

10-26-2021

## Formulating an 'Epic Religiosity': The Mahābhārata and Contemporary Hindu Traditions

Frank R. Chappell  
*Temple University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal>

---

### Recommended Citation

Chappell, Frank R. "Formulating an 'Epic Religiosity': The Mahābhārata and Contemporary Hindu Traditions." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 11, no. 1 (): 34-46.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol11/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usu.edu).



---

**Frank R. Chappell** holds an MA in Anthropology and is a doctoral student in the Department of Religion at Temple University. He has conducted ethnographic research in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Bali, Indonesia on both Buddhist ordination and the “touristification” of secondary mortuary practices among Bali-Hindus. His current research investigates the construction of contemporary Hindu discourses and negotiation of Hindu identity in the United States. His work has appeared in *Religions of South Asia*, *Chennai Journal of Intercultural Philosophy*, and the *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion*. He is also a member of the American Philosophical Association and the Society of Indian Philosophy and Religion, and has presented his findings in their respective conferences.

---

*Frank R. Chappell†*

---

# FORMULATING AN ‘EPIC RELIGIOSITY’: THE MAHĀBHĀRATA AND CONTEMPORARY HINDU TRADITIONS

## INTRODUCTION

The polysemous quality of the Mahābhārata has not only contributed to its timeless popularity across the globe, but also to its evolution as a religious and moral sourcebook for over a millennium. As the "fifth Veda," it continues to prove efficacious in contemporary ethical and spiritual discourses for multiple Hindu traditions in the diaspora. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reception-history of the epic as an evolving narrative and its applicability to the formulation of contemporary Hindu ethics.

In the *Mahābhārata*, the line between literature and sacred text is blurred to the extent that separating the redacted, retrospective, and theological elements from speculative history of a people becomes nearly impossible. The Mahābhārata self-identifies as “the fifth Veda”<sup>1</sup> and as such, implies that it contains all the efficaciousness of the authoritative Vedas to materialize change in the world and cosmos. Though some would argue that this is merely a metaphorical classification, those same scholars do not deny that the epic *is* viewed as having a transcendental impact on reality and so

---

† This is where you can put the author’s attributions.

<sup>1</sup> Bibek Debroy, trans., *The Mahabharata* Twenty-first Edition, Vol. I (New York: Penguin, 2015) 57. P. 156.

at least can approximate the Vedas in authority.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, such dichotomies as sacred/profane and religious/secular may be more the creation of a western Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation milieu than an emic conceptualization of texts, practices, and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Mahābhārata scholars have also noted “the unusual role of the epic as sacred literature in the Indian tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Ramanujan echoes this sentiment and refers to extant Indian possession cults whose members, when acting out episodes of the epic, invoke the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī during their performances.<sup>5</sup> The underlying sociological elements of the epic are that the “characters and plots are simply tools...fashioned...to serve the needs of the...narrator, the patron, and the audience.”<sup>6</sup> So too, the narration of various vignettes are interpreted by the needs, socio-economic statuses, and theological leanings of audiences seeking to understand the epic as sacred scripture. In coming to know the Mahābhārata in general and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in particular, one must become immersed in the tradition of hermeneutics seeking a reliable exegesis. Unlike Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern epic literatures, the religious milieus of the Mahābhārata are still very much alive, making it a living text.<sup>7</sup> With these considerations in mind, the purpose of the present discussion is to contend that the epic is not simply a historical chronicle (*itihasa*), but also a resource for informing religious practice and belief. The Mahābhārata conveys not only the narrative of inter-familial warfare, but also a bounty of spiritual nourishment and truth for historical and contemporary Hindu communities. Delving first into a review of the history and context of the epic’s development and reception

---

<sup>2</sup> James L. Fitzgerald, “India’s Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*’s Presentation of Itself,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1991), 159-160.

<sup>3</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). See also R.N. Dandekar, “The Mahābhārata: Origin and Growth,” *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. XII, No. 2, April 1954, 65-66.

<sup>4</sup> Romila Thapar, “The Historian and the Epic,” *Annals (B.O.R. Institute)*, Vol. LX, 1979, 213.

