animosity. Rather than leading to a situation where both ships are passing each other in the night, it seems as if they have both drawn their guns and are more than willing to shoot across the bows in broad daylight. These circumstances suggest another way in which the *BhG* could be valuable for both Indian politics and developing Indian political theory.

The historical past always weighs—sometimes more, sometimes less—upon present circumstances. In the Indian case, this history has led to contending positions of modernist skepticism and attempts to break entirely from the past by pushing it into a historical dustbin, on the one hand, and a reactionary position that can easily romanticize and over-valorize the past, on the other. In turn, this rejection of the past has alienated and angered the reactionary camp and led them to push back even harder, leading to the modernist camp pushing back even more forcefully. One could think of this as a cyclical "push/pull" effect that exacts increasingly strong, escalating reactions from both sides and leads to protracted conflict. Sadly enough, this scenario also describes the story of the *MBh* that leads to the precipitous situation on the battlefield and fuels the *BhG*'s dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. In Chapter 1, this situation represents what I call the "cyclical" structure of the *MBh* and *BhG*, which posits history as impacting present circumstances in a recurring cyclical fashion, thus leading to a waxing/waning of power between contending parties and continued distrust and violence. Lesson? Those who wish to *push* the past into obscurity, while focusing solely on the future, underestimate the effects of this past on the present and the value the past might have for the opposing party. This stands in contrast to those who wish to *pull* the past into the present as a way of grounding some cultural identity or political move for power, underestimating the effects that past wrongs or ideologies have had on the present. Undoubtedly, these past ideologies justify a deep suspicion of the past's value for both the present and the future. The tragic irony is that this structural description of the "modernist/reactionary" debate also describes core elements of the Kaurava/Pāṇḍava conflict that drives the epic's drama and eventual violence. Revisiting both the epic and the *BhG* within it can therefore help us clarify and rethink the stakes and potential outcomes of present conflicts, hopefully inspiring both sides to craft alternative routes for India's political future. This would represent one way in which a historical-conceptual study of the *BhG* could help develop Indian political theory, and theory could, in turn, help address real political conflict.[18]

I have already hinted at the dangers of Hindu nationalism and the succor they might draw from a text such as the *BhG*, but Parekh provides one final observation that proves useful for explaining why the *BhG* should be engaged directly as a work of political theory. Although Parekh's statement was based on his observations leading up to the early 1990s, the following remains presciently descriptive

18 This is not to say that the epic should be understood to frame or exhaust the entirety of India's history or some of its most dramatic historical junctures. Rather, the *MBh* and *BhG* simply provide one useful resource for reflective, critical thinking on the past's relationship to the future.

of ongoing scholarship since that time: "Since most Indian political theorists are not … exploring their past, we might ask what they are doing. … First, considerable work … has been and is being done on specific nationalist leaders, or on the development and structure of nationalist thought in general" (1992: 548). That is to say considerable attention has been paid to nationalist leaders, and scholars such as Nagappa Gowda (2011) have explored the *BhG*'s impact on nationalist thought in some detail. However, this attention has focused on nationalism and not necessarily on *Hindu* nationalism, which is a gap I intend to help fill in Chapters 5 and 6. More generally, however, this emphasis on how political leaders have been inspired by or have drawn upon the *BhG* for various purposes has led scholars to overlook the primary text itself. Parekh likewise observes that "it seems the preoccupation with the recent past is beginning to generate interest in the pre-modern past and in general methodological problems raised by the study of the past" (1992: 549). He is correct on both counts, but the first has not generated the level of scholarship that he might have predicted. This book takes such observations seriously, examining the *BhG*'s pre-nationalist history and the context that generated the *BhG*'s composition in the first place. I argue that this history can inform how we understand not only this text's more recent role in nationalist discourse, but also Hindu nationalist discourse and ideological thinking on the part of the Hindu Right. As far as methodological challenges are concerned, this study follows the theoretical approach I have defended in my earlier studies of early Indian political thought, which entails explicating a text's political theory through a careful examination of the text's own categories, concepts, and terminology, informed as much as possible by the historical context surrounding the text's authorship and its authors' intentions (Gray 2010; 2016; 2017).

How, then, does a book-length study of the *BhG* contribute to the development of Indian political theory? Firstly, it provides scholars with the first systematic examination of the *BhG* as a work of political theory, explicating its core political concepts and meaning. In doing so, this study enhances not only our understanding of Classical and epic political thought, especially as expressed in the *MBh*, but also explains how the *BhG*'s Brahmanical authors developed their thinking in the post-Vedic period when heterodox traditions (e. g., Buddhist and Jain) emerged and challenged brahmins' traditional religious and political privileges. This historical knowledge provides a better understanding of developments in political thinking in the centuries leading up to and following the start of the Common Era, including the political conflicts between traditional Brahmanism and contending philosophies of Buddhism and Jainism, among other *śramanic* or renunciatory traditions. In doing so, this study provides us deeper historical knowledge of both synchronic (continuity) and diachronic (change) developments in ancient Indian political thought between the late Vedic period (ca. 650 BCE) and Mauryan Empire (322 –

184 BCE), extending up to the reign of the Guptas (ca. 320–500 CE). Relatedly, following Parekh's observations, this study helps resuscitate a historical form of inquiry that pursues a better understanding of important developments in pre-modern Indian political thought. Secondly, this former goal is not intended as a reactionary move against what Parekh has called the modernist camp, which is understandably skeptical of reviving pre-modern texts and potentially archaic ideas that might hinder democratic progress. Rather, this study of the *BhG* is meant to help adjudicate disputes between the modernist and reactionary camps by showing how the past remains an important area of study when it comes to Indian politics and political theory. I attempt to achieve this aim while retaining a healthy skepticism of this past, partly by exposing a distinctly ideological strain of thought that extends from the Classical to the modern and contemporary periods. In other words, both sides have important points to make that the other side must hear and take seriously, and recognition of this fact can (hopefully) assist both modern skeptics and romantic reactionaries engage in civil dialogue about the role of the pre-modern past in Indian political theory and political life more broadly. Finally, a detailed study of the *BhG* clarifies how an early form of Indian political theorizing operates ideologically and does so both within the context of its composition *and* trans-historically, extending into the contemporary period.

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* and Epic Context: Toward a Political Reading

While academic political theory has generally neglected Classical Indian traditions, disciplines such as South Asian and Religious Studies have not. One discernible trend in recent decades has been an increasing interest in the political circumstances and historical context that generated epics such as the *MBh*, including the *BhG.* Scholars in disciplines outside Political Science have been focusing more intently on political readings and themes in the epic, and this section will highlight scholarship that has helped make examinations of the *BhG*'s political theory more attainable within an epic context. Although some of these scholars have examined aspects of the political thought expressed in the *MBh* and *BhG*, none of them have explicated a systematic political theory found within the text itself, which is a central aim of the present book. Nonetheless, the following scholars' work has proved invaluable in advancing our knowledge of political circumstances and historical context that drove the epic's composition.

On the historical front, Johannes Bronkhorst has authored a series of studies examining developments in Brahmanism before and after the start of the Common Era (2007; 2011; 2016). Some of his general findings and arguments are useful for

our purposes here. To begin with, he argues that during the early centuries before the beginning of the Common Era, Brahmanism was pushed to reinvent itself, which generated a new form of Brahmanism as "a socio-political ideology in which Brahmins claimed for themselves the highest position in society" (2017a: 364).[19] Importantly, Brahmanism as a socio-political ideology signaled a transition from its Vedic sacrificial roots, which had centered around elaborate sacrificial-ritual performances carried out by priests for the benefit of rulers. In this transition, Brahmanism turned both inward so that ritual became a largely individual affair,[20] and outward to appeal to a broader audience of non-brahmins (362, 364). As Bronkhorst states, the *MBh* and *Rāmāyaṇa* epics are composed during this "outward turning" period as attempts to engage a larger audience beyond kings or rulers. Second, this ideological pivot was one of adaptation and survival, as Brahmanism encountered alternative renunciate traditions and doctrines of rebirth and karmic retribution, which had not been part of the previous Vedic tradition (363, 366). According to Bronkhorst, doctrines of rebirth and karmic retribution had emerged and became widespread in Greater Magadha, a land to the east of where the Vedic tradition had originated. With the rise of the Mauryan Empire—of which Magadha was the seat and center of political power in the northeast—the diminishing privilege of brahmins had stirred some of them to adopt versions of this karmic doctrine and subsume it in ways that would help them re-instantiate their former historical and cultural political advantages (362; Bronkhorst 2015, 5–6; 2017b, 575–585). Related to doctrines of cyclical rebirth, Bronkhorst also claims that Brahmanism adapted a cyclical vision of the history of the universe from Greater Magadha, which is a claim I will elaborate upon in my own analysis in later chapters of the book (2017a: 366–367).

Specifically, brahmins re-worked elements of karmic philosophy to help them defend the centrality of the four-*varṇa* social system (brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*), which was key for reestablishing their hierarchical position in society (Bronkhorst 2015: 6). In a paper explaining the contemporary relevance of the *BhG*, Bronkhorst argues that this reworking of karmic theory to support action in the world was essential for explaining to Arjuna why he must fight in the war: "Rather than leaving society [as a renunciate, in order to escape the cycle of rebirth], the person who looks for liberation should *stay* right in it and concentrate on his or her duties in society. The *Bhagavadgītā* [therefore] arrives at this message on the basis of the same theoretical assumptions that induced others to

19 See also Bronkhorst (2017b).

20 For example, we see the emergence of texts such as the Gṛhyasūtras, which concentrated on domestic ritual applicable to members of the twice-born (*dvija*) social groups (Bronkhorst 2017a, 364).

leave society" (6). Bronkhorst follows this by saying that Brahmanism was primarily an ideology about society, in which an established hierarchy of four social groups was claimed as essential for socio-political order, extending up to the cosmic level (6 – 7). As we will see in Chapter 2, disinterestedly fulfilling the duties associated with one's social group then becomes a key aspect of the Brahmanical ideology in the *BhG*. In sum, brahmins depict *varṇa-dharma* (duty associated with one's social group) as a natural and eternal scaffolding for ethics and society, which, when properly followed, allows for liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. These social duties anchored the Brahmanical conception of rule and offered a theoretical articulation of social ethics applicable to everyone in society. The *BhG*'s political theory was therefore both explanatory and normative in nature, telling people how and why the world operated the way it did, further providing a path to spiritual liberation. Building on Bronkhorst's work, in Chapter 1, I argue that this ideological system is deeply intertwined with a broader cosmology and conception of time, which elaborate a totalizing, self-reinforcing framework for Brahmanical ideology. While Bronkhorst's historical work remains invaluable for advancing our knowledge of how Brahmanical modes of thinking changed and adapted over the centuries preceding and following the start of the Common Era, further work remains to be done in theorizing this ideology that he locates as historically emergent within the centuries preceding the Common Era.

Moving from history to translations of the *BhG*, I would like to note two relatively recent translators, both of which invoke important themes pertaining to my analysis. Kees Bolle's commentary on the text, included in his translation that was published in 1979, helps to explain why the *BhG* remains an essential object of study, claiming that most Indians recognize the *BhG* as part of *sanātanadharma*, the eternal lore of Hinduism. Bolle goes so far as to say: "All interpreters of Hinduism would agree that the Bhagavadgītā can be compared in importance to the New Testament in the History of the West" (224). Like many scholars, here we see how Bolle focuses on the text more as a religious work and not necessarily a political one. Nevertheless, Bolle's astute translation and sharp commentary helped pave the way for more advanced studies of the text's philosophy itself. J. A. B. van Buitenen's (1981) subsequent translation and lengthy introductory analysis build on Bolle's in significant ways. In terms of diachronic analysis, van Buitenen observes that the *BhG* should be viewed as a "reform" text that sought to square older Vedic tradition with criticisms coming from renunciant traditions such as Buddhism (1981: 16). This observation resonates with Bronkhorst's historical analysis and position on Classical Brahmanism, highlighting the political context of the text's composition. For example, van Buitenen explains how Arjuna begins the dialogue as a wrong-headed sort of renunciate, wanting to forego all action and engagement in the war. However, Kṛṣṇa enlightens him to understand that he

(Arjuna), as a member of the *kṣatriya*-(warrior) *varṇa*, can act as a reformed renunciate while performing his caste duties and fighting in battle. The trick, of course, is that Arjuna must learn how to fulfill his *varṇa*-obligations and fight while not attaching himself egoistically to the outcome of his actions, thus performing his duty in a disinterested manner (17–20). Politically, this means that Arjuna needs to fight the battle as a *kṣatriya* yet do so while renouncing any personal responsibility for the fruits or consequences of his actions. This shift in philosophy that signals the possibility for acting in a state of "non-(egoistic)action" displays historical interaction with contending renunciate traditions, which most scholars now believe led Brahmanical communities to reform some of their own philosophical commitments. Kṛṣṇa goes on to explain how he himself, as an incarnation of the Supreme Godhead, serves as a paradigmatic example of this ethic of *niṣkāma-karma* (acting without desire for the fruits of one's actions). Van Buitenen's commentary thus intimates a more political reading of the text, although he does not elaborate on the *BhG* as a work of political theory itself. Since the 1980s, other scholars of South Asia have developed more detailed studies of epic political thought as the political context and interests generating the epic's composition began to receive more sustained attention.

For example, James Fitzgerald has spearheaded one particularly important line of inquiry, arguing that the final, redacted *MBh* as we have it in the Critical Edition expresses a distinctive Brahmanical ideology.[21] Fitzgerald claims that the epic was an argument in and of itself, "constructed by some visionary brahmins who had ceased composing new texts of the Veda and who had interjected themselves into the process of *Bhārata*-making-and-dissemination. Their basic argument was that the armed stratum of society, the mythic ancient *kṣatra* … required regeneration by brahmin intervention and divine assistance" (2010: 113). Agreeing with Bronkhorst, Fitzgerald reads the brahmin authors as trying to regain their former political privilege by developing a text that would help justify their position as advisors to rulers, since they claimed to possess authoritative texts on topics involving the origin and nature of proper statecraft. In historical context, Fitzgerald frames the Brahmanical ideology of the *MBh* as "anti-Mauryan," arguing that it was "fashioned and promulgated sometime in the second or first centuries BCE as a reaction against the cosmopolitan 'marginalization' of brahmins under the Mauryans, under Aśoka [Maurya] in particular" (2006: 269). The result, as Fitzgerald puts it, is a narrative centering upon "the chartering of a paradigm of kingship in which the armed ruler subordinates himself to brahmin authority and uses some of his power to serve brahmin interests" (269). This analysis of Brahmanical

21 For example, see Fitzgerald (1983; 2004a: 79–164; 2004b: 52–74; 2006: 257–286; 2010: 103–121).

ideology remains crucial for advancing a political reading of both the *MBh* and *BhG*.

However, Fitzgerald's treatment of the *BhG* itself is rather minimal. He makes some brief comments in the introduction to his translation of the *Śānti Parvan*, claiming "the *Bhagavad Gītā* seems clearly to be a later and improved solution to the same basic problem of reconciling the older and the newer senses of *dharma* ... especially violence and *ahiṃsā*" (2004a: 140). Fitzgerald follows this by saying that the *BhG* provides more sophisticated arguments as to how *karmayoga* (path of disciplined action) and *bhaktiyoga* (path of devotion) could allow kings to perform their respective duties as warriors with warrant authorized by God, so that they might possess a clear conscience and sense of rightness grounded in their loving devotion to God; in short, Fitzgerald argues that the *BhG*'s Brahmanical ideology "absolves the warrior of moral responsibility for violence" (141).

In an earlier article that examined the *MBh* as religious rhetoric, he moves through the *BhG* rather quickly as the theological-ideological kernel of the *MBh*. Here he begins by stating "As many Indians have said repeatedly, the center of this ideological continuity [between the Vedic past and Classical period] in the *Great Bhārata* is the *Bhagavad Gītā*" (1983: 615). He then summarizes what he takes to be the fundamental points of the *BhG*'s ideology, explaining how it aims at convincing people to act in the world based on Brahmanical authority by pursuing *yogic* discipline to achieve liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) (616). In so doing, such yogic discipline leads to a personal transformation culminating in union with God, all within the social structure of the four-fold caste or *varṇa* system (616–617). Finally, Fitzgerald points out something that I will examine in greater depth in Chapters 2 and 3, namely what he calls the "new, revolutionary ontology of the *Gītā*," which becomes interconnected with a personal deity, Viṣṇu, who now fulfills the cosmic-liberatory role that the impersonal principle of *brahman* had once performed in earlier Brahmanical tradition (617–618). In this essay Fitzgerald provides a solid overview of some of the *BhG*'s ideological characteristics but does not delve into much detail since his primary focus remains the *MBh* at large, thus leaving out a systematic treatment of this smaller yet incredibly important text.

Narrowing the focus, Angelika Malinar (2007) provides one of the more recent systematic studies of the *BhG*, including some analysis of politics and kingly rule from the Brahmanical perspective. In her detailed exegesis of the *BhG* she examines the doctrines espoused in the *BhG*, including the history of research of the text, debates over war and peace in the *MBh* that precede the *BhG*, and both historical and cultural contexts surrounding the text's composition. She also distinguishes between Kṛṣṇa as the highest god, on the one hand, and kings possessing royal power, on the other (2007: 4). While her distinction between theological and

political categories is important to acknowledge, especially the hierarchical relationship between the former and latter, my analysis will show how Kṛṣṇa himself should be viewed as the paradigmatic model of monarchy and politics in general, which then collapses any strong categorical distinction between theology and politics. This conflation of theological and political categories into a single, totalizing theory shows how brahmins ultimately use the theological register to advance their political interests, and not the other way around. It is precisely this blurring of categories between Brahmanical/religious and political power that elucidates the depth of Brahmanical ideology expressed in the text, which is not always evident on the surface. Finally, while Malinar's analysis points out that Kṛṣṇa is designated as the "highest Lord," "mighty Lord of all worlds," and "mighty ruler and creator of the world" she does not elaborate on his monarchical-political characteristics (6–7). In the monotheistic framework she outlines, which rightly places Kṛṣṇa at the center, she does point out how "Kings are subordinated to the highest god by emulating his altruistic concern for 'the welfare of all beings'" (7), which is a claim I will elaborate on in Chapter 3. I will argue that adding a line of analysis that pinpoints the ideology surrounding such claims can enhance our knowledge of Kṛṣṇa's political character. While her textual exegesis remains astute and convincing overall, Malinar's focus on the *BhG* does not engage in any systematic treatment of Brahmanical ideology, which was a comparative strength of Fitzgerald's line of inquiry.

Therefore, previous scholars have not focused on developing a distinctly political reading of the *BhG* outside of looking at the politics driving its composition, and more specifically, they have not been concerned with explicating a political theory in the text itself. Admittedly, most scholars with considerable knowledge of the epic do not approach the text as a political theorist. Because of their alternative disciplinary training and focus, those such as Bronkhorst and Fitzgerald do not employ an analytic framework or methodological approach conversant with the field of political theory. Therefore, this book aims to engage scholarly interests and debates that overlap disciplinary boundaries, advancing an argument accessible to political theorists and scholars of South Asian or Religious Studies alike.

In addition, something distinctive about my analytic approach to the text in contrast to existing approaches is that I will use a *conceptual*-analytic as opposed to a *narrative*-analytic framework. As a political theorist I seek to explicate the meaning of central political concepts in the text as opposed to focusing my analysis on the narrative and character arcs within the epic. One reason for taking this approach—for example, one that uses temporality as an organizing analytic category—is that it helps us see through the expanse of "trees" in the epic's proverbial "forest," as the multiplicity of characters, narratives, and sub-narratives can quickly make a reader's head spin and lose focus of central political themes helping to

tie these diverse elements together. Focusing on the *BhG* helps in this instance because this text revolves around two figures in dialogue with one another. Nevertheless, one of my central claims is that the apparent simplicity of this dialogue format must be informed by context provided in the larger epic. The challenge here lies in finding a suitable balance between providing sufficient epic context, yet not getting lost in the expanse of such context. A conceptual analytic approach is a fruitful way of addressing this challenge since an epic-wide, narrative approach to contextualizing the *BhG* would be in danger of bogging the reader down with so many character references and narrative summaries that a reader unfamiliar with the epic would likely become more confused than edified. Using a theoretical as opposed to narrative analytic framework allows me to summarize important categories and concepts in Chapter 1 without necessarily having to attend to the tremendous amount of detail that appears in the five books that precede Book 6 of the *MBh*, let alone the twelve books that follow. Put simply, there is no quick or easy way to summarize everything that happens in the *MBh*'s overall narrative structure. The best one can do to explain the *BhG*'s political thought with some reference to its broader epic context is to provide the reader with essential categories and a conceptual framework that can be located throughout much of the epic, which helps make sense of core principles in the *BhG*'s mode of political thinking. While my approach is not exhaustive in a narrative sense, it does have the benefit of clarifying some of the essential context for an unfamiliar reader without the danger of confusing the reader with a superfluous amount of narrative information.

Historical cyclicality is an important structure within the epic, and my book self-consciously parallels this structure. Highlighting the book's organization in this manner helps provide readers with a feel for how the epic and *BhG* within it were composed and meant to be understood. In my own analysis, returning to the *BhG* necessarily began with present concerns and questions—in this case, contemporary reasons for the *BhG*'s scholarly neglect and questions regarding its influence on Hindu nationalism and Indian democracy. For a study that examines a cyclical re-engagement with the text on a global scale, I have shown how Peter Brook's representation of the text foregrounds other pertinent issues concerning (neo)colonialism and Orientalism involved in the text's modern reception (Gray 2021). For example, Brook's theatrical representation of the *MBh* and *BhG* highlights a central aspect of the epic: namely, its claim to comprehensive coverage of important human questions and universal applicability across time and space. For many interpreters, such universalism provides a basis for claiming the necessity of cyclically returning to the text for knowledge about how to address present concerns. As a westerner Brook sought to make the epic intelligible to a global audience, representing yet another contemporary effort to expand its pur-

ported universalism. While a deeper engagement with processes of British colonialism and Orientalism lies outside the scope of the present project, it helps to understand that the *BhG*'s universalist philosophy is an intentional design feature of the text itself, operating in an ideological fashion, and this book represents a deeper historical dive into the sources and implications of this text as an ideological work.

Chapter 1 recognizes in the *MBh* a similar question to one that confronts many interested in the study of politics: how should people act when they find themselves immersed in a disordered and deeply agonistic, conflict-ridden world? Relatedly, the narrative of the epic is partly driven by ethical and political concerns regarding political contention between two sets of cousins over propriety of a kingdom. This observation may over-simplify things just a bit, but it elucidates a key aspect of the epic's structure: in the world and politics generally, human communities consistently find themselves in conflict, both internally and externally. Oftentimes the world can feel "entropic" in nature, like it is always veering toward disorder and violence. Efforts to establish order and seek peace in an age of strife through political integration, especially through alliance-building and centralized forms of leadership, express some of the ways that communities and characters in the epic seek to redress conflict. The first chapter tells this story by analyzing material in the epic preceding the *BhG*, which supplies context for better understanding the causes and stakes of the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. This chapter argues that a cosmic "split" and cyclical structure of entropy, which moves from initial order to ever greater forms of disorder over long periods of time, can be viewed as central causes of contention between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. Kṛṣṇa provides a solution for this entropic situation in the form of a totalizing political theory outlined in the *BhG*, which also serves as an ideological mouthpiece for the text's Brahmanical authors.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn to the *BhG* itself, with each chapter focusing on a particular figure. In Chapter 2 I focus on Arjuna, arguing that he represents an "ascetic hero" model elucidating a complex micro-politics at the level of the self. This ontology of the individual views every human body as a political battlefield, further showing how Brahmanical politics pervades seemingly apolitical categories and spaces. The lesson for Arjuna, and for readers of the text, is that one must learn to become yogically disciplined and cultivate a sensibility of dharmic disinterestedness, which paves the road for someone performing his or her respective social duties without egoistic attachment to the consequences of their actions. I argue that this requires a *politics of effacement*, whereby one must learn how to efface strong connections to family and friends that might otherwise prevent someone from performing their duties in a disinterested fashion. This chapter concludes by revisiting a key political theme outlined in Chapter 1, setting up the argument

for Chapter 3: the imagery of fire as a symbol for purity and political unification, which paves the way for resolving contention through a modified ascetic form of heroic devotion to a singular godhead and cosmic ruler. Chapter 3 picks up this line of analysis by explicating Kṛṣṇa as the supreme cosmic monarch and model for rule. As the central political character of both the *BhG* and arguably the *MBh* more broadly, I argue that Kṛṣṇa best represents the totalizing political theory of integrated and unified rule expressed in the *BhG*. Examining the cosmological, ontological, and metaphysical characteristics of Kṛṣṇa shows how the text's brahmin authors construct a conceptual framework that integrates mutually reinforcing philosophical ideas across three registers: the micro-level of the self, the meso-level of interpersonal relations, and the macro-level of the cosmos. Addressing existing debates about the idea of justice in the text, this chapter also argues that rather than viewing *dharma* as the closest approximation of political justice in the text, the concept of *lokasaṃgraha*—as holding together or maintaining the integrity of the world and cosmos—better represents the text's concerns with the meaning of "justice." My political reading of Kṛṣṇa displays a henotheistic politics, whereby devotion to a unified, monarchical structure stands as the central Brahmanical response to a seemingly broken and conflict-ridden world. I argue that this Brahmanical viewpoint ultimately justifies Arjuna's resolve and decision to fight in the war against his former teachers and cousins.

The final chapters of the book return to the issue of political ideology, starting with the *BhG*'s own historical context. In Chapter 4, I build upon the work of Raymond Geuss and David Herman to argue that the political theory outlined in Chapters 1 through 3 represents a distinctive political ideology, expressive of Brahmanical interests when examined through a theoretical and historical lens outlined in Chapter 4. Interestingly, the apocalyptic situation that historical brahmins understand themselves to be living in presses them to posit a seemingly universal structure that can be revisited at any given time, even by those living millennia apart. The *BhG* thus provides an ideological conception of the cosmos, time, and politics, all of which are connected in the Brahmanical imaginary in ways that reinforce Brahmanical interests in both the immediate present *and* across vast periods of time. This formulation captures the essence of what I designate as "deep ideology." To foreground some of the essential elements of this ideology, they entail the following:

– A comprehensive philosophical, religious, mythological, and political conceptual framework.
– A temporal-cosmological framework that accounts for cosmic creation, destruction, and historical change.

– An historically effective socio-political ideology capable of being transplanted across long periods of time and adapted to changing circumstances and new political issues or crises over time.

Importantly, devotion to Kṛṣṇa as a unifying figure provides a lynchpin for Classical brahmins and deep ideology, and in Chapter 5 I explain how the historically cyclical structure of the text helps justify Hindu nationalists' return to the text as a resource for pursuing their interests in the present.

Related scholarship exists, but primarily to draw attention to how political actors invoke the *BhG*; the scholarship does not engage in a sustained analysis exploring how the *BhG* itself may naturally lend itself to nationalist projects.[22] For example, Vinay Lal's (2009) edited volume has explored various political facets of Hinduism, yet the book's chapters include only two mentions of the *BhG*, one of which draws a familiar connection to Gandhi. Achin Vanaik has alternatively focused on the rise of Hindu authoritarianism as an essential component of political Hinduism, citing how the *BhG* has been coopted politically; for example, he explains how the RSS has leveraged its political capital in BJP-ruled states such as Haryana to make readings from the *BhG* compulsory in schools (2017: 380). Nevertheless, Vanaik does not pursue any sustained analysis of the *BhG*'s ideological usage for Hindu nationalist causes. More recently, Bidyut Chakrabarty and Bhuwan Kumar Jha (2020) have addressed the topic of ideology in the context of Hindu nationalism and modern Indian politics. Like Vanaik and Kapila and Devji (2013), however, Chakrabarty and Jha primarily reference how nationalist thinkers such as Gandhi and Aurobindo have employed the *BhG* for political purposes but do not analyze the text as an intentionally designed ideological work that naturally lends itself to nationalist projects. Finally, while Lars Tore Flåten (2017) has shown how the BJP's Hindu nationalist project has pounced on (re)narrating the historical past (including sacred texts) and has used textbooks as tools for their ideological purposes, the *BhG*'s central ideological components and role in these projects remains largely unexamined.

I address this gap in the scholarly literature in Chapter 5, by showing how contemporary concerns with political disorder and a lack of (especially religious) unity in Indian society instigates linkages back to the ideological concerns and

22 Later I will clarify and expand upon this claim that the *BhG* naturally resonates with Hindu nationalist projects and their underlying logic. However, it does not follow that the text *itself* is inherently nationalistic, which is a stronger claim suggesting that some form of nationalist thought is "baked into" the text's original design. This stronger claim does not follow and is not warranted since "nationalism" is a modern political term with many connotations that would be naively anachronistic if applied to a Classical Indian context.

themes animating the *MBh* and *BhG.* Hindu nationalism becomes the new unifying banner under which Indians are asked to rally to fend off political disintegration, which is problematically associated with political contestation resulting from democratic pluralism. In short, Hindu nationalists find new ways of putting a transhistorical ideology into action, with destructive consequences for Indian democracy. In Chapter 6, which could be viewed as a contemporary parallel to Chapter 3, I offer a case-study by examining Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India and leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party, who has come to represent a more acute personification of unified political power and leadership. As Modi invokes distinct elements of a Brahmanical ideology excavated from the *BhG*'s political theory, he signifies a burgeoning form of neo-Hindu authoritarianism, which I argue must be challenged through forms of ideological subversion if religious, social, and political pluralism in India is to thrive as a wellspring for the country's future democratic aspirations. Before engaging the *BhG* directly and examining its influence on contemporary Indian politics, however, we must gather some historical and conceptual understanding of the larger epic that houses the *BhG* and the complex discussion between its two major interlocutors, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.

Chapter 1
Political Integration in an Age of Strife: *Bhagavad-Gītā* in Epic Context

We can begin situating the *BhG* within the context of the broader epic by asking the following questions: according to the text's brahmin authors, how should people act when they find themselves immersed in a disordered and contentious political environment? How do the epic's authors conceive the causes of such political disorder, along with the necessary solutions for addressing it? The *MBh* presents a grand narrative of two warring sets of cousins, the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, each striving to gain, expand, and consolidate power over a particular territory in circumstances of political unrest. This chapter examines the conceptual context within which the text's authors explain the macro- to micro-level causality behind the overarching narrative, and in doing so, it follows the cyclical temporal logic offered by the text itself. That is, I examine the epic's conception of the origins and vicissitudes of political strife by (re)turning to the historical past and the epic's understanding of its own past, which assumes this past relates to the present in significant ways. For example, the drive for political power and integration in conditions of plurality and contestation that we witness in the epic—initially through alliance-building, eventually culminating in centralized forms of rule—have also re-emerged in contemporary Indian politics. This tale of warring cousins long ago continues to inspire ways of framing contemporary political tensions and efforts at ethno-political consolidation through a Hindu medium in modern India, a topic I examine at greater length in Chapters 5 and 6.

In this chapter I advance the following argument. To gain a proper understanding of the *BhG*'s political thought, including the causes of the war, one must understand the politics and a few major events leading to the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa prior to battle. This requires paying careful attention to Book 1, in which we find some of the organizing categories, concepts, and themes that must be explicated to comprehend the *BhG*'s theory of rule and political power. This chapter thus focuses on what I take to be the most important themes and events that help explain the war and contextualize the political thought expressed in the *BhG* itself, including the politics leading up to the *BhG* and the broader cosmological context in which all of this occurs. Because the *MBh* consists of eighteen books, and five books precede the *BhG*, focusing on a single book may appear overly narrow. However, I argue that it is justified and pivotal for understanding the *BhG*'s expressed political theory for two reasons. First, examining the vast amount of material covered in Books 1–5 is far beyond the scope of a

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study that intends to focus on the *BhG*. Second, Book 1 remains essential for contextualizing and enhancing the conceptual depth of my examination of the *BhG*. For example, explicating a particular temporal structure for the epic and a corresponding political cosmology helps clarify the meaning of key passages in the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.

As I explained in the Introduction, I approach and analyze the *MBh* as a text that reflects a Brahmanical perspective seeking to map out a systematic response to what it views as a deeply *adharmic* (*adharma*, vice) political context.[1] In the first section of this chapter, I provide a broader context for examining the *BhG* in Chapters 2 and 3, focusing on two major categories: temporality and cosmology. The second section elaborates on the significance of these two categories, explaining how cyclical processes of creation/destruction and integration/disintegration frame how Brahmanical authors of the epic envision politics, and how they address what I call "political entropy" with a model of monarchical rule. The following sections of the chapter examine important narrative events using an analytic framework centered around cycles of (dis)integration, including the imagery and political use of fire.

Contextualizing the Cosmo-Political *Bheda* ("Split"): Temporality and Cosmology

katham samabhavadbhedasteṣāmklīṣṭakarmaṇām /
tacca yuddham katham vṛttam bhūtāntakaraṇam mahat //
pitāmahānām sarveṣām daivenāviṣṭacetasām /

How did that Breach arise between these men of untroubled deeds, and how did that great War come about, which was to be the destruction of creatures, between all my grandfathers whose minds were smitten by fate?

– King Janamejaya to narrator Vaiśaṃpāyana, *MBh* 1.54.19a–20a[2]

1 For example, see Hiltebeitel (2001). This "synchronic" approach stands in contrast to the "analytic-diachronic" approach taken by those such as James Fitzgerald, who have sought to uncover and distinguish an oral, epic-heroic core from later Brahmanical additions and redactions; for example, see Fitzgerald's (2003) review of Hiltebeitel (2001), and Fitzgerald (2010: 103–121; 2020b: 21–23). The latter type of approach generally seeks to parse historically distinct textual strata added over the course of many centuries, ca. 400 BCE–400 CE.

2 Translations will be J. A. B. van Buitenen's (1973 [*MBh*]; 1981 [*BhG*]). I have consulted Sanskrit commentaries for philosophical clarity on various key concepts, but do not privilege any single school's interpretation of the *BhG* so as to advance my own reading. This quotation highlights an initially confusing fact about the epic's narration. While Vyāsa is considered the original composer, the story itself is narrated on its outermost narrative "ring" by someone named Sauti Ugraś-

We should begin by viewing the political tensions, competition, and eventual tragedies involving the warring cousins against the backdrop of a broader, macro-cosmic shift from a third to fourth and final age in a larger cosmic cycle. Within this context the term *bheda* is essential, which has a semantic range centering around the activities of "splitting, tearing, breaking open, a violent rupture or breach." Politically, *bheda* can refer to the partition or division of a kingdom and clan, and the epic's main narrative revolves around a particular *bheda* between a set of contentious Kuru cousins, the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. We must first understand how the epic portrays time (*kāla*) as an onto-causal agent within the broader cycle:

> With the greatest wisdom, who can ward off fate (*daiva*)? No one steps beyond the path the Ordainer has ordained. All this is rooted in Time (*kāla*), to be or not to be, to be happy or not to be happy. Time ripens the creatures. Time rots them. And Time again puts out the Time that burns down the creatures. Time unfolds all beings in the world, holy and unholy. Time shrinks them and expands them again. Time walks in all creatures, unaverted, impartial. Whatever beings there were in the past will be in the future, whatever are busy now, they are all the creatures of Time. (*MBh* 1.1.187–190)

Hence, time is a causal agent that "burns," "unfolds," "rots," "ripens," and "walks" within all things, helping determine the existing state of affairs. Time pervades and (partially) governs the ontological state of all things, especially living things. As Emily Hudson has noted, time appears in numerous horrifying forms and incarnations, and is "terrifying because of the adverse ways it impacts the lives of individuals" (2013: 146–147). Hudson further provides a convincing analysis of Time's role in the epic, explaining how the epic can be construed as a "tale of time," arguing that the experience of time the epic produces remains central to the moral and aesthetic messages of the text (147). My own analysis will build on Hudson's argument, emphasizing the centrality of time's role in the political thought of the *BhG*. Political phenomena will be no different from the *MBh*'s standpoint, as multiple levels of temporality ground the nature of rule within any existing circumstance. I should also highlight two additional details about time in this passage.

The statement expresses a cyclical dimension of time as it animates and then destroys things, aptly captured in two important images: time as fire and wheel (e. g., the "wheel of time," *kālacakra*, *MBh* 4.47.2). This first image of time as fire that "burns down creatures," while destructive, has a constructive side as well.

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ravas at a brahmin hermitage, who had heard it from Vaiśaṃpāyana at a king's snake sacrifice, who in turn had originally learned it from Vyāsa. Therefore, a generational lag of reception and narration exists within the epic itself. These narrative rings display the cyclical temporal structure of the text insofar as the present is always open to and receiving a narration of the past, returning to political issues from the past that have some bearing on the present.

Fire not only destroys things but in "clearing the ground" also sets the stage for new life and renewal. This image will be integral for interpreting several episodes discussed at greater length below. The political symbolism of fire stretches back to the early Vedic period (ca. 1500 – 900 BCE), where brahmins used fire as a symbolic instrument for political integration in texts such as the Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā. In his study of Vedic conceptions of sovereignty, for example, Theodore Proferes shows how fire represented political unification, explaining: "Within a clan-based society, it was the suitability of fire to express the idea of unity within diversity that rendered it a fertile symbol for sovereignty, as well as an instrument for the ritualization of political processes" (2007: 1). Adding to its symbolic power for political unification and hierarchical sovereignty, fire's power to destroy paired with its ability to create or renew, to disintegrate or integrate, will play an important role within my interpretive-analytic frame.

While the notion of time as a wheel implies constant movement and becoming in which things come to be and pass away, it also suggests time is "impartial" and therefore not for or against human beings. The wheel of time is always moving, indifferent to mortals' hopes and desires. Interestingly, the passage also includes a term for "fate" (*daiva*, deriving from Sanskrit term *deva*, or god), which evokes not only divinity's role in human affairs but also the activity of gambling. Both ideas express outcomes that are unpredictable and beyond human control. In fact, each name for an age or *yuga* in the macro-temporal cycle—Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, and Kali (more on these below)—also indicates a different number and throw in a game of dice (*dyūta*), descending from "4" (the "Kṛta," winning throw) to "1" (the "Kali," losing throw). While the term *daiva* means fate, destiny, or that which is divinely ordained ("nobody steps beyond the path the Ordainer has ordained"), it also elicits in the epic audience a well-known story of the god Śiva, the lord of destructive time, who gets sucked into a losing game of dice with his wife, Pārvatī. This story draws together each of the concepts above, as Śiva represents a divine agent intervening in the world in a manner that is beyond human control, with the losing throws representing the destructive movement and gambling ratio (4 – 3 – 2 – 1) from the Kṛta to the Kali throw/age.[3] As Kloetzli and Hiltebeitel claim in connecting Śiva's game with two parallel games in the *MBh*, one of which (Yudhiṣṭhira versus Duryodhana/Śakuni) helps set the epic on its final, tragic course to a genocidal war: "The dice game is the tangible intrusion of the divine world into the human world, but a divine world whose deities not only play dice with the universe but whose rhythms are beyond at least Śiva's control" (2004: 569). Moreover, as David Shulman argues, the dice game helps lead to war because

3 For example, see: Kloetzli and Hiltebeitel (2004: 568); Handelman and Shulman (1997: 45, 64 – 69).

dicing (*devana*) is inherently connected to "fate" (*daiva*), "the very essence" of which is "negativity, in the sense of destructive, dis-integrating, crooked and unbalancing forces" (1992: 359). This theme of cyclical (dis)integration will play a central role in my analysis, but now we can ask: in what "historical" ways does time operate and thus influence political relationships? In response, the *MBh* offers a corresponding cyclical, devolutionary context in which to understand ethics, politics, and the possibility for dharmic rule.

The epic conceives of four *yuga*s (ages), beginning with a "golden" age and ending with an age in which *adharma* reigns, during which humans witness an increasing shift in the moral balance of the cosmos from *dharma* (virtue; divine law) to *adharma* (vice). The most virtuous Kṛta- ("perfect") Yuga—an ideal period where *dharma* reigns and cosmic balance exists—degenerates to the Tretā- and then Dvāpara-Yugas, with the ratio of *dharma* : *adharma* decreasing a quarter from age to age, eventually leading to the Kali-Yuga (age of discord) in which there is a preponderance of *adharma.* This final age is the shortest and morally corrupt, wherein only a quarter of *dharma* remains (*MBh* 3.186, 188–189). Ravaged by vice and, what is politically salient, experiencing the dilapidation of the traditional brahmanical *varṇa* system in which each of the four social groups (brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*) plays its proper role, this age hastens the dissolution (*pralaya*) of the cosmos before it is recreated by the god Viṣṇu or Brahmā, and the cyclical process begins anew. In Book 3 of the *MBh*, through one of the narrators of the epic, Vaiśaṃpāyana, we hear the sage Mārkaṇḍeya explaining some of the major characteristics of this final age, including the corrupt nature of rule:

> At the end of the Eon the population increases … women have too many children (3.186.35) … [A]ge after age in man's lifetime virility, wisdom, strength, and influence shrink by one-fourth. … A prey to greed and ire, confused, addicted to pleasures, men will be locked in rivalry and wish each other dead. Brahmins, barons [*kṣatriya*s], and commoners [*vaiśya*s] will mix marriages and become like serfs [*śūdra*s], without austerity or truth. … Men will rob and harm one another, they will be prayerless, creedless, and thievish at the close of the Eon [i.e., Kali-Yuga]. … [T]he *kṣatriya*s [rulers] at the end of the Eon will be the thorns of the earth; giving no protection, greedy, prideful, and egotistic … (3.188.13–34) … For twelve years during that upheaval [i.e., a final annihilation through fire and water] the clouds … fill earth with their showers, till the ocean rises above its tide line … mountains are sapped and collapse, and earth itself collapses. (*MBh* 3.186.74, transl. van Buitenen [1975])

While the contentious Pāṇḍava and Kaurava cousins careen towards the start of this dark age, which will commence with the Kurukṣetra War in Book 6, in the present Dvāpara-Yuga a precipitous balance exists between *dharma* and *adharma.* Shifting from the broader temporal to cosmological context, the *MBh* further sets up the tragic arc of the narrative by telling the audience that oppressive kings (*kṣatriya*s) have been abusing the earth and their subjects, which led to

an inevitable conflict between incarnated gods (*deva*s) and demons (*asura*s) in the respective guises of the human Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas.

This part of the cosmological story begins with a long-standing war between *deva*s and *asura*s (*MBh* 1.17). At one particularly important juncture, the *deva*s defeat the *asura*s and the latter incarnate themselves on earth to fill the current void of *kṣatriya*s (warrior and kingly social group) that had been systematically slaughtered by an angry brahmin and avatar of the supreme god Viṣṇu, Paraśu-Rāma, or Rāma-Jāmagnya. As incarnated, *adharmic* rulers, the *asura*s afflict brahmins (especially taboo), their subjects at large, and a host of other creatures. Eventually, a new generation of incarnated demons are born led by none other than the demon Kali (demon of abuse, etymologically connected to Kāla as time and death) incarnated as Duryodhana, the central antagonist in the epic, with his ninety-nine brothers as fellow incarnated demons (*rākṣasa*s) (*MBh* 1.61).[4] Therefore, this demon troop constitutes the Kauravas, the set of cousins that compete and go to war with the five Pāṇḍava brothers. The latter heroes, in turn, represent two sets of incarnations. First, they are the "five Indras" or aspects of the single warrior king of the *deva*s, Indra (*MBh* 1.189). Second, they are also distinct sons and portions of different gods: Yudhiṣṭhira, son of Dharma; Bhīma, son of Wind (Vāyu); Arjuna, son of Indra; and the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, the sons of the Aśvins. As the story goes, the gods incarnate themselves with a part of their being, thus triggering an earthly political conflict with cosmological roots. A cosmological *bheda* thus manifests as a human, political conflict. The *MBh* presents us with a deeply contentious cosmos, full of gods and demons jutting in and out of human affairs, and within this cycle between harmonic balance and destructive agonism, *dharma* serves as the ever-elusive ethical glue that instantiates harmony and the interconnected flourishing of all beings.

One problem, however, is that the *MBh* consistently claims *dharma* is very subtle (*sūkṣma*) and difficult to discern (*guhya*, "to be covered or concealed," as in a cave [*guhā*]). Not only that, but a multiplicity of potentially contending *dharmic* duties exist, associated with one's family (*kula-dharma*), life-stage (*āśrama-dharma*), and social grouping (*varṇa-dharma*). The most infamous instance of this ethical conundrum is found in the *BhG* (Book 6), where Arjuna's resolve to fight the Kaurava forces wavers when he realizes that he will be killing kith and kin in the war—a clear violation of his *kula-dharma*—while fulfilling his *varṇa-dharma* as a *kṣatriya* warrior. Here there not only appears to be a tension between ethical duties, but

4 Although Duryodhana is predominantly characterized as evil and negatively egoistic, Malinar (2012: 51–78) highlights his moral ambiguity, explaining how "the epic authors and redactors do not just play off the 'good guys' against the bad ones; rather, on each side one finds dark stains and ambiguities, although, in the end, the Pāṇḍavas shine more brightly" (53).

also a clear violation of central *dharmic* ideals of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and *ānṛśaṃsya* (lack of cruelty). Myriad uncertainties, tensions, and cycles of conflict thus characterize the cosmos and ultimately outline multiple causes for a "broken," *adharmic* world in which the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas find themselves pitted against one another. A related political question thus arises in the epic: how could either the Kauravas or Pāṇḍavas establish peace by eliminating the threat the other party poses to consolidated authority under a single ruler, either Duryodhana or Yudhiṣṭhira?

