Chapter 4
Modeling a Brahmanical Political Ideology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

History Matters: Lost Prestige and Apocalyptic Narrative

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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8 See Bronkhorst (2016) for a systematic treatment of brahmins' loss of prestige and the "existential crisis" they faced in the centuries leading up to the start of the common era.
9 On Brahmanical appeals to public imagination through religious narrative and traditional Vedic imagery, see Hegarty (2012: 13–14).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Role of Public Imagination: Ideological Time and Political Mythology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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13 See also González-Reimann (2002).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Ideology of Kṛṣṇa and *Bhakti*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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