<sup>5</sup> Ramanujan refers to the Pāṇḍavā and Draupadī cults of Himachal Pradesh and Tamilnadu specifically in A.K Ramanujan, “Repetitions in the Mahābhārata,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1991), 420.

<sup>6</sup> Madhav M. Deshpande, “Interpreting the Mahābhārata,” in *The Mahābhārata: What is not here is nowhere else (Yannehasti na Tadkvacit)*, ed. T.S. Rukmani (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2005), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Goldman also makes note of this in Robert P. Goldman, “Gods in Hiding: The Mahābhārata’s Virāṭa Parvan And The Divinity Of The Indian Epic Hero,” in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995) 77-100.

as an evolving document with layers of interpretations is necessary to flesh out this point. This article aims to discuss the place of the text in a living tradition and argues for its inclusion in the foundation for the contemporary negotiation of Hindu ethics, morality, and dharma. It concludes with an appeal for the application of the text not as a monolith with a singular interpretation, but as a living document that should be approached by both literary and social science researchers alike in terms of its negotiated meanings in Hindu traditions.

A myriad of approaches to understanding the epic employ historical-critical and anthropological methodology to contextualize the social undercurrents reflecting the birth pangs of an ancient Indian society undergoing a political transition from a clan-based pastoralist subsistence to more centralized, agricultural kingdoms. In these periods of transitions, scholars also see the interlacing and development of Bhagavatism and an emphasis on dharma in a pluralistic environment of growing post-Mauryan Buddhist/Jain heterodoxies.<sup>8</sup> Thapar notes

It was probably the immense popularity of the epic...that led to the second intention reformulation—its conversion into a Bhagavata text.<sup>9</sup>

In an effort to transform the epic into a “sectarian text,” Bhrigu or Bhargava brahmins wrote Kṛṣṇa—and Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*—as avatars of Vishnu.<sup>10 11</sup> Furthermore, the increased and overwhelming theme of correct dharma related to clan, caste, and individual may indicate a historical response to the growing need of a transmission of belief in a heterodox environment containing Buddhist and Jain discourses. That is, as the text grew with time, it became a living document that embodied the events and dialogues of the period in which it developed.

The often-misunderstood recurring motif of repetitive narratives points to a greater logic at work in the epic. It is not simply a hodge-podge of mythology aggregated half-heartedly through a piecemeal method, but is evidence of a thought-out internal structure meant to create developed

---

<sup>8</sup> Romila Thapar, “The epic of the Bharatas,” *Seminar 608, The Enduring Epic: a symposium on some concerns raised in The Mahabharata*, April 2010, 14-19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998).

characters and relate theological information.<sup>12</sup> The post-Mauryan support of Buddhism and Jainism's ideology of non-violence (*ahimsa*) as it related to dharma needed to be addressed and the epic became the place to do just that.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, public criticism of ritual action as a legitimate path to Liberation by not only Jainas, Ājīvikas, and Buddhists, but also by the Upaniṣadic tradition added to the need for a rebuttal. This came in the synthesis offered by the Gītā as it joined, through Kṛṣṇa's identity and teachings, the paths of ritual action and knowledge into a singular message of detached renunciation within the context of efficacious action:

The Gītā does not reject...both action and renunciation, but rather presents a different solution. Preserving the Vedic injunction to act, while at the same time accepting the Upaniṣadic vision of the self as ultimately identical to the pure consciousness that is Ātman, Krishna informs Arjuna of a higher truth by which a person can act in the world without incurring the binding effects of action.<sup>14</sup>

This new synthesis offered a powerful and practical counterargument to that of complete renunciation in the form of the aforementioned new religious movements. Because human beings are comprised of the illusory self of the *gunas* (the physical body, mind, and intellect, etc.), we are required to act in this reality, but by knowing our true selves (Ātman), we may alter the method and mode of our actions to not incur karma, which ultimately binds us to reincarnating in Samsara:

the question changes from whether one should act to how one should act. The choice between action and nonaction is illusory...What must be abandoned is the desire for, and attachment to, the results of action. [To perform action] purely for the sake of dharma, as a devotional offering of oneself to God [causes] actions not only to cease to produce bondage, but actually become instruments of liberation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the brilliant and practical theology available in the narrative, some text-critical research tends to view the Gītā as *only* a later interpolation of sectarian origin that does not belong in the larger epic, while others do note that to the "native reader, it belongs incontrovertibly...it is firmly in place."<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, Deshpande

---

<sup>12</sup> Ramanujan, 427; 437-439.