Time, Cosmic Entropy, and Processes of Political (Dis-)Integration

I begin this section by outlining a historical context for the political development from more decentralized, "oligarchic" forms of rule to a centralized monarchy. This transition involves alliance-building efforts aimed at integrating contentious parties within a more homogeneous grouping under centralized control. Scholars focusing on the events and developments behind the epic's narrative argue for the existence of open, participatory forms of rule indicated by terms such as *sabhā* (assembly, court) and *saṅgha* (clan association, community). The *saṅgha* consistently emerges in the first part of the epic prior to Bhīṣma's long-winded speech to Yudhiṣṭhira in Book 12, which leads to Yudhiṣṭhira's coronation as sole *rāja* (ruler, king) following the devastating Kurukṣetra War. Kevin McGrath (2017) has provided a detailed account of the *saṅgha* polity as displaying several features relevant for my analysis and argument.

First, *saṅgha*s involve the participation not only of fellow *kṣatriya*s but also a broader community that assists in anointing a *rāja* or king. For example, the figure Devāpi, who was the eldest son of King Pratīpa, had his kingly consecration blocked by "the brahmins and elders, supported by town and country folk, [who] forbade the consecration of Devāpi," grieving Pratīpa to no avail (*MBh* 5.147.18; McGrath 2017: 22–23). McGrath cites another passage in Book 5 regarding the anointment of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, where the epic poets state: "Then, sir, all the populace accepted king Dhṛtarāṣṭra according to injunction, as they had accepted Pāṇḍu as king" (*MBh* 5.147.7). Even the coronation of well-known epic king Rāma (hero of the other great Sanskrit epic, *Rāmāyaṇa*) requires the consensus of his father's community of advisors (*MBh* 3.261.7). McGrath thus concludes that the king in the older, *saṅgha*-style polity is "the most senior determining agent, but one who exists among a company of associates … [involving] the active political voice of a populace as it participates in kingly office as a necessary component of *saṅgha* political dynamics" (2017: 46). This type of polity exhibited a somewhat decentralized

"election" process, according to McGrath (10, ft. 28).[5] Such rulership operates within what he takes to be an archaic, pre-literate period that predates the Mauryan empire "as something fungible and mobile among a small oligarchic social group" (143). Finally, and most pertinent for my own argument, McGrath observes that in the pre-Hindu (ca. 1500 – 200 BCE) to post-Hindu (post-200 BCE) transition from *saṅgha* polities to a new model of centralized rule and empire in the form of *rājya* (autocratic kingship that recognizes a plurality of clans united under centralized control), emerging historically on the Indian subcontinent with Aśoka Maurya (3rd century BCE), "there is no place for any *fraternal* kingship [a la Pāṇḍavas], and certainly the *saṅgha* is viewed as old-fashioned, useless, and conducive of political disaster; monarchy becomes autarchic" (2017: 143).[6] This autarchic aspect of rule, I will argue, is a Brahmanical political ideal that emerges in response not only to the seeming "uselessness" of the *saṅgha* structure under conditions of monetization, urbanization, and empire, but also as part of a sophisticated theoretical model of politics that entails a detailed cosmology characterized by *bheda* and cyclical strife. As McGrath suggests above, smaller polities and more decentralized forms of rule seem conducive to disaster from the Brahmanical perspective.

Extending back to the early Vedic period (ca. 1500 – 900 BCE), brahmins display a chronic fear of disintegration in the cosmos and believe that proper rule is one of the key components for achieving peaceful political integration and harmony. Here, I would like to frame the concept of (dis-)integration in two ways: first, it refers to a cyclical temporal process of revolving (ethical, political) integration and disintegration reflected in the four-*yuga* structure discussed above; second, it elucidates a two-fold political concern with expanding, *integrative* rule within a broad interconnected cosmic structure and a corresponding fear of political disintegration when efforts at integration break down. From these observations I posit a principle I will call *political entropy*, which I take to be central to the *BhG*'s political thought. By this I mean the general lack of order or predictability and gradual decline into disorder and destruction of a broad, interconnected system, which must,

5 For a critique of readings that press this "elective" and even "democratic" reading too far, see Gray (2016).

6 Some scholars believe that Yudhiṣṭhira's character is partly modeled upon and/or a response to the historical Aśoka. Yudhiṣṭhira's struggle between kingly action and renunciation may reflect a Brahmanical way of grappling with the necessity for a ruler to fight and harm others, on the one hand, but also follow the ethic of *ahiṃsā* (non-cruelty) that had become a widespread feature of ascetic traditions and cultural-religious value with Aśoka. Hence, Yudhiṣṭhira's character would be a Brahmanical-ideological construct that subsumes an ascetic ethical principle into its preexisting Vedic framework to legitimate its political value for *kṣatriya* rulers. See Fitzgerald (2004a: 100 – 105) and Sutton (1997).

after certain periods of time, be "reset" by the creator of the system who stands outside of it. Shulman's interpretation of the cosmos helps to elucidate my entropic reading, as he claims that human activity and fate occur within "a cosmic structure with inherently violent and destructive components" (1992: 358). Importantly, if time itself operates in an entropic manner from the Kṛta- to Kali-Yuga, with "Time expanding and shrinking all things," then this process finds its political parallel in a cyclical waxing and waning of integration (especially through alliance) and disintegration (through vice, competition, and violence).[7] In turn, political integration—especially through the institution of a stable, hierarchically ordered, and dharmic *rājya* (kingdom, rulership) undergirded by the *varṇāśrama* (social group and life stage) system—expresses an attempt to cease or slow the entropic cycle of disintegration rendered as the cyclical movement between *dharmic* rule and peace (*śānti*), on the one hand, and *adharmic* harm and grief (*śoka*), on the other. Due to the theory of time presented by the epic, however, any peace achieved through integration will be temporary. As the *MBh* expresses through its myriad levels of narrative causality, reasons for this impermanence include the idea that some degree of harm is inevitable in all action due to conflictual needs, necessities, and tradeoffs (Dalmiya 2016: 6), and a single violent act can set off several uncontrollable consequences that are destructive in nature, thus leading to social decline and degeneration.

This natural violence that Brahmanism saw as characterizing the universe could only, in the end, be avoided through *mokṣa* (liberation) and subsequent release from *saṃsāra* (cycle of death and rebirth), which signaled a person's exit from the entire cosmo-political structure altogether. Since I will be focusing on the political thought expressed in the *BhG*, I will not dwell on this philosophical point, but the point remains useful for locating what James Fitzgerald calls the "rise of *yoga* discourse" that preceded and further developed during the time the *BhG* was composed (2004a: 109–114). This discourse is significant because it relates to the broader theme of temporal entropy that Brahmanism views as (re)occurring cyclically on both the individual level (per the self's birth, aging, death, and rebirth process) and cosmic level (per the cosmos' gradual, cyclical decline, destruction, and recreation). Fitzgerald explains: "Accepting the violence of the universe is a necessary corollary of Brahmanism's affirmation of monism … The

7 More precisely one might say that time is always shrinking things since the entropic cycle, once started, cannot be reversed. Nevertheless, this shrinking and destruction will ultimately lead to new expansion and the construction of the cosmos. This process is associated with the language of "waxing" and "waning" that I will examine later in the chapter, where we see expansion of certain families' power shrinking other families' power in a sub-cyclical process within the larger, macro-cyclical temporal process.

boundaries within the universe, insofar as the universe is a meaningful and productive plurality, must be maintained, by appropriate violence when necessary" (112). As I will argue in subsequent chapters, this "monism" operates through the figure of Kṛṣṇa, who symbolizes the political structure of monarchy that unifies this cosmic plurality into one coherent structure.

This structure can be analyzed at three distinct yet parallel conceptual levels: micro-level of the self, meso-level of interpersonal politics, and macro-level of the cosmos. The *BhG*'s authors display tremendous innovation in their ability to philosophically integrate each of these levels, providing a corresponding political model for both Arjuna and the audience. Acknowledging and legitimating violence while developing an ascetic viewpoint that had evolved since the Upaniṣads, allows the *BhG*'s Brahmanical authors to synthesize older Vedic political ideas with post-Vedic ascetic ideas and practices, helping not only keep Brahmanism alive but allowing it to flourish in subsequent centuries by rewriting past, present, and future within the *MBh*'s narrative.[8]

To provide a context and theoretical framework for my analysis of the *BhG* in subsequent chapters, below I will analyze these ideas of impermanent order and political entropy as they appear in some of the major sequences leading up to the Kurukṣetra War, whereby a series of violent acts and counter-acts reflect a deeply interconnected structure that parallels the macro-cosmic (*deva* vs. *asura*) strife discussed earlier. Here I want to suggest that one of the organizing conceptual structures of the *MBh* is captured in an attempt by brahmin authors to explain and propose a solution—pitched simultaneously at theological, ethical, and political levels—to what they consider a slip into an *adharmic* age accompanied by an inevitable decline into further disorder. I thus interpret the political narrative and thought expressed in the *BhG* itself as rather coherent, embedded reflections of a larger cosmological narrative, which partly reflects a historical set of ideological concerns and interests.[9]

Correspondingly, Brahmanical authors of the *MBh* view political alliance and integration as leading toward a single, overarching kingship as the only or proper solution to *dharmic* order. The trajectory of political thought here represents an urge to achieve a pacifying socio-political homogeneity, or harmonious unification of plurality, that centers around a system of *varṇāśramadharma* (duties associated with social group [*varṇa*] and life stage [*āśrama*]) wherein a single ruler and all subjects fall into one of four categories and fulfill their proper duties.[10] In fact,

8 For example, see Hegarty (2012).

9 I elaborate on these Brahmanical concerns and interests in Chapter 4.

10 The four life stages (*āśramas*) entail the following: celibate studentship (*brahmacarya*), householder (*gārhastya*), forest dweller (*vānaprasthya*), and renunciate, wandering ascetic (*saṃnyāsa*).

this logic of a fourfold order is built into the cosmos, as Yudhiṣṭhira explains how the sage Mārkaṇḍeya, during initial moments of cosmic creation, "watches the creatures being created by Parameṣṭhin [the Supreme Being], in the right four orders of beings" (*MBh* 3.186.5). This logic finds its narrative expression in two dharmic figures that serve as cosmo-political reflections of one another: Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, Parameṣṭhin, or Viṣṇu incarnated as Kṛṣṇa (the absolute cosmic ruler), on the one hand, and Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava (son of Dharma), on the other. Brahmanical political thought in the epic thus exhibits an attempt to address the problem of political entropy by bookending the cosmos with two ideals of ethical rule, one divine and one human. This dyarchy is a conceptual innovation that fuses older Vedic political ideas with newer, non-Brahmanical ascetic ideas, and does so by offering a normatively closed system—only the Supreme Being stands outside and encompasses the system—in which everything is integrated and explainable, yet fragile and doomed due to the logic of cyclical temporality and entropy.

This conception of monarchy, which theoretically applies to both Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira, includes the necessary and occasional use of violence. Angelika Malinar excavates numerous characteristics associated with the monotheistic framework in the *BhG*, one of which entails the following: "Kings are subordinated to the highest god by emulating his altruistic concern for 'the welfare of all beings', which occasionally implies using violence against the enemies of socio-cosmic order. … while at the same time making the king the representative and protector of the god's cause on earth" (2007: 7, 10). As I argue in this chapter, the Kauravas represent such enemies, and Yudhiṣṭhira must unify and lead the Pāṇḍavas to victory because he must emulate Kṛṣṇa. A macro-cosmic example of the destruction perpetrated by Kṛṣṇa arises in his theophany, where Arjuna witnesses the following:

> [Y]our [i. e., Kṛṣṇa's] mouths that bristle with fangs and resemble the fire at the end of the eon … And yonder all sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra along with the hosts of the kings of the earth … Are hastening into your numerous mouths that are spiky with tusks and horrifying—there are some who are dangling between your teeth, their heads already crushed to bits. (*BhG* 11.25 – 27)

Not only does his cosmic form devour beings, but Kṛṣṇa also identifies himself as "Time grown old to destroy the world, embarked on the course of world annihilation" (*BhG* 11.32). As a mortal parallel, we must recall that Yudhiṣṭhira is associated with Yama as the personification of death, and he will indeed lead the Pāṇḍavas in their death-dealing march through the war and "field of *dharma*" (*dharma-kṣetra*). Such an act is one of Dharmarāja, "King Dharma," which also happens to be an epithet of Yama (god of death). As Fitzgerald explains, "Yudhiṣṭhira is also a Lord of Death as a king, the one man among men who holds the power of life

and death … the wielder of the rod of force (*daṇḍa*, and emblem of Yama), made actual and concrete principally in the king's power of punishment and his army" (2004a: 124). As we shall see, one fruitful point of entry to begin the analysis and frame of entropic cycles of destruction lies in an early series of events involving the Kaurava and Pāṇḍava cousins.

A Weapons Show and Lacquer House: (Dis-)integration Through the Fire of Competition

To understand the (dis)integrating, cyclical causes leading to a defining "fire in the lacquer house" episode (*MBh* 1.124–138), I must examine briefly a few prior yet very important events that set the stage for the *MBh*'s early political entropy. Prior to a house fire and attempted assassination of the Pāṇḍava brothers, in prior events following the cousins' adolescent training in arms and *kṣatriya*-hood, their childhood *guru* and military instructor, Droṇa, proposes the idea of a public show-of-arms, partly to display these young princes' skills in a public forum. The show, however, turns into an agonistic competition between the cousins as witnessed in a wrestling match and mace fight between Duryodhana Kaurava and Bhīma Pāṇḍava. Here the two *kṣatriya*s "buckled their armor, hell-bent on showing off their masculine prowess, like two huge rutting bull elephants joining battle over a cow. They circled each other … with their sparkling clubs, like two bulls in rut" (*MBh* 1.124.30–32). Importantly, this is a public forum and the narrator Vaiśaṃpāyana quickly tells us that "when the Kuru Prince [Duryodhana] and Bhīma … had taken up their positions in the arena, the crowd split into two factions, each partial to its own favorite" (*MBh* 1.125.1). Droṇa realizes that the competition between the two might start a riot in the arena, exhibiting how this has become a politicized space and not merely a confidence-inducing display of military strength for the kingdom's subjects ("Look how strong and wonderful our princes and military leaders are!"). Hence, the event dregs up a deep-seated political *bheda* (split) that begins with the *kṣatriya* royalty but apparently extends downward into the populace. We also see some of the *saṅgha* dynamics mentioned earlier, and public support in this case is clearly divided as the existing lack of political integration becomes publicly manifest for the first time in the epic.

It also pays to note a few things about Droṇa's past and character, as he is a brahmin who is also an expert at arms (usually the provenance of *kṣatriya*s). He was slighted earlier in the narrative by his childhood friend, Drupada, who is now (at the moment of the weapons show) ruler of the nearby Pāñcāla kingdom lying strategically to the east of Hāstinapura, capital of the Kuru/Kaurava kingdom. As vengeful recompense for Drupada's rejection of friendship—itself an important

type of alliance and integrative relationship, as we shall later see—Droṇa asks his Kaurava and Pāṇḍava students to abduct Drupada as his teacher's (*guru*'s) fee. However, only Arjuna Pāṇḍava can carry out the military operation, impressing the mighty Drupada in the process. In fact, Arjuna makes such an impression that Drupada later sets up his (not-yet-born) daughter's bridegroom choice and ceremony (*svayaṃvara*) in such a way that only Arjuna could achieve the necessary feats to win his daughter's hand. These narrative details are crucial for two reasons. First, they pave the way for an important political alliance between the Pāñcāla clan (ruled by Drupada) and Pāṇḍavas once the five brothers establish their own kingdom at Indraprastha. Second, and more immediately significant following the weaponry exhibition, the public support given to the Pāṇḍavas instigates a bitter jealousy and fear in Duryodhana that the Pāṇḍavas, headed by Yudhiṣṭhira, will become the next ruling clan in the Kuru kingdom. This fear stokes the next entropic move and bold attempt on Duryodhana's part to convince his father that, due to the Pāṇḍavas' public support, Yudhiṣṭhira and his Pāṇḍava descendants will wrongly supplant Duryodhana and his Kaurava descendants. At this moment we clearly see the political role that the public plays, even if it is not through any direct process of electing or appointing the next ruler.

The *adharmic* vices of fear and jealousy thus push Duryodhana into the narrative's next destructive cycle. Duryodhana attempts to convince his father, as reigning king, to temporarily exile the Pāṇḍavas so that he can assassinate the five brothers outside the confines of Hāstinapura. Here we see one of many thematic, cyclical shifts of "waxing and waning" power between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas: following recent events, the Pāṇḍavas are waxing politically while Duryodhana and his Kaurava kin are waning, which pushes him to act in ways that will reverse this trajectory so that his side may wax and the competitor-cousins may wane. A consistent thematic structure can be located in this cyclical imagery of waxing and waning—partly tied to complementary astrological waxing and waning of the moon—as the Pāṇḍavas (descendants of "*pāṇḍu*," meaning "white, light, bright") will eventually undergo two cycles of exile (waning) and re-emergence (waxing) before the war begins. These cycles are triggered by the assistance of "dark" characters—i.e., three Kṛṣṇas (Skt., dark, obscure): Kṛṣṇa-Dvaipāyana (Vyāsa), Kṛṣṇa-Vasudeva (incarnation of the supreme godhead, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa), and Kṛṣṇā-Draupadī (Pāṇḍava brothers' soon-to-be wife)—each of whom assists in the Pāṇḍavas' triumphant reemergence and further rounds of competition with the Kauravas.[11] After all, a full moon (Pāṇḍavas' strengthening or reigning)

11 This cyclical imagery of waxing and waning of the moon (the Pāṇḍavas are part of the Lunar Dynasty) maps onto the epic narrative in fascinating ways; for example, see Fitzgerald (2004b: 62).

must transition into darkness (with the assistance of the three Kṛṣṇas, while the dark Kauravas reciprocally wax and reign) and gradually reemerge as full and bright, completing a single lunar cycle. This cyclical logic in Brahmanical thought will be reflected on a political plane as well.

All these prior developments then lead to a house fire and assassination attempt. Duryodhana schemes to have a house constructed of combustible materials that can be set on fire while the brothers are sleeping and thus burn all of them alive (*MBh* 1.132.1–19). However, the entire scheme is sniffed out ahead of time and the Pāṇḍavas escape via an underground tunnel, beginning their first round of exile and political waning (*MBh* 1.134–138). This unsuccessful murder attempt can be interpreted as a move to disintegrate or destroy the Pāṇḍavas as competitors to the throne, especially Yudhiṣṭhira as the alternative, eldest successor of the two respective lines. Duryodhana's actions and their causes represent an attempt to integrate the polity through (literally) disintegrating competitors, motivated by specific events stretching back into their childhood and to the weapons exhibition. It is not clear who will inherit the throne and the subjects (*prajā*) appear to be split (*bheda*) themselves, and may be leaning towards the Pāṇḍavas, which only fuels the existing fissure between the cousins and spurs further violent acts that display the *MBh*'s political-entropic vision.

The Daughter of Fire and Bridegroom "Choice": Political Integration through Draupadī

Returning to the imagery of fire, king Drupada's daughter, Draupadī, is born directly from a sacrificial fire that was designed to produce a child that could destroy Drupada's archenemy, Droṇa. During a sacrificial ritual in Book 1, the narrator recounts the dual birth of a son, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, and then of a young woman:

> [A] young maiden arose from the center of the altar … She was dark, with eyes like lotus petals … a lovely Goddess who had chosen a human form. … And over the full-hipped maiden as soon as she was born the disembodied voice spoke: 'Superb among women, the Dark Woman [Kṛṣṇā] shall lead the *kṣatriya*s to their doom. The fair-waisted maiden shall in time accomplish the purpose of the Gods, and because of her, great danger shall arise for the *kṣatriya*s. (*MBh* 1.155.41–45)

My analysis here is indebted to Fitzgerald's insights regarding relations between the Pāṇḍavas and three Kṛṣṇas. Again, brahmins are clever at weaving together multiple types of imagery to outline a totalizing, interconnected cosmic order stretching from divinities to natural phenomena and human politics.

Importantly, this birth story connects perhaps *the* central female figure, Draupadī, to the future destruction of the evil, demon-incarnated *kṣatriya*s mentioned earlier, whom the Pāṇḍavas are destined to destroy. However, this passage also intimates how she will be the source of danger for *kṣatriya*s as such, which includes the Pāṇḍavas, as the partial cause for a war that will eradicate nearly all human *kṣatriya*s. Draupadī will partly achieve this by uniting with the Pāṇḍavas as their wife, playing a dual role in helping renew the power of the Pāṇḍavas while simultaneously destroying their enemies, kicked off by the next major event: Draupadī's bridegroom choice (*svayaṃvara*).

To set the context, a *svayaṃvara* ("self-choice") presents yet another arena in which *kṣatriya*s can compete with one another, here for the hand of a wife. The ceremony is a way of selecting a husband, often involving a public contest between suitors, but can also take the form of an assembly wherein a bride-to-be can choose herself between the suitors. For reasons I have already discussed, not much choice exists for Draupadī, as *daiva* (divine fate) and prior events have already laid significant groundwork for "choice" situations outside her control. The two most important parties that have attended the *svayaṃvara* (details below) are Duryodhana, his Kaurava brothers, and the Pāṇḍavas. The latter cousins have arrived incognito to uphold the public belief—especially the Kauravas'—that they were indeed burned alive in the house fire. Why so? During their exile and under the cover of a staged death, the five brothers have grown up and gathered strength while staying off Duryodhana's political radar, disguising themselves as brahmins in their current waning period. One reason they cannot expose their true identities is because they are ontologically and politically "incomplete," and to explain this point, I must turn briefly to the Brahmanical concept of *āśrama*, or life stage. After their adolescent military training and while in hiding, the Pāṇḍavas have progressed through the first stage of celibate studentship, or *brahmacarya.* Householder (*gārhastya*) constitutes the next stage, but to progress one needs a wife. This is where the *svayaṃvara* comes into play.

The central drama of the episode revolves around Arjuna, the only person who can achieve the necessary feat of bowstringing and target-hitting to win Draupadī's hand. During this event we can discern at least two symbolic levels involving the themes I have been discussing. First, the *svayaṃvara* will help unify the five Pāṇḍavas with the one fire-born Draupadī into a single familial-political unit. The challenge requires stringing a firm bow that only Arjuna can string, and to hit a single "target" (Draupadī as wife) with five "arrows" (Pāṇḍavas as husbands). The literal target remains passive and powerless, as is Draupadī in the situation, and arrows are one of the key military symbols and instruments of the *kṣatriya*, the *varṇa* of the Pāṇḍavas. Second, on genealogical and cosmological levels, Draupadī represents two significant incarnations. She exists as the incarnation of a maiden

who in a previous life had prayed to Śiva for a husband on five occasions (*MBh* 1.157), and the boon was finally promised by the god to be realized in her next life. But she is also the incarnation of the goddess Śrī (light, radiance; also prosperity, good fortune; *MBh* 1.189.28–29). In Hindu mythology, Śrī assists Indra in restoring the ruler's political power, showing how the goddess is a necessary component of royal power and the material prosperity that comes from *dharmic* rule. Each of these incarnations symbolizes a unification with significant political ramifications. The winning of Draupadī will ontologically, cosmologically, and politically complete the Pāṇḍavas as a potential ruling power, with some of the most relevant political elements examined below.[12]

To start, her marriage to Arjuna and his brothers leads to a direct political alliance between the Pāṇḍavas and Pāñcālas (*MBh* 1.187), which puts a geo-political squeeze on Hāstinapura, home of the Kauravas. Once Duryodhana gets word that the "brahmins" they had competed with and briefly fought after the *svayaṃvara* (Arjuna and his brothers maintained their disguises following the event), the narrator explains that "Prince Duryodhana too returned [to Hāstinapura] with his brothers in low spirits," fearful of the Pāṇḍavas new alliance with Drupada (*MBh* 1.192.9, 14–15). As always, Duryodhana's diffidence will have destructive future consequences.

Moreover, revisiting the concept of *āśrama*, with a wife the Pāṇḍavas can now pass from the *brahmacarya* (studenthood) life stage and their childhood family as sons of Kuntī to the *gārhastya* (householder) stage as husbands of Draupadī, and thus pass fully into adulthood. Here the woman born of fire to extinguish the earth's evil rulers (with her husband-*deva*s, of course) serves as a precondition for integrating the Pāṇḍavas as a political unit, with the eldest Yudhiṣṭhira as the hierarchical head and *rāja.* However, to become such a unit the Pāṇḍavas also need a home and kingdom of their own, which must of course include some sort of palatial structure.[13] Soon the Pāṇḍavas will receive half of the Kuru kingdom from Dhṛtarāṣṭra in a highly contentious partition, much to the cha-

12 One might reasonably ask how she becomes the wife of all five brothers when it was Arjuna that technically "won" her. In narrative terms, upon returning home with his new bride-to-be, the Pāṇḍavas' mother, Kuntī, has her back turned to Arjuna and Bhīma as they approach and tells her sons—not knowing precisely what they bring home—to share the "alms" they announce they are carrying. After learning that it is a woman, she lamentingly explains that she cannot go back on her word and be made a liar, which is a consistent motif in the epic generally (*MBh* 1.182). Drupada then assents to the polyandrous marriage of his daughter after Vyāsa provides him a cosmological justification in the story of the five Indras (*MBh* 1.189).

13 On the Brahmanical view that the kingdom is a ruler's household writ large, eliciting a strong sense of interconnected responsibility, see Bowles (2007).

grin of Duryodhana and his brothers, which will be a forest tract that must be cleared to establish their "household-kingdom" and assembly hall. The subsequent events will again stoke Duryodhana's jealousy and his next effort to disintegrate the Pāṇḍavas as political competitors.

Partition, Abduction, and a Forest Fire: Pāṇḍavas Waxing

The sitting Kuru king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, under the guidance of Vidura (his stepbrother), Bhīṣma (grandfather of the clan), and Droṇa, decides to partition and offer the Pāṇḍavas half the kingdom, giving them the Khāṇḍava Forest tract (*MBh* 1.195–196, 199). This introduces a new geo-political partition (*bheda*) into the narrative that both represents and exacerbates the existing split between the cousins, and yet another disintegration following the Pāṇḍavas' first exile. As the Pāṇḍavas resume their true identities and re-enter the political picture, signaling the transition into a new waxing period for their family, we again witness the reemergence of *saṅgha* political elements that brahmins take as conducive to disaster. That is, we not only see a potential challenge to the top-down, unitary power of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (king)/Duryodhana (prince), but also the involvement of a populace that supports the Pāṇḍavas:

> In their [i.e., the receiving party's] midst the warlike heroes [i.e., the Pāṇḍavas] radiantly made their slow entry into the city of Hāstinapura. The city where the tigerlike men dispelled all grief and sorrow well-nigh burst with curiosity. Their well-wishers raised their friendly voices in all tones, and the Pāṇḍavas listened to their words, which touched their hearts … 'Can there be any greater pleasure in store for us, now that our heroic lords, sons of Kuntī, have returned? If we have given, if we have sacrificed, if we have practiced austerities, it is for that that the Pāṇḍavas shall stay in the city a hundred autumns!' (*MBh* 1.199.14–20)

While the Pāṇḍavas possess a measure of public support, they accept the king's proposal and set out for the Khāṇḍava Tract to establish their new home, Indraprastha ("Indra's station"), thus solidifying the kingdom's geographic partition. Here the narrator tells us how they "built a beautiful city like a new heaven…. [and] the grand city shone," going into extensive detail about the city's military strengths and fortitude, along with its material wealth and fecundity (*MBh* 1.199.26–45). With the fortified, flourishing city now established, the Pāṇḍavas have effectively positioned themselves to expand by making a new political alliance.

This alliance occurs, strangely enough, through a family-assisted abduction. While Arjuna sojourns in the forest after the establishment of Indraprastha, he attends a festival where he sees and falls in love with his dear friend's (Kṛṣṇa's) sister, Subhadrā (*MBh* 1.211). The subsequent marriage between Arjuna and Subhadrā

will lead to the Pāṇḍavas' next major alliance with Kṛṣṇa's clan, the Vṛṣṇis. Importantly, the abduction of Subhadrā displays how alliances are not only built for cosmological reasons (e.g., the Pāṇḍava family) or based on military respect (Pāṇḍavas and Pāñcālas) but also founded on "justified" force and violence, a *varṇa* duty for *kṣatriya*s. While brides purportedly choose their own grooms among the *kṣatriya varṇa*, which Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna when the Arjuna asks him how best to "obtain" Subhadrā (*MBh* 1.211.20), Kṛṣṇa curiously notes that the method of *svayaṃvara* "is dubious, Pārtha [i.e., Arjuna], since one's own sentiments have no influence on the outcome. Forcible abduction is also approved as a ground of marriage for *kṣatriya*s who are champions, as the Law-wise know. Abduct my beautiful sister by force, for who would know her designs at a bridegroom choice?" (*MBh* 1.211.21–23). There are two interrelated points I want to make here regarding the relationship between gender, on the one hand, and duty as morally justified action, on the other.

The first point concerns the male gender and the Sanskrit term that van Buitenen translates as "champion," namely *śūra.* This term is often associated with the *kṣatriya varṇa* and denotes strength, heroism, and bravery, which are ontological characteristics of male *kṣatriya*s within epic political thought. At a deeper level than his being a demarcated individual—although one's individuality is also important—Arjuna is a specific "type" of person with particular *varṇa* duties. One such duty is the proper exercise of force and violence in service of *dharma.*[14] So, for a warrior designated as *śūra*, Kṛṣṇa claims this is a perfectly valid method for obtaining a bride. But here one might ask: how could such sketchy behavior serve *dharmic* purposes, especially since it eradicates Subhadrā's choice (*svayam-* [self-], *vara-* [choice]) in the matter?

This question elucidates a second point as to how the epic's brahmin authors view not only cosmological justification for human beings' political actions, but also women's roles in political affairs. Cosmologically, we must first remember that Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation of the Supreme Person and Lord/Ruler, so his word goes—after all, he serves as one of the ruling bookends I mentioned earlier. Brahmins posit a singular, overarching *cosmic* ruler as the answer to political discord and as warrant for a single *human* monarch on earth, with the former justifying the latter. Kṛṣṇa purportedly knows how things will play out, so his injunction to Arjuna merely follows a larger cosmic plan and framework. Politically, the marriage to Subhadrā will assist in forging an alliance between two major ruling families before the war, the Pāṇḍavas and Vṛṣṇis, with Time (*kāla*) simultaneously rip-

14 On the significance of this typology in the early to middle Vedic period in Brahmanical political thought, see Gray (2017, chapters 3 and 4).

ening the Pāṇḍavas and withering their competitor Kauravas before the battle commences. The Pāṇḍavas thus collect geographic alliances with many of the major kingdoms surrounding the Kauravas, placing the latter cousins in a weaker geo-political position.

However, concerning the political role of women, Time strengthens the Pāṇḍavas by diminishing the power of a woman's choice. Here we are reminded of Drupada's staged *svayaṃvara* that eradicated Draupadī's choice of groom. This is no coincidence. Time operates as a causal agent by simultaneously strengthening one party while weakening or destroying another. One of the most significant political themes in the epic follows: for the dharmic *kṣatriya* to wax others must cyclically wane. Women and self-determination then become important sacrificial victims that Brahmanism wants to frame as positively sacrificial, for nothing can be gained without creative, sacrificial destruction. Women, following their *strī-dharma* (duty proper to women), become a necessary peg for cosmic *dharma* that has a gendered masculine parallel, as Arjuna is a sacrificial peg for his masculinized *kṣatriya-* (*varṇa-) dharma* as a *śūra.* We must also bear in mind that this is all at Kṛṣṇa's behest, as cosmically ordained sacrifice (*yajña*) helps to instantiate an interconnected cosmo-political order through monarchy or autarchy. Symbolizing an instrument of such order in clearing the way for something new, Time and monarchical rule, like fire, must destroy things like independent choice or idiosyncratic desires for the sake of a larger duty and establishing moral order. Because Time remains impersonal, brahmins are also suggesting that the narrative characters *and the audience listening* should not take this process personally or question it. We should not be upset with things ultimately outside our control, or angry with causal agents who do not target us personally. This is precisely the sort of idea we see in the final episode I would like to analyze, the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest.

This concluding episode of Book 1 provides one of the most intriguing and representative examples of Brahmanical political thinking on the themes discussed thus far. To provide a brief overview, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa (also called the "two Kṛṣṇas" during the forest fire, [*MBh* 1.218.19]), while enjoying a break from a heatwave near the cool Yamunā river, run into a "fiery looking brahmin" that turns out to be the fire god, Agni (*MBh* 1.214.15–32). Agni is incredibly hungry and wants to devour the Khāṇḍava Forest as food, but Indra always protects his snake friend, Takṣaka, who lives in the forest by sending deluges to extinguish Agni (*MBh* 1.215.5–6). Agni thus seeks the assistance of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, who agree to help him and fend off Indra while Agni consumes the entire forest and all its inhabitants as food. Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are successful in turning Indra and his fellow gods back during this gruesome episode, as they joyfully assist Agni in killing any animals that seek refuge or escape from the fire (*MBh* 1.217–225). The immense vi-

olence, combined with joy that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa exhibit in this episode, is understandably confusing because it seems to fly in the face of central virtues such *ahiṃsā* (non-cruelty), *ānṛśaṃsya* (absence of cruelty), and *anukampā* (compassion). These virtues are consistently cited as important even for *kṣatriya*s and a ruler, whose duty is to protect all beings, especially within the geographic bounds of their kingdom. In one particularly macabre series, the narrator tells us:

> Standing on their chariots at both ends of the forest, the two tigerlike men started a vast massacre of the creatures on every side. Indeed, whenever the heroes saw live creatures escaping … they chased them down. … Many were burning in one spot, others were scorched—they were shattered and scattered mindlessly, their eyes abursting. … As all watery places came to a boil, the turtles and fish were found dead by the thousands. With their burning bodies the creatures in that forest appeared like living torches until they breathed their last. When they jumped out, the Pārtha [Arjuna] cut them to pieces with his arrows and, laughing, threw them back into the blazing Fire. (*MBh* 1.217.1–12)

Here we might justifiably wonder how this violence could be justified, let alone a humorous or joyous event. As Ruth Cecily Katz has noted, this is one of the most difficult sections of the epic to understand since the two heroes' behavior "deliberately flouts the doctrine of nonviolence… and violates the rules of warfare … which states that innocent bystanders are never to be slain in battle" (1989: 72–73). So, how would we make sense of this scene and connect it with the analysis this chapter has offered?

Symbolically, Katz has made a compelling case for such permissible violence through a comparison to a scene in another work of Indo-European literature, namely the fight between Achilles and the river Skamandros in the *Iliad* (74). She argues that both episodes "are based upon a common Indo-European symbolism, which visualizes the hero's activity as resembling that of fire, against which fire's opposite, water, is a natural opponent" (74).[15] She also points out how this symbolism is inherent in the animating energy of a warrior, namely *tejas* (fiery energy, fierceness). The resemblance to fire resonates with the interpretation that I've been developing insofar as it can be seen not only as a destructive force but also an entity that can serve positive purposes in the future, including political purposes. Katz similarly notes how the goal of every sacrifice is creative, with sacrificial fires bringing down rain (77). The warrior as a fiery persona is often depicted as "burning down" his enemies in battle, and this symbolism pervades the bat-

15 Katz also compares the Khāṇḍava episode with an episode in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which she sees the heroes' behavior as expressive of an initiatory rite in an experience of death and rebirth for a hero during a period of isolation, as well as an opportunity for Arjuna to fight and prove himself as a man to his father, Indra (81).

tle scenes that follow the *BhG*. Second, the connection to *tejas* is significant considering my analysis in the next chapter, because it equates to the *guṇa* (strand or constituent of material nature [*prakṛti*]) of *rajas* (activity, passion) in Sāṃkhya philosophy. This constituent of the material world is the predominating quality of the *kṣatriya-varṇa*—a quality that philosophically underlies Arjuna's obligation to engage in battle. Arjuna's own fiery nature as a warrior thus parallels Agni's nature.

Politically speaking, on a narrative level this fire paves the way for building the Pāṇḍavas' future assembly hall, which plays a key role in the next entropic series of events leading to the Pāṇḍavas' second exile and stage of political waning before the war. Hence, it follows the cyclical causal logic that is essential to the conceptual framework of Book 1, the *BhG*, and the remainder of the epic. For example, Agni/Fire summons the god Varuṇa to assist the two Kṛṣṇas (Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa), and Varuṇa provides them with the requisite weapons to defeat Indra and his army of gods. These weapons—particularly Arjuna's Gāṇḍīva bow with "two inexhaustible quivers" and Kṛṣṇa's razor-sharp discus (*cakra*, also meaning "wheel," which will "burn down" creatures)—will play important future roles in the Pāṇḍavas' victory over the Kauravas. In a rare act of kindness during the fire, Arjuna also agrees to protect an *asura* (demon) named Māyā (*MBh* 1.219.35–40), who, as a reward for his protection, will serve as the architect and builder for the Pāṇḍavas' luxurious assembly hall, the magnificence of which will stoke Duryodhana's jealousy and anger yet again at the start of Book 2. This episode thus plays an important part in setting up future narrative events, giving the epic a growing sense of inevitable conflict associated with *daiva* and a violent entropy into which characters will be portrayed as helplessly devoured in the gaping, fiery maw of the Supreme Person in the *BhG* (*BhG* 11.23–30).

Finally, on a historical and conceptual level, this episode provides a fascinating glimpse into how brahmin authors engage in conceptual innovation and synthesis of older, Vedic ideas and figures with newer ideas associated with the political turn towards monarchy and *bhakti* (devotion). The confrontation between the two Kṛṣṇas and Indra's army presents us with a clear view of the older Vedic pantheon of divine *rāja*s (e.g., Indra, Varuṇa, Mitra), on the one hand, and the newer conceptualization of a Supreme godhead in the forms of Kṛṣṇa as an avatar of Viṣṇu and Nara-Nārāyaṇa incarnated as Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa, on the other. Interestingly, after the two Kṛṣṇas defeat Indra's army of Vedic gods, "a disembodied voice spoke to Indra" and told him "You cannot defeat Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa] and Arjuna when they stand fast in war … They are the two divinities Nara and Nārāyaṇa, who are renowned in heaven. You yourself know well of their power and bravery. Unassailable, invincible in battle, these two ancient great seers cannot be vanquished in any world. They are most worshipful to all the Gods …" (*MBh* 1.219.11–17). In this scene, the epic's brahmin authors are clearly developing, within a militarized

and devotional context and vocabulary, the late- and post-Vedic devotional tradition to Viṣṇu as the Supreme Lord (*īśvara*). The developments are deftly made not only in having Indra "shed his wrath and indignation" (*MBh* 1.219.19) upon hearing the voice and accepting the outcome as justified, but also in depicting Indra as *pleased* with the two Kṛṣṇas' moxie during battle: "The God of the Hundred Sacrifices [Indra], seeing how the hosts of the Gods turned away, continued to be pleased and praised Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍava [Arjuna]" (*MBh* 1.219.11). In fact, after Agni has completed his meal and the fire has subsided, Indra reappears to tell the two Kṛṣṇas: "You have accomplished a feat that even the Immortals find difficult. I am pleased: choose boons, even such as are hard to obtain and beyond human power!" (*MBh* 1.225.8–9). We should also remember that Arjuna is both Indra's son and one-fifth of his incarnation on earth, so there is a strong cosmological connection being made between older (Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa) and newer (Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa) rulers and conceptions of cosmo-political power.

I argue that these scenes depict a Brahmanical political project of unification as they attempt to fold the older Vedic polytheism into a monotheistic framework without dismissing the Vedic tradition—all while having the traditional warrior-god Indra, "king of the gods," happily accept the outcome. The diachronic elements of the text are intriguing partly because the authors show us a *bheda* between celestial *kṣatriya*s, which represents a transition between the old and new, and then find ways to reconcile the conflict within a new devotional, monotheistic framework that will emerge in Book 6 with the *BhG*'s infamous theophany. Moreover, in this episode we see the brahmin and *kṣatriya* powers (*brahma-kṣatra*) fuse and demonstrate a Vedic connection to the fire god Agni. Another, related reason why setting the forest aflame could be seen as legitimate is because it satisfies a brahmin (Agni), and in doing so, clears and "purifies" the space for building Indraprastha. Fire's Vedic association with sovereignty and unified rule can also be seen here: the two *kṣatriya* warriors (Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa) pair with the brahmin Agni, whose fire clears the ground for a unified, monarchical polity under Yudhiṣṭhira's rule. In this instance, we see the Vedic polytheism overcome by this powerful *kṣatriya* pairing and a subtle granting of cosmo-political legitimacy to Nara-Nārāyaṇa, which, as I argue in the next two chapters, will legitimate a historical transition from *saṅgha* to monarchical rule encapsulated by Kṛṣṇa at the cosmic level, and Yudhiṣṭhira on the human level. Two final details are important to highlight.

First, in the above quote the last thing the disembodied voice tells Indra is that this divine pairing is "*most* worshipful (*pūjanīya*) to *all* the Gods," which incorporates the language of worship/devotion and consensus as politically significant in a cosmo-political context. The voice explains a cosmic hierarchy and devotional relationship that justifies the earthly outcome. Relatedly, the Khāṇḍava episode con-

cludes on a devotional note of friendship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, which reconciles and concludes the events on a cheerful note by folding the minimal plurality of "two" (Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa, Nara-Nārāyaṇa) into a monarchical singularity (Viṣṇu, "two Kṛṣṇas"/aspects of a single Kṛṣṇa, and other versions of the Supreme Being). Returning to Indra's boons above, "Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa] asked for eternal friendship with the Pārtha [Arjuna], and the Lord of the Gods [Indra] gave him his wish joyfully" (*MBh* 1.225.13). Hence, Book 1 concludes with an "eternal" alliance of friendship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, which may be the strongest and most significant political alliance in the entire epic. As Hiltebeitel has pointed out, the Vedic term *mitra* "has a primary meaning of 'ally' but can also sometimes be translated more usefully as 'friend'" (2012: 163). The political dimensions of a friendship-alliance synchronically extend back to the Vedic god Mitra, who is often paired with Varuṇa as Mitra-Varuṇa in early and middle Vedic thought, and is one of the most significant cosmic *rāja*s. As we shall see, *bhakti* (loving devotion to the godhead) is the glue that holds this alliance together under extreme duress and entropic violence.

On a thematic level, this friendship alliance—represented as one between Nara (the first, primeval person) and Nārāyaṇa (the great deity, synonymous with Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa)—reintroduces a dyarchy that gets unified through the events of the forest fire. The fire's simultaneous destruction and creation will culminate in a single overarching monarch ruling in celestial-human form. As mentioned above, Nara-Nārāyaṇa get the assistance of Agni/fire, who appears as a brahmin that unites these two as a single force in battle against the army of the older gods; importantly, this unity proves essential to the *BhG*'s political thought expressed on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. This passage communicates the message that brahmins have some deeper knowledge and capacity to unite ruling forces for *dharmic* political purposes. In turn, this fire could be interpreted as a sacrificial fire, with the forest and its creatures serving as sacrificial victims. As Katz remarks, a strong Vedic connection exists here between fire and sacrificial activity, as the *MBh* stands in line with ancient Vedic thought in viewing "sacrificial activity as the basis of universal order, the central task of the king or hero" (1989: 75). On this reading, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna support the sacrificial order of the universe through their own fiery activity in maintaining the higher *dharma* (75). Kurukṣetra will likewise serve as a space where the sacrificial fire of battle will consume the combatants as its victims. Here the *kṣatriya* pair fulfills their military duty in protecting Agni-as-brahmin as he burns the forest in a political sacrifice that will benefit the Pāṇḍavas as rulers, allowing Yudhiṣṭhira to take the next step towards coronation in a future *rājasūya* (kingly consecration) ritual. Part of the message here is that *kṣatriya*s need brahmins to complete their political projects because, synchronically extending back to the Vedic tradition of Brahmanical political thought,

brahmins and *kṣatriya*s are depicted as necessary compliments to one another, completing each other in a brahmin (poetic-priestly)/*kṣatra* (ruler, military) alliance. To conclude my analysis of the Khāṇḍava episode, the new Supreme Person and Ruler still needs the intermittent assistance of the ritual fire and brahmins, here personified as Agni, to maintain cosmic harmony by continuing the cycle of destruction/creation that is leading to the major sacrifice of the Kurukṣetra War. Following this war, the Pāṇḍavas and Yudhiṣṭhira will finally emerge as dharmic rulers.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined some of the most significant categories, concepts, and themes that provide a background for examining the *BhG*'s political thought. Explicating core themes and concepts in Book 1 is crucial, as much of the dramaturgical context and cosmo-theological background outlined in this book provides the framework within which epic politics operates and gains its significance. I have also begun to explain how epic political thought is a distinctly Brahmanical one and should be understood against the backdrop of historical developments leading up to the epic's final composition. In Book 1, the epic's brahmin authors display an uncanny ability to use categories such temporality and cosmology to develop and synthesize late Vedic and early Hindu ideas with previous Vedic ideas and figures, crafting a meta-narrative of sorts that would help—conceptually and ideologically—legitimate a transition from more plural, contentious *saṅgha*-style politics to a more integrated, centralized form of rulership under a single just ruler guided by brahmin advisors. As I have also explained, this involves using two rulers that serve as cosmic bookends to create a symmetry to encompass and contextualize the political entropy structuring the epic's politics. Political integration under Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava, however, will have to wait until the conclusion of a destructive war on the horizon.

In the next chapter, I will begin my examination of the *BhG.* While important narrative events take place after Book 1 leading up to the *BhG*, the theoretical framework that I have outlined in this chapter applies throughout the adjoining Books, clarifying key categories and concepts that prove crucial for explicating the *BhG*'s political thought. The first major category, temporality, operates in both a cyclical and entropic manner. This chapter has examined key examples of cyclical destruction/creation and (dis)integration. As I have begun to suggest, the superior yet temporary solution to these cycles, according to the Brahmanical authors of the text, is the political structure of Brahmanically advised monarchy. In the next two chapters, related to the second major category of cosmology, I will

unpack the deeper philosophical and ideological elements of this monarchical vision. The present chapter has initiated this analysis in the broader context of the *MBh*, explaining how a political *bheda* runs up and down the cosmic structure, from the *deva*s and *asura*s down to the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas.

