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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 For example, see Hegarty (2012).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Partition, Abduction, and a Forest Fire: Pāṇḍavas Waxing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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