<sup>13</sup> Thapar, 18.

<sup>14</sup> John M. Koller, *The Indian Way* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982) 196-197.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 198; 201.

<sup>16</sup> Ramanujan, 425.

surmises that while the Mahābhārata was developed into diverse regional variations through the centuries, the Gītā remained consistent due to its elevated status as a sacred text.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> Deshpande also draws attention to the addition of “bhakti layers” built into the Mahābhārata which support the devotional cult of Kṛṣṇa maintained in the Gītā.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it may be that the “late-interpolation” theory of the Gītā’s timing has been nullified by its having withstood changes due to its vital importance as scripture; perhaps it seems out of place because the rest of the epic continued to evolve while the Gītā retained its integrity on account of its theological importance.

Since the early medieval period, Indian commentary traditions have regarded the epic as a *dharmasāstra* meant to elucidate the proper means of pursuing the Good in life (espoused in the four Puruṣārthas<sup>20</sup>) and its significance as a śāstra (source of moral instruction) has been well-attested historically.<sup>21</sup> The Bhagavad Gītā especially has been taken up as a foundational text for conflicting Vedantic schools.<sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> On the Vedantic appropriation of the Gītā, Robert and Sally Goldman assert

That this one, relatively small text within a text could be claimed by three such philosophically and theologically divergent—and, in fact, mutually hostile—traditions as these is perhaps the earliest indication of the extraordinary protean quality of the poem that would later puzzle, fascinate and irritate so many modern scholars.<sup>24</sup>

Multiple strains of nondual (Advaita) and dual (Dvaita) philosophies have been gleaned from the epic in general and the Gītā in particular. Both Śiva and Viṣṇu—including Kṛṣṇa as an avatar of Viṣṇu—have been suggested by commentators as being the embodiment of Brahman in disparate

---

<sup>17</sup> Deshpande, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Deshpande also goes on to discuss the Gītā as equivalent to the Vedas in its status as a “pre-existing”

śruti text in the *Bhagavadgītāstuti* on pages 10 and 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Kama, Artha, Dharma, and Mokṣa* or pleasure, prosperity/economic gain, right-action, and liberation respectively.

<sup>21</sup> Fitzgerald, 162; 168-169.

<sup>22</sup> Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, “Interpretive histories,” *Seminar* 608, April 2010, 20-25. P. 20.

<sup>23</sup> C. Minkowski, “Nīlakaṇṭha’s Mahābhārata,” *Seminar* 608, *The Enduring Epic: a symposium on some concerns raised in The Mahabharata*, April 2010, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 20.

Advaitin understandings of the text for example.<sup>25</sup> Arjuna's character development is an embodiment of Vedantic traditions' emphasis on the path of knowledge (*Jñāna-yoga*), for he does not become a different character, but only shifts from ignorance to knowing the totality of truth.<sup>26</sup> Further complications arise when other avenues of thought and practice in Bhagavatism are considered; the continuum of nondual or dual "emotional devotionism" and a more strict Dvaitin *bhakti* (devotional/ritualistic) path of religious practices are also able to be deduced from interpreting the Gītā.<sup>27</sup>