Not only is there a political rupture or tear in the cosmic fabric, but time marches forward toward a destructive war, which lies precipitously on the other side of the *BhG.* This war will arguably, and perhaps paradoxically, have a positive outcome insofar as the cosmo-political split will be resolved by the ascension of the eldest Pāṇḍava brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, to the throne of Hāstinapura. However, while this monarchical transition appears to be the most important political development and outcome of the war, I will argue that the deepest ideological lesson and monarchical model is actually located in the figure of Kṛṣṇa. While Arjuna is the primary student of the *BhG* within the context of the dialogue and Kṛṣṇa's primary target, Arjuna also serves as a model for anyone reading the *BhG* itself. That is, Arjuna's lesson is the first step in explaining how the text's brahmin authors address the question of how to act in troubled political times. In this sense, Kṛṣṇa's lesson to Arjuna is not only intended for a broader audience within its own historical context but also within a transhistorical context applying to anyone, at any given time.

Chapter 2
Ascetic Arjuna: (Im)Mortal Self as Political Battlefield and Becoming a Yogic Hero

Contextualizing the political thought of the *BhG* within the *MBh* remains essential, since key themes introduced in Book 1 of the *MBh* supply the necessary conceptual framework for explicating the *BhG*'s political theory as a justificatory theory for rule anchored in Brahmanism. Here political cosmology serves as the organizing framework for understanding how Brahmanical political thought, extending from the Vedic into the post-Vedic period, creatively synthesizes ideas of martial and spiritual heroism. On the surface of the epic lies the key conflicts between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas as martial clans seeking to consolidate political power. Beneath this level, however, lies the historical experiences of the alienated Brahmanical authors of the epic and *BhG.* These authors claimed to possess not only the supreme knowledge contained in Vedic texts, but also answers to how key political and spiritual ideas could be woven together in a totalizing theory framed through cosmology, ontology, and metaphysics. The *BhG* thoroughly synthesizes these categories in its political vision. As I will argue in the next two chapters, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa represent key figures for this vision, culminating in a tri-level, monarchical unification that could serve as a political-philosophical solution to finding temporary peace in a conflict-ridden age. What the *BhG* thus represents is an astute attempt by brahmins to justify not only their religio-political significance to society at large but also a comprehensive theory exhibiting a deeply ideological vision of the world.

Within this vision, Arjuna stands as one of the two central characters in the *BhG* and the primary target of Kṛṣṇa's teaching. As we saw in the last chapter, the *MBh* portrays a world that is always veering entropically, so both the self and society must be properly ruled to prevent their untimely destruction. Proper rule at the level of the self, I will argue, operates "yogically" through self-discipline directed toward deeper levels of self-knowledge, which ultimately leads toward liberation from the cycle of suffering, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*), and finally achieves *mokṣa* (liberation). Yogic self-rule at the micro-level entails becoming a *yogin* (contemplative ascetic), and I outline below how Kṛṣṇa describes this ascetic figure to Arjuna. Consequently, in the face of an entropic world and temporality, one must be able and willing to efface personal attachments to others to perform one's duties with the proper sensibility of dharmic disinterestedness. Before examining the *yogin*, I first explain the structure of the self and how the body is politicized as a "nine-gated fortress" (*pur*; *BhG* 5.13), with "the embodied self" (*dehin* or

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ātman) dwelling inside.[1] I then explicate the significance of this description as a basis for the micro-level politics that is the starting point for the *BhG*'s political thought. I first examine the self to argue that the *BhG*'s political thought and vision of proper rule begins at the individual level, which we must unpack before turning to the meso-level of interpersonal politics. As we approach this meso-level, my analysis returns to fire imagery as a symbol of political unification, which appears as a synthetic theme running throughout both the *MBh* and *BhG*. Ultimately, this imagery leads to a vision of heroism that finds its perfection in devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Both religious and philosophical thinking then support political unification through the Supreme Godhead, thus unifying the micro-, meso-, and macro-cosmological levels to support a form of deep ideology, which I will revisit in the final three chapters of the book.

Micro-Politics and the Material World: Ontology of the Self as Political Battlefield

According to the *BhG*, individuals are multifaceted and possess several hierarchically related components, and we can begin to see how this is the case by returning to the beginning of the *BhG*'s dramatic staging. Standing in his chariot situated between the Pāṇḍava and Kaurava armies, Arjuna becomes utterly despondent with the idea of slaughtering his kith and kin. As he laments to his charioteer and dear friend Kṛṣṇa: "When I see all my family poised for war, my limbs falter and my mouth goes dry. ... I am not able to hold my ground and my mind seems to whirl ... I see no good to come from killing my family in battle" (*BhG* 1.29–31). As an incarnation of the Supreme Being, the divine Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to dispel his doubts and engage in battle (*BhG* 2.3), explaining that Arjuna misunderstands the very nature of his own selfhood and existence. Arjuna's misapprehension, according to Kṛṣṇa, begins with an ontological distinction lying at the heart of one of the text's expressed philosophical systems, Sāṃkhyan dualism, which enumerates several concepts predicated on a fundamental distinction between spirit and physical matter. Along these lines, one of the central concepts in the *BhG*, *dehin*, denotes an "embodied one that does not perish." The term denotes a *deha*, or physical body, and an *ātman*, an inner spirit or self that inhabits the body as an inactive spectator. In one of many passages explaining the relationship between the *ātman* and its physical body, Kṛṣṇa explains: "Never was there a time when I did not exist, or you, or these kings, nor shall any of us cease to exist hereafter.

1 The "gates" here refer to the nine bodily orifices.

Just as creatures with bodies [*dehinaḥ*, "possessing a body"] pass through childhood, youth, and old age in their bodies, so there is a passage to another body, and a wise man is not confused about it" (*BhG* 2.11–13). The first part of this passage needs unpacking, as it refers to one of the core ontological concepts of the *BhG*, namely the *ātman*.

Kṛṣṇa begins by telling Arjuna that the two of them have always existed. While this is quite jarring for Arjuna to hear, elsewhere Kṛṣṇa explains that the *ātman* does not perish but rather persists over time and survives the body: "Our bodies are known to end, but the embodied self is enduring, indestructible and immeasurable; therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!" (*BhG* 2.22). Hence, the body ages as time destroys it but the *ātman*, the embodied one (*dehin*), does not. In these verses one also notes a cyclical process, wherein aging denotes an entirely acceptable, natural process beginning in childhood and progressing toward old age. According to Kṛṣṇa, there is nothing to lament about this progression within a lifetime, which is paralleled by a longer progression of the *ātman* passing from one body to the next—an entropic sub-cycle in itself. The cycle is inevitable and thus should not be lamented: "Suppose you hold that he is constantly born and constantly dead, you still have no cause to grieve over him, strong-armed prince, for to the born, death is assured, and birth is assured to the dead; therefore there is no cause for grief, if the matter is inevitable" (*BhG* 2.26–27). This idea would purportedly alleviate the attachment Arjuna feels to his and others' bodily existences, which supplies the first step in convincing Arjuna that he is foolhardy for not engaging in battle and endangering his bodily existence, along with the physical existence of others. The ontological relationship between the *ātman* and physical body is also significant, as one might ask: are these two entities completely distinct and disconnected from one another, or is there some level of attachment that would explain Arjuna's reticence to kill another person, let alone family and friends? What's causing his delusion?

To answer these questions, one must understand the ontology of the self expressed in the *BhG*. The *ātman* may be immaterial and imperishable, but ignorance of its existence at the deepest layer of Arjuna's selfhood arises because he is deluded by its apparent connection to *prakṛti* (primal, material nature). To begin with, *prakṛti* consists of the material, phenomenal world accessible through our sense faculties (*indriya*s). According to Kṛṣṇa, due to our tangible connection with this aspect of the world, including the sensations and desires it produces, we are easily led to believe that it constitutes our true, albeit fleeting, reality: "The contacts of the senses with their objects, which produces sensations of cold and heat, comfort and discomfort, come and go without staying. … When a man thinks about sense objects, an interest in them develops. From this interest grows desire, from desire anger" (*BhG* 2.14, 62). Hence, the senses connect and tend to bind us to the material

world, producing destructive emotions that do us harm.[2] These potentially destructive sense objects are the first, ontological wave of enemies for the self, and the *ātman* must properly stand guard over the nine-gated fortress, or body, through yogic discipline. This discipline, however, requires that Arjuna gain proper knowledge of additional structures of his selfhood. Importantly, the immortal *ātman* stands outside or beyond the material realm, but within this realm higher faculties exist, and we can ultimately discern the following hierarchical schema within oneself.

Above the sense faculties (*indriya*s) lie the *manas* (lower mind), *buddhi* (higher mind and intellect), and ultimately the *ātman* and *puruṣa* (pure, immaterial substrate of our being and selfhood). The *manas* is a cognitive faculty allowing us to process thoughts and physical sense impressions. Above this stands the *buddhi*, which allows us to discriminate between these impressions and make judgments about them, but it also supplies us with the capacity to ascertain the deeper ontological entity that is one's *ātman* and the pure consciousness of *puruṣa. Puruṣa* is a passive spectator standing beyond *prakṛti*, existing as a sentient entity that constitutes an aspect of the Supreme Being's higher nature. The being's reality is independent of and transcends the properties of material nature. Importantly, each of the faculties—*indriya*, *manas*, and *buddhi*—exists in the ontological realm of *prakṛti*, giving us access to and helping us make sense of the material, phenomenal world. Through the proper training in one of three paths to liberation (*mokṣa*)—knowledge (*jñāna*), disciplined action (*yoga*), or devotion (*bhakti*)—one can cross over the ontological divide between material *prakṛti* and immaterial *puruṣa* to cognize the deeper reality of the imperishable *ātman.*[3] As Kṛṣṇa summarizes: "The senses, they say, are superior to their objects; the mind [*manas*] is higher than the senses; the spirit [*buddhi*] is higher than the mind; and beyond the spirit is he [*ātman*]" (*BhG* 3.42). At this stage in the dialogue, Arjuna has not fully cognized this truth and continues to think that he, through his physical self, will be the causal actor in the death of his enemies.

According to the ontology outlined above, causal action all occurs within the realm of *prakṛti* governed by three distinct material forces or *guṇa*s (*BhG* 3.27–29), and Kṛṣṇa ultimately transcends all *prakṛti.* As he explains to Arjuna,

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2 For a contemporary expression of this argument regarding the importance of controlling one's emotions, which appears in a book published by the Gita Press and displays the impact the *BhG* has had on contemporary social and spiritual reform projects, see Freier (2012: 397–398).

3 The distinction between *puruṣa* and *ātman* is aspectual in nature. One could view them as two sides of the same coin: *puruṣa* refers more to the pluralized, immaterial aspects of the Supreme Being, while *ātman* refers to the immaterial aspect of a distinct self that is connected to a particular *buddhi-manas-indriya* construct that extends into the realm of *prakṛti.*

"Know that all conditions of being, whether influenced by *sattva*, *rajas*, or *tamas*, come from me; but I am not in them: they are in me" (*BhG* 7.12). Hierarchically aligned and serving as the chief properties or characteristics of all existent material things, the forces (*guṇa*s) of *sattva* (lucidity, purity, goodness), *rajas* (passion, emotion), and *tamas* (darkness, ignorance, illusion) drive causal relations in the physical world and help constitute a person's nature (*BhG* 14.1–27). Kṛṣṇa thus claims that he, as the Supreme Being, exists as the causal totality within which these material forces operate. Kṛṣṇa also explains how the preponderance of a particular *guṇa* at one's death will dictate how one is reborn: "If the embodied soul dies when *sattva* reigns, he attains to the pure worlds of those who have the highest knowledge. The one dying in *rajas* is reborn among people who are given to action; while one expiring in *tamas* is born among the witless" (*BhG* 14.14–15). These *guṇa*-forces are all part of Kṛṣṇa's creative, illusory power, called *māyā.* In fact, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that he must "create himself" in avatar form in the realm of *prakṛti* from eon to eon, using his *māyā*, in order to reestablish *dharmic* order (*BhG* 4.5–9). I will discuss these larger cosmological topics in the next section of the chapter, but it is relevant to point out that in transcending the cycle of rebirth, the *guṇa*s also play a crucial role:

> When a man of insight perceives that no one but the *guṇa*s acts and knows the one who transcends the *guṇa*s, he ascends to my being [i.e., *ātman* merging with its source, *brahman*, the unmanifest absolute]. By transcending these three *guṇa*s, which are the sources of the body, the embodied soul rids himself of the miseries of birth, death, and old age and becomes immortal. (*BhG* 14.9–10)

Arjuna can thus achieve *mokṣa* through a proper understanding of ontological truths that would release him from disillusioned attachment to the material realm. The imperishable self is *not* an actor or causal agent, which diverges from many familiar conceptions of agency that might be related to terms often used to translate *ātman*, such as "soul" or "spirit." In this regard the *BhG*'s stance on materialism remains crucial for understanding why all the killing and death that will result from the war is not to be lamented, at the end of the day, since this is the natural course of physical matter in an entropic world.

In sum, Arjuna's charioteer reveals himself as the causal force behind everything. As the supreme reality lying beyond all material creation, Kṛṣṇa is not only the efficient cause of everything at the level of *ātman*/*puruṣa*, but also the material cause of things through his *māyā* in the form of *prakṛti* and the three *guṇa*s. The final cause is dharmic order of the cosmos, which is inured in a process of gradual dissolution. I will discuss Kṛṣṇa and his political associations in greater detail in the next chapter, but here I want to ask: what does all this mean for Arjuna, espe-

cially concerning the nature of war and killing other human beings out of ethical-political or dharmic duty?

Categorically speaking, this means Arjuna's imperishable *ātman* cannot technically act in the phenomenal world because an ontological divide separates the material or phenomenal and immaterial realms. It follows that the true self, the *ātman*, cannot kill or be killed. Arjuna's delusion thus stems from his misapprehension of this ontological reality, whereby the lower parts of Arjuna's self that exist in the material world—the *buddhi, manas,* and *indriya*s, in descending order—mistakenly draw him toward and bind him to *prakṛti*, thus making him think *he* is the true killer. Ontologically, this could never be the case. Rather, death is part of yet another changing, cyclical state of *prakṛti* in which illusory aspects of a phenomenal world inevitably come and go, like new clothes and stages of a life cycle come to pass. Aging and death thus constitute what Kṛṣṇa explains as illusory modes of a deeper reality and agency that remain immune from material destruction. Along these lines, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna two important things. First, he claims, "At any rate, actions are performed by the three forces of nature, but deluded by self-attribution, one thinks: 'I did it!'," thus failing to "see that all actions are performed by Prakṛti alone and that the self [*ātman*] does not act at all" (*BhG* 3.27; 13.29). Second, he explains, "For whenever Law [*dharma*] languishes, Bhārata [Arjuna], and lawlessness flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law" (*BhG* 4.7–9). Therefore, Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate cause of death and all righteous order, including political order. Nevertheless, for *dharmic* order to be attained, Arjuna must perform his duty and engage in this battle, doing so in a particular state of consciousness.

Before examining this state of consciousness and yogic rule over oneself, I must highlight an important Sanskrit term used to describe the body, *pur*, which fills out some of the most intriguing political dimensions that exist at the micro-level of the self. Previous scholars have not unpacked the significance of this term for the *BhG*'s political ontology, which has prevented them from fully appreciating how the text's political thought begins at the micro-level of the body. The term *pur* can denote a rampart, fortress, or castle, but also a city or town. Likening the body to such structures and bearing the discussion of key ontological terms mentioned above, especially those associated with the self, we can see how the body and its internal components could be viewed as a sort of "city" containing a plurality of interrelated entities (e.g., *buddhi*, *manas*, *indriya*s). Moreover, the martial associations of a defensive fortress intimate the constant threat of conflict and entropic destruction that can occur with(in) a physical body that is drawn toward any number of sense objects out in the world. These sense objects all represent potential "enemies"—namely the destructive, offensive elements that call

forth a defensive position of the nine-gated fortress. As we shall see in greater detail, at any time the sense objects can overpower the fortress of the body and become rulers over our higher faculties such as the *buddhi*, thus drawing the *ātman* into another round of (re)birth and suffering.

Relatedly, other potential enemies are woven into our ontology per the *guṇa* of *rajas* (passion, emotion): "It is desire [*kāma*], it is anger [*krodha*], which springs from the force of *rajas*, the great devourer, the great evil: know that that is the enemy here … Therefore, bull of the Bharatas [Arjuna], first control your senses, then kill off that evil which destroys insight and knowledge" (*BhG* 3.37, 41). One material "thread of our being," namely *rajas*, opens us to these destructive vices and conflicts that they create, both internally and externally. Desire and anger thus become some of our most persistent enemies at the level of the self. As the second part of this passage indicates, this evil destroys our would-be knowledge regarding what is highest and most essential in each of us. The passions and objects of the passions can easily overrun the fortress if they are not ruled over in the proper fashion. Moreover, one can read a subtle historical-ideological element in this micro-politics, which I will mention briefly and elaborate on in greater detail in the next chapter. The sense objects that stir our destructive emotions are plural, while a properly ruled self is ruled in a more stratified, monarchical fashion. Here we see a connection to older *saṅgha*-style politics associated with plurality, paralleling the multiple senses and sense-objects, contrasted with a monarchical politics organized under single ruler (*ātman*, ultimately Kṛṣṇa) represented in the Pāṇḍava camp in the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira—whose name also means "firm or steady in battle." The battle thus begins internally, as various components of the self interact with one another while simultaneously interacting with the external world and sense objects. The very name "Yudhiṣṭhira" personifies the *BhG*'s micro-political stance. So, now we must ask: what does a "well-defended fortress" look like? This brings us to the position of the disciplined *yogin*.

Get Yoked! Yogic Ruling, Dharmic Disinterestedness, and the Politics of Effacement

Kṛṣṇa describes the *yogin*, or meditative ascetic, in numerous passages. The first mention of the qualities of such a figure appears in chapter 2, with a description of "the person whose insight stands firm," or *sthita-prajña*, as one who "forsakes all the desirable objects that come to his mind … and is sufficient unto himself. Not distressed in adversities, without craving for pleasures, innocent of passion, fear and anger, he is called a sage whose insight is firm" (*BhG* 2.55–56). In a memorable

passage, Kṛṣṇa makes one of his many analogies to the natural world, but one that nicely encapsulates some of the ideas discussed thus far:

> When he entirely withdraws his senses from their objects as a tortoise withdraws its limbs, his insight stands firm. For an embodied man who does not eat,[4] the sense objects fade away, except his taste for them; his taste, too, fades when he has seen the highest. (*BhG* 2.58–59)

Here we see how one must restrain oneself and refrain from making strong, egoistic connections to sense objects. The philosophical term and compound describing this "renunciate in disinterested action" is a *saṃnyāsayogayuktātmā*, "one whose self is yoked to the *yoga* of renunciation" (*BhG* 9.28). When this is accomplished and one has climbed up the "ontological ladder," so to speak, and realized that the *buddhi*, *ātman*, and eventually the imperishable *brahman* and Kṛṣṇa are the "highest" things, this person's insight stands on firm ground and remains there, ruling from within.

Later in the text, Kṛṣṇa goes into greater detail about the *yogin*, explaining one of the central philosophical pillars of the *BhG*, namely non-attachment to the consequences or "fruits" (*phala*) of one's actions. In chapter 6, Kṛṣṇa explains:

> Know, Pāṇḍava [Arjuna], that what they proclaim as 'renunciation' is precisely this discipline, for no one becomes a man of discipline without abandoning the intention of fruits … For he is said to have risen to the discipline only when he is interested no longer in sense objects, no longer in his acts, but has renounced all intentions. (*BhG* 6.1, 4)

The *yogin* must renounce his attachment to the fruits or consequences of one's actions, but not renounce action altogether. Rather, one must non-egoistically and "sacrificially" fulfill one's respective duties, which uphold the proper structure within oneself, within society, and within the cosmos more broadly. The *yogin*, I will argue, must therefore act in a state of dharmic disinterestedness, thus becoming an ascetic ruler over oneself—one that does not forsake action entirely, but quite the opposite. I will unpack each of these claims below.

Considering the knowledge that the *ātman* is an interconnected aspect of the Supreme Being, "Puruṣottama" (i. e., Kṛṣṇa in his unmanifest, absolute form), one must relinquish credit for one's actions. In another passage that captures Kṛṣṇa's teachings, Kṛṣṇa states that results of one's actions must be given up to Kṛṣṇa as a form of sacrifice:

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4 Van Buitenen clarifies that this phrasing is figurative, meaning someone "who does not feed on, thrive on, external objects" (1981: 163).

> But he who curbs his senses [*indriyas*] with his mind [*manas*], Arjuna, and then disinterestedly undertakes the discipline of action with his active faculties, stands out. All the world is in bondage to the karmic consequences of action, except for action for the purposes of sacrifice: therefore, engage in action for that purpose, disinterestedly … (*BhG* 3.7–9)

Intentionality thus plays a central role in the *BhG*'s theory of action. As Kṛṣṇa states, "The wise call that man a sage all of whose undertakings are devoid of intention to achieve an object of desire, for his *karman* [consequences of the act] has been burned off by the fire of insight. If one engages in an act while forgetting about its fruit … one does not incur any *karman* [negative *karmic* residue] at all" (*BhG* 4.19–20). Assuming responsibility for the fruits of one's actions binds the person to *prakṛti*, thus preventing liberation. Arjuna can only progress toward escaping the cycle of death and rebirth by performing his dharmic duty in a disinterested fashion, without any regard for the consequences. This is the well-known idea of "desireless action," or *niṣkāma-karma.* Performing one's *svadharma* (one's own, proper duty) upholds social and cosmic structure, and this applies to Kṛṣṇa as well: "I have created the society of the four classes with due regard for the various distribution of the *guṇa*s … know that I am its author, and that I am forever without *karman.* Actions do not stick to me, for I have no yearning for the fruits of my actions"—that is, not in any egoistic sense (*BhG* 4.13–14). Attachment to the consequences of action, following the false belief that the senses and our material bodies put us in contact with what is most real about us, is what binds us to the world and the cycle of *saṃsāra.*

Liberation (*mokṣa*) requires following Kṛṣṇa's example, which entails acting dutifully to maintain the integrity and harmony of a three-tiered cosmic structure: the micro-level of the self, the meso-level of society, and the macro-level of the cosmos. Escaping one's material death requires familiarity with a deep organizing principle of the *BhG*, namely dharmic disinterestedness. At the micro-level of the self, one must understand how the *ātman* does not act and stands as a disinterested spectator of *prakṛti* and the body, the latter of which the *BhG* describes as the nine-gated fortress within which the *ātman* dwells peacefully and stands watch (*BhG* 5.13). At the meso-level of society, fulfilling one's *svadharma* entails disinterestedly acting out one's dharmic duties associated with family (*kūla-dharma*), life stage (*āśrama-dharma*), and social group (*varṇa-dharma*), which maintain the social order in a manner that parallels self-order at the micro-level. Finally, at the macro-level of the cosmos, Kṛṣṇa explains that he disinterestedly stands watch over the cosmos, creating himself when necessary in order to reestablish dharmic order (*BhG* 4.7–8). The theme of cyclical creation and destruction also plays a role at each level of dharmic disinterestedness. Because the body, socio-political order, and cosmos find themselves entwined in an entropic cycle spiraling toward degra-

dation and physical destruction, one reason the logic of disinterestedness would appear to make sense is because it would alleviate the anxiety and pain one suffers in experiencing processes of aging, death, and in Arjuna's case, killing other human beings.

To achieve a sensibility of dharmic disinterestedness requires someone to participate in what I will call a *politics of effacement*. That is, human beings must diffuse strong attachments to particular people and specific relationships by effacing, or erasing, the significance of particular marks that exist at the surface-level of *prakṛti* to achieve a deeper understanding of one's broader socio-political duties. For example, Arjuna hesitates at the start of the *BhG* because he is overly attached to specific people such as Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Bhīṣma as his former teachers. Even participating in one's *varṇa* duties entails effacing specific attachments for a broader purpose or cause. It is not so much the particular person—say, Arjuna—that matters in this battle, but that he is a *kṣatriya* who must fight to perform his *svadharma* for the purposes of maintaining or enhancing the integrity of his self and the cosmos more broadly.[5] Such effacement dodges difficulties associated with particular attachments to other people (family members, friends, teachers), as well as the sentiment that we are the ultimate doers of our deeds and thus personally responsible for the subsequent consequences. As Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna, the *ātman* or true self does not really act at all, and the "doing of deeds" is simply *prakṛti* acting upon itself. In a sense, the *ātman* has no face to efface. Only in the realm of *prakṛti* is material carved up and given some type of face or self-demarcated physical identity. By effacing specific attachments Arjuna can then relinquish the idea that action is self-originating and self-referential in an egoistic manner, so that he can fruitfully participate in the process of cognizing his inherent connectedness to everything else in the cosmos and participate in integrating it in more fruitful ways according to *dharma.*

In the context of the *BhG*, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that his socio-political duty as a warrior supersedes his family duty, the latter of which would prevent him from fighting and killing family members. If family duties supersede his broader socio-political duty, he would fail to engage in battle, his side would likely lose, and the evil Kauravas would (wrongly) retain political power as rulers of Hāstinapura. Therefore, Arjuna must participate in a politics of effacement because otherwise both earthly and cosmic *dharma* would suffer further, and most importantly for the broader narrative, the demon-Kauravas would win. Hence, his *svadharma*

5 This is not to claim that Arjuna's specific identity is entirely unimportant in the broader narrative, only that his duty as a *kṣatriya* acts as a trump card over his own idiosyncratic preferences in this scenario, whatever those preferences may be.

is to follow injunctions according to the duties of his *kṣatriya-varṇa.* As Kṛṣṇa reminds him:

> The embodied being [*ātman*] is in anybody's body forever beyond killing … therefore you have no cause to sorrow over any creatures. Look at your *svadharma* and do not waver, for there is nothing more salutary for a *kṣatriya* than war that is lawful. It is an open door to heaven, happily happened upon; and blessed are the warriors, Pārtha [Arjuna], who find a war like that! (*BhG* 2.30–32)

Therefore, his duty is to fight heroically as a *kṣatriya*, to defeat the evil Kaurava forces, and to help his brothers establish a righteous political order. To fail to engage in battle would incur dishonor and shame, which is worse than physical death according to Kṛṣṇa (*BhG* 2.34–35). Moreover, Kṛṣṇa explains that following his *kṣatriya-dharma* results in a "win-win" situation: "Either you are killed and will then attain to heaven, or you triumph and will enjoy the earth" (*BhG* 2.37).

Yogic discipline, achieved through action (*karma-yoga*), knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*), or devotion to Kṛṣṇa (*bhakti-yoga*) all allow a person to efface problematic attachments to *prakṛti* and achieve *mokṣa* as liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. Linking each of these methods for achieving *mokṣa* constitutes an underlying philosophical principle of yogic discipline. The term *yoga* derives from the Sanskrit verb root, *yuj-*, which can mean "to yoke or harness" one thing to another, often in the sense of yoking one's horses to a chariot. Again, we see the martial aspects of the *BhG*'s ontology. The proper yoking process is associated with going into battle with one's fighting instruments properly yoked, which also entails having the proper agent in charge. Through each of the aforementioned methods, one can come to greater conscious awareness of the proper ontological components of oneself and the world around oneself, leading up to one innermost, imperishable self or spirit (*ātman*) that has no particular face.

Related to this martial image of yoking, the *ātman* had been likened to an actionless rider in a chariot with the *buddhi* serving as charioteer, the *manas* as the reins, the body as the chariot, and the sense objects as the surrounding paths. This influential allegory is first seen in early Upaniṣadic thought expressed in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* and is called the *Raṭha Kalpana.*[6] Proper yogic rule thus entails passing on to ever-higher entities and yoking oneself to whatever entities they happen to be. Without the *buddhi* holding the reins and the chariot-rider in control, the "horses" or senses will presumably run amok and take the inhabitants of the chariot in whatever direction the horses decide. Alf Hiltebeitel (2011b) explains the

6 See *KU* 1.3.3. On a detailed analysis of the Upaniṣadic connections and background for this "two Kṛṣṇa" image, see Hiltebeitel (2011b: 485–512).

deep Indo-European, Vedic, and Upaniṣadic philosophical background to the chariot allegory, which channels duality upward to a unity ordered by some higher entity. For example, citing passages from Book 11 in the *MBh* (11.7.13–15, 19cd–20), Hiltebeitel explains:

> Here *buddhi* as the restrainer-charioteer (*yantṛ*) is identifiable with *sattva*, 'goodness', the *guṇa* which characterizes the *buddhi* or understanding at its most lucid. On this ... 'spiritual' chariot, the *buddhi*, by restraining the horses of the senses and transforming them into yogic restraints identified as the 'horses of *brahman*,' enables the *ātman* to attain the world of *brahman*. ... [*B*]*uddhi* and *ātman* have a reciprocity that implies a unity, which may help explain why certain epic passages make the soul itself the charioteer. (2011b: 497–498)

In earlier Upaniṣadic passages, the endpoint for such unity was *brahman*, but in the devotional context of the *BhG*, we shall see how liberation requires passing through *brahman* to reach Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme God. As I will argue in Chapter 3, this provides further imagery in support of a unified, monarchical political vision.

Therefore, only in yoking himself to the highest will Arjuna understand why he must yoke himself to his dharmic duty as *kṣatriya* and fight the battle. As Kṛṣṇa commands Arjuna in chapter 2: "Yoke yourself to the battle!" (*BhG* 2.38). In the literal action of the *BhG* and taken from a broader metaphorical perspective, the charioteer is God himself. This command is both literal and philosophically significant: fight the battle against your enemies in the form of the Kauravas, which is also predicated on fighting the internal, ontological battle against destructive emotions in preparation for combatting attachment to the sense objects. In this context we can better understand a later passage where Kṛṣṇa states: "This body, Kaunteya [Arjuna], is called 'the field', and the ones who know this call the one who knows this 'field' the 'guide' to this field. Know, Bhārata, that I too am such a guide, *but to all fields*; this knowledge of guide and field I deem knowledge indeed" (*BhG* 13.1–2; italics mine). In the first part of the passage, the body is referred to as a "field," and I would add, "field of battle," with *ātman* as the proper "guide" to this field. However, Kṛṣṇa identifies himself as the highest guide, or the guide to all fields—everything existing in the realm of *prakṛti*—and therefore the final guide to which we must yoke ourselves. As Kevin McGrath points out, this field is both terrestrial and human, universal in scope, and becomes the "primary medium—*qua* the actual and material personage of Kṛṣṇa himself—for a devotee to transcend from the terrestrial toward the divine" (2016: 79). In these images we clearly see the associations with military implements, which is even more appropriate in Arjuna's case because he himself is a *kṣatriya*, so it is his nature and duty (*svadharma*) to engage on the battle*field*.

In renouncing one's egoistic attachments to the fruits of one's action by acting in a state of dharmic disinterestedness, one is not ascetically renouncing action al-

together, thus displaying an important historical development in Brahmanical political thought. Johannes Bronkhorst highlights this somewhat counterintuitive ascetic position posed by the *BhG*, explaining, "one can pursue the highest goal while yet staying in society. … Arjuna can pursue the highest goal while yet fulfilling his obligations as a warrior" (2015: 5). Each of the *varṇa*s (brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*) must fulfill its respective dharmic duties through the same process of renouncing egoistic attachment to the result of one's actions, allowing Brahmanical political thought to incorporate the idea of ascetic renunciation while maintaining and justifying its ideal, hierarchical social order—a social order that resembles the four-fold hierarchy within each individual (*ātman*, *buddhi*, *manas*, and *indriya*s) and macro-temporal structure (Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, Kali). Within each of these fourfold schemas, a scale of purity runs from top to bottom, highlighting an important ideological element in Brahmanical political thought propounded in the *BhG* and *MBh*, more generally. Within each category—self (micro-), *varṇa* (meso-), and *yuga* (macro-)—the lower element indicates moral decline and closer proximity to entropic destruction extending from the self, outward to the socio-political order, and finally, connecting to the cosmic structure. The cosmology is thus shot through with conflict and battle, and *dharma* (verb root *dhṛ-*, "to uphold") upholds the integrity and welfare of each fourfold structure as it inevitably veers toward decline. This decline invokes ideas of disintegration that I examined last chapter, but here mapped on to the self. As we saw in Book 1 of the *MBh*, Brahmanical political thought employs the imagery of fire to conceptualize how such disintegration can be avoided and how integration, and political unification, can be achieved. In the next section, therefore, I will use the conceptual framework outlined in the previous chapter to elucidate how this framework simultaneously operates at the micro-level of the individual, with Arjuna serving as a concrete example. In fact, I argue that one of the *BhG*'s most important political innovations within the longer trajectory of Brahmanical political thought lies in its creative synthesis of older Vedic concepts and images, on the one hand, and more contemporary ascetic-philosophical ideas, on the other.

Fire Imagery and Political Unification

An important term discussed earlier in the chapter appears in the last passage quoted above from chapter 13 in the *BhG*, namely *jñāna* (knowledge, wisdom, or insight), and this philosophical term allows me to further explicate the important imagery of fire and its political salience. In chapter 4, Kṛṣṇa states:

> The wise call that man a sage whose undertakings are devoid of the intention to achieve an object of desire, for his *karman* has been burned off by the fire (*agni*) of insight (*jñāna*). If one engages in an act while forgetting about its fruit … one does not incur any *karman* at all. He is not polluted when he does only bodily acts, without any expectations, keeping mind and self controlled, and renouncing all possessions. (*BhG* 4.19–21)

Jñāna provides one way of achieving *mokṣa* (liberation), and here Kṛṣṇa associates it with fire. Recalling a point made in the last chapter, fire (*agni*) has destructive, unifying, and purifying qualities, as it allowed Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna to clear the space that was the Khāṇḍava Forest so that the Pāṇḍavas could erect their palace at Indraprastha and take the next step toward dharmic rule. Above we see that knowledge plays a similar role within the self, preventing one's actions from being "polluted" through dharmic disinterestedness. It is the *kṣatriya*'s duty to help the brahmin/Agni incinerate the forest, and Arjuna/Kṛṣṇa do so in a dutiful manner that does not account for the suffering and death of the forest's inhabitants, just as Arjuna must engage in battle and "burn down" his kith and kin. The language of pollution/purity is also relevant here, hearkening "lower" versus "higher" entities in the Brahmanical cosmos. Objects of desire, already discussed as micro-political enemies to a self, are inferior and injurious to the process of renunciation explained above.

Placed in a broader historical context, this language displays how brahmins can internalize the imagery of fire as it relates to traditional Vedic ritualism. In the earlier Vedic Saṃhitās (ca. 1500–800 BCE) and Brāhmaṇas (ca. 900–650 BCE), Agni was the ritual fire and god that relayed the offerings to the intended deity, but after the Upaniṣads' ascetic and philosophical internalization of ritual fire in the form of *tapas*—heat achieved through meditative austerity and power—the ritual of meditation now generates a type of fire that purifies oneself through internal means. As in the Khāṇḍava episode, fire also possesses destructive capacities, but these capacities are leveled for positive, creative purposes in both cases. The fire of knowledge destroys or burns off ignorance and delusion, as literal fire destroyed the Khāṇḍava Forest. In the *BhG*, however, this creative/destructive process is internalized for micro-political purposes: namely, to establish proper ruling relations within the self by pursuing unification under a micro-monarchical type of rule by "the highest." Following Theodore Proferes' (2007) analysis of fire and conceptions of sovereignty in earlier Vedic thought, here we can see how fire represents political unification as a symbol for sovereignty at the individual or micro-level. I contended that fire's power to destroy must be paired with its power to create or renew, to disintegrate *and* integrate. In the *BhG*, knowledge as fire clears ground for something higher, properly integrating and unifying hierarchical ruling components within the self. This move effectively synthesizes

Vedic ritual elements with new ascetic ideas that had posed certain challenges to orthodox strains of Vedic ritualism.

These political valences, I argue, are invoked and creatively deployed at the individual level. In making this move Brahmanical political thought finds a new way to politicize the self by extending its political ontology and cosmology into new terrain, effectively expanding this terrain to formerly apolitical spaces. Brahmins expand this space by turning inwardly to a smaller space and developing a deeper, more expansive political ontology within the self. Yogic self-rule then serves as preparation for envisioning a vast cosmo-ontological connectedness through the self, with the self becoming the commonly possessed, political "hook" for the entire ideological structure. In other words, one must go through the self to properly understand its terrain, so that one knows how to act out in the world on more traditional, external political terrain. In the *BhG* the body and one's selfhood thus become a Brahmanized political instrument that solidifies their socio-political station, as the authors of the text drill into the bedrock of the self and then expand and connect everything in the cosmos through the medium of Kṛṣṇa.[7] In sum, the self becomes not only a ritual and spiritual space but also a *political* space, pervaded by associations with (im)purity and hierarchical order, further connected to the fundamental constituents of the material world (*sattva-rajas-tamas*). In the language of the politics of effacement, the lower levels of the material world must be effaced so that higher, "purer" elements of both the self (such as the *buddhi*) and the world can be set over the lower elements, and proper ruling relations can then be established. This development also shows a new modality of Brahmanical ideology that I will touch upon in the next chapter and examine in more detail in Chapter 4. However, self-knowledge is not the only place where older Vedic ideas associated with fire and political power are fused with newer ascetic ideas.

Kṛṣṇa also instructs Arjuna on the *yoga* and "fires" of self-restraint. Here we again see ascetic elements paired with the imagery of fire:

> Others offer the senses of hearing and so forth into the fires of restraint, while others sacrifice the objects of sound, etc., into the fires of the senses. Others again offer up all the actions of the senses and those of the vital faculties into the wisdom [*jñāna*]-kindled fire of the *yoga* of self-restraint. (*BhG* 4.26–27)

In this passage, Kṛṣṇa describes how restraining the senses is an ascetic practice that acts as a sacrificial fire; however, instead of ritual offerings being given to a literal fire as Agni, the objects of the senses and their significance become the sacrificial offerings that are burned in the "fires of restraint" to help purify the self of

7 I will expand on this point in the next chapter.

potential roadblocks to achieving *mokṣa.* As before, we see the individualization and internalization of the Vedic ritual sacrifice, kindled again by wisdom or knowledge, which is cultivated in turn by the *yoga* of self-restraint. I want to emphasize the conflictual nature of the self that is suggested in this passage, which indicates how the self is a battlefield of sorts that entropically gravitates toward the senses and sense objects, moving one further and further away from one's true self or *ātman.* Part of what brahmins have done is map external elements of the ritual and political world *onto and into* the self, thus subtly politicizing the self while retaining hierarchical structures and categories centered around the organizing dichotomy of purity/impurity.

To get a further sense of how the internal/external and purity/impurity dichotomies operate together, one can take a closer look at the different "types" of human beings said to exist in Brahmanical political thought. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna he has set in motion an ontological complex that taxonomizes people through the *guṇa*s within the realm of *prakṛti*, informing Arjuna about the binding nature of the *guṇa*s and *prakṛti:* "The *guṇa*s called *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are born from Prakṛti, and they fetter the eternal embodied souls [i.e., *ātman*s] to their bodies" (*BhG* 14.5). The predominance of a given *guṇa* in any individual determines this person's nature—for example, as attached to joy and knowledge (*sattva*-nature) versus passion and attachment to craving (*rajas*-nature) (*BhG* 14.7). This means that peoples' natures are "woven" differently, with the *guṇa*s acting as the essential threads of the material world. Later, in chapter 18, Kṛṣṇa further explains:

> There is not a creature on earth, nor in heaven among the Gods, which is free from these three *guṇa*s that spring from Prakṛti. The acts of brahmins, *kṣatriya*s, *vaiśya*s, and *śūdra*s, enemy-burner, divide themselves according to the *guṇa*s that spring from nature. … self-control … purity … insight [*jñāna*], knowledge [*vi-jñāna*], and true faith are the brahmin's task, which derive from his nature [*sva-bhāva*, lit. 'self-being,' or 'nature of oneself'] (*BhG* 18.42).

Not surprisingly, while the brahmins possess all the positive characteristics mentioned above, Kṛṣṇa simply says that the *śūdra*'s "natural task is to serve" (*BhG* 18.44). In describing the brahmin's nature we clearly see various characteristics I've been discussing, especially those centering on self-control and purity. If this is indeed the case, by implication the brahmins are also the most properly self-ruled as individuals. Again, the underlying message is that brahmins, while they are not supposed to serve as rulers, are in fact the *best* rulers—albeit at the micro-scale—and therefore can serve as a model for *kṣatriya*s, to whom falls the proper meso-level of ruling over other people. Relatedly, Hiltebeitel has argued that the proper actions (*svakarma*) of the brahmin "provides the paradigm that models the activities of other classes on prerogatives grounded in sacrificial ritual. Kṣatriya *svadharma*, on the other hand, is a role model for all classes to fulfill du-

ties that uphold the Brahmanical order" (2011c: 562). This Brahmanical paradigm partly begins with the theory of the *guṇa*s and *karman* (actions from previous lives leading to birth in a particular *varṇa*), providing an underlying logic for why particular *varṇa*s have specific duties assigned to them.[8] Sacrificial ritual then provides an overarching category that explains how and why members of each group must act sacrificially according to *varṇa-dharma*, with *kṣatriya*s such as Arjuna serving as role models for all classes to fulfill their duties. These duties may be difficult to swallow (as they are for Arjuna), but they must be fulfilled for maintaining cosmic order, which, at an ideological level, also helps solidify and uphold the Brahmanical order.

In the face of such ontological distinctions and the destructive results that come about if each social group does not perform its proper dharmic duties, the answer Kṛṣṇa provides relates back to dharmic disinterestedness, thus tracking two additional images related to temporality and the imagery of fire in the *BhG*'s political thought. The first image is the "wheel." In the previous chapter I explained temporality as a "wheel" spinning indifferently to any given person's concerns or desires. In the epic the wheel can have strong martial connections to the chariot, which also happens to be the site of the conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Moreover, we can observe how Arjuna's chariot unifies Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, but this time to "burn down" their foes. Time as a wheel that turns and destroys everything thus relates to the warrior's chariot wheels turning and facilitating destruction of the lives of fellow warriors on the battlefield. When the wheels are turning—and they must always be turning so long as *kṣatriya*s exist—someone is killing and someone else is being killed. Moreover, Arjuna must keep the wheel(s) turning in a dharmically disinterested fashion: "He who does not keep rolling the wheel that has been set in motion, indulging the senses in a lifespan of evil, lives for nothing" (*BhG* 3.16). Human beings must participate, in time, by turning this wheel of disinterested action, performing acts and duties accordingly (*BhG* 3.19). We can see this idea summed up in the figure of Kṛṣṇa, who declares during his theophany: "I am Time grown old to destroy the world, Embarked on the course of world annihilation" (*BhG* 11.32). During his theophany we see Kṛṣṇa identifying himself as Time, which has "grown old" (approaching the end of a Yugic cycle) and embarks on a course of annihilation in a disinterested fashion, wherein "Your [i. e., Kṛṣṇa] dreadful flames are filling with fire, And burn to its ends this universe, Viṣṇu!" (*BhG* 11.30). Since time is impartial or indifferent

8 For a philosophical challenge to this presumption that one can derive such an "ought" (dharmic duty) from an "is" (*varṇa*-status) based on *guṇa*-theory in texts such as the *BhG*, see Prasad (2008: 335 – 57).

to human concerns, humans must combat this by acting disinterestedly themselves, which, ironically enough, is the only way out of the "wheel" of birth, death, and rebirth. The lesson stands: participate in the wheel to escape the wheel. This process necessarily entails sacrifice, which re-invokes the *BhG*'s Vedic/post-Vedic synthesis.

Vedic rituals entailed making sacrificial offerings to Agni for transport to the gods, and dharmic disinterestedness in the *BhG* now becomes a form of sacrifice. As discussed earlier, one must sacrifice egoistic attachments to objects of desire and to the fruits of one's actions. Kṛṣṇa states: "All the world is in bondage to the *karman* of action, except for action for the purposes of sacrifice: therefore, engage in action for that purpose, disinterestedly" (*BhG* 3.9). Warriors themselves become, in this militaristic context, sacrificial offerings on the battlefield, as they selflessly fulfill their *svadharma*, remaining indifferent as time is indifferent. Both the wheel of time, and battle as sacrifice, can then spin indifferently as the cosmos moves in an entropic direction toward the destruction of beings.[9]

This point brings me to the second image and related activity, namely gambling. The battlefield—both self and literal battlefield of Kurukṣetra—is likened to a gambling den by King Dhṛtarāṣṭra toward the start of the *BhG:*

> That dangerous and inhospitable gambling den on the battlefield, where the carpet for the dicing had been spread out with the bodies of men, elephants, and horses, and the dice rolled with the arrows, spears, clubs, swords, and javelins—what slow-witted warrior gamblers entered that den to gamble for the fearful stakes of their lives? Who won? Who lost? Who carried off the prize? (*MBh* 6.63.66–68)

This passage provides an image wherein most warriors will become sacrificial victims, losing their lives as gamblers (*kitava*s), with gambling analogized with fighting and dice analogous to various types of weaponry. Here I want to recall a point I made in the previous chapter regarding the parallels between gambling and dice, on the one hand, and temporality and the four ages on the other. Time or temporality has been depicted as a wheel and now we have the gambling imagery as well. The names of the four *yuga*s match the names for the different numbers and throws in a game of dice descending from "4" (the "Kṛta," winning throw) to "1" (the "Kali," losing throw). We can glean an important nexus of associations here between temporality, entropy, and politics. Gambling itself is part of the kingly consecration ritual, as we see in Book 2 of the *MBh.* Duryodhana cheats in the dice match, and Yudhiṣṭhira's loss signals a major setback in the Pāṇḍavas' reemergence as legitimate rulers in their home-base of Indraprastha, which kickstarts

9 On the topic of war as a type of sacrifice for *kṣatriya*s, see Brekke (2006: 113–144).

a waning period for their political power vis-à-vis the Kauravas. Again, everything is cyclical, and cyclicality partakes of divinity. Or, as Ruth Cecily Katz puts it: "God himself cannot change the inevitable cyclical course of fate that dominates the epic world view; God *is* the *yuga*s" (*MBh* 12.325.105–7; Katz 1989: 230). A bout of gambling led to the Pāṇḍavas' exile and a new episode of gambling, this time through warfare, will now lead to the Kauravas' downfall.

