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-

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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).

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-

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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-

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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 pre-modern 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.

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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-

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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'

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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

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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:

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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

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[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

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[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

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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

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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 Classi-
cal 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 ac-
tors invoke the *BhG*; the scholarship does not engage in a sustained analysis ex-
ploring 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 polit-
ical Hinduism, citing how the *BhG* has been coopted politically; for example, he ex-
plains 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). Never-
theless, Vanaik does not pursue any sustained analysis of the *BhG*'s ideological
usage for Hindu nationalist causes. More recently, Bidyut Chakrabarty and Bhu-
wan 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 pur-
poses 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 con-
temporary concerns with political disorder and a lack of (especially religious)
unity in Indian society instigates linkages back to the ideological concerns and

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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 in-
herently 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.