As we can see from even this brief discussion of rival sectarian truth-claims to the authentic spiritual nature of the Gītā particularly and the epic *in toto*, the narratives are multivocal and may be negotiated according to one's philosophical perspective. Referring to the previous discussion of the inclusion of both the paths of action—including ritual action—and knowledge in the synthesis of the Gītā, we again find that with the Vedānta schools, an indigenous strain of inclusivism existed throughout the text that was not reliant upon British reductionist readings of "core texts" or intercultural mimesis wherein Indians and orientalist-constructs worked to create a new milieu.<sup>28</sup> The Gītā allows for a plurality of paths to the Ultimate Reality that included "[m]editative insight, discrimination, selfless action and faith in scripture."<sup>29</sup> Because the epic has been added to, and even subtracted from and "compressed"<sup>30</sup> to bring it to its contemporary form according to multiple authors adapting it to various time periods, the project to "reconstruct the meaning of the Mahābhārata 'as it was' for the period in which it was composed" seems to be a lost cause for such a massive tome.<sup>31</sup> The recovery of a singular synchronic meaning in a document whose interpretation has been continually negotiated in the matrix of culture over time is impossible without a researcher imposing their own narrative onto the creation of the

---

<sup>25</sup> Minkowski, 34.

<sup>26</sup> See Ramanujan, 438, Point 7 for a succinct discussion of this concept.

<sup>27</sup> Minkowski, 35-36.

<sup>28</sup> See Richard King, *Orientalism And Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "The Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 118-158 for a more in-depth discussions of the creation of Neo-Hinduism and inclusivist Vedantic formulations and intercultural mimesis ala the British College at Fort William, Radhakrishnan, and Swami Vivekananda.

<sup>29</sup> Koller, 202.

<sup>30</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Minkowski, 34.



text and subjectively defining what could be the primal, original, or “most authentic” elements. As Goldman and Sutherland Goldman have pointed out in the scholarship of the epic, there seems to be “no support whatever to the claims of the scholars who held that entire Books of the poems were spurious or who argued that the divinity of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa is asserted only in a demonstrably late strata of the works.”<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, Goldman argues that there exists no convincing textual or historical evidence for the late-interpolation theory of Vaiṣṇava religiosity.<sup>33</sup> Sukthankar as well saw no basis for the divinity of Kṛṣṇa being a later addition to the epic.<sup>34</sup> The labyrinthine “digressions” western scholars interpreted as later additions to a core text may more be more accurately described as the progression and cumulative nature of the epic as an oral performance rather than a closed textual canon that was added to over time.<sup>35</sup>

The efficaciousness of the Mahābhārata in bringing victory, the birth of a son, removing evil karma, and ultimately assisting in one’s liberation from Samsara are well attested in its pages as well as the notion that it was received by the mythical audience as a Vedic source.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the insertions of Ganesha, and especially Brāhma, from whose mouth the Vedas initially poured forth, “constitutes a powerful authoritative presence guaranteeing the transcendent value of Vyāsa’s great Bhārata.”<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that the epic is recognized in South Asia as a religious text.<sup>38</sup> In coming to understand the traditional label of “itihasa”—often regarded as history—placed on the epic, one must take into consideration the cultural variations in using the term “truth.” As Richard King points out in an exchange between a Balinese Hindu and German writer, Bichsel, the historicity of the Rāmāyaṇa has no impact on its ability to convey spiritual or ethical truth; for the Indonesian informant, Rāma’s story is absolutely true even if it had not occurred on Earth while for Bichsel, the truth of a narrative relies upon its having occurred in

---

<sup>32</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Robert P. Goldman, “Gods in Hiding: The Mahābhārata’s Virāṭa Parvan And The Divinity Of The Indian Epic Hero,” in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995) 77-100.

<sup>34</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Goldman, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Fitzgerald, 161-164.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>38</sup> Goldman, 79.

history.<sup>39</sup> These two disparate ideas of “the truth” of a narrative should also be applied to the consideration of the Mahābhārata’s place in the genres of world literature. To a more binary western mind, the subtlety of the Mahābhārata’s conveyance of truth is reduced to nothing since it is lumped in the category of myth while for some Hindus, the status of the tale as mythology does not necessarily drive truth-claims from its purview.