This war could be interpreted as possessing each of the valences: as a gambling den inhospitable to warriors' (and the Pāṇḍavas in Book 2) lives, with the gambling-as-warfare itself serving as part of the Pāṇḍavas—and Yudhiṣṭhira's in particular—coronation as the proper dharmic rulers on the human plane. The war can also be viewed as a ritual fire that will destroy or burn down most of the warrior-gamblers on the battlefield, purifying the political space by defeating the evil Kauravas and further clearing the ground for dharmic rule by the Pāṇḍavas at the meso-level. In general, then, we get an image of human existence as not only a battlefield but a sort of gamble in the face of an indifferent world and an entropic, cyclical temporality. In the face of this cosmic indifference and entropy, to live well is akin to living a heroic warrior's life, capable of combatting indifference with indifference, or more properly speaking, with dharmic disinterestedness.

Heroism and Goodness through Devotion

Arjuna's ascetic heroism highlights an important category that I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter but should be introduced in the context of this chapter's analysis, namely religious devotion. As Katz has argued, "a heroism of religion is able to restore a hero to heroic status even in an age that is not conducive to heroism" (1989: 213). Interpreting Arjuna's political significance in the *BhG*, one can combine two categories that had not traditionally been paired with one another: asceticism and heroism. Traditionally, ascetic traditions promoted withdrawal from worldly activity, with asceticism often connected to the Sanskrit term *nivṛtti* (renunciation of worldly life, oriented toward personal liberation), contrasted with *pravṛtti* (active engagement with worldly life), which is connected to things like the heroic activity of fighting in battle. Ascetic religions such as Buddhism and Jainism were also seen as contending with orthodox Brahmanical religion in the historical context of the epic's composition. However, considering my reading of the body as a political battlefield, we can see how the two categories intertwine as asceticism becomes a form of heroic political activity and combat *par excellence*, whereby the body is likened to a mobile fortress: one must control one's senses to stave off defeat at the hands of emotional enemies such as greed

and anger. However, religious devotion also serves as an important hinge for such ascetic heroism in the *BhG.* Katz's analysis of Arjuna explores what she calls the "religious dimension of Arjuna," which she claims most strongly suggests that he be taken as a role model (213). Since I have also argued that Arjuna should be viewed as a role model of the ascetic-heroic type, I would like to examine Katz's reading of Arjuna's devotional-heroic nature both as a supplement to my reading and as a precursor to my examination of Kṛṣṇa and the role of devotion in the *BhG*'s political thought in the next chapter.

Katz argues that Arjuna becomes a heroic role model through a devotional medium, which emphasizes the intimate connection between the two heroic figures of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. She not only explains how Arjuna's full character is predicated on his relationship with Kṛṣṇa and that Kṛṣṇa is the source of Arjuna's power, but also that Arjuna's exploits at the devotional level "greatly resemble exploits of Krishna" (217). As I will explain in the next chapter, this resemblance is no coincidence insofar as we can interpret Arjuna as a literal *part* of Kṛṣṇa when viewed from a macro-level perspective. This divine connection plays a central role in the political thought of the *BhG*, as Katz explains: "he [i. e., Arjuna] is fully divine as Vishnu/Krishna's friend and devotee" (218). Submitting to a higher power can be construed as a political act, and here it is not just submission, but loving devotion that sublimates the relationship to a divine level. An aspect of this devotion is grounded in the idea of a lower being or entity humbling itself before a higher being, giving up one's self-centeredness out of loving devotion to that which is higher and purer. Of course, this idea connects with a central idea in the *BhG*, namely renunciation as desireless action (*niṣkāma-karma*) and acting out of a sense of duty for higher purposes related to *dharma.*

Kṛṣṇa's theophany can then be read in this context as the maximum revelation of Kṛṣṇa's supreme form, which helps complete Arjuna's enlightenment and solidify his humble devotion to the Supreme Godhead. This theophany plays a key role in enlightening Arjuna, as M. M. Agrawal explains that once Arjuna views and existentially experiences a vision of macro-cosmic reality, thus perceiving the entire process of cosmic creation and destruction, this vision destroys his attachment to mortal existence along with "the sentiments and fears consequent upon his attachment" (1989: 140). Egoism and any sense of personal gain dissipate because he now understands the macro-level context, which completely shifts his perspective and leads Arjuna to realize "not only intellectually [per the previous philosophical instruction from Kṛṣṇa] but deeply, existentially, that the inner self is immortal … [so] Arjuna now feels no grief at the thought of the death of his affectionate and respected ones"; on his part, Arjuna is now ready to accept "a position to act from the motive of duty alone" (140). Perhaps paradoxically, heroism is not captured in distinguishing oneself in pursuit of honor or glory

but rather in humbling oneself, devotionally, to something higher and taking direction from this higher being. Heroism becomes grounded in a deep humility, leading toward dharmic disinterestedness and non-egoism. For Arjuna, this humility is partly based on the revelation that one's *ātman* is eternal and does not perish, freeing him up existentially to act out of dharmic disinterestedness because he now realizes the relative insignificance of his personal attachments to particular people in the realm of *prakṛti*, along with his much deeper cosmological attachment to Kṛṣṇa.

Katz advances additional analytic points pertinent to my own analysis of both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. She explains that Arjuna "is viewed as partaking of divinity insofar as his splendor (*tejas*) is equal to Vishnu's" (1989: 218). I will argue that this makes complete sense since Arjuna is revealed to be part of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa himself, and specifically, a *kṣatriya-aṃśa* (particle) of Kṛṣṇa, whose nature is characterized by *rajas* (or *tejas* in Sāṃkhyan philosophy). Devotion signals the key medium through which Arjuna participates in Kṛṣṇa's divinity and assumes his religious heroism. As Katz observes, "Arjuna *as devotee* participates in Krishna's divine nature" (218, emphasis mine). In other words, devotion triggers the divine connection and participation. As Katz also comments, the identity of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa can be viewed as a poetic expression of a monistic philosophy, wherein "the two are really one self" (218). I will build upon this observation in showing the political valences of this monism, unpacking its political parallel in monarchy. Finally, as Katz concludes: "Arjuna restores his threatened heroic potential, and transcends it, by his devotion to God" (219). What I will argue is that this is not only a theological claim, but a deeply political one as well, and one rife with ideological elements.

The last component of Katz's analysis that I would like to draw upon is the connection she draws between goodness and devotion to Kṛṣṇa. While the righteous cause of the Pāṇḍavas is symbolized by their kinship relation with Kṛṣṇa, Katz explains how this connection is deepened through Arjuna's specific relationship to Kṛṣṇa through devotion. She argues, "Arjuna's restored superheroism resides in the fact that he is the chief proponent and practitioner of devotion in the epic, supplying it to the rest of the family" (233). This relationship is yet another reason that Duryodhana's character and the Kaurava side must be viewed as the evil side that will lose the war. For example, Arjuna's embrace of Kṛṣṇa stands in sharp contrast to Duryodhana's rejection of Kṛṣṇa when they must make a choice between either taking Kṛṣṇa alone, or his army as allied forces, before the war. As Katz reminds us, Duryodhana violently rejects Kṛṣṇa, attempting to imprison Kṛṣṇa during his pre-war peace mission (234). These acts seal the image of the Kauravas as demonic entities, soon to be extinguished in the cataclysmic war on the field of Kurukṣetra: as the *MBh* clearly states, with Kṛṣṇa lies victory. This com-

mentary on Arjuna's special connection to Kṛṣṇa now sets the stage for a closer examination of Kṛṣṇa in the next chapter.

Conclusion

As I argue in this chapter dharmic disinterestedness stems from yogic rule over oneself, helping stave off the natural entropy of the cosmos, especially at the (micro-) individual and (meso-) political levels. This heroic form of asceticism further requires taming egoism and effacing particularities that attach us to specific things and people, preventing us from undertaking our dharmic duties. This politics of effacement helps us uncover and better understand the interconnectedness of everything, and how participating in the harmonious integration of the cosmic structure requires becoming a yogic ruler at the micro-level of the self, which, according to the *BhG*, is all we can control and the most any one of us can contribute to helping uphold a cosmic structure that is always veering toward entropic destruction.

In the next chapter, my analysis will shift to Kṛṣṇa, his attributes, and the ideological components of *bhakti.* However, before leaving Arjuna, I would like to reiterate a key ideological feature that surrounds this character. Arjuna is perhaps the epic's penultimate *kṣatriya*/warrior-hero, evoking older Vedic ideas associated with martial abilities and responsibilities. In the *BhG*, this martial heroism is spiritualized in innovative ways, bridging a theoretical gap between ruling and spiritual authority. Arjuna's deference to Kṛṣṇa signals an important attempt to restore the authoritative link between brahmins as spiritual or religious advisors, and *kṣatriya*s as the proper agents of rule. In other words, the *BhG* forges several new conceptual connections between such figures, helping establish a new framework in which to understand the meaning of rule within a cosmos in entropic decline.

Chapter 3
King Kṛṣṇa: Cosmic Self, Monarchy, and Devotional Integration

In the last chapter, I began explicating what I called a "micro-politics of the self," including key philosophical categories such as *prakṛti* (primordial matter), three *guṇa*s (constituent elements of *prakṛti: sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*), and their proper relation as envisioned through yogic discipline and rule. Importantly, the *BhG* depicts the body as a "nine-gated fortress," which depicts the self as a battlefield of contentious elements trying to pull rule either toward the higher parts of the self (*ātman*), or toward the lower parts (*indriya*s and sense objects). Proper ruling within the self then leads to one fulfilling one's dharmic duties in the world, encapsulated by one's *svadharma* (one's own, proper duty) and *varṇāśramadharma* (duties associated with social group and life stage). Such ruling is achieved through dharmic disinterestedness and a politics of effacement that requires detaching oneself from attachments to those such as family members, teachers, and friends. Relinquishing the fruits of one's actions disinterestedly allows one to participate in a broader process of socio-political and cosmological integration. However, I also argued that such integration requires participating in the deeper, cyclical-temporal structure of the cosmos and intermittent processes of destruction or disintegration for enhancing cosmic integrity and political unification. Here I examined how fire imagery plays a central role and allows the Brahmanical authors of the *BhG* to synthesize older Vedic ideas with newer ascetic ones.

While Chapter 2 focused more on how Arjuna needs to act, and why, this chapter will look more closely at Kṛṣṇa and how he serves as a model for proper rule extending from the micro- up to the macro-level, minding the basic philosophical structure covered in the previous chapter.[1] The next step in my argument requires

1 For an alternative, "this worldly" reading of Kṛṣṇa that brackets the text's claim to his divinity, see McGrath (2013). In taking an analytic-excavationist approach to the *BhG*, McGrath seeks to bring the political thought of what he views as the earlier parts of the text "down to earth," making Kṛṣṇa a purely human hero and bard-charioteer. This approach is predicated on parsing an earlier, pre-Classical and preliterate heroic stratum of the text from a later one that is Brahmanically redacted and morally didactic in nature. Such parsing of the text continues to be a point of debate regarding the *MBh* more generally. However, by excluding the premise that Kṛṣṇa is an avatar of Viṣṇu and divine in nature, McGrath brackets a tremendous amount of conceptual context, including the entire cosmological set of valences surrounding Kṛṣṇa and the *MBh*'s political thought more generally. In sum, McGrath's analysis treats Kṛṣṇa and the *BhG* more as a continuation of Vedic thought and less a part of the Classical and finished epic *MBh* as we now have it in the Pune Crit-

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focusing on Kṛṣṇa's cosmic pervasiveness and how he upholds *dharma* in ways that stretch throughout the cosmic totality. Discussing further the nature of *dharma* in the next section, I examine a debate that has arisen regarding the *BhG*'s stance on justice. Here I argue that a suitable concept for justice in the text is denoted by *lokasaṃgraha*, or "world welfare." However, supporting *lokasaṃgraha* requires violent and destructive acts. This section makes a key interpretive move for my argument by explaining how, from a macro-cosmic level, the *BhG* can be viewed as an internal dialogue between the higher and lower parts of Kṛṣṇa himself. On this reading, the dialogue represents a model for the movement of internal conscience, through which Kṛṣṇa convinces a *kṣatriya*-particle of himself, represented by Arjuna, to engage in battle for the purpose of *lokasaṃgraha.* The following section explains how *bhakti* more fully enacts the connection between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, thus allowing for integration with(in) Kṛṣṇa as the supreme, cosmic monarch. This interpretive move then allows me to fold each of the three conceptual-analytic layers together—micro-level of self, meso-level of interpersonal politics, and macro-level cosmos encompassed by Kṛṣṇa—not only to finish explicating the *BhG*'s political theory, but also to respond to J. M. Fritzman's (2015) critique that Kṛṣṇa's arguments are incomplete and unconvincing. In contrast, within the purview of my interpretation of the *BhG*, I alternatively argue that Kṛṣṇa's position is both complete and convincing at the dialogic and textual levels.

The present chapter's argument regarding Kṛṣṇa's political role in the *BhG* complements Chapter 2's analysis of Arjuna, providing the first systematic account of a coherent political theory found in the *BhG.* However, as I will argue in Chapter 4, once historically situated the text's political theory can also be understood as a sophisticated political ideology seeking to defend Brahmanical-Hindu interests. Rather than viewing the text simply as a mixture of different philosophical and religious systems and claims, my reading shows how the text's brahmin authors creatively synthesized these systems and claims within a single, coherent conceptual framework. The text's authors achieved this by innovating a unique mode of political ideology within the *MBh* that could accommodate several potentially conflicting or incoherent systems of thought, doing so in a way that justified a Brahmanically endorsed form of monarchical rule.[2] In other words, at the most funda-

ical Edition. Each of McGrath's books that center around major epic characters takes this analytic approach, thus diverging from the approach taken in the present book (McGrath 2004; 2011; 2013; 2016; 2017).

2 My reading thus contributes to Malinar's (2007) and Fitzgerald's (1983; 2004a; 2006; 2020a; 2020b) diachronic readings of the text, offering a new synchronic view within a distinctly political theo-

mental level the *BhG* is a political text *par excellence* and not merely a philosophical or religious text, as has often been assumed. I will contend that political theorists and philosophers should not only focus their critique on the arguments emerging from the mouths of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as epic characters, which has been the predominant analytic trend, but also focus on elements of the political ideology underpinning the text. Such focus, I will argue, can help prevent the text's co-optation for problematic contemporary political projects. In sum, I argue not only that the *BhG* must be understood as a seminal work of political theory *and* as a form of political ideology, but also that scholars of political theory must view this text as significant both within a South Asian context and the global history of political thought. So how do these brahmin authors of the text achieve their ideological feats? This question leads us from Arjuna to Kṛṣṇa as the primary focus of analysis.

Kṛṣṇa's Cosmic Pervasiveness and Upholding the World

The first aspect of Kṛṣṇa I would like to examine is his cosmic pervasiveness, which enlivens a fundamental interconnectedness among everything that exists and supplies the conceptual scaffolding for my analysis and argument in subsequent sections. In chapter 7, Kṛṣṇa explains:

> My material nature [*prakṛti*] is eightfold, comprising the order of earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, spirit, and ego. This is my lower nature, but know that I have another, higher nature which comprises the order of souls: it is by the latter that this world is sustained … Realize that all creatures have their sources therein: I am the origin of this entire universe and its dissolution. There is nothing at all that transcends me. (*BhG* 7.5–7)

Here Kṛṣṇa states several essential qualities: first, he pervades and constitutes all *prakṛti* and the manifest, material world; second, the latter constitutes his *lower* nature, but a higher nature exists in the form of the "order of souls," or *jīva-bhūtam*; third, he is the source or origin of everything in a creative sense, but also the source of everything's destruction. In this passage we see Kṛṣṇa as final cause of everything, pervading or existent in everything, and containing a hierarchy of entities extending from a "higher" to "lower" order. As J. A. B. van Buitenen explains regarding the "order of souls," these individual souls remain eternal and represent

retical framework, but also builds upon scholars' observations that the text exhibits ideological tendencies.

particles (*aṃśa*s) of Kṛṣṇa, "from whom they derive their properties as souls" (1981: 169).

Kṛṣṇa also encompasses the highest order, which constitutes the imperishable elements of Kṛṣṇa's being, beginning with the eternal *ātman*s stretching upward to *brahman*, or the unmanifest Absolute, which is the last step before reaching Kṛṣṇa. As he states in chapter 13:

> He who sees the Supreme Lord equally present in all creatures, not perishing while these creatures perish, he sees indeed. When he sees the lord equally present everywhere, he himself no longer hurts the self [*ātman*] and then goes the supreme journey. He who sees that all actions are performed by Prakṛti alone and that the self does not act at all, sees indeed. When he perceives that the variety of beings have one center from which all expand, then he is at one with *brahman.* (*BhG* 13.27–30)

Kṛṣṇa is thus present everywhere, in everything, and stands as the one center from which everything manifest emanates. We also observe a reference to the imperishable *ātman* as an aspect or particle (*aṃśa*) of Kṛṣṇa's imperishable self. A few key insights then appear necessary for undertaking "the supreme journey" to *mokṣa* (liberation): first, one must be able to fully cognize the distinction between what is perishable in the realm of Prakṛti, and what is imperishable; second, in seeing how *brahman*—and Kṛṣṇa beyond *brahman*—pervade everything, one can understand the inherent interconnectedness of everything in Kṛṣṇa. As R. C. Zaehner puts it in his commentary, the same eternal substratum underlies all beings, with God/Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Person (*puruṣottama*) identical with Brahman yet transcending it (1969: 347). This leads to an astounding sort of knowledge and equanimical stance toward the world: "Contented in his insight and knowledge, firm on his peak, master of his senses, looking with the same eyes on a lump of clay, a rock, or a piece of gold, he is called a yogin who is truly 'yoked'. He is set apart by his equanimity before friends, allies, enemies … and relatives, before good men and evil ones" (*BhG* 6.9–10). Serene equanimity (*samatva*) can be reached through seeing "the same" in all things, made possible through proper cognition of Kṛṣṇa and his true, pervasive nature. Such equanimity is possible partly because there *is* nothing else outside of Kṛṣṇa, so no additional transcendental appeals or liberation could make any sense.

However, in these passages we also see two potentially conflicting ideas: hierarchy and equality. I will examine the ideological components of this conflict in the next chapter in greater detail but will say a few words here about how these two ideas might be reconciled. The cosmos exists as a fundamentally interconnected body of Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Godhead. Ontological hierarchies exist, but insofar as everything shares in Kṛṣṇa's being, everything can be reflected upon as equal to some extent, or as an equal part *of* Kṛṣṇa. This stance of equanimity relates to the

dharmic disinterestedness and politics of effacement discussed in the previous chapter. That is, these seemingly real hierarchical distinctions between friend and enemy, or a rock and piece of gold, are all false to the extent that these things are equally part of the perishable world as manifestations of Kṛṣṇa's *māyā* (illusory-creative power). Thinking that these things in the material world are what is truly real, and then falsely believing there are qualitative hierarchies between them that would justify pursuing some material things over others in an interpersonally contentious manner, people become increasingly tethered to *saṃsāra.* Being yoked to and ruled by the lower elements of *prakṛti*, we are prevented from discerning the better, imperishable things as superior to the inferior, perishable things. Moreover, attachment to materiality and physical appearances makes it increasingly difficult to perform one's dharmic duties, since one must efface specific attachments and act in accordance with action conducive to micro-, meso-, and macro-cosmic integration.

Maintaining this integrity at each cosmic level requires everyone fulfilling his or her *svadharma*, which then results in what one might gloss as "cosmic justice," or *lokasaṃgraha.* This Sanskrit term opens onto vast conceptual terrain, so I will map out some of this territory to address a lingering debate regarding one of the central political ideas expressed in the text—namely, the meaning of justice. The term *lokasaṃgraha* means, "holding the world together," but it can also refer to the "welfare or coherence of the world."[3] This term is only used twice in the *BhG*, which should also give readers pause when considering whether it is advisable to search for a single term that might capture *the* core virtue or cornerstone for the entirety of a text's political thought. The first passage reads: "For it was by acting alone [i. e., without selfish or egoistic motive] that [King] Janaka and others achieved success, so you too must act while only looking to what holds together the world [*lokasaṃgraha*]" (*BhG* 3.20). Janaka is not only a ruler, but an ideal Vedic king, which allows the authors, once again, to connect and synthesize older Vedic authoritative texts and figures with more contemporary conceptions of ideal rule as a form of personal, ascetic sacrifice and fulfillment of one's dharmic duties. In this series of passages in chapter 3, Kṛṣṇa employs the term *lokasaṃgraha* in the context of a ruler and the "best people" setting the moral-political example for everyone else, claiming:

> People do whatever the superior man does: people follow what he sets up as the standard. I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha [Arjuna]. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. … The wise, disinterested man

3 For example, see Zaehner (1969: 159).

> should do his acts in the same way as the ignorant do, but only to hold the world together. (*BhG* 2.21–25)
>
> No act binds me, Dhanaṃjaya [Arjuna], for I remain disinterested and detached from all acts. Nature [*prakṛti*] gives birth to the standing and moving creatures under my tutelage, Kaunteya, and for that reason does the world revolve. (*BhG* 9.9–10)

Here, the clear standard is acting disinterestedly because, according to Kṛṣṇa, this sets the proper example and is the only way the world can be held together or integrated in a peaceful fashion. Kṛṣṇa serves as the ultimate example, stating, "Actions do not stick to me, for I have no yearning for the fruits of my actions" (*BhG* 4.14). The second part of the compound, *-saṃgraha*, means holding or bringing together, and thus stabilizing something that is inherently or potentially unstable. This term is conceptually related to meanings surrounding the term *dharma*, whose underlying root (*dhṛ-)* can mean "to uphold or sustain." Consequently, terms with such meaning possess tremendous normative value within an inherently entropic vision of the cosmos. This now brings us squarely to examinations of justice in the *BhG*, which is one term some have used to translate the term *dharma.*

Dharma and the Nature of Justice

Scholars have debated whether the *BhG*'s conception of *dharma* and related ideas about justice are consequentialist, deontological, or some combination of both, further questioning whether the *BhG* has something valuable to teach us on the topic of justice more generally. For example, Amartya Sen (2009) has argued that an adequate theory of justice requires qualities of both deontological impartiality and sensitivity to consequences and comprehensive outcomes, claiming that the *BhG* poses Arjuna as a consequentialist and Kṛṣṇa a deontologist, with the *BhG* providing a worthwhile resource for moral and political thinking. Joshua Anderson critiques Sen's reading of the *BhG*, arguing that Arjuna is not the comprehensive consequentialist Sen claims him to be (2012: 67–68). However, Anderson's criticism that Sen does not properly identify the *BhG* as a religious text, and that Sen fails to appreciate that Kṛṣṇa's concerns are otherworldly and centered on religious liberation, is misplaced (Anderson 2012: 69). As I have argued, the text expresses a distinctive political orientation and theory, and I will attempt to elaborate further on this claim in the next chapter. Here, however, Anderson's failure to see the politics at play in this text and his claim that it is a predominantly religious text remains limited for the following reasons.

In failing to identify the text's political claims and context, scholars such as Anderson overlook the Brahmanical-ideological aspects of the text. In his critique

Anderson also overlooks the impartial spectator (key to deontological impartiality) that exists within the *BhG*'s own conceptual framework, namely the *ātman*. For his part, Sen is mistaken when he claims that Kṛṣṇa's "deontology … denies the relevance of any concern, particularly any consequential concern, in determining whether some action should be undertaken or not" (2009: 216). As I will explain in greater detail below with the concept of *lokasaṃgraha*, Kṛṣṇa's deontological position does indeed possess consequential concern with world-welfare and stability: Arjuna must fight precisely because of broader consequences. As I explained in Chapter 1, these consequences include cosmological consequences associated with the Pāṇḍavas as incarnations of *deva*s (gods) who have been incarnated for the purpose of exterminating the Kauravas as incarnations of *asura*s (demons).

In contrast to both Sen and Anderson, Roopen Majithia (2015) properly identifies what he calls the text's "ethical syncretism," arguing that the *BhG* poses a form of consequentialism that allows a place for deontological and virtue-centric intuitions.[4] The addition of virtue theory is important in understanding the *BhG*'s moral-political framework, as one can see in passages such as the following, when Kṛṣṇa describes the divine complement of virtues: "yoking of knowledge, liberality, self-control, sacrifice, peaceableness, loyalty, compassion for creatures, lack of greed, patience, friendliness and lack of pride" (*BhG* 16.1–3). Each of these traits suggests a virtue of some sort, with an according disposition to act virtuously in some manner. More specifically, each of these virtues signals a skill that allows someone to help harmoniously integrate various components of the world. Majithia's interpretation is closest to the mark, addressing the idea of "world-welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*)" and deep ontological interconnectedness, especially in the realm of *prakṛti*, which ties everything together through the same *guṇa*s. Majithia also notes the text's contemporary value insofar as the text "captures something true about the ethical dimensions of our lives: that good action involves deontological, consequential and virtue-centric aspects" (2015: 64–65, 69–70, 76). This pluralist conception of ethics and what it means to live a dharmic life signal a capacious ethics that may prove more valuable than any single ethical framework taken in isolation, at least in a world that is constantly changing and veering, entropically, toward chaos and destruction. As Majithia states, "The text's utilitarian principle of world-welfare provides the basis for assessing the nature of one's duty in a chang-

4 Another participant in this debate between Sen, Anderson, and Majithia is Fritzman (2015), who contests Anderson's critique of Sen and defends Sen, further arguing that Kṛṣṇa's arguments are incomplete and unconvincing. I will address Fritzman's argument later in the chapter.

ing world, even when faced with competing duties as in the case of moral dilemmas" (76).[5]

Importantly, one can observe the significance of change in the *BhG*'s ethical framework in its scaled levels of *dharma: kula-dharma* (family duties), *varṇa-dharma* (social group duties), *āśrama-dharma* (life-stage duties), and *sādhāraṇa-dharma* (universal duties). According to the scale, broader duties supersede more localized ones, as we see elsewhere in the *MBh:* "To save the family, abandon a man; to save the village, abandon a family; to save the country, abandon a village; to save the soul [i. e., through *mokṣa*], abandon the earth" (*MBh* 2.55.10). *Sādhāraṇa-dharma* applies to everyone and extends beyond more specific duties associated with social group or life-stage; these universal duties are often associated with the principle of self-restraint, including duties such as *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and *satya* (truthfulness).[6] Duties may indeed conflict in particular instances, and those advancing greater world-welfare must supersede more localized duties. Concerning the principle of change, even duties within specific categories may change over time based on what Yuga one lives in, along with the concomitant level of *dharma*/*adharma* that exists in each age.[7]

For example, Kṛṣṇa's trickery and deviant behavior in particular circumstances—his seeming moral relativism—could be interpreted as appropriately dharmic or justified in an age (Dvāpara-Yuga) that is lacking in *dharma* and on the verge of spilling into preponderant *adharma* in the Kali-Yuga. Each of Kṛṣṇa's incarnations must necessarily act within the *yuga* structure and change with the shifting environment (Katz 1989: 231). Additionally, B. K. Matilal has explained the situational character of *dharma* in the *MBh* more broadly, whereby *dharma* ethics and what Matilal calls "Kṛṣṇa-ethics" are malleable (2002: 19 – 36). Matilal even goes so far as to claim that Kṛṣṇa poses a realist ethics, which would make sense in an increasingly depraved age. He reads Kṛṣṇa as the instigator of a new moral paradigm that "displays the limitations of a generally accepted moral code of truth-telling and promise-keeping," whereby "the risk of the loss of the greater good might influence a rational agent to transgress certain valued principles" (106). This "greater good," on my interpretation, could be precisely the *lokasaṃgraha* that Kṛṣṇa mentions in the *BhG*, which would supersede more localized duties,

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5 For a direct comparison with Mill's utilitarianism and heavy utilitarian-consequentialist reading of the *BhG*, see Shukla (2014).

6 For a list of *dharma*s applicable to all *varṇa*s, see Bhīṣma's list in Book 12 (*MBh* 12.60.7– 8ab), which include speaking truth, patience, and rectitude (Fitzgerald 2004a: 109).

7 For analysis of ethical action in times of distress and relative *adharma*, or *āpad-dharma*, see Bowles (2007).

including duties that might preclude the killing of family members in certain circumstances.

Nevertheless, I would add the following observations to the accounts offered by Sen, Anderson, and Majithia as it pertains to *dharma* and questions of justice. Here I reference Sandeep Sreekumar's argument for the text's consequentialism and modify this account slightly to defend the syncretic reading of the *BhG*'s stance on ethics and justice. First, Sen and Anderson do not delve far enough into the *BhG*'s ontology and cosmology to see that the *ātman* would be the closest thing to what we might consider an "impartial spectator," since it is free from action, distinct from *prakṛti*, and thus stands on a higher, more objective perch to understand the necessity of performing one's dharmic duties so as not fall prey to the pitfalls of *prakṛti.* When we properly identify the *ātman* as such, we better see how the *BhG*'s conception of *dharma* and purported justice, expressed by Kṛṣṇa himself, might initially be considered a form of "thick consequentialism" wherein dharmic duties service the broader consequence of world maintenance, integration, and welfare. Here, Sandeep Sreekumar (2012) provides perhaps the most thorough investigation and defense of the *BhG*'s consequentialism. He has argued that the text espouses a rule-consequentialism that takes two consequences as intrinsically valuable: *mokṣa* and *lokasaṃgraha.* Sreekumar provides an impressively detailed, and largely persuasive, argument that the *BhG*'s ethical stance is ultimately consequentialist in nature.

However, I argue that this debate in its current framing remains stunted because the *BhG* frames dharmic duties and an objective impartiality as central due to the consequences they have for world welfare. We can construe the duty to act for world welfare and maintain its integrity as a self-supporting, deontological imperative, or in the *Right* because God/Kṛṣṇa deems it as such regardless of consequences. For example, those such as Sen view Kṛṣṇa's argument from detached action (*niṣkāma-karma*)—which entails indifference to the consequences of one's actions—as fundamentally deontological. If detached action is indeed Kṛṣṇa's "highest teaching" (*BhG* 18.6), then the text's theory of ethics would appear primarily deontological (Sreekumar 2012: 297). Moreover, duties often point toward consequence, but we can also disavow consequences based on the intrinsic duty of detached action. Sreekumar nevertheless explains how even the (arguably) deontological elements introduced in Arjuna's arguments—for example, the argument from committing an inherent evil [*pāpam*]—are presented and addressed by Arjuna in consequentialist terms (291). Kṛṣṇa explains that one consequence is of fundamental importance and served through detached action: namely, *lokasaṃgraha* (*BhG* 3.20, 3.25). As Sreekumar summarizes: "Krishna's claim here is that detached action is action specifically directed at bringing about a certain good consequence, namely *lokasaṃgraha*, or a state of affairs in which the world coheres in its proper

integrity, thus ensuring that the welfare of all creatures is preserved in a lawful fashion" (299). Again, Kṛṣṇa models this ethic in his own behavior: "If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. These people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures" (*BhG* 3.24). Therefore, Kṛṣṇa must regard overarching consequences as well.

Returning to the impartiality component of the *BhG*'s ethics, it operates through dharmic disinterestedness and what I've called the politics of effacement, in which individuals efface emotional or personal attachments to particular people and things while bearing a longer and larger consequentialist view, considering what is most beneficial to the welfare of the world and all beings. This goal requires cultivating a sensibility of dharmic disinterestedness, which makes one capable of effacing destructive attachments to *prakṛti*, and further requires cultivating numerous virtues mentioned in the earlier passage. So, while Sreekumar may be correct that the text's ethics is ultimately consequentialist, I believe Majithia is also correct to point out that the *BhG*'s ethical stance should be considered a *syncretic* one.[8] In other words, we must recognize the role of duty-following and practicing the virtues as significant at various levels of the text, including its vision of what constitutes a good human life, even if the text is consequentialist in its final orientation.

Ultimately, I argue that *dharma* is too broad and multivalent a term to interpret as justice in most contexts, and that *lokasaṃgraha* is the better term to use if one wants to excavate a conception justice in the text. This term denotes the goal or purpose toward which the consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethics components in the text all aim. While one might claim that *mokṣa* is the goal of these systems for any individual, I would argue that justice is a distinctly interpersonal concept and would thus preclude personal considerations regarding *mokṣa.* In other words, *mokṣa* remains predominantly apolitical, at least at a theoretical level. Therefore, what the *BhG* teaches us about justice comes close to what Sen proposes, insofar as it combines elements of deontology and consequentialism but also, as Majithia suggests, includes elements of virtue theory. In sum, the *BhG* expresses an idea of justice grounded, first, in the broadest possible concern for the welfare of the world and its constituent elements, and second, entailing elements of all three ethical theories since no single system or approach will be enough to address the complex factors that unpredictably emerge in any given

8 Sreekumar himself suggests as much, stating that Kṛṣṇa's normative ethical arguments are "embedded within a complex syncretistic philosophy which incorporates and fuses elements of metaphysics, eschatology, and soteriology drawn from several traditions of Indian philosophizing" (2012: 291).

moral or political predicament. The *BhG*'s political ethics, therefore, is non-exclusivist.

Finally, the ultimate enemy of *dharma* and any theory of justice one can glean from the *BhG* is not a single entity or being, but rather the broader entropic reality and temporality that human beings find themselves within, which cannot ultimately be escaped but only kept at bay through dharmic disinterestedness and the politics of effacement. According to the *BhG*'s vision of a natural and cyclical entropy, one must be able and willing to view the world from the broadest and least egoistic perspective possible. Such egoism, as I've been arguing in the case of the *BhG*, is attached to materialism and the physical world, especially the lowest parts of *prakṛti.* In fact, one of the lowest levels of the self in the realm of *prakṛti* is the *ahaṃkāra*, which sometimes gets translated as "ego" but literally means "I-maker." Therefore, I have argued for an interpretation that views the self as a battlefield and the body as a fortress, using political vocabulary in a seeming non-political space to highlight what the *BhG* views as the broader stakes of yogic self-rule. If one does not adopt a micro-political standpoint, as Kṛṣṇa suggests,[9] then meso- and macro-level entropic processes would presumably intensify or accelerate. This syncretic ethico-political vision entails a politics of effacement that requires an understanding of the self as a political battleground of sorts, which then points us toward a series of deontological steps that ultimately serve a "thick" consequentialist position and brings us to the impartial spectator that is the *ātman.* Once one yokes oneself to these duties through dharmic disinterestedness and reaches the *ātman*, further realizing its oneness with *brahman*, and merges with it, one then arrives at the Supreme Godhead (Kṛṣṇa) and thus achieves liberation from *saṃsāra.* As I will argue below, this culminates in Kṛṣṇa's own self-realization and enlightenment, inducing selflessness in upholding *dharma* insofar as he has convinced a particle of himself (namely, Arjuna) to undertake its proper *kṣatriya-dharma* for the consequence of sustaining cosmic integrity as much as possible within a macro-temporal entropy headed toward destruction. In other words, from a macro-level perspective the entire *BhG* can be read as a parallel macro-/micro-cosmic, internal dialogue that models how any micro-cosmic self should conscientiously think and act. Beginning with the self and broader cosmological context, and not with ethical theories of justice or *dharma* as many scholars have done, is therefore essential, and we can see this point expressed and exemplified in the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa if we step back to consider what

9 This is essentially what Kṛṣṇa is doing on the field of Kurukṣetra, which represents this micro-political standpoint from the macro-level perspective of Kṛṣṇa as Supreme Godhead. I elaborate on this point at greater length later in the chapter.

is happening in this dialogue from the aforementioned "meta" or macro-cosmic perspective.

Conscience and Necessary Violence: Kṛṣṇa's Internal Dialogue and Relationship to Arjuna

To understand this macro-level perspective, one must revisit the epic relationship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. While Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna stand as two distinct entities in the epic at the meso-level, they are often characterized not as a duality but rather a unity, and this characterization is not without political and philosophical significance. Kevin McGrath points out that "Kṛṣṇa in the great Bhārata epic is nearly always linked with the warrior Arjuna ... They are joined grammatically as 'two *kṛṣṇas*', *dvau kṛṣṇau*, as well as being partners in fighting and intimate and playful cousins" (2013: 18). McGrath then cites a key line from Book 9 of the *MBh:* "Both Kṛṣṇas combine one spirit towards each other" (18; *MBh* 9.3.10). In one important observation, McGrath highlights how Kṛṣṇa is responsible for the death of Duryodhana ("slain by the mind of Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa]," *MBh* 1.1.152), and how it is Kṛṣṇa's friend Arjuna "who performs the *violence*" while Kṛṣṇa somehow performs the *slaying* (2013: 19, emphasis mine). Therefore, both characters participate in killing the enemy, Duryodhana, but the text explains that Kṛṣṇa is the final agent and slayer. Further merging the figures of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna into a unity, Kṛṣṇa serves not only as Arjuna's friend but also a counselor or advisor. As McGrath notes: "It is the role as friend or counselor that will be Kṛṣṇa's key role in the narrative, particular during the battle books when he becomes charioteer or driver for the hero Arjuna, and the poet Saṃjaya is said to speak about the *ekātmyaṃ* (unity or complicity) of these two heroes" (20; *MBh* 1.2.144). We can further identify this complicity and the special relationship between the two figures insofar as Kṛṣṇa informs Arjuna, during his theophany, that nobody beside Arjuna has ever laid eyes on Kṛṣṇa's supernal form (*BhG* 11.47). As counselor, one might consider Kṛṣṇa as the "higher mind" for Arjuna, even an impartial spectator, who can see the entire "field" that is the cosmos from past, to present, and into the future.

In these textual passages and McGrath's observations, we can see how Arjuna is subsumed within or deeply complicit with the figure of Kṛṣṇa, and this is no coincidence. I will further explicate the text following McGrath's observations to make an interpretive move that allows us, from a philosophical perspective offered by the *BhG*, to read this text as an internal dialogue *within* the Supreme Godhead

(Kṛṣṇa) himself, which can then provide a subtle political philosophical message for the audience or reader of the text.[10]

A key interpretive point helps frame the remainder of my analysis in this chapter: the *BhG* ("Song of the Lord"), from a macro-cosmic perspective, is an internal dialogue between Kṛṣṇa as the non-manifest absolute and an aspect of himself in the form of Arjuna's unmanifest *ātman* in embodied form on the battlefield. In the dialogue, Kṛṣṇa is trying to convince a lower part of himself—a part of himself extending down into the material realm of *prakṛti*, represented by Arjuna—that he must disinterestedly fight this battle to fulfill *dharma.*[11] As James Fitzgerald puts it, Kṛṣṇa, as the *paramātman* (highest self), represents the transcendent Self existing outside of time while Arjuna, as the *jīvātman* (lower self), represents the contingent, embodied self that acts in material, human form within historical time (2020a: 42). In philosopher Stanley Cavell's language, albeit in a different sense of the phrase, Kṛṣṇa is imploring Arjuna to "become who he is," as he has forgotten his many past births (*BhG* 4.5).

For example, Duck-Joo Kwak and Hye-Chong Han have applied Cavell's thinking to the *BhG*, turning to Cavell's position on autonomy in the sense of "becoming what you are or having the will to be responsible to yourself" (2013: 57). In my interpretation, Kṛṣṇa implores Arjuna to become what he is—a *kṣatriya*, divine Nara—and to have the will to be responsible to himself, in the sense of being responsible to Kṛṣṇa as a higher part of himself. As Hiltebeitel explains, "Kṛṣṇa subordinates himself to Arjuna as *buddhi* to *ātman*; and Arjuna subordinates himself to Kṛṣṇa as *jīva* [embodied soul] to Paramātman [highest self]" (2011b: 508). Here Arjuna can be interpreted as a potentially rogue particle of Kṛṣṇa, which is in danger of not acting out its *kṣatriya-dharma.* Therefore, Kṛṣṇa attempts to convince Arjuna to undertake his *svadharma* to sustain the cosmic structure that the Supreme Being has created and sustains—a creation that is always hurdling toward entropic dissolution. Following Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna as an aspect of his higher self, the first challenge is not being addicted to *prakṛti* and its material seductions, including the illusion that death is the worst thing that can happen to us. One should engage in neither full ascetic rejection of action and physical life, nor overattachment to life in the form of individual physical desire and the fruits of one's actions. The second major challenge confronting us entails fulfilling the duties and actions necessary for preserving the world and its structural integrity. In the *BhG*, Arjuna's

10 See also Hiltebeitel (2011b: 485–512) for analysis on the singular relationship between the "two Kṛṣṇas."

11 A multi-perspectival interpretation and framework is key to analyzing the text: on one (macro-) level, Arjuna's self is a lower part of Kṛṣṇa's self, but on another (micro-) level, Arjuna's *ātman* is the highest part of his own self.

duty to act as a *kṣatriya* reflects this challenge because he must act as a necessary instrument in preserving the world by annihilating the Kauravas, who represent a destructive earthly force.

To help support this interpretation, one can turn to one of the foremost Indian commentators on the *BhG*, namely Rāmānuja (ca. 1017–1137 CE). As a leading theologian of Viśiṣṭādvaita, or qualified non-dualism, he argues that individual selves (*ātman*s) are modes (*prakāra*s) of the *paramātman* (God) and ultimately dependent on him. Therefore, the individual self and God are fundamentally connected to one another but not completely identical. Rāmānuja explains that *brahman*—which is *īśvara*, Lord, and the creator—is the one supreme self, or *paramātman.* This one supreme and pure self, untainted by *karma*, transforms itself into individual selves, or *jīvātman*s, through the creative process of *māyā* (Gray and Hughes 2015: 382).[12] Arjuna is thus a particular particle (*aṃśa*) or aspect of Kṛṣṇa as one of these *jīvātman*s, which has a duty to uphold *dharma* for broader cosmic purposes. This philosophical context helps explain the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna from a macro-cosmic perspective, including the deep connection and unity between them. Ruth Cecily Katz, relatedly emphasizing the devotional component to this relationship, explains: "his [i. e., Arjuna's] position vis-à-vis God … seems, rather, to be one of qualified union, permitting the devotional relationship to exist" (1989: 232). I will discuss this devotional element at greater length later in the final section of the chapter, but here I agree with Katz that this "qualified union"—in Viśiṣṭādvaita's philosophical language, qualified non-dualism—intimates an important chain of reasoning in support of the *BhG*'s devotional political thought.

Considering this interpretation, we can deduce a few additional points. First, Arjuna's appeal to Kṛṣṇa for advice and understanding represents a lower part (*ātman* or *jīva*) of the *paramātman* consulting the higher part of itself. This then models the ontology and political philosophical claims I began examining in Chapter 2. Namely, Kṛṣṇa explains how the higher parts of the self must rule over the lower parts, especially since these lower parts, within the realm of *prakṛti*, can become overly attached to the material world and relationships. These ideas parallel what is happening in the dialogic action of the text itself. Namely, Arjuna's overattachment to his former teachers and cousins on the Kaurava side, along with his belief that egoistic concerns for political gain had motivated his action, made him despondent on the battlefield. Consultation with Kṛṣṇa thus models and represents an internal dialogue whereby the highest part of any self must properly

12 See also *BhG* 7.1–5, which describes how a part of Kṛṣṇa is made up of all the individual souls, which would include Arjuna.

bring its lower self around to an understanding of the true nature of the world. This dialogue therefore provides reasoning as to why Arjuna, as an embodied *kṣatriya-ātman*, must engage in battle and why this is simply *prakṛti* acting upon *prakṛti*, with the true selves remaining imperishable. The destructive (*kṣatriya*) component of the Supreme's self, embodied in the figure of Arjuna, also connects to a devotional context in which double identities, here Viṣṇu and Śiva, are viewed as united, with Kṛṣṇa representing Viṣṇu and Arjuna representing Śiva: "For just as the epic insists … on the identity of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, so it insists on the reciprocity and ultimate ontological unity of Śiva and Viṣṇu. … [with] Arjuna retaining his identity with Śiva as the destroyer, thus linking Arjuna's warrior activities … with the Śiva who periodically destroys the universe" (Hiltebeitel 2011b: 510–511). As Hiltebeitel explains, Kṛṣṇa understandably subordinates himself to Arjuna as Arjuna's charioteer in this theological context in his destructive dimension as a form of Śiva (512). Not only is Arjuna a destructive *kṣatriya*-portion of Kṛṣṇa, but Arjuna also takes on the identity of Śiva throughout the epic, which further unites major deities (here, Viṣṇu-Śiva) as well as major divinities (Nara-Narāyaṇa). As I have explained since Chapter 1, the true nature of the world is not only one of world-creation and maintenance, but also one of destruction, even necessary destruction, aiming toward greater stability and unity.

