

Chapter 6

Neo-Hindu Authoritarianism, Narendra Modi, and Ideological Subversion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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