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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theory in Action: Ideology and Hindu Nationalism

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

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

Temporality: Cyclicality and Universalism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ascetic Idealism: Dharmic Disinterestedness, Self-Control, Purity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Integrated Politics in Divisive Times: Plurality, Devotion, Unity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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