Returning to the concepts of *prakṛti* and violence, Arjuna's initial attachment to *prakṛti* and concerns about killing and death means he must appeal to his higher self, just as each person's *indriya*s (senses) and *manas* (lower mind) must turn to the *buddhi* (higher mind) and ultimately the imperishable *ātman.* As stated above, this *ātman* is one aspect of the Supreme Godhead and achieves *mokṣa* by merging with the *paramātman*, or Kṛṣṇa. This interpretation helps make sense of a passage in chapter 11 where "Kṛṣṇa states that he himself will destroy the army of the Kauravas, and that Arjuna will be merely his instrument" (Fritzman 2015: 328; van Buitenen 1981: 117). My reading explains, at the cosmological and ontological levels, how this is so: Arjuna is ultimately a *kṣatriya*-instrument and element of Kṛṣṇa, so it is really Krishna that is destroying them: "I myself have doomed them ages ago: Be merely my hand in this, Left-handed Archer [i. e., Arjuna]!" (*BhG* 11.33). The Sanskrit term that Kṛṣṇa uses here is *nimitta-mātra.* The philosophical meaning of *nimitta* is the instrumental or efficient cause of something, and *mātra* is elementary matter, so the compound nicely captures the idea that Arjuna is a material-instrumental element of Kṛṣṇa acting in the realm of *prakṛti.* In chapter 10, to connect this interpretation with a passage that relates Kṛṣṇa as ruler to Arjuna as his *kṣatriya*-instrument, we see Kṛṣṇa explain: "Among the Vṛṣṇis I am Vāsudeva, among the Pāṇḍavas Arjuna … I am the stick [*daṇḍa*] of those who chastise, the statesmanship [*nīti*] of those who seek to triumph" (*BhG* 10.38). As we know about Brahmanical political thought surrounding the turn of the millenni-

um, which also finds clear expression in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, governance or ruling is also called *daṇḍa-nīti* (application of the rod of punishment or coercion), so Kṛṣṇa is stating that he is the "rod of punishment" and the science of its application. Relatedly, Kṛṣṇa effectively coerces Arjuna to fulfill Arjuna's dharmic duty, as a sort of *kṣatriya-daṇḍa*, by revealing his terrifying cosmic form during his theophany. It's as if Kṛṣṇa is telling Arjuna: become who you are as my instrumental, *kṣatriya-daṇḍa* and disinterestedly complete the violent, destructive act for the sake of the greater good. Kṛṣṇa as *paramātman* thus models proper rule in the *BhG*'s ontology by ruling over the macro-cosmic body, as the *ātman* should rule over the inferior components of the micro-cosmic self and body.

This internal, macro-cosmic dialogue also represents the movement of conscience resulting from interactions and tensions between the multi-tiered layers of the self. At the dramatic narrative level, the *BhG* insinuates that such moments of conscience often emerge in situations where some sort of harm or violence is imminent, and one begins questioning what standards to apply in deciding whether to act violently. Arjuna's embracing this moment and imminent violence in this context is not, as we might otherwise think, something to be shunned. This point connects with one of the major interpretive points I've been advancing: within both the *MBh* and *BhG*, sometimes destruction is a necessary and fruitful thing to combat further entropic slippage into *adharma*, which can result in positive integration and political unification under a hierarchical order. In this internal dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and a lower part of himself, we see him appeal to the fact that this part of himself—namely Arjuna—is a *kṣatriya* and thus ontologically meant to fight, and must do so in dharmic fashion (i. e., disinterestedly fulfilling his dharmic duty). This stands as another example, and layer, of political integration. Consequentially, if this *kṣatriya*-particle were not to engage in battle, the righteous Pāṇḍavas would presumably not be victorious, and the unrighteous Kauravas would prevail. This moment symbolizes a point I made earlier that what happens internally at the micro-level of the self has an external impact on both the meso-level of politics and macro-level of cosmic integrity. Below I expound on some of the implications of this interpretation.

To start, such moments of conscience can be viewed as internal dialogues between the higher (Kṛṣṇa) and lower (Arjuna) parts of oneself as it comes into contact and interacts with the external world of *prakṛti* and physio-material relations —for example, political relations between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. The higher parts of oneself, according to the *BhG*, must be increasingly impartial when confronting one's respective duties, standing aloof from attachments that may prevent one from fulfilling these duties. As such, a type of moral perspectivism emerges first within the self and then extends outside oneself. Connecting this back to the narrative drama surrounding the dialogue, Arjuna's initial lamentation at

the thought of killing family members represents an internal sense of guilt that many people might feel when they confront a situation where they may have to engage in destructive or coercive behavior for some higher purpose, especially circumstances that may require perpetrating some degree of force or violence for some broader good, such as world-welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*). If we read the *BhG* from this perspective—namely, as an internal dialogue within Kṛṣṇa himself, with a martial particle of his being whose duty is to fight and kill—we get the very model for thinking I have suggested connects ontology with morality and politics. That is, if we understand how the cosmos operates, then we also understand how and why we must do our best to sustain it given the circumstances any one of us faces at a given time, which will change over the course of time, and requires participating in a politics of effacement and dharmic disinterestedness expressed by Kṛṣṇa himself. This dutiful detachment finds disturbing expression in the theophanic destruction and mass death revealed to Arjuna within Kṛṣṇa's supernal form—Kṛṣṇa remains unperturbed by its necessity. These points display the importance of the micro- for the macro-, and why political relations must first be recognized within oneself to understand how one must act in the world.

These interpretive points reintroduce us to yogic self-rule and its implications, now exemplified by Kṛṣṇa in this dialogue and clearly possessing political consequences on the battlefield of the self while standing metaphorically on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Against the backdrop of cyclical entropy and the broader context I started outlining for the *BhG* in Chapter 1, the dialogue could be viewed as providing a somewhat tragic vision of justice and politics: sustaining life, the world, and their stability or integrity through *dharma* is difficult and sometimes forceful or violent business, as it calls us to efface some of our most deeply felt connections to particular things and people, which further requires deep self-sacrifice and non-egoism.[13] However, such tragedy is mitigated because yogic self-rule allows one to understand the purposeful nature behind everything in joining Kṛṣṇa through devotion. Cyclical entropy, or fate understood as the inevitable progression of *yuga*s, would likely lead toward a fatalistic attitude were it not to gain meaning in the devotional layer of the text.[14] This, I take it, is one of the central moral lessons of the *BhG* and its political thought. Just action may entail violence, but if we are self-critical enough to inhabit a more impartial perspective, as Anderson notes, one's moral obligations can be seen as "transcending the boundaries of

13 For an elaboration of the tragic socio-political aspects of the *BhG*, see Minnema (2013: 146–152).
14 Ruth Cecily Katz puts it nicely: "The great difference between fate and God's will is this: their relationship to God gives favorable meaning to events that would lack such meaning or, at the human level, be construed as unfavorable, when viewed as mere products of fate; nothing is negative or meaningless when viewed through the eyes of devotion" (1989: 230).

any particular community and are exacting, a failure to act on one's duty ... is equivalent to supporting injustice" (2012: 73). In the dramatic narrative of the *BhG*, Arjuna failing to fight would be equivalent to supporting the Kauravas, and thus injustice.

Finally, this dialogue reveals a sort of dialectical relationship that aims at peaceable integration and stability, both internally and externally, further resulting in a dyadic monarchy exemplified in the "two Kṛṣṇas" and Nara-Nārāyaṇa framing. To invoke a theme discussed last chapter, we see a gradual movement away from legitimate political plurality in the form of the *saṅgha* (assembly) toward monarchical political visions in the *MBh* and *BhG*, whereby political pluralities move toward unification and harmonious integration under a single king and godhead. This unification for the purpose of the maintenance of the world, as Katz has claimed, finds expression in the Nara-Nārāyaṇa pairing: "Any mention of the two in the epic carries with it implicitly the eternality and perfection of their friendship: it is said that as a [unified] pair, Nara and Narayana are born *yuga* after *yuga*, 'for the sake of maintenance of the world', Arjuna and Krishna incarnating the pair in the present age" (*MBh* 7.172.81; Katz 1989: 215). One of the most significant innovations in Brahmanical political thought can be seen in its ability to create a conceptual framework that offers a totalizing cosmology and ontology, providing coherent political parallels at three different levels: self, interpersonal politics, and cosmos. For example, in describing Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as *two* Kṛṣṇas, the text dissolves any absolute distinction between the two as heroes, suggesting they are actually two aspects of "Kṛṣṇa." Here, a duality becomes a unity, and in the philosophical context I laid out in the previous section, we can see how the figure of Kṛṣṇa takes on a unified monarchical aspect when it comes to ruling relations.

Henotheistic Politics Revisited: *Bhakti* (Devotion) and Monarchy

A central concept that helps tie each of these levels (self, politics, cosmos) together and provides a framework for legitimating such unification and monarchy, is *bhakti.* The political framework of monarchy allows Brahmanical political thought to unify disparate elements of the cosmos that might provide alternative forms of legitimating political power, centralizing them in the figure of Kṛṣṇa. As Angelika Malinar (2007) argues, Kṛṣṇa as political model expresses a "cosmological monotheism," wherein ideal human kings are representative of yet remain subordinate to Kṛṣṇa as the cosmic monarch, protecting *dharma* and doing so in a detached or disinterested fashion. Importantly, she specifies the cosmic-apotheotic nature of

this monotheism, explaining, "the *BhG* develops a new theological doctrine in that the highest god is regarded as the lord of yoga, the ruler and creator of the cosmos, as well as the ever-detached highest self guaranteeing liberation from rebirth" (237). One must first understand what *bhakti* entails and how it leads one to Kṛṣṇa as a cosmological-monarchical figure, and this begins by relinquishing or renouncing the fruits of one's actions to Kṛṣṇa:

> Relinquish all your acts to me with your mind, be absorbed in me, embrace the *yoga* of the spirit [*buddhi-yoga*], and always have your mind on me. With your mind on me you will by my grace overcome all hazards; but when you are too self-centered to listen, you will perish. If you self-centeredly decide that you will not fight, your decision is meaningless anyhow: your nature will command you. Fettered by your own task, which springs from your nature, Kaunteya, you will inevitably do what you in your folly do not want to do, Arjuna. (*BhG* 18.57–60)

Thus, relinquishing and devoting oneself to Kṛṣṇa entails not being "self-centered" because one's true self, including Arjuna's, leads inevitably back to Kṛṣṇa. Here, being self-centered might mean that Arjuna thinks he is an apodictic, independent source for decision-making, which is incorrect given the framework Kṛṣṇa provides.[15] Moreover, if we pan out to the macro-cosmic perspective of the *BhG* being an internal dialogue, Kṛṣṇa informs Arjuna that the latter's nature is to fight and will ultimately command him, which "fetters" this aspect of Kṛṣṇa to its *kṣatriya*-nature. Passing ultimate responsibility to Kṛṣṇa also allows for greater equanimity and dharmic disinterestedness: "Beloved of me is the devotee who is dependent on nothing, pure, capable, disinterested, unworried, and who renounces [the fruit of] all undertakings. Beloved of me is the devotee who neither hates nor rejoices, does not mourn or hanker, and relinquishes both good and evil" (*BhG* 12.16–17). In devoting oneself to Kṛṣṇa, much human, existential angst can be transferred so that one becomes less troubled by objects of desire and anger.

Not only must this loyalty remain exclusive to Kṛṣṇa, but it is available to everyone. As Kṛṣṇa explains in the following passages:

> Those who, absorbed in me, resign all their acts to me and contemplatively attend on me with exclusive yoga [*bhakti-yoga*], soon find in me their savior from the ocean that is the run-around of deaths, Pārtha, for their minds are conducted to enter into me. (*BhG* 12.6–7)

> Four kinds of good men seek my love … Among them stands out the adept, who is loyal to me exclusively[16] and is always yoked, for I am unutterably dear to him, and he is dear to me. All

15 This is an essential point that Fritzman (2015) fails to consider, as I will explain below.

16 The Sanskrit term here is *ekabhakti*, which van Buitenen helps clarify as meaning those "whose loving loyalty is directed to one person only" (1981: 166).

> four are people of stature, but the adept I count as myself, for through his discipline he comes to me as his incomparable destination. (*BhG* 7.16–18)

In this second passage we see the importance of exclusive devotion and loyalty, as one returns to the source since Kṛṣṇa is "the eternal seed [*bīja*, primary cause or source] of all beings" (*BhG* 7.10). This devotion directs everything toward Kṛṣṇa: "May your thoughts be toward me, your love toward me, your sacrifice toward me, your homage toward me, and you shall come to me, having thus yoked yourself to me as your highest goal" (*BhG* 9.34). We again see the language of yoking oneself, or engaging in yogic discipline, but here it extends to Kṛṣṇa with yogic self-rule leading to integration with Kṛṣṇa through devotion. The discourse of sacrifice also plays a role. As Malinar notes, the *BhG* draws upon the language of sacrifice and Vedic tropes "to connect different levels of discourse and meaning … [and] to explore the nature of action and the chances to control its workings," including for purposes of detached action (2007: 4). Perhaps more importantly, she points out how Kṛṣṇa's paramountcy relates to sacrifice as well, as he is made "the protector of all sacrifices and asks his followers to dedicate their lives to him as a continuous sacrifice" (4). This sacrifice thus involves yogically disciplining oneself by sacrificing egoism and the self-centeredness mentioned earlier.

Importantly, anybody can reach this goal, which would purportedly take some of the Brahmanical elitism out of the *varṇa* hierarchy and help erase traditional Vedic traces of Brahmanical domination. As Kṛṣṇa explains in chapter 9:

> If one disciplined soul proffers to me with love a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water, I accept this offering of love from him. (*BhG* 9.26)

> I am equable to all creatures, no one is hateful to me or dear—but those who share me with love are in me and I am in them. Even a hardened criminal who loves me and none other is to be deemed a saint, for he has right conviction … Understand this, Kaunteya: no servitor of mine is lost. Even people of low origins, women, *vaiśya*s, nay *śūdra*s, go the highest course if they rely on me, Pārtha. So how much more readily holy brahmins and devoted royal seers. (*BhG* 9.29–33)

In the first passage plain, simple offerings are happily accepted in place of traditional, complex sacrificial rituals, making favorable access to Kṛṣṇa available to all. This passage signals an important post-Vedic development that connects with Kṛṣṇa's statements in the second passage. That is, Kṛṣṇa not only lays out the four *varṇa*s and displays a "democratized" devotional position, but he also subtly separates the lower two social groups (*vaiśya* and *śūdra*) from the upper two (brahmin and *kṣatriya*). The latter pairing evokes a more traditional, Brahmanical-Vedic reference to the "*brahma-kṣatra*" relationship, here combining theological and political authority while doing so under the cosmological auspice of

Kṛṣṇa.[17] As we see throughout the *BhG*, however, Kṛṣṇa invokes the Vedas but subordinates their traditional authority beneath himself, thus consolidating theological-political authority: "I cannot be seen with the aid of the Vedas, austerities, gifts, and sacrifices. Only through exclusive *bhakti* can I be seen thus, Arjuna, and known as I really am, and entered into, enemy-tamer" (*BhG* 11.53–54). Finally, this consolidation manifests in Kṛṣṇa's references to other deities, in statements such as the following: "But those who serve me while thinking only of me [versus the "purified Vedic drinkers of Soma"] and none other, who are always yoked, to them I bring felicity. Even they who in good faith devote themselves to other deities really offer up their sacrifices to me alone" (*BhG* 9.21–22). In other words, all cosmo-theological roads lead back to Kṛṣṇa, the unified and supreme authority.

Now we can look more closely at how the political framework of monarchy allows the text's brahmin authors to synthesize older Vedic ideas regarding political power with post-Vedic ideas in innovative ways, thus legitimating Brahmanical authority in a new, post-Vedic historical context. Brahmins had traditionally operated and oversaw sacrificial rituals through their knowledge and command of the Vedas, which allowed people to propitiate any number of gods for personal benefits. The bramanical authors of the *BhG* do not throw these ideas out entirely, but creatively integrate the essential terms and categories associated with the Vedas within a new ascetic and devotional framework. In one telling passage, Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna:

> There are those who, always yoked to devotion, adore me and glorify me, while exerting themselves with fortitude, and pay homage to me. … I am the rite, I am the sacrifice, I am the libation to the ancestors, I am the herb, I am the formula, I am the butter, I am the fire, I am the offering … I am … the *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*; goal, master, lord. (*BhG* 9.16–18)

Kṛṣṇa thus links himself to many of the traditional Vedic sacrificial elements: oral formulas, offerings, medium of sacrifice (fire), and the three oldest Vedas (Ṛg-, Yājur-, and Sāma-Vedas). This passage shows how Kṛṣṇa subsumes each sacrificial element, along with the whole sacrificial vocabulary, and later claims to be the godly recipient of the sacrifice as well: "For I am the recipient of all sacrifices and their master" (*BhG* 9.24). Therefore, the older Vedic sacrifice and Triple Veda, which had possessed a plurality of distinct, viable sacrificial recipients (e. g., Indra, Soma, Agni, Savitṛ), now filter into the unified, monarchical position that Kṛṣṇa inhabits. At one juncture, Kṛṣṇa openly disparages the traditional Vedic framework wherein multiple, distinct gods existed and were viewed as legit-

17 For an explanation and analysis of this *brahma-kṣatra* and brahmin-*kṣatriya* relationship in earlier Vedic political thought, see Gray (2017: 157–62).

imate recipients of a given sacrifice: "Armed with that faith he [i. e., person who propitiates other deities] aspires to propitiate that deity and obtains his desires —desires for which I in fact provide. However, the rewards of those of little wit are ephemeral: God-worshipers go to the Gods [plural], but my loyal followers go to me [singular]" (*BhG* 7.22–23). Kṛṣṇa now claims that all the traditional rewards that a sacrificer may have received from various gods come from Kṛṣṇa, and only the "witless" believe in and propitiate a pantheon of distinct gods as true sources of sacrificial rewards. Such statements are historically significant because they allow the authors of the text to incorporate elements of Vedic orthodoxy without rejecting many of its central elements *tout court*, while integrating and sublimating them within a devotional framework centered around Kṛṣṇa.

Justifying the Decision to Fight

Employing the interpretation and analyses above, I now turn to J. M. Fritzman's argument and critique that Kṛṣṇa offers incomplete and unconvincing arguments to Arjuna, which runs against the grain of the interpretations that I provide in this chapter. To start, Fritzman explains that his reading of the *BhG* is an interventionist one, which "prescinds from or suspend[s] history" and "directly engage[s] with texts as dialogical partners who share a contemporaneous present" (2015: 323). Fritzman contends that Sen takes this approach, claiming it is a viable way to read the text since the *BhG* is a "living document," further explaining that "while the history reader denies that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are engaged in a debate, the interventionist reader may nevertheless construe their discussion as a debate" (324). On these grounds, Fritzman provides his critique of Kṛṣṇa's position, arguing that it is incomplete and unconvincing, and that one "may examine Arjuna's considerations on their own merits … [and] may intervene on Arjuna's behalf, supplementing his reasons" (324). To begin with, I agree with Fritzman that the text can be viewed as a living document, which is a point I will elaborate on in Chapters 5 and 6. However, relying solely on an interventionist reading can present problematic interpretations that prevent a deeper understanding of the text and its multilayered contexts for Kṛṣṇa's speech and Arjuna's decision to fight. Fritzman advances some reasonable points, but I would like to critique some of his more problematic claims and interpretations to highlight some of the interpretive contributions of my own reading. I will not address each of Fritzman's analytic points, which would be tedious, but rather the ones meriting some critical response. Since he claims the "history reader seek[s] to read a text as a self-consistent whole, but the interventionist reader attends to the moments where the history reading fails," I will inversely return the favor and show where reading the text as a (somewhat)

consistent whole attends to the moments where the interventionist reading fails (324).

I begin by examining Fritzman's claim that Arjuna's abstention from fighting would result in Arjuna being shamed and dishonored. Fritzman claims that any disapproval of Arjuna on the part of others would be based on ignorance of important facts and thus have no merit since Arjuna is in fact no coward, and only those who are sensible and understand his particular situation and reasons for acting would be in a position to pass valid (negative) judgment upon him (329). In the abstract, this critique might have some warrant, but it fails to account for an incredibly important aspect of the *BhG* and *MBh*'s political thought: namely, warrior and hero culture.[18] As Kevin McGrath states, "Arjuna Pāṇḍava Kaurava in epic Mahābhārata is a figure of warrior accomplishment who is both supernatural *and* mortally heroic" (2016: 1). While his fellow warriors may indeed be ignorant of certain details about Arjuna's situation and reasoning, this does not change the fact that they would still heap shame upon him since he is a *kṣatriya*, whose very identity is that of a heroic warrior (*śūra*) who fights and does not abstain from battle, especially when the stakes are as high as they are at the start of the war. We should also remember that Arjuna is the son of Indra, the penultimate "warrior god" extending back to the early Vedic texts. Contra Fritzman, the more significant point concerns Arjuna's *honor and reputation* and not his reasoning. Fritzman intellectualizes Arjuna's position and the situation as a philosophical debate, which is misplaced in this context. Kṛṣṇa is pointing out a basic fact about their immediate circumstances, regardless of the criticism's non-contextualized rational merit. Arjuna is a penultimate epic hero and heroes do not back down in situations such as this, regardless of the rationality involved in making such a decision.

Second, Fritzman argues that Kṛṣṇa's reasoning is contradictory since his view about shame contradicts Kṛṣṇa's sixth argument, which concerns indifference to consequences (2015: 329). On the one hand, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna he will incur shame among his fellow *kṣatriya*s and that it is dishonorable not to fight, and on the other hand, the charioteer contends Arjuna must remain indifferent to the consequences and opinions of others and simply fulfill his duty as a *kṣatriya* in devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Fritzman thus states, "Were Arjuna to be indifferent to the consequences of his actions, he would not care whether he receives honor or shame" (329). Arjuna should indeed act indifferently, but this is one of Kṛṣṇa's "higher order" reasons, compared to the "shame/reputation reason;" the latter reason is more empirical and emotional in nature, predicated on interpersonal honor,

18 For an analysis of the Sanskrit hero and warrior culture depicted in the *MBh*, which focuses on the figure of Karṇa, see McGrath (2004).

while the former is more philosophical, based on the ontological claims that Kṛṣṇa proffers. Put another way, they are two different *types* of reasons, so pointing out a contradiction here is misplaced. Kṛṣṇa's claim amounts to the following: "here is what your fellow warriors will think of you, since you would transgress your nature as a *kṣatriya*, and besides that, you must ultimately act indifferently for a larger purpose that involves the ontology of the self and other philosophical or cosmological reasons I will provide." The point about shame is simply an observation Kṛṣṇa thinks might help bring Arjuna around, but it is not the whole story or argument. Besides, even if we were to consider this a significant contradiction, we must remember Kṛṣṇa is simply trying to get Arjuna to engage and not crafting something like a consistent philosophical argument open for dialectical critique. The dialogue is closer to a gradual cosmic revelation than a Platonic dialogue. The "shame reason" is simply a primer that pertains to Arjuna's warrior mindset and might help set Arjuna up for his gradual enlightenment and progression through higher order reasons that Kṛṣṇa lays out.

Third, Fritzman critiques Kṛṣṇa by pointing out that the war does not actually end in a dharmic fashion but rather with "the destruction of the world," so the claim that Arjuna's engagement will help hold the world together (*lokasaṃgraha*) appears patently false (2015: 331; see *MBh* 2.46.1–3, 5.156.12–13, 18.1.7–9). Citing Sheldon Pollock, Fritzman claims the *MBh* "ends, not with the restoration of dharma, but rather 'in anomie, ascetic suicide, and apocalypse'" (2015: 331; Pollock 2008: 71). Therefore, the consequences of Arjuna fighting seem to be the opposite of what Kṛṣṇa claims they will be, since they lead to world destruction. Firstly, the war itself ends with a unified monarchical structure, with the righteous Yudhiṣṭhira at the head, who is also called "King (of) Dharma." Hence, the text implies this outcome is as dharmic as it could be and an improvement from the non-unified contentiousness between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas that existed before the war. The consequences may look ugly to a modern reader and admittedly involve tremendous loss of life and pain, but read in the broader context of the *MBh*, the outcome was necessary and as positive as it could have been given the circumstances and age-transition (from Dvāpara- to Kali-Yuga) involved. Contextually, we also must remember that the Kauravas are demons incarnate and destruction is sometimes necessary for creating a more dharmic, unified political order under a single ruler.

In responding to Fritzman's critique, we must consider a few additional points. Dharma is Yudhiṣṭhira's father, so Yudhiṣṭhira becoming ruler means the offspring of Dharma reigns at the end of the war. Regarding the destructive consequences of the war, Fritzman highlights Yudhiṣṭhira's lamentation to support his point that the war's outcome was more negative than positive (2015: 331). Yudhiṣṭhira's despondency after the war is understandable, but we must also note that his personal feelings and viewpoint at this moment remain limited, as he does

not see the situation from a broader perspective in his initial moments of pain. His feelings are also limited temporally, as his *śoka* (grief) will be cyclically followed by *śānti* (peace) under his unified rule following Bhīṣma's soothing counsel in Book 12. Kṛṣṇa presents the proper context, as he alone knows why and how things must come about from a broader, cosmo-theological perspective. After all, Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Godhead, so if this is the result he intends—and we have every indication it is—then it is a necessary outcome in the broader context of the epic regardless of Yudhiṣṭhira's lament or our own moral judgments as readers. Finally, this destruction accords with the temporal structure that I have elaborated, which shifts to the Kali-Yuga by the war's end. Due to the natural entropy and cyclical dissolution enveloping these characters, the story and action necessarily moves in this direction as *dharma* wanes. The world only gets messier and more violent as *adharma* increases, as moral ambiguity increases with the approach of the Kali-Yuga.

Moreover, putting Yudhiṣṭhira aside for the moment, Arjuna must fight at this point because he and his brothers have been pushed to conflict after diplomacy failed in Book 5, "The Book of Effort." Duryodhana has failed to treat them in a just fashion by withholding the land that is their right, so the context is not as much one of rational choice but rather necessity. As Matilal has argued, "a threat posed by Duryodhana's victory and the consequential loss of the chance for the restoration of justice, might have influenced Kṛṣṇa's decision to follow the devious course" (2002: 106–107). It is also not clear the Pāṇḍavas would win without Arjuna, who, again, is connected to Kṛṣṇa at both the meso- (political, interpersonal) and macro- (cosmic, particle of Kṛṣṇa) levels. Since Kṛṣṇa serves as Arjuna's advisor/counselor and "highest mind or self" that truly knows best what serves *loka-saṃgraha*, he must inevitably heed Kṛṣṇa's advice, which is to fight according to his *kṣatriya-dharma.*[19]

Fritzman points out that Kṛṣṇa's eighth and ninth arguments introduce additional problems. These arguments state that Arjuna cannot ultimately act independently and that Kṛṣṇa, using Arjuna as his instrument, will kill Arjuna's kin. Fritzman claims these considerations are not relevant in determining what Arjuna should decide (2015: 332). According to Fritzman, insofar as Arjuna can decide how he should act, these considerations (i. e., that Arjuna cannot make an independent decision that will affect the outcome) are not relevant to *his* deciding whether he should fight or not (332). In response, the claim that Arjuna is Kṛṣṇa's instrument can be best understood in the context of my macro-level reading: at the deepest level, Arjuna is not a fundamentally distinct agent separate from Kṛṣṇa, but rather

19 See also Sreekumar's (2012: 306) defense of this point.

a particle (*aṃśa*) of Kṛṣṇa, so Arjuna cannot act otherwise or outside the will of Kṛṣṇa because he is not a fully independent agent *at this level of reality.* On my reading, this claim about instrumentality should be read according to the fact that it is ultimately Kṛṣṇa who acts, and Arjuna represents an aspect of Kṛṣṇa's manifestation in the realm of *prakṛti* as a *kṣatriya*/warrior. Additionally, Kṛṣṇa's theophany explains how, since Kṛṣṇa *is* Time, the destroyer of all, he/Time ultimately kills these bodies, with Arjuna serving as his warrior-instrument in the war. Fritzman presumes these two figures are fundamentally distinct agents given his interventionist approach, but his approach fails to properly account for the three interpretive layers I have identified: micro, meso, and macro. The figures are distinct on the meso-level but not on the macro-level, and it is on the latter interpretive layer that this claim about instrumentality should be understood.

We also must remember that they are a unified pair (of sorts) at the meso-level, and Kṛṣṇa serves as counselor and "higher mind" for Arjuna in this scenario. In other words, we do not have two completely distinct, equal, and independent interlocutors chatting about fighting, but rather a discussion between a lower part of a (single) higher mind having a bout of conscience while faced with the possibility of killing its kin and former teachers in the realm of *prakṛti.* A deeper interpretation understands the dialogue as one of internal conscience, whereby the lower element needs the counsel and theophany that only the higher (or highest) element of the cosmic body can provide.[20]

As I have argued previously, this reading coheres with the *BhG*'s ontology of the self at the micro-level. According to this ontology, the highest part should rule and win out, so Kṛṣṇa as the highest part and Supreme Godhead must necessarily take the day. In this sense, at the normative-cosmic level Arjuna has no independent choice in the matter in the sense that Fritzman suggests; as a parallel, we should recall Draupadī's lack of choice in her own *svayaṃvara*, which is constrained by *daiva* (divine fate), and *daiva* is playing a similar role here. To get Fritzman's conclusion one would need to shoe-horn the dialogue into a narrower, meso-level of interpretation, neglecting the parts of the *BhG* and *MBh* that would allow us to make sense of this claim to instrumentality. In contrast to Fritzman's approach, I have tried to do two things: first, distinguish between three conceptu-

20 Readers should remember that conscience emerges in that moment when a tension arises between the immaterial and material world, especially when some type of destruction is necessary. Again, I argue that the fighting and killing are—or at least, can be—justified by and within the conceptual and narrative framework of the text itself, regardless of whether I or anyone else agrees with Kṛṣṇa's reasoning or Arjuna's decision to fight. Relatedly, one of the weaknesses of the interventionist approach is that it overlooks the broader context that would allow us to explain the rationale behind Kṛṣṇa's claims and Arjuna's behavior.

al-interpretive levels that exist in the text, and second, show how they should not be fully conflated but rather parallel, resonate with, and reinforce one another in ways that allow us to explain why Arjuna should, and does in fact, fight. This response renders Fritzman's critique of Kṛṣṇa unconvincing, or at least unwarranted, since recognizing what is happening at the macro-level allows us to explain some of these potentially unconvincing statements by Kṛṣṇa at an interpersonal dialogic level.

The last of Fritzman's critiques I want to address concerns questions about duty. Fritzman argues that "what is at stake is not whether Arjuna should perform his duties, but whether his duties actually require him to fight his kin, and, if they do, how they are to be reconciled to duties that require him to be loyal to and protect his family" (2015: 333). To begin with, his duties require him to fight his kin for the reasons I've given above, but also due to what I've called "scaled duties," according to which broader duties supersede more localized ones. His highest duty, as part of Kṛṣṇa, is pursuing justice as world welfare or integration, which necessarily supersedes his duty to cousins and former teachers. Accordingly, the issue is not one of total reconciliation—which is the way Arjuna problematically conceives the situation at the start—but rather an issue of scaled duties pointing toward superior, less subjective ties to particular people while recalling the principles of dharmic disinterestedness and politics of effacement. Scaled duties require the acknowledgement that duties associated with *kūla-dharma* may sometimes conflict with *varṇa-dharma*, as they happen to be in this case for Arjuna. The very logic of the *varṇāśramadharma* system bears this out. Namely, one must think less egoistically and more "objectively" according to duties that broaden one's considerations for the welfare of those extending past one's immediate family. Arjuna's duties are not based on a particular 'who' and his idiosyncratic choice of what duties he'd like to fulfill at any given moment, but rather 'what' social group he is part of, and which life stage he happens to be in.

To summarize my own position in response to Fritzman's critiques, I first want to ask: would it even matter that Kṛṣṇa's argument is not convincing, or contradictory, from an interventionist standpoint? The interventionist reading may provide an astute critique from a contemporary philosophical standpoint, taking these two figures as distinct interlocutors at a certain meso-level of interpersonal relations in the realm of *prakṛti.* On this reading, Fritzman suggests Kṛṣṇa must provide a logical and consistent philosophical argument to Arjuna, and if the argument failed, this would justify readers stepping in to help Arjuna provide a counterargument as to why he should not fight, or to explain why anyone should not fight if they were in Arjuna's shoes. I pose two responses to this position. First, contra Fritzman, Kṛṣṇa's position remains consistent, but to properly understand its consistency one must shift to the macro-level perspective of Kṛṣṇa's cosmic self,

with Arjuna as a sort of conscientious objector-particle of Kṛṣṇa, to see both the consistency and necessity in a claim to fight and kill members of his family. Second, taking the interventionist approach provides us with a misguided reading of the text for the reasons stated above, since it does not account for enough context to give a fair hearing as to why Kṛṣṇa claims what he claims, and why Arjuna behaves how he behaves. I have intimated points to this effect and will attend to it at greater length in the next chapter, but the interventionist reading also misses important points of historical context that would allow us to make sense of why the Brahmanical authors of the text are writing Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the way they are.

In contrast to Fritzman's interventionist approach—which, by the way, is shared by many scholars, including Sen—I think the following are more important questions: first, "*why* is Kṛṣṇa ultimately trying to convince Arjuna?" and second, "*what* happens as a result of his speech?", and not, "Is his argument philosophically convincing?" I have already covered many of the reasons why Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to fight, and to answer the second question: what happens is that Arjuna becomes even more devoted to Kṛṣṇa, realizes the deeper structure of his situation, and ends up fighting and killing many warriors in battle in helping lead the Pāṇḍavas to victory. These actions, then, pave the way for subsequent actions in the remainder of the *MBh.* We can speculate as to whether Arjuna should have refrained from fighting and what may have happened as a result, but I don't see nearly as much upshot in this line of analysis. Kṛṣṇa instructs, Arjuna fights, and dramatic consequences follow. Otherwise, we would not have the epic as we now have it. Regardless of our assessment of Kṛṣṇa's chain of reasoning, his appeal works and that is what matters most because it leads to the next stage in the action of the *MBh.* In the end, we are talking about the *BhG* and *MBh* as we have them, not about what we might like them to be. Engaging in interventionist and normative-speculative projects such as Fritzman's—for example, in seeing what independent lessons we could take away from the text that apply in the contemporary world—undoubtedly has some value. However, I think we can still draw such lessons without jettisoning what Fritzman calls a "history" reading. If we do not supplement the interventionist reading with a sufficient historical reading, our interpretation can miss salient points and become misleading. This is precisely what happens with Fritzman's critique. Incorporating a historicized reading or using elements of such a reading as I have, can help prevent us from dangling critical questions that can be effectively answered should we look at some additional context in both the *BhG* and *MBh.* This approach allows us to attend to the moments where the interventionist reading would otherwise fail. In short, if one accounts for sufficient textual/epic-wide and historical context, then Kṛṣṇa's position can be interpreted as both complete and convincing—to an extent.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an interpretation of Kṛṣṇa as the penultimate political model within the *BhG.* "King Kṛṣṇa" models the proper behavior for ruling, extending from the micro-level of the self all the way up to the macro-cosmic level. The hinge for my political interpretation of Kṛṣṇa is reading the dialogue as a discussion between higher and lower elements of a cosmic structure that exists entirely within the proverbial 'body' of Kṛṣṇa. I have called this a dialogue of internal conscience, in which a higher part of the cosmic structure and Supreme Being attempts to convince a lower, *kṣatriya*-aspect of itself to engage in warfare and killing for the broader purpose of *lokasaṃgraha*, or upholding world welfare. I argued that this term may be the closest we have for something like "justice" in the *BhG*, which entails fulfilling higher duties for purposes of world integration and stability. Of course, this integration and stability will be temporary within the larger cyclical-temporal structure characterized by entropy and movement toward the Kali-Yuga. Culminating in the figure of Kṛṣṇa, this text offers a henotheistic stance that requires devotion to the Supreme Godhead, further modeling a monarchical political structure. As I will explain in the next chapter, this monarchical structure is rife with ideological claims that support a Brahmanical viewpoint.

At this juncture, one might ask: what are the consequences of reading Kṛṣṇa as the ultimate political model in the *BhG?* What alternatives might there be, and what is the significance of reading this specific character within the *BhG* as the overarching model for the text's political teachings? First, reading Kṛṣṇa as cosmic monarch displaces many scholarly readings of the *BhG* as a political work situated within the *MBh.* When focusing on particular characters, scholars such as Kevin McGrath and James Fitzgerald have drawn greater attention to kingly figures in the epic, especially Yudhiṣṭhira, or the hero Arjuna, as the model for rule by *kṣatriya*s.[21] Yudhiṣṭhira undoubtedly remains an essential political figure within the *MBh*, but as I will explain in the next chapter, when considering the historical context and authorial intention of both the *MBh* and *BhG*, we see that reading Kṛṣṇa as cosmic ruler is necessary for clarifying the ideological nature of the *BhG* and some of its central political messages. On the other hand, while Arjuna remains crucial to the text's political thought, I have argued that his role is more instrumental in nature. Fighting, killing, and earning honor or fame in battle is an important element of the meaning of rule in the *BhG*, to be sure, but it does not capture what I take to be the most fundamental element. Rather, the most essential components of the text's political thought emerge when using the framework that I have expli-

21 For example, see McGrath (2016; 2017) and Fitzgerald (2004a: 128–142).

cated in Chapters 1 through 3, which express the brahmin authors' intentions to compose a text that could transcend historical context and achieve transhistorical applicability. My reading of the *BhG* as a paradigmatic political treatise within the larger epic also contrasts with those who have focused on the more explicitly political portions of the *MBh*, especially Book 12 (*Śānti Parvan*). In short, my analysis intends to bring the *BhG* to center stage as a text of political significance within the epic.

I will argue that Kṛṣṇa serves not only as an overarching theoretical model, but also an ideological model capable of transmitting Brahmanical ideas across time and space in support of a socio-political structure favorable to Brahmanical interests. In fact, viewing either Yudhiṣṭhira or Arjuna as the central political figures of the *MBh* can provide a misleading image of the text's most important political ideas. This is not to say that both figures are not crucial for understanding the epic's political thought and the *BhG* within it, but careful examination of the *BhG* has the virtue of bringing Kṛṣṇa's political significance to the forefront and into clearer focus. In the next chapter, I will unpack these claims and clarify what I take to be the deeply ideological structure of the *BhG*.

Chapter 4
Modeling a Brahmanical Political Ideology

In previous chapters I have focused on interpreting the political thought expressed in the *BhG*, engaging in a conceptual analysis that centered around the two central figures, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. I have argued that Arjuna represents an "ascetic hero" and warrior that models a set of normative claims at the micro-political level. At this level Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna a doctrine of dharmic disinterestedness, which involves a politics of effacement for the broader welfare of all beings (*lokasaṃgraha*) and greater cosmic integration under the unified human monarchy of Yudhiṣṭhira, but even more importantly, Kṛṣṇa's cosmic monarchy. Therefore, in Chapter 3 I examined how Kṛṣṇa serves as both a macro- and micro-level model for the political philosophical lessons introduced in Chapter 2, which centered around a political ontology of the self. I argued that the *BhG*'s ultimate political vision culminates in the complex and multi-layered figure of Kṛṣṇa, the cosmic monarch, who experiences a bout of internal conscience while a potentially rogue particle of himself, Arjuna, threatens to abstain from battle. In providing Arjuna numerous reasons for why he should engage in battle, Kṛṣṇa himself stands as the ultimate model for the *BhG*'s central ethical and political teachings. While Yudhiṣṭhira is often viewed as a primary ideological Brahminical figure in the epic,[1] I will argue that Kṛṣṇa should be viewed as the central ideological figure in the *BhG*, and perhaps the epic more broadly. Scholarship referencing the existence of a Brahminical ideology in the *BhG* remains incomplete as scholars have not fully analyzed the text's core ideological elements, beginning with a precise definition as to what one means by the term "ideology." Therefore, it is worth engaging with a mature formulation of ideology found in critical theorists such as Raymond Geuss, complemented by a theory of narrative's role in ideological thinking as found in the work of David Herman.

My analysis now shifts from a textual exegetical and conceptual analytic lens to a more historicist one. Following James Fitzgerald, I believe we can roughly date the *BhG*'s inclusion as a finished product within the epic to the first few centuries of the Common Era, with a likely *terminus ad quem* in the 4th century CE. Perhaps most importantly, the *BhG* likely represents a Brahmanical response to several major historical events, such as the rise and fall of the Mauryan Dynasty

1 For example, see Fitzgerald (2020b: 22–24), who argues that Yudhiṣṭhira's character in the epic shows brahmins entering squarely into religious competition with heterodox traditions in efforts to develop a new, reformed Brahmanical canon in the wake of Aśoka Maurya's rule.

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(ca. 324–185 BCE), the rise of heterodox traditions (at least from a Brahminical viewpoint) of Buddhism and Jainism, and the creative revivalism of Brahmanical thought during a Classical period extending into the Gupta Empire (ca. 320–500 CE). During this period, redactors of the epic and authors of the *BhG* sought to extend the ancient ritual authority of the Vedas in new ways, innovating and incorporating ideas from Upaniṣadic and Sāṃkhyan philosophy, as well as Vaiṣṇava theology and *bhakti*.

To address this issue, I draw upon the work of Geuss to develop a critical-realist lens for reapproaching the text. Geuss offers a concise yet sophisticated definition of what constitutes an ideology, explaining how ideologies operate and how one might critique them. Employing Geuss's definition helps provide a fresh approach to the *BhG*'s political thought within the purview of political theory, in contrast to most epic scholars who approach the text from South Asian and Religious Studies. This realist lens on ideology sheds new light on Brahmanical political thought, especially its ideological elements, which are not only historically significant in pre-modernity but also consequential for contemporary Indian politics and questions surrounding Hindu nationalism. To supplement my analysis of ideology, I incorporate Herman's (2009) theorization of a "storyworld," partly through the work of Adheesh Sathaye (2015), since Sathaye employs Herman's conception of a storyworld in a narrative-mythological context. This storyworld promoted by the *BhG*—situated within the broader narrative of the *MBh* and its conceptual framework—helps explain how the text's brahmin authors can more effectively transmit a political ideology to their intended audience of both rulers and a broader public.

In subsequent sections of the chapter, I apply this critical-realist lens to examine the *BhG* by identifying four distinct topical areas where Brahminical ideology can be located. I begin by considering how historical context would have influenced the *BhG*, specifically brahmins' diminished political prestige, suggesting how the epic's apocalyptic narrative attempts to provide a naturalized explanation for brahmins' lost prestige. I then focus on two historical figures, Aśoka Maurya and Puṣyamitra Śuṅga, examining how they may have influenced Brahmanical concepts involving harmlessness (*ahiṃsā*), liberation from suffering and cycle of death/rebirth (*saṃsāra*), and the legitimate use of violence. In the following section I shift from historically elite figures to consider the *BhG*'s ideological role on public imagination, especially the role of an ideologized temporality and a political mythology capable of appealing not just to rulers but also to a broader public

audience through royal court and popular performances.[2] The final subsection ties up the elite ideological elements in examining Kṛṣṇa as the penultimate ideological figure in the *BhG*, explaining how *bhakti* devotionalism opens new conceptual and narrative avenues for looping non-elites into a Brahmanical ideological fold.

My overarching argument in the chapter is that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna model Brahmanical ideology in an effective and comprehensive manner, esoterically hiding its ideological elements from becoming too obvious for an audience that needed to be convinced of its truth claims but would not necessarily benefit from its realization in the political world. The text's Brahmanical ideology is not directly expressed in the form of a theory, but rather modeled in a narrative format, thus creating a potent medium for its socio-political uptake. The social model is *varṇa*-based and hierarchical, while the political model is monarchical and unitary. The narrative format combines numerous philosophical, cosmological, theological, and normative claims, but combines them within an accessible dialogic frame that could appeal to audiences as non-ideologically "true," "natural," or "universal" in nature. Chapter 5 will then provide a transitional analysis to clarify the transhistorical connection between this Brahmanical ideology as it existed in the historical past extending into the contemporary period, further reflecting on how the text offers not only an ideology but what I will call a *deep ideological* structure applicable to political crises in any given age. From a Brahmanical standpoint the defining transhistorical crisis involves pluralistic political contestation, on the one hand, and normative claims about how political peace and prosperity can only be achieved through unified authority, on the other. In the modern and contemporary period, an updated version of the crisis involves challenges to Brahmanical-Hindu based authority as a unifying political structure in the face of Indian democratic plurality.

Methodologically, the concept of deep ideology helps explain why and how the text's historically situated ideology can be made to appear pertinent to an ever-present audience while perpetuating a particular group's self-interest, reifying an ideology capable of surviving over millennia. One thing that differentiates regular forms of ideological thinking from this deep ideological structure is the philosophical depth and breadth of the latter's ideological claims, which includes the sophistication of the justificatory structure for its claims. Another element that distinguishes more historically limited ideologies from this deep ideology is the latter's ability to manifest political success over long periods of time in response

2 On the topic of the epic's performance and its narrative effect for a public audience, see Hegarty (2012).

to historical change, and do so in ways that align with the original ideological aims of the text's authors.

A Realist Lens: Power, Political Ideology, and the Storyworld

Two contemporaries provide us with useful new frameworks for revisiting the *BhG*, Raymond Geuss's conceptualization of ideology and David Herman's concept of a "storyworld." With these conceptual tools we can see how brahmins could construct the *BhG* for particular historical reasons, and not universal ones. First, Geuss (2008) has defended what he calls a "realist" approach to political philosophy, which identifies and examines important elements driving a political theory, such as agency, power, and interests located in historical context. As Geuss reminds us, "If you want to think about politics, think first about power" (2008: 97). Insofar as the *BhG* can be read as a text of political theory or philosophy, one must consider how power plays a role in shaping the conceptual contours and meaning of the text. Seen through this realist lens, the *BhG* exhibits a historical set of Brahmanical interests in the context of lost power and privilege, especially political patronage from rulers, with the rise in prominence of heterodox traditions and challenges posed by Buddhism and Jainism. On my reading the text expresses a complex ideological structure designed to convince both rulers and a broader audience that brahmins possessed a special philosophical, theological, and cosmological status in the world. The *BhG*'s Brahmanical authors composed the text as a literary instrument designed to help re-instantiate their former privileges vis-à-vis political power. Second, I will build on Herman's conception of "storyworld" to sharpen my analysis of the *BhG* as a work of political ideology. Specifically, I contend that narratives, fictional characters, and the creation of storyworlds can all serve as powerful ideological tools for appealing to a broad audience to convince the audience of a text's claim to universal truth. The *BhG*'s brahmin authors advance this project partly by expanding the text's literary appeal and normative applicability, doing so in ways that differentially benefit Brahmanical interests.