It seems that in fulfilling their goals, the epic’s characters engage in sophistic justifications for their actions. Dharma is presented as subjective and malleable to individual pursuits while consistently being referred to as a longstanding, culturally-accepted standard for behavior. The Mahābhārata has been described as a text of dharmic “dissonance” wherein the correct behavioral repertoire of the characters is confused.<sup>40</sup> Is it ironic then that it should be a source of information for present day formulations of correct dharma-ethics? The application of the epic to dharmic formulations entails the assumption that the ethical framing of the characters’ storylines is shared universally by all peoples over time, however a considerable amount of “ethical revisionism” has taken place throughout the development of the text to suit various audiences in disparate historical contexts.<sup>41</sup> It is true that the Mahābhārata presents very few universal ethical and moral absolutes; dharma depends not only on caste and stage of life (*varṇa* and *āśrama*), but also gender and individual circumstances.<sup>42</sup> A deep well of behavioral recommendations from *smṛti* literature combined with *dharmasāstras*, present multiple, and at times contradictory, sets of rules and moral proscriptions that allow for liberal navigations of what an individual should do in a particular context.<sup>43</sup> Goldman relates as well that in the “cultural tradition, explicitly codified in the *dharmasāstras*,” there is an “indexing [of] the gravity of a crime to the relative rank of the perpetrator and victim.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the gravity of the crime is “regarded...in direct proportion to the status of the victim.”<sup>45</sup> Of course, one must keep in mind that the cultural context of ethical decision-making represented in Indian epic literature is one of

---

<sup>39</sup> King, 39-40.

<sup>40</sup> Robert P. Goldman, “*Eṣa Dharmah Sanātanaḥ: Shifting Moral Values and the Indian Epics*,” *Relativism, Suffering And Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, eds. P. Bilimoria and J.N. Mohanty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) 187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-192.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

sharp social stratification. Ethics between castes are clearly one-sided as no compensation or reconciliation is offered to such characters as Ekalavya who, striving to learn the dharma of a kṣatriya, essentially deserves to be chastised for attempting to subvert the hierarchy for his own gain.<sup>46</sup> Rather than serve as a story meant to extoll the virtues of the lower castes in pursuing excellence in various realms of achievement and the pettiness, jealousy, and rancor of the upper echelon toward the lower—this is a modern theme read into the text—it is meant to enhance the character of Drona as a truth-speaking brahmin set on fulfilling his vow to Arjuna that he would be the best archer in the world at all costs.<sup>47</sup> The lacquered-house incident where five innocent lowborn men and their mother are burned to death as the Pāṇḍavas escape through a tunnel in the floor brings no outcry of dharma-violation from the compilers of the epic in the form of narrative elaboration or from later commentaries—their social status alone is enough to warrant ill-treatment—although it bears mentioning that medieval commentators do respond to the incident as a casualty of fate (*kāla-codita*) and a sign of the degraded age (*kaliyuga*).<sup>48</sup>

Another valid point to consider when explaining the notion of dharmic dissonance is that violations of dharma by the characters invalidates them for sanctuary by dharma in particular circumstances of powerlessness or vulnerability. Karṇa's appeal to *kṣatriyadharmā* and request for a temporary pause in battle to unstick his wheel—brought on by a previous curse—at Kurukshetra does not result in Arjuna staving off an attack. On the contrary, the humiliation of Draupadī and other insults to the Pāṇḍavas are reviewed in order to justify the continuation of Arjuna's attack. Those who have already violated dharma have no right to be shielded by it.<sup>49</sup> Bhīma's infamous low-blow and trampling of Duryodhana's head is also explained in this way along with appeals to Bhīma's fulfillment of a vow and a curse, Kṛṣṇa's undying support of the Pāṇḍavas, the diminishment of dharma in the Kali Yuga, and the pragmatic need for trickery and cheating in battle to defeat such a strong opponent as Duryodhana who surely would have beaten them!<sup>50</sup> The text *must* be adaptive to particular historical circumstances in order to continue to be a valid dharmasāstra or even a casual reference for spiritual

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 195-196.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 195-197.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 208-211.