Geuss's conception of ideology begins with the concept of power and its applications (2008: 50–55).[3] He explains that power relations can operate to generate or influence the formation of beliefs, desires, and attitudes in a multitude of ways and "only a historical account of the particular details will be at all enlightening" (51–52). Geuss also states that power relations can operate in ways such that "cer-

3 For his systematic focus on ideology within the context of critical theory, see Geuss (1981).

tain features of the society that are merely local and contingent, and maintained in existence only by the continual exercise of power, will come to seem as if they were universal, necessary, invariant, or natural features of all forms of human social life" (52). As I will argue below, this is the ideological move I observe the Brahmanical authors of the *BhG* make. I argue the brahmins want to claim their localized and contingent interests are both "universal" and "necessary," while understanding this requires the exercise of power—especially political power—to support their ideal form of human social life structured by the *varṇāśramadharma* system, by Vaiṣṇava theology, and by Kṛṣṇa's purported cosmic monarchy.

Geuss further clarifies key features of an ideology as a "set of beliefs, attitudes, preferences that are distorted as a result of the operation of specific relations of power," with the distortion "characteristically tak[ing] the form of presenting these beliefs, desires, etc., as inherently connected with some universal interest, when in fact they are [expressive of and] subservient to particular interests" (52). In other words, ideology operates when specific people or groups of people pose something that serves a particular group's interest as being in everyone's best interest, or claim some set of beliefs, etc. is naturally occurring when in fact it is not natural at all but rather the effect of particular power relations. Hence, Geuss identifies ideologies as comprising three distinct elements:

1. a certain configuration of power;
2. this configuration of power brings it about that certain contingent, variable features of our human mode of existence (which are in fact maintained in existence only by the constant exercise of that power) appear to be universal, "natural," or necessary or spontaneously arising features;
3. as a result of (2), certain particular interests can plausibly present themselves as universal one. (52–53)

This definition and outline of what constitutes an ideology can edify the literature on the *BhG*'s political thought, helping us identify key components of Brahmanical ideology as it operates in narrative and philosophical form in the text. Clarifying these components in a theoretical fashion is also helpful because it will help combat what Geuss calls "ideological illusion" by identifying the existence of specific configurations of power (or claims thereto) that would otherwise remain hidden (53).

To further understand how Geuss's ideology may be in operation, I turn to the concept of a "storyworld" when reading Adheesh Sathaye's (2015) study of the Hindu sage Viśvāmitra, a notable figure in Hindu mythology. Using David Herman's (2009) concept of a "storyworld," Sathaye asks how Brahminical social ideology could operate through narrative structures. As Herman explains, "*Storyworlds* can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives; reciprocally, narratives can be

defined as blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation" (2009: 105). Here I would add that such world-creation can include ideological world-creation. Story-worlds can thus provide an incredibly effective subterfuge for transmitting political ideologies, whereby new narrative worlds are created to change the real world in ways that inscribe particular interests as universal or natural. This process involves "mapping words … onto worlds … [whereby] this mapping operation may seem so natural and normal that no 'theory' is necessary to describe and explain the explicit procedures involved" (105). Examples of this process, taken from my previous analysis in Chapter 1, are the traditional or familiar Vedic figures, concepts, and myths that brahmins invoke to help them "naturalize" their accounts and explain certain events or phenomena in the world. Brahmin authors reinvoke Vedic figures and images, extending myths and engaging in what Geuss calls "conceptual innovation" in ways that subtly or creatively expand such imagery through narrative and map them onto new, changing worlds that brahmins were experiencing over the centuries of the epic's composition. As Geuss explains, conceptual innovation entails an attempt "to provide a new thought-instrument or conceptual tool to help particular people understand and define, and thus begin to deal with, certain problems" (2008: 43–44).

One such problem was a Brahmanical loss of socio-political privilege beginning in the 4th century BCE. Narrative and conceptual extensions could appear natural enough that the move to map new worlds and conceptual structures onto the existing world to recreate a new one would not require any formal theory to explain the procedures involved. For example, I discussed this phenomenon in the micro-political level of the self in Chapter 2. This politicized self represents a tapestry of familiar religious and philosophical ideas drawn from both pre-Classical and Classical contexts, both Brahminical and non-Brahminical, mapped onto the space of the body through Kṛṣṇa's dialogue and contextualized in a narrative fashion by the text's brahmin authors.[4] By creatively drawing upon various religious and philosophical resources, brahmins were able to frame the body as a *natural* and *necessary* political space with hierarchies of purity/impurity that impacted distinctions between different social groups and justified the rule of some people over others. Without framing the body as a natural political space, the entire Brahmanical political theory expressed in the *BhG* would be rendered incoherent and more conspicuous as an ideological work.

Herman's theorization of a storyworld—an imagined space that "we are asked to manufacture mentally in the course of consuming a narrative"—can help ex-

4 See Fitzgerald (2004b: 72) and Sutton (2000) on the gradual process of Brahmanical communities incorporating ideas both within and outside traditional Brahmanical discourse.

plain how Brahmanical political ideology could produce real effects in the world in attempting to "real-ize" itself in the lived world beyond the story (Sathaye 2015: 6). The *MBh* and *BhG* both present imagined, normatively charged worlds that their authors claim as real, inspired by world historical events and changes in socio-political configurations that they and their predecessors had experienced from the 5th century BCE up to (and perhaps just beyond) the Common Era. Sathaye explains:

> Even if there once had been a real person named 'Viśvāmitra' who lived in prehistoric India, the stories about him still conjure up 'possible worlds' that have shaped how Hindu communities have historically come to understand the remote past, and in doing so, how they have structured [and continue to envision how they might structure?] the social world around them. (2015: 6)

These "possible worlds" possess within them pieces of the actual world in the form of the authors' experiences, even as the story or narrative attempts to enact new ideas in response to new historical experiences and cultural surroundings. I believe the same process operates within the epic, including figures such as Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, both of whom reflect Brahmanical experiences with rulers they had perceived to be "evil" or corrupt. For example, brahmins literally "demonize" the Kauravas, who may represent or reflect rulers that brahmins perceived to be evil, such as the Nandas (as "impure" *śūdra*s) and Mauryans such as Aśoka, whom they portray as needing to be exterminated to reestablish rule that was *brāhmaṇya*, or in accord with Brahmanical authority. Fitzgerald identifies elements of this ideological thinking in explaining how "The Nandas, the Mauryas —Aśoka in particular—and their client kings were certainly kings fostering the kind of *saṃkara* [breakdown of *varṇadharma* system] the *MBh* finds abhorrent" (2006: 276). This breakdown of the ideal Brahmanical socio-political order was a key aspect of the epic's storyworld, contextualizing the narrative of the *BhG* and justifying Arjuna's engagement in battle to defeat the Kauravas.

With this conceptual framework, we can read the *BhG* as a Brahmanical narrative with the capacity to create a particular storyworld. In this world, one can imagine one's innermost self as a fragment of a divine godhead that might further possess various duties according to one's *dharma.* This imaginary may then motivate someone to act differently in the world, inspired by the narrative. As Geuss emphasizes, from a realist standpoint it does not matter if a particular narrative is entirely untrue or illusory *if* it actually motivates people to act in particular ways in the world (2008: 9–13).[5] I argue that brahmins attempted to achieve some-

5 As Geuss further explains, "even illusions can have effects. The realist must take powerful illu-

thing like this and were especially interested in engaging and motivating rulers (along with others) as part of their audience to act in particular ways. Potentially sympathetic rulers would be one of the most important audiences for the text's authors. As Sheldon Pollock explains, "the imaginary and the conceptual have a reality, and often a very consequential reality, of their own … [and] Epic representations provided a template for structuring real political aspirations … among historical rulers across the space-time of the Sanskrit cosmopolis" (2006: 237). Insofar as the *BhG*'s Brahmanical authors succeeded in creating this effect, they would also be able to obscure or naturalize some of the more explicit ideological elements operating in the text, perhaps convincing the audience, in Geuss's words, that a set of particular interests are actually of universal interest and applicability. To help defend these claims, I must explain historical context and factors that would influence Brahmanical ideology expressed in the *BhG*.

History Matters: Lost Prestige and Apocalyptic Narrative

While the phrase "Brahmanical ideology" has been frequently used in reference to the *BhG*, these references do not systematically employ analytic tools such as the ones that I provide.[6] What follows is an attempt to build on existing scholarship in South Asian and Religious Studies to identify specific historical factors that would help clarify and elaborate on claims regarding Brahmanical ideology expressed in the epic, and the *BhG* in particular.

The account goes something like the following. In the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods during which the *MBh* and *BhG* were composed, the texts' Brahmanical authors were developing a narrative that supported a distinctly Brahmanical ideology in reactionary response to their diminished economic and socio-political prestige beginning with the rule of Aśoka Maurya (ca. 265–232 BCE), during which time heterodox religions such as Buddhism and Jainism were ascending in popularity. This "cosmopolitanism" of the Nandan and Mauryan empires resulted in brahmins' loss of political patronage, which fueled important literary and philosophical responses observable in the *BhG*. Fitzgerald aptly explains "One of the principal effects of this cosmopolitanism was that men who did not know or honor the Vedas were lavishly funded by princes and wealthy patrons,

sions seriously as factors in the world that have whatever motivational power they in fact have for the population in question" (11).

6 For example, see: Biardeau (1997: 118); Bronkhorst (2007: 95–97); Fitzgerald (1983: 625; 1985; 2001: 63–92; 2004b, 53–54; 2006, 257–286); Hegarty (2012: 37); Hiltebeitel (2001; 2004: 213; 2011a: 486); Sutton (1997: 340).

to the lasting humiliation and impoverishment of brahmins whose identities and livelihoods were tied to knowing and using the Vedas" (2020a: 18). Accordingly, during the *BhG*'s composition its brahmin authors attempted to justify their religious and political centrality for society at large, doing so in a rhetorical way that would legitimate the hierarchical, *varṇa*-based vision they had of society. This vision followed a Brahmanical worldview that had been slowly acclimating to historical developments from ca. 1500 BCE to 300 CE, during which time brahmins adjusted conceptual and ritual frameworks they had been defending since the Vedic period. The corresponding social structure posited four distinct groups: brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra.* As we saw in the case of the *BhG*, Kṛṣṇa is the progenitor of this divinely sanctioned system, and Arjuna's social status as a *kṣatriya* requires him to engage in battle since this is his proper duty, or *svadharma.* Accordingly, each social group (*varṇa*) had its own set of social functions and duties (*dharma*s) specific to the group's station: priestly and intellectual functions (brahmin); ruling and warrior functions (*kṣatriya*); productive functions associated with farming, trade, etc. (*vaiśya*); service functions (*śūdra*).

As one of the staunchest defenders of claims regarding Brahmanical ideology expressed in the epics, Fitzgerald explains the historical-political background in the following way. First, he claims: "The *Great Bhārata* … directed to all members of society, was constructed as an almost ideal rhetoric for the presentation and inculcation of this new theological ideology. The *Great Bhārata* powerfully motivates and dramatizes the basic ethical dilemma addressed by the *Gītā* and exemplifies the ethical model revealed in the *Gītā*" (1983: 618). This theological ideology centers around an early Brahmanic Vaiṣṇava (devotees of the god Viṣṇu and his various *avatara*s, such as Kṛṣṇa) vision of the cosmos and society, which served as ideological grounding for an empire under a single monarch (625). In line with the argumentation I've presented in previous chapters, he further explains that "the type of political integration and subordination [i. e., under a monarch] required to produce a harmoniously disciplined society [per the *varṇāśramadharma* system] and imperial state certainly must not have come easy to the imagination of the old political elites of Aryan society, which were fractious and agonistic" (625). This "fractious and agonistic" politics to which Fitzgerald refers correlates to the earlier *saṅgha* (assembly)-style system I discussed in Chapter 1.

Elsewhere Fitzgerald elaborates on this context, explaining how brahmins responded to several sensed threats to their traditional privileges. For example, he explains how "the *Mahābhārata* developed as a Brāhmaṇ-inspired response to the tremendous damage (as seen from the point of view of some Brāhmaṇs between approximately 300 and 100 BCE) wrought by the rise of the empires at Pāṭaliputra and the "heathen" (*nāstika*, Jainism and Buddhism particularly) religions these empires promoted" (Fitzgerald 2004b: 53–54). These challenges to Brahman-

ism appear throughout the epic's narrative, with Fitzgerald claiming that its apocalyptic vision grew from a deep sense of rage that finds expression in both "brahmin-abuse" stories and narratives depicting how armed rulers had been neglecting the sacred Vedas (2004a: 123). The crisis the Brahmanical elite sensed had much to do with the new political and economic institution of the Mauryan empire, wherein brahmins found themselves in "unprecedented competition for patronage and support" (2004b: 72). This competition for political and economic support existed within an increasingly cosmopolitan context, as the Mauryan empire expanded, encompassed, and tolerated an increasing diversity of religious and philosophical traditions. As the Mauryan government's geographic cosmopolitanism spread, Brahmanical communities likely felt "insufficient recognition of the uniqueness of Brahminic authority" (Fitzgerald 2003: 811). To enhance their recognition and legitimize their perceived uniqueness, even if driven to an extent by a "deep political rage (Fitzgerald 2001: 85)," Alf Hiltebeitel offers the possible interpretation that the Brahmanical authors of the *MBh* may have designed the text "to sustain a sly and patient political theology that unfolds a new bhakti cosmology in which royal patronage and Brahman prestige find new justifications and meanings that are still nonetheless saturated with overtones of the Vedas" (2004: 213). I find Hiltebeitel's suggestion compelling and will provide reasons for accepting this interpretation, unpacking and expanding on his claims regarding *bhakti* in greater detail later in the chapter.

I first want to advance two claims that are central to my argument moving forward, bearing the aforementioned historical context in mind. First, agreeing with Fitzgerald, I believe the *BhG*'s ethical model and relatedly, its political model, exemplify the same such models revealed in the *MBh* as a whole. Therefore, since the *BhG* provides its own microcosmic view of the broader Brahmanical viewpoints expressed throughout many parts of the larger *MBh*, the *BhG* is an especially valuable place to anchor an examination of epic Brahmanical political thought. Moreover, scholars such as Fitzgerald that examine Brahmanical ideology within historical context have focused much attention on Book 12 of the *MBh*, the *Śānti Parvan*, which focuses explicitly on the duties of rulers or kings in times of both peace and adversity.[7] My analysis of Brahmanical ideology supplements Fitzgerald's analysis of texts such as Book 12, showing the pervasiveness of an ideological vision expressed throughout the *MBh.* Second, when scholars such as Fitzgerald make claims regarding Brahmanical ideology, the term "ideology" generally goes undefined and remains under-theorized in the literature, preventing scholars from locating and elaborating on important ideological elements of the *BhG*'s political

7 For example, see Fitzgerald (2006: 257–286).

thought. Providing perhaps the closest definition of Brahmanical ideology in the literature, Fitzgerald suggests that this form of ideology "advances the claims of brahmins to be the sole determiners of right and wrong in the polity and the society – claims that were certainly not generally accepted at this time" (2020b: 24). While this articulation provides a helpful starting point, it remains undertheorized and can be expanded analytically in a number of ways to elucidate the depth of Brahmanical ideology and its mode of operation.

One such ideological element involves the category of temporality and an apocalyptic narrative expressed in the text. According to Johannes Bronkhorst (2007), following the Vedic period (ca. 1500 – 650 BCE), Brahmanical culture was pushed eastward from the northwest of the subcontinent and increasingly forced to interact with the northeastern culture of what Bronkhorst calls "Greater Magadha." As the Brahmanical community gradually lost its political prestige,[8] it would be reasonable for brahmins, including the authors of the epic, to construct a cyclical conception of time that envisioned a more ideal past that had been kinder to their community's interests. Likewise, the current "corrupt" age was viewed in apocalyptic terms during which they believed themselves to be living at the end of a cosmic era, captured by the designation of "Kali-Yuga." As Bronkhorst puts it, "The authors and redactors of the *Mahābhārata* inevitably came up against the culture of the country that had united northern India into a single empire and had thus signaled the end of the Brahminical way of life as it used to be" (2017b: 578). In order to capture the public imagination, brahmins needed some type of conceptual hook in the existing religious and philosophical culture of Greater Magadha.[9] One promising hook was a theory of *karma* and *saṃsāra* (cyclical rebirth). Thinking of time cyclically at the individual level through rebirth and karmic retribution or reward would provide a connection for brahmins to expand such cyclical time to the cosmic level, per the four *yuga*s. Conceiving time at the macro-level as cyclical would allow them not only to explain their perceived downtrodden situation, but also help package this vision within a seemingly universalist temporal framework—precisely the sort of move that Geuss claims is central to the development of ideological thinking.

In this regard, brahmins could expand a preexisting cyclical conception of time at the individual level to a cosmic level, using the following schema. First, they could draw a parallel between an individual birth and a "cosmic birth," then perceive a period of degradation (both moral and physical) that ends in

8 See Bronkhorst (2016) for a systematic treatment of brahmins' loss of prestige and the "existential crisis" they faced in the centuries leading up to the start of the common era.

9 On Brahmanical appeals to public imagination through religious narrative and traditional Vedic imagery, see Hegarty (2012: 13 – 14).

death or destruction, and finally, posit an eventual rebirth after the cycle of temporal destruction had ended. This temporal process coheres with the entropic model that I outlined in previous chapters, whereby both individuals and cosmic eras, in a parallel fashion, were viewed as always veering toward destruction, thus requiring the practice of various *dharma*s to maintain some structural integrity at the level of the self, society, and the cosmos. These dharmic duties constitute a key normative element of Brahmanical ideology. Being presented with strong conceptual parallels, pockets of elite and popular culture in Greater Magadha would be primed for adopting an extended version of this conceptual innovation of bringing different levels of cyclical time together into one coherent, totalizing worldview. This effort would involve brahmins creatively adopting a more sophisticated cyclical-temporal logic that had not previously existed within traditional Vedic frameworks (i. e., in Vedic Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, and Upaniṣads). In this manner brahmins could rhetorically shroud their concerns and interests in an apocalyptic narrative, partly by invoking a cyclical conception of temporality that was more familiar to some of its target Magadhan culture. Brahmins could further achieve their ideological purposes by appealing to biological phenomenon at the individual level—namely, the physical process of aging and death, attached to a theoretical belief in the rebirth of an imperishable *ātman*—as a conceptual hinge for imagining a reasonable extension to broader categories involving an entire society and age. Finally, brahmin authors of the *MBh* and *BhG* achieved this while simultaneously claiming that these had been their *own* ideas all along—that is, part of the Vedic tradition and Brahminical knowledge.[10]

To conclude this section, I draw attention to an essential component of Brahmanical ideology concerning the *BhG* and its apocalyptic vision of its immediate temporal context. Returning to my definition of ideology adopted from Geuss, a configuration of power needs to bring about certain contingent, variable features of a given human mode of existence as natural. The *BhG*, ensconced as it is within the broader context of the *MBh* and its cyclical conception of karmic rebirth, can help reinforce (conceptually speaking) the apparent necessity of killing and fighting battles on the part of *kṣatriya* warriors. Again, Kṛṣṇa's central task in the *BhG* is to convince Arjuna to fight and kill his former teachers and cousins. As I have explained in Chapters 1 through 3, Kṛṣṇa contends that it is natural for warriors such as Arjuna to fight, and that they have a normative duty to do so. Moreover,

10 It should be noted that this was a well-worn move on the part of brahmins when they confronted challenges of various sorts. They frequently incorporated non-Brahminical ideas in innovative ways and claimed that they had possessed knowledge of these ideas all along. As Bronkhorst puts it succinctly, "Brahmanism never admitted that it borrowed anything whatsoever from outside" (2017a: 366).

one need not worry about such dutiful killing because the essence of mortal humans, the *ātman*, remains eternal and indestructible. The Brahmanical ideology that I have started to unpack and its cyclical conception of temporality, which seeks to naturalize the cycle of birth, death, and (ostensible) rebirth, helps justify engagement in warfare and killing based on the concept of dharmic disinterestedness. That is, not only will Arjuna's opponents inevitably die and be reborn, but the entire scenario can be viewed within an ideological framework of an ethic of dharmic disinterestedness and politics of effacement, now appearing natural and of universal interest for "world welfare" (*lokasaṃgraha*). In the last chapter I argued that *lokasaṃgraha* could be interpreted as the closest analogue to a conception of justice that exists in the *BhG.* In turn, by fighting in the name of *lokasaṃgraha*, Arjuna participates in (re)establishing and upholding the *varṇāśramadharma* system. Because this system differentially benefits the hierarchical status of brahmins, the Brahmanical conception of justice is shown to be deeply ideological in nature. In sum, the apocalyptic temporal narrative plays an important role in the *BhG*'s ideological vision, and I will leave further discussion of temporality and Brahmanical ideology for a subsequent section. From this more general historical context, I would now like to consider specific historical figures that influenced developments in the *BhG*'s ideological framework.

Countering Aśoka and Justifying Puṣyamitra: Harmlessness, Liberation, and Legitimate Violence

Any account of historical factors shaping the *BhG*'s composition must attend to two notable figures: Aśoka Maurya and Puṣyamitra Śuṅga. Numerous scholars have argued that the *BhG* reflects a historical response to Aśoka Maurya, his stance towards Brahmanism, and other religions that posed challenges to Brahmanical authority. As Fitzgerald notes, "It is likely that Aśoka's 'insubordinate' attitude toward Brāhmaṇas was merely the most prominent rejection of Brāhmaṇ philosophy by a ruler of the era, for the *Mahābhārata* has numerous stories depicting failures of Kṣatriyas to respect the dignity, special position, and special contributions Brāhmaṇas saw themselves making to society" (2004b: 59). Statements such as these capture a common scholarly account of the epic as reflecting brahmins' ideological interests, whereby Aśoka disrespected Brahmanical authority during his reign and thus elicited criticism from many Brahmanical communities. According to both Fitzgerald and Nick Sutton, one such ideological response manifested in the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira. Sutton argues that the final redaction of the epic, "and the *Bhagavad-gītā* in particular, marks an attempt to show that whilst the dharma of kings who forsake war and seek virtue is admirable, this change in ideology must not be

allowed to promote social instability through weak leadership" (1997: 340). Likewise, Fitzgerald explains how Aśoka may have agitated brahmins because he coopted *dharma* as a central organizing concept in both moral and political discourse, and because he patronized non-Brahminical elites. For example, he explains how "Aśoka had preempted the brahmin monopoly on the teaching of *dharma* (he launched a 'Dharma-campaign' in his various edicts, presuming to teach 'Dharma' on his own authority … [and] like his Mauryan predecessors, patronized *nāstika* ('heathen') elites of Jains, Buddhists, and others and became a lay Buddhist himself" (2006: 276). The historical figure of Aśoka, his strong leadership, and violent expansion of Mauryan rule across the subcontinent struck an imposing challenge to Brahmanical orthodoxy beginning in the 4th century BCE.

Shifting to the corresponding storyworld of the *MBh*, the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira must face up to his duty as a *kṣatriya* and soon-to-be ruler by engaging in warfare and committing acts of violence. The same applies to Arjuna in the *BhG*. One of the most significant ideological components of this claim relates to liberation from *saṃsāra*. As Sutton concludes: "The *Gītā* hence makes its central premise the view that dharma-śāstric ideals of kingship are fully compatible with the pursuit of *nirvāṇa*, absolute salvation, so long as the motive is one of duty and not avarice" (1997: 340). We view such avarice in Duryodhana, which invalidates his claim to dharmic rule. We also observe this violent/nonviolent compatibility principle in Kṛṣṇa's speech to Arjuna when Kṛṣṇa asks him to undertake violent acts out of dharmic disinterestedness, thus achieving liberation through becoming Kṛṣṇa's devoted "instrument" of destruction.

One ideological element Fitzgerald and Sutton fail to account for concerns Kṛṣṇa himself. Not only does this Aśokan response find expression in Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna, but I would argue that it finds theoretical-ideological perfection in the figure of Kṛṣṇa. Historically, Aśoka was responsible for the death of thousands in his military campaigns, but he also committed himself to the principle of Buddhist nonviolence, irritating many of his political opponents (especially brahmins) who would see this as a clear contradiction between principle and action. Following his many military victories and conquests, Aśoka was dubbed a *cakravartin*, which denotes a universal ruler or an ideal king who "turns the wheel, whose chariot wheels roll everywhere [without obstruction]." For Buddhists, the *cakravartin* was the temporal equivalent of a Buddha, and Aśoka was the first secular king who achieved such status as inscribed in texts and monuments that praise his conquests. Here we should recall the various political associations of "the wheel." Not only is the ruler's—here, Aśoka's—chariot wheels rolling across all four corners of the Indian subcontinent, but the *BhG*'s association of the wheel with Time and death also remains relevant. When Kṛṣṇa shows himself as destructive "Time grown old to annihilate the worlds," this image resonates with the historical

Aśoka, whom many brahmins believed had been destroying their own world, or at least was a sign that the world as they knew it was coming to an end—hence, their theorization of the start of a Kali-Yuga.

However, transfigured in the person of Kṛṣṇa, brahmins could be viewed as attempting to coopt this image and legitimate it through their own authoritative framework. This could be a nifty bit of ideological storytelling to validate the actions of a ruler such as Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (see below), who was a brahmin that assassinated the last Mauryan ruler and (re)established *brāhmaṇya* rule. Yudhiṣṭhira could be one fictional character evoking this image, but I want to suggest that the "higher" image toward which this ideological point filters, is ultimately Kṛṣṇa. Framing and sublimating necessary violence through imagery of the wheel in the figure of a Supreme Godhead may prove more ideologically persuasive than associating such violence with a human figure, whether that be Aśoka or anyone else. Moreover, abstractly associating Kṛṣṇa with time itself makes his purported violence appear much more natural, since everyone is familiar with processes of temporal degradation and destruction in the natural world. If Kṛṣṇa is synonymous with time, then he wouldn't appear to express any partiality in destroying things while a mortal human could more easily be held accountable for violent acts and killing. In sum, what constitutes a choice for the historical Aśoka would appear entirely natural and necessary for an ahistorical godhead—that is, if brahmins could convince a wide enough audience that Kṛṣṇa had such cosmological status.

Returning to the *BhG*, as the Supreme Godhead we saw how Kṛṣṇa encompasses everything in the cosmos as the cosmic monarch or ruler. Kṛṣṇa unites nonviolent religious principles associated with *dharma*, on the one hand, with violent principles applicable to kingship, on the other. Kingship requires using violence and engaging in warfare, as well as punishment in times of peace. If brahmins were responding to the historical Aśoka and mapping out political ideals that attempted to square non-violence with violence in a way that suited or supported their interests as a community, then Kṛṣṇa becomes a perfect ideological figurehead: as the supreme cosmic monarch, he destroys beings of various sorts (as revealed in the theophany) yet does so in accord with *dharma* and for the sake of world welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*). What brahmins accomplish here is the de-historicization of the politically ideal ruler that serves as the model for human rulers and, because he is God incarnate, he remains above moral reproach. The brahmin authors of the *BhG* are thus able to cloak their historically contingent interests in a complex storyworld involving metaphysics, ontology, and cosmology that find perfect unification in Kṛṣṇa. Moreover, in following Kṛṣṇa's model and devoting oneself to him, one can transcend politics altogether and achieve the ultimate individual goal of liberation from *saṃsāra.* Liberation and violence can thus coherently

coexist, and the *BhG* can operate as a political ideology that legitimates this claim to theoretical and moral coexistence. By transferring the ultimate responsibility to Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna and anyone else following Kṛṣṇa's guidance does not violate the principle of *ahiṃsā*, especially since the violence being perpetrated is merely *prakṛti* (illusory material nature) acting upon *prakṛti*, with the *ātman* remaining undamaged and eventually liberated through *bhakti.*

Aśoka is not the only historical figure connected to this Brahmanical ideology, as the brahmin general Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (ruling ca. 185–150 BCE) also remains historically relevant. For context, Michael Witzel notes that Puṣyamitra followed the traditional Vedic religion closely and revived the great horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*), which helped lead to his depiction as a fanatical opponent of Buddhism (2006: 465). Such revival of traditional Brahmanical praxis would require fusing older ideas and rituals with newer ideas and practices that were more attuned to the immediate context, and this is precisely what the *MBh* and *BhG* helped achieve. As I began explaining in Chapter 1, Vedic sacrificial rituals needed a new frame, which is partly achieved through the idea of performing one's duties in a sacrificially and dharmically disinterested manner. Grand sacrifices such as the *aśvamedha* could now be scaled down to an individual level that was applicable to all members of society through the *varṇāśramadharma* system, not just wealthy kings accompanied by lavishly patronized brahmin sacrificial officiants. A new sacrificial framework applicable to the lower segments of society, especially *śūdra*s, could now be achieved through *bhakti*, which is covered in greater detail below.

Puṣyamitra also combines functions of the two upper-level *varṇa*s insofar as he was a member of the brahmin *varṇa* yet served as a military general, which was the normative function of the *kṣatriya varṇa.* This combination could be understood as justified in Brahminical thought and the storyworld mapped out by the *MBh*, since corrupt rulers had preceded his ascension to a position of kingship. Puṣyamitra assassinated the last Mauryan king and took the throne, and would have done so, as Witzel states in the context of the *BhG*, "without attachment, just for the dharmic benefit of the realm … [thus] restoring (perceived) 'Vedic' values."[11] Once such values are reestablished, as they are in the epic by Yudhiṣṭhira, then the *varṇāśramadharma* system could be fully instituted with *kṣatriya*s reassuming their proper role as warrior-rulers under the guidance of brahmin advisors and chaplains. In the figure of Puṣyamitra, we view a fascinating overlap between a historical figure, his actions, and likely motives on the one hand, and the

11 Witzel continues, "A similar social and religious background can also be assumed for large parts of the *Mahābhārata*" (2006: 486).

ideological storyworld of the epic on the other. That is, the epic and *BhG* provide a justificatory framework for Puṣyamitra's actions, as this historical figure engages in precisely the sort of (perceived) legitimate violence that Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna engage in during the Kurukṣetra War. I would add, however, that Kṛṣṇa remains the legitimating lynchpin for this narrative. One reason the *BhG* can be viewed as such an important and influential ideological text is that its Brahmanical authors are able to consolidate a multiplicity of legitimating religious and philosophical concepts under a central cosmo-monarchical figure.

The Role of Public Imagination: Ideological Time and Political Mythology

I now want to expand on something touched upon briefly in the previous section and chapters of the book, namely the role the public audience's imagination played during the Classical period as it gradually adopted a politicized temporality, mythology, and narrative presented in both the *MBh* and *BhG*. The epic's authors intend it to intervene in and affect their contemporary audience's imagination, drawing on past and current religious and philosophical ideas while creatively expanding mythological narratives in response to familiar political events. A historical story about how Brahmanical ideology operates needs not only to consider the role of central political figures such as Aśoka and Puṣyamitra, but also must consider how this ideology could operate more broadly and spread within a people's imagination, eventually turning a storyworld into a historical *reality*. For example, Brahmanical ideology aimed to convince a broad audience that brahmins' cyclical conception of time was true, and as I will continue to explain, this cyclicality helps reinforce brahmins' vision of the cosmos all the way down to the level of individuals' lives. Emphasizing the central role of a non-elite public audience, Fitzgerald claims that the "Brahminically educated poets working in the *Bhārata* epic tradition intended to make an argument for a brahmin-centered view of polity and society to an audience the brahmins had not previously addressed in ancient India—the public at large" (2020a: 17). On the topic of public imagination in South Asian traditions considered here, I build upon the work of James Hegarty in the following ways.

First, Hegarty helpfully explains how public imagination can be construed as a "collaborative construction and evocation of times and places and of people and things, as well as causes and consequences, that are not present to us" (2012: 4). Relevant to Brahmanical political thought, Hegarty further explains that people may assert that what they imagine—here, brahmin authors of the epic—is real or factual, and true or authoritative (5). This is a key ideological component of

the *BhG* and operates at two levels: first, the external authoritative claim to truth by the text's authors, and second, the internal claim to truth by Kṛṣṇa as he speaks to Arjuna. Second, to contextualize the significance of such public imagination as it applies to the *BhG*, Hegarty claims, "the Mahābhārata was a major and self-conscious invention in the public imagination of early South Asia," and that this "intervention relates to issues of cultural power that are connected both to earlier and contemporary religious ideologies and to processes of state formation and change in the pre-Common and early Common Era in that region" (6). This quote aptly captures the significance of the *MBh* and *BhG* in the public imagination over centuries and highlights the role that ideology plays in processes of state formation, especially centralized political rule over vast empires on the subcontinent. Now I'd like to return to one of the central elements of Brahmanical ideology, which helped shape the public's imagination of the cosmos and political world: namely, temporality.

A new vision of time, especially a re-envisioning of the past, signals one of the epic's most innovative ideological constructions. Reconstructing a public's conception of the past remains key to the epic's ideological aims, especially when it views this past as having a particularly strong causal impact on present circumstances within a yugic structure. Hegarty explains the ideological context for his study of religion, narrative, and public imagination in South Asia, which offers astute analyses of epic temporality, by considering "the Mahābhārata's recurrent attempt to legitimate itself in Vedic terms whilst simultaneously integrating and 'naturalizing' new religious ideologies and practices. ... the Mahābhārata seeks to intervene very decisively in the public imagination of past, place and of preferred religious ideologies and practices" (37). Narrating an essential connection between past, present, and future can serve potent ideological purposes. Communities often understand their present circumstances in a very strong sense through their understanding of a collective past, which, in this South Asian context, does not operate through familiar western historical accounts leading up to the start of the Common Era but rather through authoritative stories, narratives, and myths that are passed down generationally. We should understand the epic's conception of time within this context, in which "the aftermath of the Mahābhārata war, was constituted as *the* present and the point from which all subsequent historical developments were to be narrated *in the future tense*" (108). In the next two chapters, I will explain how this "future" includes the 19th–21st centuries, making the *BhG* a particularly appealing text for Hindu nationalist ideologues. This totalizing view of time pairs with the totalizing view of the cosmos and selfhood covered in previous chapters, further elucidating how brahmins pose a contingent set of interests and configuration of power as natural and universal. Moreover, this temporal imaginary would help provide something else that Geuss highlights po-

litical theories as providing, namely a general orientation in the world (2008: 40–42). By giving a public a particular temporal "world-picture" or worldview, brahmins can press their audience to imagine new ways of orienting themselves in the world on a macro-scale—for example, by envisioning themselves as living in a "Kali-Yuga" following a fictional dialogue and war on the fields of Kurukṣetra. In this way, the "age" can explain the preponderance of chaos, disorder, and *adharma* from a Brahmanical point of view.

Therefore, a central aim of the *MBh*'s and *BhG*'s authors is to re-wire the public's understanding of its past by stimulating new imaginations of this past, which entails an elaborate narrative and mythological schema. One aspect of the past that authors invoke is a Vedic one, replete with mythological characters who are portrayed as the progenitors of notable families and heroes in societies extending from the northwest to northeast portion of the Indian subcontinent. Hegarty uses the term "Vedish" instead of Vedic to describe these narrative materials, arguing that the authors of the *MBh* embed Vedic characters in many stories and myths, even as the stories "tend to depart from, re-work, or extend and develop the Vedic past and often, in so doing, expound novel religious teachings" (2012: 112). For example, the Vedic pre-history of the Bharata tribe plays a crucial role in the epic's narrative, encompassing members of this famous tribe at both the center and outer-rung of the epic's narrative; constructing the narrative in this manner, Hegarty explains that the *MBh*, for perhaps the first time in South Asian history, "puts together a coherent account of a significant, Brahminically-centred, past" (108).[12] Constructing this storyworld allows brahmins to preserve, extend, and innovate with their orthodox Vedic materials in response to new socio-political figures and pressures described above, such as Aśoka and Puṣyamitra. In turn, this allows the authors to construct "a significant past that speaks both to earlier Vedic ideologies and to the concerns of its pre- and early Common Era audiences" (108).

One example of such concerns is associated with karmic doctrines that posit a cycle of human suffering based upon one's actions in present and past lives, which impacted the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Karmic doctrines also offered philosophical paths to liberation (*nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*) from this cycle of suffering. As Bronkhorst puts it succinctly, perhaps the most striking difference between Vedic culture that had flourished in the northwest and the culture of "Greater Magadha" to the east concerned the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution: "Vedic culture did not have it: the culture of Greater Magadha did" (2017b: 578). Earlier

12 For an elaboration on how the epic's authors extended and consolidated the Vedic past, partly demonstrated by the mythology surrounding the Bharata tribe, see Hegarty (2012: 108–110).

sacrificial ritual-based Vedic ideologies would therefore have trouble accounting for this theory, and the epic's authors would need to construct a new conceptual framework that delivered some such liberation, or account for it on some level. As previous chapters argue, this is exactly what we see taught in the *BhG*, with devotion to Kṛṣṇa serving as a publicly accessible path to liberation. Hence, in both the socio-political and personal sphere, brahmins envision a new past to capture the imagination of its audience, and in so doing, create a new conception of its present circumstances. In short, they reinterpret the past to reinterpret an understanding of the present. This is where the ideological role of the yugic cycles re-enters the conversation.

To understand this role, as Bronkhorst has argued, we must look at some of the historical context during the periods in which the text was composed. It is essential to note the cyclical notion of time per the *yuga*s is not known to the early Vedic texts (ca. 1500 – 650 BCE), which, along with corroborating textual evidence from the *Yuga Purāṇa*, means this was an idea that likely developed during the composition of the final, redacted epic and thus reflects Brahmanical historical interests in the centuries leading up to the Common Era. This idea may have even entered into the Brahmanical tradition from the culture of Greater Magadha (Bronkhorst 2007: 70 – 71).[13] Bronkhorst also highlights the historical role of invading armies of Greeks and Scythians in the northwest of the subcontinent that destroyed the remnants of the Brahmanical order of society following the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, which he claims influenced brahmins' conception of a the complete breakdown of *varṇa*-ordered society (*saṃkara*) and impending apocalypse (363). As brahmins were forced to move eastward out of their previous northwest strongholds and encountered different religious traditions within Greater Magadha, they likely would have been pushed to think they were living in a Kali-Yuga since they lost their accustomed prestige under Mauryan rule. The notion of a Kali-Yuga had a very concrete historical sense with "immediate relevance for the present, because it was thought of as being the end of the Kali-Yuga, an observation that explained the political and social disasters of the time," and this theory was revised such that disasters and mishaps could be attributed to the Kali-Yuga as such (Bronkhorst 2016: 14). The age itself thus became a "catch-all" explanatory concept for brahmins' misfortune. Due to their relative loss of religious prestige and patronage, it would have been reasonable for brahmins to construct or adopt a cyclical notion of time where the past had been kinder and the present harsher. Yugic theory could then place them in an apocalyptic eon, with the current age viewed as coming to an end due to its relative corruption. This historical

13 See also González-Reimann (2002).

backdrop helps make sense of Brahmanical notions of cyclical time expressed in the *MBh*, and even sheds light on Kṛṣṇa's "dark" nature as "Time grown old to destroy worlds." Here Kṛṣṇa again provides a single, apotheotic figure within which the *BhG*'s authors synthesize several concepts for ideological purposes. What is more, since Kṛṣṇa and Vaiṣṇavite devotionalism are more accessible to a wider public, this ideology could spread and operate more extensively across a larger demographic.

Such a spread in the public imagination, however, requires "hooks" in existing conceptual frameworks to ground the reasonability of new claims as brahmins attempt to capture the public's imagination while inserting these claims.[14] This means brahmins needed some type of conceptual hook on which to hang their understanding of their social dilemmas mentioned above, and it must already exist or be invented to help clarify the situation at hand. Likewise, the public to which brahmins are appealing must also have some conceptual hook within their preexisting system of beliefs that would allow them to understand the dilemma that brahmins are trying to explain. Brahmins must achieve this feat ideologically by posing particularistic claims as *universal* ones, partly through crafting new storyworlds. As brahmins confronted a real historical dilemma regarding prestige and patronage, their preexisting beliefs about their own superiority did not correspond to their lived reality. Moreover, they confronted new beliefs regarding rebirth and karmic retribution as they moved eastward, with which they had been unfamiliar. Because these ideas had traction in existing communities, particularly in Greater Magadha, they had to invent a storyworld and ideology that could account for them. Finally, brahmins carried with them a bevy of early Vedic and later Vedic-Upaniṣadic ideas and beliefs about the nature of selfhood—for example, the idea of an *ātman* or self as an imperishable portion of a supreme reality (*brahman*). I will now tie these strands together to explain how brahmins might ideologically appeal to the public imagination given the dilemma they were facing, through the category of temporality and related concepts.

As I have already begun to suggest, a primary conceptual hook concerns temporal cyclicality. To summarize my earlier point, thinking of time cyclically at the individual level per rebirth and karmic retribution, which preexisted within the culture of Greater Magadha, would provide a hook for brahmins to develop a conceptually related, cyclical conception of time at the cosmic/yugic level in ways that suited their own socio-political interests and situation. What Brahmanical political thought achieved here was the following. First, brahmins could connect a preexist-

14 For a theoretical explanation of such conceptual hooks and how they function within the logic of the history of ideas to explain how beliefs change, see Bevir (1999: 234–243).

ing belief about an imperishable self (Upaniṣadic) to a preexisting cyclical conception of time at the individual level tied to a karmic theory (Magadhan), and then later view it as expanding to the cosmic level of the *yuga*s. Cyclical temporality could therefore be coherently expressed in a parallel fashion from the micro-level up to macro-level, thus providing a meta-level orientation for people.[15] We can now observe the following parallels and resonance between temporality, self, and cosmos: (i) (individual) birth ~ (cosmic) creation; (ii) (individual) aging and physical degradation ~ (cosmic) "age-ing" and entropic degradation; (iii) (individual) death and rebirth ~ (cosmic) destruction at the end of the Kali-Yuga and re-creation with the Kṛta-Yuga. Due to the strong parallels, the public's imagination would be primed for adopting an extended version of this conceptual innovation of a temporal-cyclical logic up to the cosmic level.

In carrying forward the belief in a timeless/imperishable *ātman* that has access to an imperishable *brahman* (Upaniṣadic), and now in the context of the *BhG*, adding the belief in an imperishable Supreme Godhead (Kṛṣṇa-Viṣnu) accessible through devotion, brahmins can synthesize late Vedic beliefs with more contemporaneous ones while making them more accessible and sensible to the broadest possible audience. In so doing, they posit a path for transcending and becoming liberated from the cyclical temporality—the impartial wheel of Time that burns down all creatures—as a solution to the cycle/wheel of rebirth and human suffering. This vision further allows them to compete with similar solutions offered by their competitor traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. Brahmins would then be able to explain the suffering of human existence, especially their own, while supplying an answer for how to escape it within a totalizing, universal worldview that extended from the micro-level of the self up to a macro-cosmic level. Here temporality itself becomes ideological in universalizing a set of claims that privileges Brahmanical epistemic authority concerning ontology, cosmology, and perhaps most importantly in their appeal to the suffering masses, soteriology. However, temporality is not the only thing that becomes politicized in Brahmanical political thought in the *MBh* and *BhG*, as mythology also takes on a deeply politicized hue.

Highlighting another important conceptual hook for the audience, Fitzgerald has examined the role of the mythological backdrop to the epic's drama. This backdrop helps explain the tension between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas while justify-

15 See also González-Reimann (2002: 3) on this connection, who advances a parallel claim between a microcosmic level (days, lunar month, and year) that affect the individual extending back to the Vedic period, and macrocosmic level, "which deals with the large cycles of social transformation and world creation and destruction." Here I wish to supplement this account with an ideological connection that would legitimate Brahminical political thought extending its reach across every temporal register.

ing the latter's claim to legitimate rule within a Brahmanical framework. Fitzgerald highlights the following mythological frame for the *MBh:* the five Pāṇḍavas are divine incarnations of dharmic *kṣatriya*s, whose earthly purpose is to eradicate the incarnated demon "horde" of the Kauravas, aided by the three Kṛṣṇas (Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, the incarnation of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa; Kṛṣṇā Draupadī, the incarnation of Śrī; and the epic's composer Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, the father of Pāṇḍu, grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas, and representative of the world's Vedic brahmins) (2004b: 56).[16] Fitzgerald even describes these three Kṛṣṇas as "holy agents of Brahmanism" that are meant to help the divine *kṣatriya*s complete their celestial task (56). The mythology would play effectively upon the public's imagination, especially the divine agents acting through human characters. Fitzgerald goes so far as to claim that "the presence of these divine agents was the jet fuel that powered the new *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* for its audiences, making it into a highly popular and persuasive story tradition" (2020a: 23). The persuasiveness of this storyworld would further impact rulers as part of the audience, as Fitzgerald suspects that the epic persuaded many rulers to adopt its Brahmanical ideology and support brahmins due to the popularity of the story and its figures (23). However, stories including heroes often require a good villain, or set of villains, to set a dramatic contrast and provide some normative orientation (i.e., "this is why so-and-so is good, and so-and-so is evil").

We see the ideological demonization of the Kauravas as representative of prior historical rulers that did not privilege or follow Brahmanical authority. Historical Nanda and Mauryan rulers (ca. 362–185 BCE) were likely fictionalized in the epic by the "demonic" rulers that were said to plague the earth over a period prior to the dharmic ascension of Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava. Of course, this included the Kauravas, who were epitomized as incarnated demons or *asura*s, the primordial enemies of the gods (*deva*s). Therefore, per Kṛṣṇa's exhortation in the *BhG*, these evil *kṣatriya*s were to be legitimately exterminated by *brāhmaṇya kṣatriya*s, or warriors backed by Brahmanical authority. The third Kṛṣṇa-assistant mentioned above, Vyāsa, represented the brahmin *varṇa* and in so doing completed the proper Vedic pairing of *brahma* (priestly, religious) and *kṣatra* (political, military) powers (Fitzgerald 1985: 137). This pairing thus represents an ideological fusion of two powers that had been severed by the Nandas and Mauryas when brahmins lost their traditional, privileged connection to political power and patronage. Brahmins could now reacquire their political prestige and patronage through a newly popularized mythology that reinforced brahmins' supposed religious and philosophical authority in post-Mauryan society.

16 See also Fitzgerald (1985; 2006: 272).

To summarize, the Pāṇḍavas represent highly politicized mythological figures. However mythological these figures might be, they become "realized" through the epic storyworld to become the *kṣatriya*-heroes of a narrative that seeks to justify the authoritative position of brahmins in society. Through narrative form, these fictional characters can then capture and transform the public imagination, especially Kṛṣṇa, who becomes a central figure for devotional sects in both India and abroad. Importantly, the *BhG*'s brahmin authors move away from the more elitist and specialized sacrificial ritual as the centerpiece for their claim to authority. With the *MBh* and *BhG*, they have composed narratives that remain accessible and attractive to a broader, cosmopolitan audience. Once the epic characters have taken hold of the public's imagination, what is later considered "classical Hinduism" has morphed from its Vedic roots to become a publicly accessible and dense mythological narrative that re-embeds Brahmanical authority within the socio-political sphere, finding new ways to justify a privileged status in contrast to Buddhist and Jain traditions.

The Ideology of Kṛṣṇa and *Bhakti*

In previous chapters, I've pointed to a few ideological elements surrounding the figure of Kṛṣṇa and *bhakti*, so now I would like to unpack these elements in greater detail. The first ideological component of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* that I would like to explicate concerns democratized access to supreme or universal truths and spiritual liberation. We recall Kṛṣṇa's statements to Arjuna regarding the multifarious modes of devotion accessible to people, such as the passage in chapter 9: "If one disciplined soul proffers to me with love a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water, I accept this offering of love from him" (*BhG* 9.26). Such love and devotion provide anyone access to Kṛṣṇa and his divine nature. This devotionalism levels the playing field when it comes to accessing liberation from suffering and the cycle of *saṃsāra.* However, in doing so Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* diverts attention from the ideological observations covered below, thus preserving a structure of power that disproportionately favors Brahmanical epistemic authority. Before unpacking these points, I want to clarify why this structure of power may not seem obvious or as problematic as it might otherwise be if viewed through a critical-realist lens. To begin with, anyone can reach Kṛṣṇa, wherever someone happens to stand as an individual, thus sending a message of relative equality. People also possess the same internal structures since the ontology of the self is universal, meaning that no human being is structured differently at the ontological level, even if someone's karmic residue has led to a lower *varṇa*-birth. Within this same basic structure each person may be "woven" differently by the strands of the material *guṇa*s or attributes, explaining

why we find ourselves hierarchically situated in different *varṇa*s. Nevertheless, due to karmic theory and actions in past lives, each of us is responsible for this socio-political situatedness. Most importantly, the hope provided through equal access to Kṛṣṇa and possession of equally imperishable *ātman*s can appear to make this storyworld somewhat attractive.

Firstly, as readers of the *BhG* receive and absorb its instructions alongside Arjuna, they receive numerous subtle and potentially impactful messages. The first message is to devote oneself to the cosmic monarch, and then one will be liberated. Ideologically, the reader or audience member is pulled into a legitimating monarchical imaginary, a storyworld that legitimizes unified rule or monarchy as the proper political structure (e.g., in contrast to an assembly or *saṅgha*). As mentioned previously, this storyworld includes Yudhiṣṭhira as a (semi-)mortal "book-ending" monarchical figure. Moreover, a reader is pulled into this position by being placed in a monologic orbit, drawing the reader into an internal dialogue that Kṛṣṇa is having within himself in a moment of what could be called cosmological conscience. As I have argued, Arjuna represents a *kṣatriya*-particle of Kṛṣṇa that must engage in battle and violence, but in a morally justified manner. *Dharma* justifies violence because it is framed as necessary for the maintenance of world welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*), which means the Kurukṣetra War is a just war within the macrocosmic perspective of Kṛṣṇa, to whom we are drawn as readers or audience members. As the audience we imbibe the message as if we were an aspect of Kṛṣṇa himself, which we *would be* if we listen attentively to and accept the *BhG*'s message. Put another way, there is nothing "outside" this cosmological structure to which one could appeal to legitimately challenge Kṛṣṇa's message.

Following this last point, the dialogue of the *BhG* becomes a universal model for everyone who hears or reads it. This model entails realizing that a Supreme Being models yogic self-rule within himself. That is, Kṛṣṇa is not above any of us in this sense, since he is humbly showing Arjuna and the audience how and why yogic self-rule should be undertaken and how it can apply on a personal level to everyone. This is the part of the philosophical message that I explicated in Chapter 2, where Arjuna becomes a model for yogic self-rule at the individual level and the ontology of the self finds full expression. Politically speaking, this model also reinforces a monarchical structure, beginning at the micro-level of the self. Accordingly, proper rule entails the highest part in the macro-cosmic structure ruling over the lower parts of itself, as these lower parts mingle with the material world of *prakṛti* and potentially become "polluted" if seduced into a materialist mindset. This means Brahmanical political thought advances, up to this point in its history, one of its most crucial developments: it democratizes part of its message, and the medium for accessing its message, to re-inscribe and legitimate a non-democratic socio-political structure (monarchical and hier-

archically *varṇa*-based). This democratized devotional path to a non-democratic political end also, if successful, leads to liberation from politics and the material world altogether. In other words, if one successfully pursues Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*, one must not only adopt a Brahmanically sponsored and monarchical political vision, but also an idea of personal liberation through following duties associated with social group status and life-stage (*varṇāśramadharma*).

This ideology entails another crucial development in Brahmanical political thought more generally, namely the politicizing of the body. By turning the self and one's physical body into a primordial starting point for politics, Brahmanical political thought surreptitiously brackets and obscures the meso-level (interpersonal), *varṇa*-based politics and its monarchical implications. This ideological move can, if not critically interrogated, further obscure the Brahmanical claim to authoritative knowledge of and command over the space of the self and one's body. By mapping parallel spaces at the meso- and macro-levels, the *BhG*'s Brahmanism completes a totalizing vision of the self and politics wherein no external ground to question its authority exists, especially since each sphere (micro-, meso-, and macro-) coherently map onto and reinforce one another. Viewed through a critical-realist lens, brahmins claim a universal, essentialist type of political rule that can easily evade detection since the abstract qualities within the self are not often seen as a distinctly political terrain. In sum, the brahmin authors of the *BhG* politicize new terrain, connect it to more traditional political territory (meso-level interpersonal relations and rule), and simultaneously extend and "scale" this (now) Brahmanized framework to the cosmic (macro-)level, thus mapping a totalizing political cosmology that privileges their authoritative knowledge at every level.

One final component of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* ideology concerns the category of (im)purity. Not only do we view a monarchical political model and *varṇa*-based social structure, but the logic of the purity/impurity binary pervades this structure at every level and organizational category, even temporality. That is, brahmins achieve their project of a totalizing framework partly by extending the logic of purity and fourfold hierarchy to the following: the internal, micro-domain of the self per the *ātman* (immaterial self—highest, more pure), *buddhi*, *manas*, and *indriya*s (physical senses—lowest, least pure); the external, meso-level domain of the socio-political order (brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*); and the encompassing, macro-level domain of temporality in the *yuga*s (Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, and Kali). Within each fourfold category, the scale ranges from the highest and "most pure" element in the category to the lowest and "least pure" element. This structure thus provides an interconnected political taxonomy of every level of the cosmos, operating on a hierarchical scale of purity running from top to bottom. Returning to Geuss's definition of ideology, brahmins claimed a type of superiority

for themselves involving the terminology of purity and designed a taxonomic schema—supported by an elaborate, dramatic narrative—that differentially benefits their own social group and interests *while* claiming this structure as both natural and universal. The account thus provides an ideological philosophical account and corroborating mythological storyworld that would appeal to the broadest possible audience. Finally, because brahmins envision all these structures as operating entropically, dharmic duties become the normative salve for stabilizing and maintaining the welfare and order of the world, as we ultimately veer toward destruction at each level—personally, politically, and cosmically. The *BhG* thus represents an exquisitely constructed and elaborate worldview that combines philosophical, theological, mythological, and normative-ethical concepts to support a structure favoring their interests within an ever-changing world. Enter the concept of "deep ideology," as Brahmins cleverly suggest this temporal change had structure to it, further claiming they had unique insight into this structure and could therefore be understood as necessary and authoritative resources for understanding how *dharma* could provide some stability in an otherwise entropic political and cosmic context.

Conclusion

Reading the *BhG* in historical context, considering its authors and their intentions in composing the text, I have made a case for viewing the *BhG* as a distinctive work of political ideology. Drawing upon thinkers such as Geuss and Herman, I provided a critical-realist lens for analyzing the text and showed how elements of power, interests, and the storyworld should make significant contributions to our understanding of the text's expressed political theory. This theory, I've argued, exudes ideological elements that not only express an impressive symmetry from the micro- to macro-level of its cosmology and ontology, but also elements supporting normative claims that embed Brahmanical interests within a world they wanted to see modeled on figures such as Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. In this sense, these two figures literally "model ideology," making the ideology even more surreptitious since it draws the audience in as a dialogue between two mythological characters within a dramatic storyworld and apocalyptic narrative.

Expressing an ideological framework, Kṛṣṇa provides the overarching political model that encompasses a cosmically layered theory at every level. Kṛṣṇa as cosmic monarch serves as a perfect theoretical model insofar as the structure embeds *bhakti* within a monarchical structure, which renews a connection between Brahmanical theology and political power. Inasmuch as empire and centralized kingship have become a historical reality in the centuries prior to and during the con-

struction of the *MBh* and *BhG*, their authors would presumably need to find ways to renew their authoritative connection to rulers or kings—best represented in warriors such as Arjuna, and virtuous monarchs such as Yudhiṣṭhira—while simultaneously appealing to a broader audience since they are competing with heterodox traditions for political patronage. As I argue in the previous section, this can best be achieved by democratizing access to the Supreme Being through *bhakti*. On the surface, this theoretical structure provides equal access to the supreme source of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, including karmic retribution, but brahmins still hold a privileged place in the social hierarchy, as we see throughout the epic. If this theoretical structure and storyworld are accepted as true, natural, or universal, then everyone would ultimately be playing within the proverbial sandbox provided by Brahmanism, with *bhakti* helping grease the ideological wheels for entry.

This Brahmanical vision does not just apply to pre-modern Indian contexts but also extends into modern and contemporary contexts, as I will explain in Chapters 5 and 6. The *MBh*, and *BhG* by extension, make claims to universality not only through their macro-level temporal structure, since according to the texts contemporary societies still exist within the frame of the Kali-Yuga, but also through a textually related reality principle. That is, the text claims to communicate a transhistorical reality, which, when heard or read, extends its reach beyond the context of its composition into any present age. As David Shulman has noted, "The *Mahābhārata* is coterminous with the world … it presents itself not as a work of art but as reality itself. No boundary marks off this text from the world" (2001: 26). The *MBh* itself famously claims "Poets have told it before, and are telling it now, and will tell it again. Whatever is found here may be found somewhere else, but what is not found here is found nowhere" (1.56.34). Building on Shulman's comments that the epic and its contents claim no discernible historical limits and no significant distinction between internal and external listeners, J. M. Fritzman points out that there is no "outside" to this text, citing Emily Hudson's study of the *MBh* on the ethics and aesthetics of suffering: "The design of the epic suggests that whenever, wherever, or whoever tells or receives the story … becomes part of the *Mahābhārata.* In other words, through the art of its design, the text explodes the boundary between interiority and exteriority" (Fritzman 2015: 324; Hudson 2013: 165). It is at this juncture that I want to elaborate upon the concept of deep ideology.

Deep ideology seeks to eradicate any significant boundaries between historical epochs and presumed interiority/exteriority of a text. In doing so, brahmin authors make claims within the historical past but construct their text and storyworld in such a way that historically contingent boundaries and exteriority of a text are framed as irrelevant or illusory. Such efforts, if successful, achieve several things.

To begin with, the text's brahmin authors can create a conceptual basis for universal applicability across time and space while simultaneously transmitting an ideology that advances their interests. In the process, potentially irrelevant or archaic stories, characters, and events receive new life and application in contemporary contexts. The concept of deep ideology helps explain why and how the text's historically situated ideology can be made to appear pertinent to a present audience while perpetuating a particular group's self-interest, thus reifying an ideology that can survive over long stretches of time. This phenomenon leads to a parasitic form of universalism that does not simply claim universality within more specified or restricted cultural and historical contexts, but one that is universally applicable across *all* conceivable cultural and historical boundaries.

Finally, scholars engaging the text, if not careful, can participate in expanding the historical reach and application of the text's ideological components. If one does not seek to critique or subvert ideological extensions or applications of concepts found in the text, one can unconsciously help to extend Brahmanical ideology into new, contemporary terrain. When readers analyze and comment on the text, they are said to keep its truth alive and expand its intended reach to ever broader audiences, thus giving it a "timeless truth" quality that would allow one to apply its moral, philosophical, or political ideas to any given present circumstance. Many contemporary political claims and actions on the part of Hindu nationalists exhibit such extensions of ideas and themes within the *BhG*, which will be the focus of my analysis in the next two chapters. The sort of critique I advance here is crucial since the *MBh* and *BhG* have played a key role in Orientalist discourse, (neo)colonialism, and Hindu nationalist projects. In this regard, the brahmin authors constructed a text capable not only of intervening in the public imagination of its own period but also intervening in and impacting the public imagination of subsequent periods.

Conscious of the text's intended cyclical structure and claims to universality, in Chapters 5 and 6 I return to a contemporary context by examining political groups and a prominent political leader, all of whom have participated—self-consciously or not—in helping to extend ideological themes and concepts expressed in the *BhG*. To be clear, my own analysis of the *BhG* tracks the *MBh*'s cyclical structure by starting with present concerns in the Introduction, turning to the internal contents of the text itself and its context in the historical past in Chapters 1 through 4, and finally returning to the modern and contemporary period in Chapters 5 and 6. I take this approach for two reasons. First, as much as possible, I have sought to explicate the *BhG* within the context and structure of the *MBh* to clarify its political thought for unfamiliar audiences as an essential work in the history of Indian political thought, as well as to establish a reading for the text that situates its significance within a transhistorical context. Tracking the text's meaning within the

epic's cyclical structure and highlighting how the present book parallels this structure, helps to demonstrate the very ideas I am attempting to analyze. Second, my analysis exposes how the text communicates a form of political ideology, which is not only relevant within a pre-modern context but also within a contemporary political context.

These efforts extend my previous theoretical work in the history of Indian political thought on two fronts. On the first front, earlier chapters engage in what I have called "critical revivalism," which entails a contextualized analysis of a tradition while resisting the claim to revive anything monolithically or culturally essential (Gray 2016: 257). Such critical revivalist projects seek to prevent the interpretive capture of pre-modern Brahmanical-Hindu traditions by Hindu Right groups such as the RSS, who might otherwise monopolize cultural "ownership" of texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG* for harmful political purposes (257). Political theories and interpretations of texts always implicate particular interests and often express some political project or ideology. Critically reflecting on one's motivations and their implications before engaging in textual exegesis is crucial, as I have attempted to do throughout the book. As an intellectual endeavor, my critical-revivalist approach to the *BhG* expands a larger project that I have taken to the history of premodern Indian and Hindu political thought, beginning chronologically with earlier Vedic traditions and moving to later Brahmanical texts such as the *BhG*.[17]

On the second front, the present work takes a decidedly more *political* step involving "internal subversion" of Brahmanical-Hindu political thought (Gray 2020: 240–260). Here I argue that if Hindu Right organizations remain unwilling to cede the historical past as a politicized object of study, one way to decolonize culturally essentialist projects is to critically engage them on their own turf through a strategy of internal subversion. Accordingly, one attempts to offer a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of a text by clarifying and developing indigenous categories of Indian political theory; however, this project can also entail subverting what one identifies as the text's most problematic elements, and in the case of the present book, this means exposing the *BhG*'s distinctly ideological elements. This approach involves a political strategy aimed at creating conceptual and epistemic space for subverting essentialist claims made by contemporary individuals or groups, particularly those drawing on Brahmanical and Hindu political traditions (241). Such a move not only displays the historically contingent nature of the text's ideas and authorial motivations, but also raises a red flag about contestable ideas that appear in the text that may otherwise go unnoticed. Raising this

17 For a critical revivalist examination of the earliest tradition of Brahminical political thought as expressed in the Vedic Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas, see Gray (2017).

flag is not intended to diminish or jettison the text's importance altogether, but rather to identify potentially problematic ideas that could be used to perpetuate even more destructive real-world projects. With these points in mind, I turn to an explanation of what some of those problematic projects or purposes have looked like in the late-modern and contemporary periods.

Chapter 5
Hindu Nationalism and Indian Democracy: Contemporary (Dis)Integration in the Kali-Yuga

Beginning in Chapter 1, the idea of political (dis)integration can be seen as playing an essential role in our understanding of the *BhG*'s political thought in the broader context of the *MBh.* In Chapters 1 through 3 I've uncovered three general yet distinct Brahmanical categories that operate ideologically, which brahmins conceived for combatting forces of political entropy and disintegration: bodily asceticism, integrative ideology, and temporal universalism.[1] I argue that these tools remain incredibly pertinent to contemporary Indian politics. Below, I outline these categories as core components of a modern form of Brahmanical-Hindu political ideology operating within modern Hindu nationalism. The theme of cyclical entropy over time represents one of the very deepest structures of Brahmanical thinking in both the epic and *BhG* within it, and one can view the idea of cyclical (dis) integration as an outgrowth of this conception of temporality. In the present chapter and Chapter 6, I contend that an effective way to understand how aspects of "deep ideology" find expression within modern forms of Hindu nationalism, is to gather the conceptual structures and ideological tools outlined in prior chapters and use them as a resource to subvert the force of parallel ideological components within modern Hindu nationalism.

By putting my analysis of the *BhG* in a comparative and critical conversation with Hindu nationalism in modern day India, we gain a clearer understanding of the ideological components within these two distinct historical periods—components that might otherwise be used in a universalist fashion to justify problematic political projects moving forward. One reason the *BhG* remains such an important work of Indian political thought is because some of its major themes resonate with timely issues in Indian politics. If these ethnic-nationalistic and religio-political issues are not identified and critically assessed, I wager that texts such as the *BhG*

1 I am not suggesting these ideological elements are found solely within the *BhG*, as aspects of each appear throughout a broad array of Brahmanical-Hindu traditions. It is outside the scope of the current study to systematically excavate and link such categorical parallels between diverse, lengthy texts and literary genres stretching across more than two millennia. Rather, I am primarily concerned with a focused analysis of the *BhG*'s political theory itself, including how the potent combination of these three elements has been used for modern political purposes. The *BhG* provides an invaluable resource for excavating this deep ideology since it supplies a lucid exposition of each ideological component and has been an essential touchstone for Hindu nationalists of various sorts. The ideological structure identified here is a fruitful area for future research.

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will not only be co-opted by Hindu nationalists and ideological organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), but this co-optation will likely lead to the continued neglect of this text on the part of political theorists and philosophers. Again, Poor company lends itself to a poor reputation, and although this text contains some questionable philosophical ideas and concepts of seeming irrelevance to present circumstances, I claim that it deserves greater scholarly attention not only within the history of Indian political thought but also within the global history of political thought due to its continuing impact in Indian politics.

Specifically, I am interested in how Hindutva ideologies effectively appeal to modern Hindu sensibilities using various icons, themes, and symbology embedded within the *BhG.* My argument centers around the conceptual mechanisms at play in these ideological usages and is less concerned with unpacking all the multifarious influences and motivations driving various political actors. For example, Narendra Modi's thought, behavior, and political effectiveness extending from the early 2000s as Chief Minister of Gujarat into his second re-election as Indian Prime Minister in 2024, undoubtedly rely on numerous conceptual and cultural schemas, not all of which could be explained by Classical Brahmanical ideology. Such schemas are inflected by both neoliberal economic and fascistic ideas. My central concern, however, is that if we limit our attempts to explain why and how Hindutva appeals effectively register in the political sphere by focusing solely on more proximate historical influences such as modern capitalism or European Fascism, including the influence figures such as Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler have had on Hindutva ideology, then scholars can fail to recognize the transhistorical significance of Hindu traditions and texts as effective resources that play a role in the process of ideological appeal and uptake, with important consequences for Indian democracy.

My central critique thus centers around the perennially useful structure of deep ideology as expressed in the *BhG* and its political effects, regardless of whether contemporary ideologues are fully aware of this ideology's past, its authors' intentions for the future, or how it was structured to advance a Brahmanical-Hindu community's political interests. I have shown that in the historical past, the *BhG*'s ideology was intentionally designed in response to a complex set of historical factors, which happen to parallel modern political circumstances from the purview of Hindu ideologues. Furthermore, in the modern and contemporary periods, various types of Hindu nationalists have likewise developed and deployed forms of ideological thinking. Now I seek to show how the historical, Brahmanical-Hindu ideology and its structural elements have served as a resource for modern and contemporary political actors, even when these more historically proximate political actors (e.g., Hindutva ideologues) are not fully or consciously aware of the deep ideological structure I have outlined in previous chapters, and how they are par-

ticipating in replicating or extending this ideology. This potential lack of awareness does not prevent these actors from drawing upon elements of this deeper ideological structure for their own historically situated purposes. To be sure, these final two chapters cannot and do not attempt an exhaustive analysis of Hindu nationalism's connections to this deep ideological structure, but rather provide a provocative opening and avenue for further thought and research as it pertains to the past's ideological connections to the present. I simply claim that one can plausibly identify how Hindu nationalists have—again, knowingly or not—drawn political-symbolic inspiration from some of the ideological ideas and categories identified in previous chapters. Whether these actors are consciously aware of the transhistorical connection is beside the point for the observations I wish to advance here. More than anything else, I am concerned about the actual ideological *effects* of the deep ideological structure I have explicated in previous chapters, or the ways in which it can serve as a transhistorical resource for current and future political actors.

I want to be as explicit as possible regarding my intentions, as I understand some readers may want a more comprehensive explanatory account of the past's connection to the present. However, given the scope of the existing study, I do not claim that this deep ideology expressed in the *BhG* can exhaustively explain Hindu nationalism's antipathy to pluralism and its authoritarian state politics. The level of explanation I wish to make concerns *some* of the reasons for the successful effects of Hindu nationalists in their references to the *BhG* and its major themes or figures, since the text's political ideology was designed for such uptake into the future. Hindu nationalists' authoritarian politics, with their undoubtedly diverse influences and motivations, are implicitly supported by an ideology embedded in a text that they happen to find effective as a touchstone for their political projects. Of course, this ideological effect is buttressed by peoples' beliefs in the *BhG*'s truth or sacrality, including the two major figures in the dialogue. This is why I wish to highlight the references and parallel political predicaments faced by modern Hindu nationalists and the *BhG*'s authors concerning the will to craft an authoritarian unity in conditions of plurality through ideological means, especially through ideological concepts that are more historically pernicious than has been recognized. As in the historical past, when a community that strongly associates elements of its religious identity with Brahmanical-Hindu sources feels its unity or interests threatened by some form of political pluralism, where do they turn? What sort of language or vocabulary do they drawn upon, and what sorts of ideas and images? Parts of this community and some of its political leaders, I argue, have turned to the very sorts of ideas embedded in this deep ideology, which provide comprehensive answers about how to integrate and unify—hierarchically—in the face of an "enemy." The *BhG* simply lends itself well to these po-

litical concerns and interests because it was designed to be an effective resource in such circumstances.

Among the three categories the first one, which I began examining in Chapter 2, is *bodily asceticism.* Kṛṣṇa's guidance to Arjuna outlined a form of political asceticism that began at the level of an individual's own body. This asceticism focused on locating the higher parts of oneself so that these parts could "reign in" and rule the lower parts, beginning with one's senses and the deleterious paths they may lead one to traverse in the physical world. The central ethic preventing one from choosing harmful paths in life is dharmic disinterestedness, which becomes possible when this bodily form of political asceticism is successfully achieved. As we saw, this ethic requires one to fulfill various duties without egoistic attachment to the consequences or "fruit" of the action itself. The second tool involves what I will call an *integrative ideology.* I discussed Brahmanical ideology at length in the previous chapter, and the term "integrative" is meant to capture the elements of this ideology that promote harmonious, hierarchical integration and unity over disintegration and disunity. In the Brahmanical thought expressed in the *BhG*, disintegration and disunity are clearly frowned upon and associated with destructive political disagreement. The third and final tool is *temporal universalism.* While the *BhG*'s temporality operates cyclically, this claim to cyclicality itself is philosophically universalist in orientation. This not only means cyclicality is claimed as universally occurring, but also that the current time in which we dwell —namely, the Kali-Yuga—possesses affinities with the time period in which the war at Kurukṣetra occurs, and therefore has its proper genealogy in the events leading up to the war. In turn, such universalism lends itself well to an ideological connection between the *BhG*'s storyworld and India's present circumstances. If the text speaks to issues involving political disintegration in the Classical world, according to its brahmin authors, then it also (necessarily) speaks to related issues in the modern world. On this account the ages are roughly commensurate with one another, so the tools used to address similar political problems should also resemble one another. It is precisely these transhistorical ideological connections we see in the Hindu nationalist examples discussed in the present chapter and Chapter 6. At a general categorical level, these three designations could be delineated as a *body—time—ideology* construct.

With this construct in mind, this chapter moves into contemporary conversations involving the Hindu Right and Hindu nationalism, showing how Hindu nationalists' attempts to achieve political unity reinforce the universal structure of a text they use to legitimate themselves. Such groups and members thereof invoke themes, ideas, and strategies operative in the *BhG* as timeless and totalizing, containing all the truths necessary to maximize political peace and flourishing in the present. Elsewhere I have shown how Hindu nationalist efforts are seemingly cor-

roborated and justified by the universalist conflation of a Brahmanical-ideological universalism, on the one hand, and Orientalist-(neo)colonialist forms of universalism reminiscent of theater director Peter Brook and his representation of the *MBh*, on the other (Gray 2021). In so doing, the purported universal value inherent in the text is problematically kept alive. At the very least, the modern interpretive horizon of reception for the *BhG* makes universalist claims about the text more plausible for a global audience by expanding what could be viewed as reasonable grounds for these claims' applicability. An Orientalist and (post-) colonial horizon of textual reception creates a clear lane for universalist impulses and beliefs expressed in the text, further making the text more pertinent to an audience beyond the Indian subcontinent. A problematic confluence of Orientalist/(neo)colonialist universalism and Brahmanical-Hindu universalism gives scholars yet another reason for making these conceptual structures explicit, as grounds for questioning and challenging their most problematic manifestations—whether that be Brook's representation of the *MBh*, or Hindu nationalist agendas invoking legitimating themes from the text. In both instances, examining historical context and the intended audience for reception remains paramount.

Following these observations, the primary question driving this chapter stands: where and how do we see ideological themes from the *BhG* resonating with contemporary Hindutva ideology, especially as it is expressed politically in actions of the RSS and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)? To the extent that we see these connections and the problematic usage of ideological ideas over extended periods of time, we can identify the existence of what I've called a deep Brahmanical-Hindu ideology. After identifying the existence of a deep ideological structure and the conceptual tools/construct outlined above, we can begin exposing them as historically and culturally contingent and not natural or essential. In turn, this can assist efforts to resist ideological uses of texts such as the *BhG* for problematic Hindu nationalist projects. I organize this chapter around the following themes associated with political (dis)integration and the Brahmanical conceptual tools designed to address it: temporality, asceticism, and integrationist politics. The examples below show elements of the *BhG*'s political theory and ideology in action within a variety of Hindu nationalist projects. In short, an ideology of the past resonates deeply with an ideology of the present, which is no coincidence since the two are genealogically related.

Theory in Action: Ideology and Hindu Nationalism

In this section I contend that political forces representing an ethnic form of Hindu nationalism, which aspire to political centralization and unity, have eroded possi-

bilities for peaceable democratic pluralism from the 19th century into the 20th and 21st centuries. Akin to textual figures such as Kṛṣṇa that express the *BhG*'s Brahmanical ideology, Hindu nationalists reject strong forms of pluralism in favor of unified political authority under a singular figure (Modi paralleling Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira) and party (the BJP paralleling the Pāṇḍavas). For example, we see this phenomenon in attempts by Hindu nationalists to unify India as an innately Hindu nation, partly by effacing the religious and political plurality that continues to exist in India. Here, nationalists participate in something like the politics of effacement discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, as they ask non-Hindus to efface specific attachments and aspects of their personal identity (e.g., Muslims) to pursue a duty to a larger entity (e.g., Bharat Mata, or Mother Bharat/India). In the instances discussed below, Hindu activists claim that this larger group identity is anchored in a long-standing tradition of Hinduism, Sanskrit language, and the texts that bear their cultural imprint. Insofar as Hindu nationalists deploy rhetorical strategies of political effacement, they help perpetuate the deep ideology latent in Brahmanical texts such as the *BhG*.

Temporality: Cyclicality and Universalism

As I've argued in previous chapters, the temporal conception of cyclically declining ages contextualizes the epic narrative and meaning of the *BhG*'s political theory, and the text's brahmin authors portray this cyclical temporality as universal, extending into the present. According to the text, the epic's war signaled a transition to the Kali-Yuga and we human beings still live in this age, the final and most morally decrepit age in the yugic cycle. Within this macro-yugic context, in contemporary Indian politics the *BhG* has served as an inspirational resource for many Hindus, especially for Hindu nationalist groups, who return to the text for moral and political guidance believing that it would help them address religious and political divisiveness many communities had experienced both before and after India's independence from the British. In this section on temporality, I examine how core ideological themes seen in the *BhG* have emerged in Hindu nationalist propaganda, as both individuals and groups have tapped into the text's universalist register and (re)turned to it as a resource in their efforts for social and political reform. In the words of an RSS chief during the 2014 election cycle, during which the BJP was in the process of rebranding India as "Bharat" or the "land of the Bharatas," Mohan Bhagwat boldly stated that because of the universal nature of Hinduism, the whole world should chant "Bharat Mata ki Jai (Victory for Mother India)!" (Jaffrelot 2021: 164; IENS 2016). Here we must recall the namesake of the epic: *Mahābhārata*, or "Great *Bhārata*."

Wendy Doniger denotes the cyclical nature of Hindu nationalism in her much-discussed book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009). Doniger is quite familiar with Hindutva ideology and the *BhG*, including how the book has been used as a unifying source for Hindu causes. This is partly because her book became a central object of Hindu nationalist ire for purportedly denigrating Hindu culture. Such criticism put pressure on the book's publisher, Penguin India, which succumbed to public pressure and pulped the book before a decision had been reached in a civil court case to ban the book. Doniger points out that "the great mystery about the abuse of history is not the abuse itself but the question of why, in a future-intoxicated-age, we still reach for the past (or a past, however confected) to justify the present" (2009: 688). My analysis reveals one reason why particular Hindu groups may continue to reach for the past and feel justified in doing so: an ideological resonance between past and present that makes the text low-hanging fruit for Hindutva causes. While Doniger herself does not see the value in making decisions for the present and future based on accounts of the past (689), if I am correct and a deep ideological strain pervades Hindu nationalist causes because these causes find legitimation in texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG*, then it is not enough simply to pose her question about this return to past texts as curious. Rather, exposing these ideological elements for what they are, questioning and critiquing them, and showing them to be historically contingent and therefore *non-universal*, may be one of the more promising strategies for contesting various elements of Hindu nationalism. Put another way, it is not enough to implore Hindu nationalists and their sympathizers to lay aside their sacred texts and contestable histories involving such texts from the past. As I have argued in defending a strategy of internal subversion, we must systematically re-examine these texts and traditions of political thought in a manner that takes them seriously yet does not fetishize them. Circling back to Doniger's comment, one reason why people may reach for the past is precisely because texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG* possess within them the very conceptual structures that naturally lend themselves to such appeals. When these structures are exposed and critiqued for what they are, this better allows us to challenge the universalist and ideologically ethnocentric bases of these appeals.

For example, cyclical conceptions of time premised on ideological interests lend themselves to such "eternal returns" to the past more easily than linear conceptions of time. Linear conceptions can suggest that past periods and their associated socio-political realities are fundamentally different than present realities since significant historical changes have taken place over millennia. In this sense, linear conceptions can make it more difficult to appeal to the past as a worthwhile source for normative inspiration because the past can more easily be framed as irrelevant as a guide for the present (and future). In contrast, a cy-

clical conception of time, especially one that claims a deep temporal connection between events in the distant past and the present such that they can be depicted as participating in *one and the same age*, is more plausibly relevant for present dilemmas. Not to mention that this transhistorical connection within the Kali-Yuga allows brahmin authors to claim explanatory power for their texts since events depicted in the *MBh* and *BhG* claim to show why and how human beings find themselves in a seemingly chaotic political world in the first place. We find the world broken and chaotic precisely because of the age we live in, and the best we can do, according to the Brahmanical-Hindu political thought expressed in the *BhG*, is to combat entropic decline by aiming at political unification through strategies such as ascetic self-control and dharmic disinterestedness, which I will explain at greater length in the next section.

If one is looking for specific examples of a Hindu nationalist leader making cyclical-universalist appeals to the Brahmanical-Hindu tradition, M. S. Golwalkar (1906–1973), an early leader within the RSS, proves useful. As the second major political figure leading the RSS, Golwalkar succeeded the organization's highly influential founder, K. B. Hedgewar (1889–1940). Golwalkar assumed the helm of the RSS in 1940, and during his time as the organization's leader we see a persistent attempt to craft a pan-Indian identity in a uniquely Hindutva form. Born into a brahmin family, he maintained an even more rigid definition of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation or polity) than his Hindutva-predecessor, V. D. Savarkar. For example, he requested that religious minorities pledge allegiance to Hindu symbols of identity, assuming these epitomize Indian national identity (Jaffrelot 2007: 97). As Christophe Jaffrelot points out, Golwalkar maintained that Indian identity was equated with Hindu culture, and religious minorities were urged to bracket and express their communal particularism in the private sphere (97). Here, one is reminded of a key component of dharmic disinterestedness that Kṛṣṇa preaches to Arjuna, namely the effacing of more personal or particular attachments for the purpose of pursuing one's duties to a larger cause or community. On what basis did Golwalkar make these claims? They are made based on what Golwalkar calls the "eternal truths discovered by our ancient seers and tested on the touchstone of reason, experience, and history" (138). Golwalkar paradoxically refers to a westernized, post-Enlightenment discourse of "testing" based on "reason," which is clearly rhetorical and aimed at giving his claim the status of something like an empirically tested truth. However, he also creatively merges this Enlightenment-style language with a cyclical return to the universal and "eternal truths" discovered by ancient seers who recorded the sacred Vedic Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas, along with the *MBh* and *BhG*. Golwalkar mentions history as well, invoking a paradoxical pairing of historicity and ahistorical universality present in Brahmanical-Hindu texts such as the *BhG*. As I explained earlier this statement invokes an essential

ideological component of Hindu nationalism by claiming a historically grounded basis that could be accepted as historically factual by both westerners and non-Hindus. Golwalkar's statement invokes a universal basis that would apply equally to those outside the Hindu fold—especially Muslims and Christians living on the Indian subcontinent, who strongly valued their "particularist attachments" to non-Hindu traditions.

Another Hindu nationalist leader, Balraj Madhok (1920–2016), would later reiterate Golwalkar's "historical-universalist" move in the 1960s and '70s, which influenced Hindu nationalist efforts to reform educational curriculum via textbooks. History as taught in textbooks continues to be a powerful means of cultivating a collective memory for a given community's past. As a historical parallel discussed earlier, the brahmin authors of the *BhG* crafted an elaborate storyworld that purported to be an accurate historical account, which included an ideological structure designed to advance Brahmanical interests while essentializing a particular philosophical and cosmological account as natural. Similarly, contemporary Hindu nationalists have attempted to re-tell history in a manner conducive to their community's interests—or at least the interests of a subset of their community. Returning to Madhok, he claimed that "tampering with history" and the "removal of references to India's traditional heroes and heroines from the textbooks in the name of secularism and eradication of communalism is most impolitic" (Jaffrelot 2007: 162). The "tampering" to which Madhok refers is a reference to emending existing textbooks so that non-history texts such as the *BhG*, or texts that are sacred to a particular community, are not taught in a culturally biased manner or taught to be something they are not. For example, such texts are not accurate recordings of history or indicative of an essential culture unifying all communities on the Indian subcontinent. The "removal of references to traditional heroes and heroines," of course, would apply to (non-historical) figures such as Kṛṣṇa, the Pāṇḍavas (especially Arjuna), and Draupadī. Such removals or emendations are indeed political, but not "impolitic" in Madhok's sense of the term.

Failing to address Hindu ideology expressed in textbooks would be a severe mistake. Tellingly, at a conference in Patna in December of 1969, Madhok addresses the audience on the topic of "Indianization" and makes the following statement:

> Education should be based on national culture and tradition. Knowledge about Upanishads, *Bhagvad Geeta*, Ramayana, *Mahabharata* ... [should] be disseminated and efforts should be made to bring that day nearer when knowledge about this common cultural stream will be considered essential by people of all parts of the country. (Jaffrelot 2007: 166)

Here Madhok clearly associates "national culture" with texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG*, claiming them as part of a "common cultural stream" that might unite dispa-

rate parts of the country. This historical (re)turn and appeal to a particular set of traditions and texts as essentially Indian reflects a Brahmanical ideological theme by invoking a cyclical turn to the past to diagnose and address current political issues. One issue expressed in Madhok's statement involves a concern with communal differences and divisiveness in conditions of both religious and political plurality. Madhok therefore attempts to invoke a Hindu-centered past as an antidote for intercommunal disputes, which he and other Hindu nationalists hoped would generate acquiescence on a "common cultural stream" capable of reducing conflict and enhancing peaceable unity under the banner of a Hindu Rashtra. While Madhok calls both the *MBh* and *BhG* out by name, I would argue that the *BhG* has played a more general yet crucial role in helping leaders articulate key components of Hindu nationalist ideology, especially when it comes to the press.

In the early 1920s two businessmen, Jaydayal Goyandka and Hanuman Prasad Poddar, established a non-profit publishing house in Gorakhpur for Hindu religious literature, named Gita Press. To date, Gita Press has sold over 70 million copies of its namesake text and has served as a platform for promoting numerous Hindu nationalist voices on causes ranging from cow slaughter to the promotion of Hindi as the national language. As Akshaya Mukul (2015) has explained in his detailed account of the press's history, the press's publications have played a crucial role in the formation of a Hindu political consciousness, helping explain the rise of the Hindu Right in Indian politics. Importantly, Monika Freier contends that Gita Press gained its tremendous popularity in part through its Hindi translation of the *BhG*, which was styled as the central scripture for all Hindus (2012: 397–413). She argues that Gita Press was vital in constructing "orthodox Hindu tradition" as a concept, doing so in a way that would unite the Hindu community as a whole, which could then serve as the basis for projecting an idea of a broader, unified Hindu nation (398; see Zavos 2001: 120). Specifically, the press helped create the *BhG*'s textual authority within an emerging Hindu nationalist consciousness through a two-way process: "their advice books legitimized their teachings through quotes from ancient scriptures, while simultaneously promoting these scriptures as canonical texts of Hindu doctrine" (Freier 2012: 398). Therefore, this press returned to the *BhG* as a touchstone to universalize the text's authority within Hinduism, while simultaneously helping to popularize it in ways that helped construct a Hindu nationalist consciousness. One of the Press's aims was to make original texts such as the *BhG* accessible to a broader audience who could read the translation in their own mother tongue, while forcefully "declaring that the Bhagavadgita encompasses the spiritual knowledge of all other sacred scriptures that came before it, even and especially the Vedas" (401). Here we see how this particular press helps universalize the text's accessibility *and* authority among the broadest possible audience, partly by claiming it as the ultimate universal-spiritual text.

Aside from promoting its namesake text as Hindu scripture and a universal spiritual guide, Gita Press used the power of print to influence both policy and politics by supporting various movements, ideologies, and organizations favoring Hindu identity and culture (Mukul 2015: 289). Showing the political weight of both the *BhG* and the press's influence, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India (1950–1962), erected a statue of Kṛṣṇa in Gorakhpur located at a new gateway named "Gita Dwar" ("Gita Gate"), later stressing in a speech the immortality of Indian culture: "Whereas other religions differentiate one from another, the Bhagavadgita is an example of integration" (153). These examples highlight the text's emerging popularity and authority in political circles, partly by claiming universal and eternal status ("immortality of Indian culture"), and by using the political language of "integration" for political unification under a Hindu banner. Perhaps most tellingly, President Prasad claimed to have the greatest regard for institutions like Gita Press, which undertook the laudable task of "engag[ing] in translating the vision of sanatan [eternal] Hindu dharma into reality and I want them to succeed further" (153). Prasad clearly believed in an eternal Hindu dharma and wanted institutions like Gita Press to universalize its message by distributing Hindu religious ideas as far and wide as possible. Of course, the *BhG* served as one of the most effective textual vehicles for spreading this message. In Prasad's statement we also see a crucial element of ideological thinking that I examined in Chapter 4, namely the attempt to *real*-ize Hindu messages in the social and political world. That is, Gita Press helped turn ideas and aspects of a storyworld into a reality, and a politically potent one at that. As Mukul summarizes, "No other publishing house in India has marketed religion so successfully. And despite claiming to maintain a safe distance from politics, Gita Press has regularly taken political stands" (430). For example, the press has supported political narratives promoted by the RSS, Hindu Mahasabha, Jana Sangh, and BJP at every critical juncture since 1923 (430). Mukul's study shows the lasting political legacy of the very term "Gita" and thus "Bhagavad Gita" as signaling an object of political contestability involving Hindu nationalism that extends into the present day.

Turning a purported sanatan (eternal) Hindu dharma into a reality also requires access and appeal to a young audience through the educational system. The "Saffronization" of education includes efforts to promote texts such as the *BhG* as essential Indian texts containing both morally universal and historically descriptive narratives. Along these lines, Saraswati Shishu Mandirs and Vidya Bharati primary and secondary schools promote Hindu texts and values as essential to Indian national identity. As Mushirul Hasan explains, "we live in a time when efforts are underway to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda" (2015: 251). According to the Indian Central Board of Secondary Education, under the "Themes in Indian History" portion of the curriculum, the third

unit is titled "Social Histories: using the Mahabharata" (ICBSE 2019–20). One must remember that the *BhG* itself claims status as an accurate recording of past events, including the Kurukṣetra War and both Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as historical figures, thus providing a false basis for Hindu nationalists to claim the text as historical material for school curricula.

In a more politicized example, in 2014 the RSS formed a committee called the Bharatiya Shiksha Niti Ayog, which aimed to "Indianize" the national education system in the wake of Narendra Modi's rise to power (Jaffrelot 2021: 169). The committee sought this goal through influencing the Ministry of Human Resource Development, a national organization in charge of education. Headed by Dinanath Batra, a long-standing member of the RSS who had specialized in rewriting Indian history according to the canons of Hindu nationalism, the committee infamously filed the aforementioned civil suit to ban Doniger's book, which Batra and other Hindu nationalists believed portrayed classical Hindu texts and figures in a derogatory manner (169). Moreover, as general secretary of the RSS's network of religious schools, or Vidya Bharati, Batra sought to combat what he perceived to be historical errors in history textbooks written by secularist authors; one such "error" was the failure to attribute to India "all the glory of its epic poems, which are presented [by Batra] as an accurate reflection of historical reality" (170).[2] The "glory of the epic" then becomes a key element of Hindu nationalist ideology and an educational tool for pursuing the Hindu Right's political interests.

In these examples we see a cyclical return to Hindu texts as political groups seek to operationalize them for current political purposes. With the BJP's support and acting as the educational wing of the RSS, the Vidya Bharati School system has grown tremendously since the 1990s and now runs one of the largest private networks of schools in India, claiming nearly 5,000 informal teaching centers, 12,754 total schools, and almost 3.3 million students (VB 2022). As mentioned above, the schools' syllabi include a Hinduized version of history, with a return to the past and texts such as the *BhG* allowing present parties to re-invoke their universal applicability while simultaneously categorizing them as historical in nature, giving Hindu nationalists a historical anchor for their nationalist propaganda. On the educational front, Jaffrelot explains that Hindu nationalists have been most active at the state government level, especially in BJP-ruled states, since primary and secondary education fall under the responsibility of states (2021: 172). In one example, Batra successfully implemented educational reform by introducing new textbooks in the state of Haryana in 2015, for classes 7 to 12 (ages thirteen to eighteen), which taught a Hindu moral education beginning with praise to the goddess Saraswati.

2 For statistics on the immense changes made to Indian textbooks, see Jaffrelot (2021: 172).

Batra claimed Saraswati was "not a religious figure"—thus the reform was not a form of Hinduization—but rather a "symbol of qualities that every student should emulate" (173, citing Chopra 2015). Again, we see the universalist element of Brahmanical-Hindu ideology emerging clearly into light.

This critique of Hindu nationalists' use of epics such as the *MBh* and texts such as the *BhG* shows how the Hindu Right has tapped into conceptual and ideological themes present in these texts. The general category of temporality, and more specifically, sub-categories associated with historical cyclicality and universalism, have become increasingly salient and contestable in the contemporary Indian political context. The next section will continue this line of critique in examining the topics of asceticism and dharmic disinterestedness, as both have found problematic political expression in contemporary Indian politics.

Ascetic Idealism: Dharmic Disinterestedness, Self-Control, Purity

Hindu forms of asceticism have often been viewed as "otherworldly" and apolitical in nature, sometimes even anti-political. As a set of individual practices focusing on self-restraint and renunciation, among other things, asceticism can easily be associated with a retreat from the public sphere to focus on the self. However, figures like Gandhi and his political asceticism allow us to push back on this presupposition, since his methods helped to shape the Indian political landscape in the 20th century moving forward.[3] The *BhG* played a central role in Gandhi's political thought and many people have viewed this impact in a positive light. As Farah Godrej (2016) points out, the *BhG* does not teach renunciation from the world and political action but rather sustained engagement with worldly ethics, which is clear from Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna to engage in battle and only renounce egoistic attachment to the "fruits" of his engagement. Clearly, then, asceticism can be political in orientation and can even provide a provocative method for political engagement. But asceticism can also operate ideologically. Such ideological expressions appear in conceptual vocabulary and language we see extending back to the *BhG*, including "self-control," "purification," and "sacrifice." As we will see, Hindu nationalists often employ this ascetic language to justify violent action as a form of civic duty.

Modern ascetic discourse in India, which sometimes invokes the *BhG* and epic themes or figures, has played a central role in various forms of modern Hindu na-

3 For example, see Rudolph and Rudolph (1967: 155–249).

tionalism. Deendayal Upadhyaya was one of the first leaders within the RSS to embrace and promote political asceticism as a core element of Hindu nationalism. Upadhyaya claimed to abandon his worldly, egoistic passions to dedicate himself completely to the nation—of course, framed as a *Hindu* nation or rashtra. In fact, he abandoned his studies to join the RSS and embraced asceticism "to the point of refusing marriage" (Jaffrelot 2007: 140). The theme of purity/celibacy is evident here and Upadhyaya frames his actions in the language of sacrifice to the nation and a larger cause, which can problematically resonate with a core idea we see in the *BhG:* dharmic disinterestedness. Jaffrelot explains that Upadhyaya devoted his life to the RSS and composed an influential Hindu nationalist text titled *Integral Humanism*, which promoted the rehabilitation of the old varna system (140). The title of his text incorporates concepts of integration and a universalizing humanism, thus signaling an effort to unify disparate social and political elements in Indian society under what Upadhyaya calls "bharatiya culture." Importantly, Upadhyaya claimed that bharatiya culture "looks upon life as an integrated whole" (141). This theme of integrationism finds its roots in philosophical ideas associated with the *varṇāśramadharma* system (duties associated with social group and life stage), which he and other Hindu nationalists believed should extend throughout and harmoniously unite a potentially fractured society. Such integration also invokes political motivations outlined in previous chapters, according to which Hindu ideas could provide an organized, united, and notably *hierarchical* vision of life capable of mitigating socio-political entropy. According to Upadhyaya, what held every society together was its "chiti" (soul, innate nature) (145). For him, this concept of chiti invokes an ascetic basis for sacrificial duty to one's culture and nation, and for India this culture was a *Bharatiya* culture stemming back to the great epic and Bharata family.

Tellingly, Upadhyaya returns to the *MBh* for legitimation, a text he claims provides an example of two things: the innate nature binding a society together in the present, and a transhistorical nature binding a present to a past. He begins by answering the question "What is a nation?" stating: "When a group of persons lives with a goal, an ideal, a mission, and looks upon a particular piece of land as motherland, this group constitutes a nation" (144–145). Here, the geographic "motherland" of the subcontinent as a land of "Bharat" (of/belonging to the Bharats, thus Bharat-iya) helps advance his claim about integration and unification. Shortly after this general statement about what constitutes a nation, Upadhyaya elaborates on "Chiti—Culture—Dharma," stating the following:

> Chiti determines the direction in which the nation is to advance culturally. … By way of an illustration consider the story of Mahabharat. Kauravas were defeated, and Pandavas won. Why did we hold up the conduct of Pandavas as Dharma? Or why this battle was not consid-

> ered just a battle for a kingdom? The praise for Yudhisthir … Krishna killed his uncle Kansa, the established king of the times. Instead of branding this as a revolt, we consider Krishna as an Avatar of God, and Kansa as an Asura. (146)

First, Upadhyaya claims that the present and future direction of the country is determined culturally through knowledge of the past, and that a return to this culture extending back to the epic period is necessary. Second, he uses the epic in a rhetorical fashion to suggest this ancient battle was not a conflict over mere power and egoistic concerns, but rather a justified moral conflict with the Pāṇḍavas in the right partly because they had the "avatar of God" on their side. A unified integration under Hindu culture, dharmic disinterestedness in serving this Hindu culture and nation, and central leadership through the RSS posing as a "Paṇḍava/Kṛṣṇa force for good"—these elements of a contemporary Hindu ideology all find sustenance in a deep ideology expressed in the *MBh* and *BhG*, which, if not questioned and exposed as damaging to Indian democracy, may continue to grow and flourish in Indian politics.

One of the best expressions of this "nationalist asceticism" is the figure of the *pracharak*, who operates under the ideological cover of modern dharmic disinterestedness. While this term could denote a "civil servant" for Hindu nationalist causes, the *pracharak* is literally a preacher, propagandist, and organizer of meetings and public lectures. Someone serving as a *pracharak* must propagate Hindu messages through a variety of public forums and contacts. In so doing, these figures are also supposed to remain non-egoistic in service to the Hindu nationalist cause, to achieve a type of political purity associated with disinterestedly performing their "public duty." Such purity resembles a modality of political thinking outlined by Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (1967) in the figure of Gandhi, who exhibited what they call a "saintly politics." As Rudolph and Rudolph explain, Gandhi's concern to extend the organizational bases of Indian political life were rooted in a Hindu expression of this-worldly asceticism (158). A Gandhian type of political asceticism exhibited charismatic authority that I would argue operated on a logic of saintly purity. Because such political figures are viewed as selflessly pursuing broader, non-egoistic goals in pursuit of a higher political aim, they can be viewed as "pure" insofar as their motives are self-sacrificial and beholden to an ascetic form of life. The *pracharak* could be viewed as a low-level version of what Gandhi exemplified in the ascetic-nationalist model. Rudolph and Rudolph's description of Gandhi captures the essence of this model: "The authenticity with which he sought virtue and the highest religious goals through self-control, truth, and non-violence re-enacted a familiar but rarely realized cultural model, that of the saintly man" (159). It is precisely this saintly model that acts as a subterfuge for figures such as Modi at the national level, extending down to a low-level

version in the *pracharak* as a saintly foot soldier. In short, an image of saintly purity in a politically ascetic form can be dangerous because it can delude people into thinking that political actors are not acting egoistically or self-interestedly. Here, the ideological effect becomes clear: political asceticism helps make a person's or group's goal appear to be untainted by personal interests and power, when the opposite is in fact true.

Overtones of a political or nationalist form of asceticism, accompanied by saintly purity in the form of self-sacrifice and dharmic disinterestedness, can be linked to important ideological themes in the *BhG* as well. With the help of Gita Press, the *BhG* has become a repository and central resource for connecting ascetic ideas to politics within the Hindu nationalist ambit. For example, in response to a communist "anti-God/-religion" meeting in Moscow in 1928, with fear that communist, anti-religious propaganda would spread throughout India, Akshay Mukul explains that Gita Press provided an alternative ideology for orthodox Hindus as "something that would not threaten the tenets of sanatan Hindu dharma yet celebrate the concept of equality" (2015: 329). As he further explains, an alternative Indian form of communism was located in the *BhG*, one that was conceived as divinely ordained (329–330). What is more, the method for achieving this "Indian communism" involved a type of purification: "To follow Indian communism, one had merely to purify the mind," backed by inspirational forces that included Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira, Vidura, and Vyāsa—all major figures from the epic. In this grouping, we see epic figures enlisted as ascetic models to follow, and *bhakti*/devotion to such figures was depicted as a necessary condition for achieving this spiritualized form of Hindu communism (330). This example again shows how the *BhG* could be used as a piece of theological-political propaganda capable of perpetuating the hierarchical status of Hindus while preaching equality at the same time, with claims about equality serving as a democratic smokescreen for appeals to members of lower castes.

One can also locate a Brahmanical-Hindu focus on purity in the BJP and its leaders' privileging of the brahmin caste as "guides" for the society at large. According to Jaffrelot, Modi has served as an effective champion of the upper castes during his time in leadership, setting the tone for others in the political hierarchy. In one example, the proportion of Lok Sabha Prime Ministers from the upper castes started to increase in 2009 at the expense of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Muslims, and this trend continued in 2014 largely due to the BJP's unprecedented political victory (Jaffrelot 2021: 139). In fact, BJP leaders during the Modi years have grown bolder in claiming their moral superiority, predicated on traditional claims about brahmins' higher birth status predicated on ontological "purity." In a telling example of this point, a BJP Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Om

Birla, eulogized the Brahmins and the caste system openly, claiming that the Brahmin community served as a guide for all other communities in the nation (141).

Their moral superiority supposedly stemmed from the superiority of their birth based on their innate qualities, or *gun*, which is a Hindi word stemming from the Sanskrit term *guṇa* that I examined in Chapter 2. Traditionally, the *guṇa* of *sattva* (lucidity, purity, goodness) is supposed to be preeminent in brahmins and therefore justify their "higher" birth status. The idea that brahmins should play guiding roles in society is an idea stretching back to the Vedas and extending through texts such as the *BhG*, thus showing the tendency on the part of upper castes, and the politicians like Modi who support them, to cyclically return to their sacred texts to justify their superiority and the caste system that sustains this ideology. Birla openly defended caste endogamy and caste-based observances as the best way to sustain social order and unity: "If we want to bind the society together, then there is only one arrangement today; *like our ancestors* used to forge alliances for marriage ... and if we want to save the society, then this is the lone alternative" (Jaffrelot 2021: 142, emphasis mine). This statement is rife with coded Brahmanical-Hindu terminology that would resonate with anyone familiar with ideas stretching back to the epic, including a return to ancestral ways of life, forging alliances for marriage, and soteriology through Brahmanical traditions. Jaffrelot summarizes his analysis of Birla's Hindu conservatism by explaining that for those such as Birla, the unity of society could only come from caste order, and this order reflected their belief in the impurity of Dalits (142).

However, brahmins were not the only representatives of this purity discourse and the ascetic model, as Hindu nationalists sought to find ways of appealing to women as well. One way that Gita Press helped popularize ascetic elements of Hindu thought in politically salient ways was to develop a platform on the topics of female hygiene, health, and sexuality. Documenting the press's appeal to ascetic self-control for women, Mukul discusses how writers for Gita Press advised "an expecting mother ... for positive energy she should keep photographs of sadhus or brave men before her, avoid anger, greed and arrogance," and do so partly by listening to selections from scriptures such as the Mahabharata, especially the third and eleventh chapters of the *Bhagavad-gita* (2015: 377–378). Mukul also points out that Gita Press's overemphasis on hygiene stemmed from the premium the Hindu social system placed on purity, as women were considered naturally impure due to their monthly menstrual cycle (375). Hindu ideology thus peddled a theory of impurity and promised a cure to solicit buy-in on the part of women, with ascetic methods playing a key role in justifying both the cure and its methods. In the examples above, Hindu nationalists and their propagandists at places like Gita Press helped spread an ascetic ideology that reinforced their Hindutva political messag-

es, while simultaneously promoting the *BhG* as a touchstone for Indian historical and cultural identity.

The final problem with this discourse on asceticism and purity lies in the violence that it justifies in the political sphere. B. G. Tilak (1856–1920), an early Indian nationalist and independence activist, was a Chitpavan brahmin and well-known for his interpretation of the *BhG.* His interpretation emphasized the importance of action in this world, especially in fulfilling one's religious and political duties in what one may call a dharmically disinterested fashion. In a speech at the 1897 festival honoring the 18th-century warrior-king Shivaji, Tilak boldly declared that the *BhG* sanctioned killing enemies for unselfish and benevolent reasons, claiming violence in a righteous cause was morally justifiable (McDermott et al. 2014: 263, 264). This unselfishness resonates with Kṛṣṇa's language about nonegoistic action, or *niṣkāma-karma.* Tilak also cited the *BhG* in stating, "Shrimat Krishna's teaching in the Bhagavad Gita is to kill even our teachers and our kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being motivated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds" (264). Here we see explicit reference to one of the *BhG*'s central ethical principles. Sadly, while Gandhi's nonviolent interpretation of the *BhG* influenced many, it irritated many of his compatriots on the Hindu Right who preferred more forceful methods. Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin and student of V. D. Savarkar, revered the *BhG* and believed it justified political violence, holding Gandhi's opposing, nonviolent interpretation in contempt. Godse was not alone in this stance, as a strain of Hindu nationalism holds the *BhG* in very high regard but alternatively views Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna as both a religious and political justification for committing acts of violence.

Integrated Politics in Divisive Times: Plurality, Devotion, Unity

India has always been, and remains, an incredibly pluralistic nation—religiously, ethnically, and politically. However, Hindu nationalists and the Hindutva ideology they promote tend to deny this plurality and emphasize more simplified, binary oppositions between Hindus and non-Hindus. This binary opposition often takes the form of an 'ally versus enemy' frame reminiscent of the Pāṇḍava versus Kaurava opposition. In contemporary Indian politics this framing and division, according to Hindu nationalist ideology, often find expression in two areas: one religious, the other political. The first, religious division perceives Hindus on one side and other non-Hindu groups on the other, which includes Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists.

While multiple religious groups have fallen under the category of an enemy "Other," Muslims have been a frequent target for Hindu nationalists. For example,

Jaffrelot explains that repressive policies have consistently targeted India's Muslim population, as Hindu nationalists have systematically sought to disqualify them as Indian citizens (2021: 194). One reason for this exclusion is that Hindu nationalists often perceive Muslims as having a higher obligation to their religious faith, over and above any political obligation to an Indian state, let alone one that is portrayed as essentially Hindu. In one example of such religious polarization during the 2017 election in Uttar Pradesh, Parvesh Verma, an MP and member of the BJP representing the West Delhi Lok Sabha constituency, stated: "Muslims have never voted for us and they never will. It is a very simple matter. … Why is every terrorist in the country a Muslim and why do Muslims not vote for BJP[?] … Because the BJP is a patriotic party, that's why Muslims don't vote for us" (194). We see two key moves being made in this statement. First, Muslims are portrayed exclusively as terrorists and enemies of the Indian nation. Second, Verma frames the BJP, the political wing of the RSS, as the "patriotic" party and insinuates that its commitment is to the Indian state and motherland. This patriotism contrasts with extra-political commitments such as religious ones that could be used to negatively frame other, non-Hindu groups. As Jaffrelot adds, a leitmotif of Hindu nationalism under Modi's national populist leadership holds "Muslims to be potential traitors due to their alleged connection with Pakistan and the Islam-equals-terrorism equation" (194). Not only are Indian Muslims seen by Hindu nationalists as having a bifurcated and faulty sense of religio-political obligation, they are also framed as having stronger political ties to Pakistan.

Historically, many of these fears and the theoretical apparatus established to justify them stem back to V. D. Savarkar and his infamous text, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). In many respects, Savarkar is responsible for a concrete conceptualization of Hindu nationalism. Not only was he born into a brahmin caste, but he was also a firm religious believer and ideologue for Hindu cultural essentialism. His main argument was one for the ethnic and national unity of Hinduism, stipulating that the Aryans who settled in India long ago formed a "nation embodied in the Hindus" (Jaffrelot 1996: 26). Key to his conceptualization of Hindu identity was a contrast with a constitutive "Other," and his *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* was largely written in response to the "threatening Other" viewed as pan-Islamism (25). According to Jaffrelot, Hinduism as an essentialized category was rekindled in reaction to a subjectively felt threat and despite being in the majority, Hindu stigmatization of the "Other" was rooted in what Savarkar and his colleagues in the Hindu Mahasabha believed to be their vulnerability as a people, whose national and ethnic unity had yet to be established. Not only do we see a concern with unity in conditions of religious and political plurality, but I would also suggest there is an uncanny parallel with the original Brahmanical motivations for the *MBh* and *BhG:* namely, brahmins' sense of vulnerability as a privileged community

within the Mauryan Empire, instigated partly by the rise of "heterodox" religious traditions. Much of Savarkar's own thought came from "his deeply rooted hostility to Islam and its followers" (15). Part of this hostility stems from his belief that the Sanskrit language preserved a culturally essential identity located in texts extending back to the Vedas and epics such as the *MBh*. One reason the *MBh* became easily co-opted for such Hindu nationalist purposes is precisely because the Pāṇḍava/Kaurava division lends itself to any number of historically shifting divisions and corresponding identities that could be shoehorned into an ally/enemy distinction.

The second major division, intimated in Verma's earlier quote, is a distinctly political one. The ally/enemy binary finds expression in electoral politics where elections are perceived as ongoing "wars," thus resonating with ideological themes extending back to the *BhG* that invoke a primordial Pāṇḍava/Kaurava division. In contemporary electoral politics, Muslims are not the only enemy. The BJP's political "Other" is the Congress Party, the party of Nehru and Gandhi. In some of its most intense political rhetoric, Modi's BJP has explicitly and vocally pursued a Congress-free India, a country in which the main opposition party would be eradicated (Jaffrelot 2021: 349). This political eradication of Congress echoes the apocalyptic destruction of the Kurukṣetra war, where the Kaurava opponents ("demons") were annihilated. Here, the BJP fails to embrace political plurality as a key element of democratic political life and electoral politics, with political uniformity under a Hindu banner becoming the central goal. As Jaffrelot explains, "this rejection of a multiparty democratic system flowed directly from the core ideology of Modi's national populism, an ideology where there is room for only one political force, the Hindu nationalists, who embody the nation" (349–350). A key ideological component of Hindu nationalism that subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) evokes the *MBh* and *BhG* is the basic moral binary drawn between "good" and "evil."

As seen above, the BJP seeks to discredit its political opponents as legitimate rivals, often using language of criminalization to justify their claims, underhandedly framing a moral dichotomy between good and evil by using secularized legal language. Returning briefly to the *BhG*, we recall that the text's brahmin authors claimed the Pāṇḍavas were on the side of right and *dharma* partly because they were viewed as the incarnations of *deva*s that were meant to eradicate the evil Kauravas, who happened to be incarnations of evil *asura*s. One also recalls that the Kauravas were portrayed as an existential threat to the world as evil *kṣatriya*s that had been abusing the earth and were therefore justified in being eradicated. This good/evil and god(s)/demon discourse is fundamental to both the major Hindu epics, and a contemporary audience in Indian electoral politics would be primed to understand this moral language and its corresponding associations. Keeping these points in mind, Jaffrelot draws upon Steven Levitsky's and Daniel Ziblatt's analysis of de-democratization to show how a political party such as

the BJP threatens two mainstays of democratic culture: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance (Jaffrelot 2021: 351; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019: 23, 111). The BJP under Modi has displayed many authoritarian behaviors, some of which I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter, which "claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life," or "describe their partisan rivals as criminals" (Jaffrelot 2021: 351). The ideological connections to themes in the *BhG* are clear, with the presumable "prevailing way of life" being one that is characterized as Hindu in orientation. Moreover, the criminalization of opponents reflects a moral distinction that conceptually maps onto the good/evil binary. Criminals are those that threaten "our [Hindu] way of life" and signal political disintegration, with the "good guys" and their allies portrayed as fighting an ongoing war to eradicate the destructive plurality in pursuit of unity through (Hindu) uniformity.

An important element of this criminalization concerns a lack of perceived patriotism or devotion to India as a Hindu nation. In one of the most blatantly ideological and disturbing statements by a political leader within the ranks of the BJP, Sushma Swaraj, a foreign affairs minister, argued for the state to recognize the *BhG* as "National Scripture (Rashtriya Granth)" (164). This recommendation was made on the basis that Modi had given a copy of the text to former President Barack Obama, with M. L. Khattar, the BJP chief minister of Haryana, following Swaraj's sentiment and claiming the *BhG* was "above the Constitution" (164). A clear transgression of secular democratic principles is evident in both Swaraj's and Khattar's statements. In the first instance, Swaraj attempts to combine two different types of texts in an ideological fashion to make them appear as if they were coherently connected—namely, "scriptural," which is often associated with sacred religious texts, and "national," a political concept. In blurring the boundaries between religion and politics Hindu nationalists like Swaraj attempt to establish political privilege for their own religious affiliation. Khattar is even bolder in claiming the *BhG* stands above the Indian Constitution as a legitimating document for India's political identity. Not only does Khattar's statement violate principles of equal toleration of different religious denominations in the public sphere, but it openly claims that a particular set of religious traditions stands above India's political constitution altogether. Reading into Khattar's claim, he may believe the *BhG*'s presumed universal character justifies its authority in superseding the content of more historically situated documents and institutions associated with India's constitution.

Patriotic statements invoking the *MBh* as a long-standing, legitimating document capable of unifying India have also appeared in the novelistic sphere. In 1989, Shashi Tharoor published a modern re-telling of the *MBh* in the context of the Indian independence movement. Not only did this highly popular novel re-present the *MBh*'s own cyclical structure of returning to the past to tell the history of

the present, but according to Ashutosh Mohan (2006), the novel was a politically biased re-telling of the *MBh* story for Hindu nationalist purposes. In the novel, the political battle for power had been resolved into the eternal binary opposition of Kauravas and Pandavas, with the Janata party representing the Pandavas and Congress the Kauravas (Mohan 2006: 52). For Tharoor, the novelistic storyworld is a plausible way of retelling recent Indian history, which seeks to legitimate nationalist projects in an effort to anchor modern political movements and figures in an epic past. Such moves perpetuate Brahmanical-Hindu ideology by pursuing a totalizing political unity during divisive times through appeals to texts like the *MBh* and *BhG.* One must remember that these texts privilege a particular understanding of time and political action that are not eternal but rather historically contingent and must therefore be questioned.

Swaraj's statement above shows how political actors were using the *BhG* as an ideological cornerstone for establishing a Hindu Rashtra or nation, and this project has involved attempts to inject the *BhG* into "enemy" educational establishments such as madrasas. In 2021, as part of the new curriculum on ancient Indian knowledge and heritage in the New Education Policy (NEP), The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) decided to make the teaching of Hindu epics and texts like the *BhG* mandatory in 100 autonomous madrasas in Uttar Pradesh (Rizvi 2021). Thus far, Muslim clerics have refused to accept this new curriculum, but this example shows the ongoing importance of not only elections but educational institutions as "battleground" venues for Hindu nationalists attempting to impress their interests on non-Hindu communities. Relatedly, a Muslim cleric named Maulana Yasoob Abbas, who denounced the NIOS curriculum decision, asks an excellent question in an interview about the decision: "if NIOS wants to teach Gita and Ramayana in madrasas, why is it not introducing the Quran in the curriculum of RSS-funded Saraswati Sishu Mandir?" (Rizvi 2021). Surely we can hazard an answer based on the analysis I've provided in this and previous chapters, but any answer cuts straight to Hindu nationalist attempts to forge—by legal force and/or educational reform—a uniform Indian political identity underwritten by Hinduism. Hindu nationalists have framed various divisions, whether religious (Hindus versus Muslims) or political (BJP versus Congress), as deleterious to India's political future. This is an ideological move that frames difference and plurality as divisive and destructive, which Abbas notes in commenting how "Hindus and Muslims fought together for the freedom of this country, but some people are trying to divide the country in the name of language and religion" (Rizvi 2021). This comment is incredibly telling, since Abbas points out that groups from the Hindu Right are the ones unnecessarily drawing destructive divisions when historical collaboration and political solidarity in conditions of plurality can easily be identified throughout India's history.

The irony, then, is that Hindu nationalists claim to be combatting the very problems they are stoking in the first place, and they are stoking them to bully all Indians into accepting India as an inherently Hindu Rashtra. In the process, texts such as the *BhG* become collateral damage when used as weapons for Hindu nationalist purposes. I use the phrase "collateral damage" very carefully here. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the text does in fact express a Brahmanical-Hindu ideology when read on its own terms and in historical context. Nevertheless, if groups and individuals from the Hindu Right successfully co-opt the text for their own purposes and convince a broader populace that the texts are inherently problematic, and therefore either pointless to engage or politically destructive as objects of study, these historically important texts could further lose serious scholarly interest or attention on the part of political theorists. Simply because some bad actors in the present have used the *BhG* for problematic causes does not mean we should jettison the text entirely as a worthwhile object of study in the field of political theory. After all, not every political actor that has appealed to the *BhG* has done so with deplorable effects. As I have also suggested, just because Hindu nationalists of various sorts have attempted to monopolize authoritative use of texts such as the *MBh* and *BhG* for their own political reasons or purposes, it does not follow that others might employ these texts for very different and laudable sorts of projects (theoretically or politically). In fact, one can work to actively subvert the nationalists' efforts by combatting them on their own textual turf in offering alternative interpretations, or by creatively drawing on concepts for non-nationalistic reasons.

Chapter 6
Neo-Hindu Authoritarianism, Narendra Modi, and Ideological Subversion

Continuing the analytic track from the previous chapter I now examine Narendra Modi as a case study, since he has drawn upon the text in authoritarian ways and could be portrayed as an aspirational "neo-monarch" of Hindu nationalist causes. At stake in a political movement toward a more centralized, Hindu form of authority in India is a workable solution to navigating deep, doctrinal political disagreements and contestation in conditions of democratic plurality. As I began explaining in Chapter 5, within its Classical, modern, and contemporary forms we see the ideological villainization of an "Other" as existential enemy and threat to peace and political prosperity. Similarly, in the *BhG* we witness the warring Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, which includes the literal demonization of difference along political lines. I have argued that this ideological demonization is partly driven by a "will to unity" and a Brahmanical vision of an entropic political environment in imminent danger of perceived disintegration. This observation explains one reason why we should be cautious and critically examine conceptual tools that claim universal applicability as effective methods of political integration.

As I also argued in Chapter 5, the *BhG* has been used by Hindu nationalists in their proverbial battle against Indian democratic pluralism, which has further displayed authoritarian challenges to Indian democracy under the political leadership of Modi. Specifically, Hindu nationalists and other groups on the Hindu Right tap into elements of what I've called a deep ideology present in the *BhG* itself. This deep ideology possesses transmutable ideas that have been de-historicized and weaponized for Hindu nationalist causes. Parsing these ideological elements into three distinct categories, I've attempted to show how each has served as an ideological tool or weapon in a partisan battle against what Hindu nationalists frame as the new entropic forces in Indian politics. This remains a bare-faced ideological war waged against democratic plurality as Hindu nationalists attempt to establish a false unity under a singular Hindu identity portrayed as innate to the Indian subcontinent. As in the *BhG*, a unified form of political authority is sought to mend various divisions (ethnic, religious, etc.) and what Hindu nationalists see as forces of *dis*-integration.

As a figurehead of these forces, Modi represents a neo-Hindu form of authoritarianism that elicits support from tradition and sacred texts such as the *BhG* to legitimate its movement. Devotion to a higher entity is central to the *BhG*'s political thought and finds application in contemporary Hindu nationalism as well. Hindu

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majoritarianism has generated what one might call a populist form of *bhakti* whose abstract devotional object is a Hindu state, represented in human form through the leadership and figure of Modi. This majoritarianism exhibited in contemporary Hindu nationalism expresses devotion to a unified Hindu nation, and Jaffrelot relatedly explains how India has been gradually transitioning to an authoritarian Hindu Raj or nation-state (2021: 6). Such authoritarian impulses are present in one of Hindu nationalism's favored texts, namely the *BhG*, which also happens to promote a unified form of authority. In pursuing this unified authority Modi has helped take the lead in Hinduizing the public sphere, especially as the BJP trumpets Hindu majoritarianism as a basis for national identity.

In the epic we see how centralized leadership is pursued to unify contending interests and contestable authority in an unstable political climate. This unstable climate is sometimes framed in binary terms of an "us versus them." I have already explained how the Muslim community has been consistently villainized as an Other in contrast to a Hindu majority, but Modi has also helped lead a crusade against political liberals and secularists who embrace democratic pluralism and pose challenges to Hindu essentialism (Jaffrelot 2021: 175). Under Modi, democratic pluralism itself has become a meta-villain of sorts. Rather than celebrate ethnic and religious pluralism as a source of strength in Indian democratic society, Modi and the BJP have focused on integration, and more specifically, integral *Hinduism*, to contextualize plural elements of society within a Hindu frame of reference and symbology. A traditional Brahmanical-Hindu image has been invoked for this very purpose: the primordial figure Puruṣa, whose singular body was said to encompass and serve as the source of the cosmos in Ṛg-Veda 10.90, the infamous "Hymn to Puruṣa" (23–24). We'll recall that the Hindu nationalist ideologue, Deendayal Upadhyaya, composed a text titled *Integral Humanism*, in which he argues that society is "self-born" and inherited from the traditional Brahmanical-Hindu *varṇa*-system, in which "our concept of four castes, they are thought of as analogous to the different limbs of Virat-Purusha'" and form a "unity … a complete identity of interest" (Jaffrelot 2021: 23; Upadhyaya 1965: 43). Upadhyaya clearly equates "humanism" with Hinduism itself, along with traditional, conservative legitimating texts within the Vedic canon. Importantly, this creation hymn and narrative in the Ṛg-Veda is often viewed as the *locus classicus* of the modern-day caste system.[1]

As Modi and the BJP have worked to Hinduize the public space, early in his political career Modi was declared "emperor of Hindu hearts" (Hindu Hriday Samrat) in the wake of the infamous anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002 (Jaffrelot 2021: 39). This title exhibits a conceptual connection to Classical monarchical forms

1 For a non-traditional, subversive reading of Ṛg-Veda 10.90, see Gray (2020).

of rule but with an authoritarian Hindu inflection. The specific language in this informal title is particularly distressing. The phrasing resonates with elements of the ontology outlined in the *BhG*, in which an internal aspect of one's bodily existence (the *ātman*, extending up to the Supreme Godhead) was viewed as the proper ruler. In being equated with an internal source of rule, Modi's authority is almost sublimated to Kṛṣṇa-like status. To be an emperor or supreme ruler of a people's hearts strikes deeply authoritarian tones.

To access people's hearts, Modi has employed language familiar to the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, as well as among the Pāṇḍavas—namely, the language of friendship and family. Using this language is rhetorically effective in creating an intimate connection between leaders and their followers, especially since the language downplays the hierarchical nature of the relationship by evoking a sense of equality-in-friendship or the intimacy of familial relationships. For example, through his intonation, jokes, and carefully chosen terminology Modi has successfully personalized his messages, which enables him to enter the private lives of his supporters to become their "friend" (Jaffrelot 2021: 48). During his first Independence Day speech on August 15, 2014, Modi rhetorically attempted to create a close connection with India's poor population by consistently addressing them as his "brothers and sisters" while referencing his own poor background and coopting Gandhi's legacy on the topic of cleansing the "filthiness" that he claimed plagued India's cities and villages (115–117). As Jaffrelot notes, in such addresses Modi displays a keen understanding of and amplifies Indian concerns with cleanliness and sensitivity to purity, which underpins caste logic (117). In general, he has developed his populist-style leadership by emphasizing that he was an *aam admi* or common man, who as a child served as a tea boy in his father's shop, thus making him a self-made man (appealing to the middle class) and putting him on equal footing with the OBC masses (and therefore capable of being a justifiable spokesperson for their concerns) (55).

Outside of a neo-monarchical, Kṛṣṇa-like intimacy he seeks with the people, Modi has also likened himself to a political ascetic seeking to serve the nation in a non-egoistic fashion. According to his biographers, he aspired to renunciation early on in his life and later pursued politics as an ascetic vocation, first serving as a *pracharak* (34). During one interview Modi explained that he traveled to a Ramakrishna Mission-run monastery in Kolkata before going off to explore the Himalayas, during which time he "went to the Vivekananda Ashram in Almora … loiter[ing] a lot in the Himalayas. I had some influences of spiritualism at that time along with the sentiment of patriotism—it was all mixed. It is not possible to delineate the two ideas" (35). Jaffrelot clarifies that RSS members typically merge the Hindu religion and national culture in this way, and this mixture resonates strongly with the ideological elements of political asceticism I have analyzed

in previous chapters (35). We recall that Kṛṣṇa implores Arjuna to become a political ascetic, fighting non-egoistically for a just cause. This is precisely the type of discourse that pervades Hindu nationalist ranks and Modi's behavior. In this way, Modi has become the self-styled, modern-day ascetic and sacrificial "hero" of a neo-Hindu battle following a script laid out by his Hindu ancestors. We must also recall that contemporary Indian politics, drawing on epic temporality, is purportedly part of the same script composed well before the common era as the Kali-Yuga drags on, warts and all. In an eerie trans-temporal parallel, the entire Hindu nationalist cause under Modi's leadership takes on the spirit of the old Pāṇḍava-Kaurava paradigm.

Examples of Modi's self-proclaimed sacrificial and ascetic heroism abound. In a 2012 electoral speech he claimed: "I am a labourer who has not taken a break for an hour in the past 11 years in order to work for the development of Gujarat" (Jaffrelot 2021: 54). He works tirelessly for the people, with whom he conflates his entire identity as a leader in another speech, again using the language of "brother and sister":

> Our owners are the people. … These people own the Prime Minister, the 1.25 billion people of the country. That's my high command, the divine people. I do not have any other leader, I do not have any one to call my own. You tell me, has this country been destroyed by corruption or not? … Has corruption done the most damage to the poor or not? … Will corruption say, 'Now that you have come, Modiji, I am scared. I'll leave?' No, it will not go on its own. We will have to take a stick and chase it away, won't we? … Brothers and sisters … I am fighting for you. Brothers and sisters, what is the most they can do to me? Tell me, after all I am a simple ascetic man [*fakir*]. … Brothers and sisters, it is this asceticism [*fakiri*] which has given me the strength to fight for the poor. … (126–127)

First, the "highness" of his "divine" command comes from "below," which exhibits a populist strain evident in many of his speeches and rhetorically inverts the traditional hierarchy between a leader (or neo-Hindu monarch) and his people. Because he purports to not have any one to call his own other than the people, he frames his political leadership as a form of sacrificial service to the people. Second, the speech is framed in familiar battle language, where an enemy is identified—this time, those engaged in corruption—with Modi non-egoistically serving as the people's leader in a "fight" against this enemy. For rhetorical effect, he even personifies corruption to make the threat appear more vivid, giving himself the honorific suffix of Modi-*ji* in the process. Finally, he claims ascetic powers in his fight against corruption for the sake of the poor. Interestingly, he even evokes the language of dharmic disinterestedness insofar as he claims that he does not egoistically care about potential backlash or what his enemy will do to him. In other words, he remains disinterested in any negative consequences or "fruit" of his

moral combat against corruption. In another instance where Modi flaunts his willingness to combat the wealthy, he states, "If big people are troubled, how does it matter if I am troubled?," with Jaffrelot noting that Modi effectively exploits the theme of sacrifice in this and other such statements (130). Jaffrelot has tied these themes together in explaining how "sacrifice" is a highly emotional concept in India, and "not only did he impose asceticism on himself, but also he invited others to suffer to purify the nation ... It was thus a test of patriotism that his victims were urged to heroically submit to" (130). In this two-step process, Modi claims the status of ascetic warrior-hero and then invites his fellow countrymen to do the same. If the Kṛṣṇa-style leadership and words of advice to Arjuna on Kurukṣetra do not ring a bell here, they should.

While such connections to Kṛṣṇa may initially appear far-fetched, examining another statement of Modi's helps to establish the significance that Kṛṣṇa (specifically) holds in Modi's personal and political imagination, as well as this epic figure's cultural significance for his intended audiences. In his victory speech following the 2019 election, epic references clearly emerge in the BJP's jubilant moment of victory. Early in the speech Modi invokes his Hindu nationalist and ascetic credentials, stating his detachment from worldly possessions in his service to the nation. He states that "every second of my time and every cell of my body is dedicated solely to the citizens of this country" (BIIB 2019). This statement resonates with those appearing in his biography about the abundance of ascetic virtues in his character, such as celibacy and the abandonment of family and spouse in service of the nation. According to one individual writing on the themes in Modi's speech, Modi's three promises—to not act with ill intent, to not act for himself, and to dedicate every ounce of his being to the nation—reflect the image of the "karmayogi" in the *BhG* (ONS-KO 2019). Modi himself states:

> Friends, when the battle of Mahabharata ended, Lord Krishna was asked, "Who's side were you on?" At that time, in the time of Mahabharata, the answer that Lord Krishna had given, today in the twenty first century, in the 2019 elections, the people of India, the 130 crore citizens, have given the same answer as Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna had said that he was not fighting for any side. 'I was only on the side of Hastinapur," he had said. The citizens of the country have stood on the side of India, voted for India. Therefore, this feeling of the Indian people is the guarantee of India's bright future. (BIIB 2019)

In this statement we see Modi invoke a direct parallel between contemporary India and the epic storyland of Hāstinapura as a divided kingdom that must be united under central leadership and rule. Moreover, Modi refers to Kṛṣṇa and his sayings as historical fact, connecting them to the election in an appeal to fellow Hindu nationalists.

Similarly, in a speech following Modi's unveiling of an enormous copy of the *BhG* at a ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) temple on February 26, 2019, he mentioned the text's universality and its importance as *the* symbol of Indian culture (Sagar 2021). For example, Modi boldly states "The Bhagwad Gita has been the sole source of India's tradition of *vaicharik swatantrata* [freedom of expression] and *sahishnuta* [tolerance] ... It has guided our nation since the time of Mahabharata" (Sagar 2021). Not only does he connect the epic and *BhG* to the modern Indian nation state in an exclusivist, essentialist, and ideological manner but he also anachronistically claims that liberal democratic ideals of free expression and toleration existed within the epic itself. Further showing his deep commitment to the *BhG* as a universally significant spiritual and political text for both Indian society and the entire world, as Prime Minister in 2021 he released eleven volumes of manuscripts with commentaries by twenty-one scholars on *śloka*s from the text, saying that the *BhG* was a book for the whole world and every creature (PM India 2021). Echoing his statement in 2019, on this occasion he added that the text was a symbol of India's freedom and tolerance, which motivates every person to have his own viewpoint. As evidence, he cited the different interpretations of each verse in this scripture, ranging from pre-colonial interpreters including Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja to modern figures such as Gandhi (PM India 2021). Here Modi leverages a traditional and scholarly plurality of interpretations over millennia as evidence of both the text's universal temporal significance *and* its liberal democratic street credentials for contemporary audiences.

Merging the pre-modern and modern in his ideological use of the *BhG* exposes another facet of his Hindu heroization. Part of this modern heroization lies in physical, bodily portrayals of himself as a leader. For example, he has famously bragged about his muscular physique, especially his "fifty-six-inch" chest, which, if accurate, would measure only a few inches shorter than that of Arnold Schwarzenegger's in his bodybuilding days. Aside from his immediate physical characteristics, the steely spirit within his body allowed him to climb a Himalayan mountain days after the polls closed in 2019, where he spent "two days meditating in a cave just large enough for him and his photographer" (Jaffrelot 2021: 312). Therefore, like his epic-heroic precursors, Modi depicts himself as mighty in both body and spirit. The merging of ideal types from the past and present also appears in Modi's sophisticated use of technology to communicate to large audiences. He was the first among his political competitors to use holograms to transport his body/image to multiple locations at once to address political rallies simultaneously throughout the country. Jaffrelot contends that the contemporary appetite for moving images partly draws its sources from Hindu mythology, which is brought alive by cinema and its special effects—an appetite that Modi has been very successful at exploiting. Of course, the two major Hindu epics and their central figures have

been politicized and sensationalized in an increasingly consumerist and capitalist Indian society, especially through Bollywood and Tollywood cinema, making it easier for Modi to play on action-packed consumerist sensibilities to inject his intended messages more effectively into the arm of his intended audiences.

Perhaps most disturbingly, Modi's appeals to the *BhG* reflect his distinct Hindu authoritarian style of political leadership, which has pushed Indian democracy in a starkly ethnic-nationalist direction, leading to a gradual process of de-democratization that has only gained steam in recent years. Jaffrelot's detailed study of what he calls "Modi's India" does an excellent job of highlighting the Hindu integrationist approach and political authoritarianism expressed in Modi's behavior. India has been witnessing what Jaffrelot frames as institutional de-pluralization, whereby the police force, justice agencies, and the judiciary have all become less independent as institutions. This increasing lack of independence has led to a loss in the balance of power between different parts of India's political infrastructure (see Jaffrelot 2021: 253–444). Likewise, Jaffrelot shows how Indian politics has witnessed a shift to more unified forms of political authority under Modi, the Sangh Parivar, the RSS, and the BJP. This de-institutionalization of India signals an overall decline of democracy in India, which has been empirically documented in recent years by numerous surveys (405). Just to give a few examples: in 2020, India ranked 110 out of 162 countries in terms of personal freedom, and Freedom House documented that India earned "the largest score decline among the world's 25 most populous democracies" in its yearly report (Jaffrelot 2021; 405; FH 2020). These numbers indicate where India stood shortly after the start of Modi's second term as Prime Minister, but what about more recent developments? In 2022, for a country that prides itself on the prowess of its technology and communications industry, India received an "Internet Freedom" score of 49, placing it in the "Partly Free" category and roughly on par with Uganda (49), Indonesia (48), Libya (48), and Nicaragua (48) (FH 2022). Its "Global Freedom" score was 66 (Partly Free), which was one point lower than its 2021 score and five points lower its 2020 score (FH 2022). In explaining these scores, Freedom House cites examples such as increased governmental authority over social media content, and several states governed by the BJP proposing or passing "love jihad" laws meant to curb the alleged practice of Muslim men marrying Hindu women in order to convert them to Islam (a Hindu nationalist conspiracy theory) (FH 2022). Clearly, Indian democracy has not been trending in a positive direction under Modi.

So, what does all of this have to do with the *BhG?* To begin with, this neo-Hindu authoritarianism is especially pernicious because it cannibalizes its own traditions in attempting to foster a false perception of a trans-historical, essentialized Hindu identity. This identity resists the cultivation of healthy democratic and secularist principles, including inter-religious toleration and civil engagement on

highly disputed political topics. As my analysis has shown, ideological themes expressed in the *BhG* are peppered throughout the images, symbols, language, and behavior of modern and contemporary Hindu nationalists. Identifying such a traditional—even "sacred"—source of these ideological elements remains an essential part of *de*-essentializing and disarming some of their rhetorical force in contemporary Indian society and politics. At this juncture in Indian history the *BhG* is being used as a dangerous tool in the Hindu nationalist arsenal. Problematically, the *MBh* depicts not only a war for political integration but a morally justified one in which the godhead, incarnated as Kṛṣṇa, instructs his dutiful friend, Arjuna, to fight and kill Arjuna's brethren for the Pāṇḍavas' righteous cause. The text's Bramanical authors depict this cause as a just and moral one, requiring people to adopt the ethic of dharmic disinterestedness. The transhistorical resonance to current political examples is not, I would argue, utterly coincidental. In sum, the *BhG* has been weaponized, in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, by Hindu nationalists in a manner that must be critiqued and openly challenged. This book has sought to initiate such a challenge, doing so in the following ways.

Chapters 1 through 4 undertook a two-fold contextual analysis (textual and historical) reading of the *BhG*, exposing a deep ideological structure present within it. In explicating and exposing this structure, Chapter 5 and the present chapter have shown how some of these ideological elements have survived into the present, or have at least been creatively resuscitated for contemporary purposes. Not only have these elements survived but they have been developed by Hindu nationalists, finding manifold practical application in Indian politics. In identifying these transhistorical connections, I have sought to challenge the intended universalism in Brahmanical-Hindu ideology by showing how its universalist claims are far from natural or essential, nor do they provide evidence of a benign Hindu-ness innate to the Indian subcontinent. In turn, this universalist ideology could never legitimately underwrite a unified, pan-Indian identity under a single Hindu parasol. Finally, I have undertaken this project to challenge a particular strain of Brahmanical ideology by attempting to de-weaponize the *BhG*'s role in contemporary Indian politics. Expanding such efforts beyond the academic sphere may help to subvert the basis for the *BhG*'s nefarious uses while simultaneously drawing attention to its tremendous significance within the history of Indian political thought. Here, an important question presents itself: how do we attempt to better understand what are important, sacred texts to millions of people worldwide in a sufficiently respectful fashion, while not foregoing a critical eye as it pertains to their negative impact on democratic ideals and practices in modern India? My hope is that this study will help us better navigate this debate in a manner that neither dismisses the value of the past for the present, nor sacrifices present political goals on the altar of a deeply held beliefs anchored in past traditions.

In the end, the *BhG* can be read as an invitation to think about the incredibly weighty consequences of human beings' decisions in the proverbial "battlefield" of both our individual lives and politics, especially in a world that can feel like it is veering entropically into an abyss. One of the text's most important lessons might be summarized in the following way. Human beings must cultivate the courage to pause and think deeply about committing themselves to causes that may enlist or implicate them in forms of violence. However, pushing back on the *BhG*'s invitation to embrace political-philosophical unity and hierarchy at the cost of strong democratic pluralism and civil political contestation, we can become more self-conscious about the destructive consequences of a "will to unity" that attempts to shore up the chaos and disintegration that inevitably accompanies human life. Such disintegration is necessary for all living things and no conception of universality, temporality, or bodily asceticism will stop it. Democratic politics may always feel a little entropic for our liking, but we all must come to terms with this fact and resist any ideological illusions that may be fed to us as a solution.

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