guidance. There is significant difficulty in achieving theological certainty within the Mahābhārata on various conceptualizations of dharma.<sup>51</sup> Looking historically to contextualize a contemporary position of the epic in Hindu spiritual formation, we find that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century milieu of the epic's commentators, Nīlakantha, borrowing from the Mīmāṃsaka tradition, argued that the Mahābhārata belonged to the genre of remembered texts (*smṛti*) that are based on the "heard tradition" of sacred texts (*śruti*).<sup>52</sup> As such, the epic "was a reliable source of instruction [for religious behavior] for readers."<sup>53</sup> This source allowed for significant flexibility in "movements and practices" such as the interchangeability of Śiva and Viṣṇu for the nondual reality of brahman.<sup>54 55</sup> Today as well, devotees in various Hindu traditions and schools of thought maintain an encyclopedic set of historical writings, philosophical treatises, sets of religious canons, and oral traditions from which to draw upon to negotiate a cosmological worldview. The matrix of "Hindu ethics" may be gleaned from śruti which includes sacred scriptures such as the Vedas, smṛti or "remembered tradition," *sadachara* or regulations set by virtuous individuals—which may include the traditions of a guru—and one's own conscience and personal interpretation of dharma.<sup>56</sup> Earlier, it was noted that part of the grand theological significance of the Gītā lies in its ability to synthesize multiple traditions of belief and practice into a unique, inclusive whole. The multiplicity of options in Hindu traditions are emblematic of the Gītā's philosophical layering; "[d]evotionalism, ritual, and knowledge were being integrated into a single comprehensive way that combined the strengths of these previously separate ways of salvation."<sup>57</sup> Kṛṣṇa iterates in Chapter 9.16 and 9.23 that he is the ritual action, fire, and offering; insofar as anyone worships god in any form, they are in fact worshipping him. This remains an extant view of

---

<sup>51</sup>S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, "Hindu Ethics," in *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Robin Rinehart (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004), 174.

<sup>52</sup> Minkowski, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, Minkowski argues that the interchangeability of various gods as primary and the inability for devotees of specific gods to see them as only manifestations of the unified Brahman or a single deity, "the one god who may legitimately be worshipped in many forms," led to the formation of neo-Hinduism beginning not in the 19<sup>th</sup>, but in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. P. 37-38.

<sup>56</sup> Rao Pappu, 155-177.

<sup>57</sup> Koller, 188.

contemporary *bhaktins* in temple communities in the United States.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary constructions of dharma tend to emphasize key concepts inspired by the Gītā as well. For example, just as Yudhishtira, responding to the Yaksha’s questions, finds the supreme of dharma to be ahimsa, many practicing Hindu devotees continue to hold this view.<sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> Taking shape within the context of a predominantly Protestant Christian religious milieu with an emphasis on the authority of one sacred scripture (*sola scriptura*), Hindus have elected to speak about the Bhagavad Gītā as the “Bible” of Hinduism. Though it is not the only text in a vast cultural and religious landscape, it has been critical to the formation of Hindu philosophy, spirituality, morality, and devotion. Therefore, a historical and contemporary understanding of the Gītā as a theological text shaping the religious life of Hindu groups is of vital significance to understanding its position in the Mahābhārata for devotees in living Hindu traditions.

In the present discussion, we have seen how the Mahābhārata has been understood throughout its long history. The internal structure of the Mahābhārata developed as its socio-cultural and religious significance was negotiated throughout history as a source for practical ethical guidance and appropriate dharmic paths. This also remains the case in contemporary Hindu traditions, making the epic a living document applicable as a dharmaśāstra, Advaita Vedānta, and bhakti text. The Gītā especially has been both a place of theological synthesis and a place to mete out multilayered currents of philosophy and cosmology especially pertaining to karma. Historically, it has remained consistent despite regional variations in the rest of the Mahābhārata’s narrative.

Finally, the discussions above may ultimately provide a lens from which to view the trajectories of future scholarship. Present-day constructions of dharma, for example, manifest via a complex negotiation of the epic and believers’ lived experience. With multiple layers in the transcendent meaning of the text in mind, it may be more fruitful for researchers to engage in inquiry on the construction of those meanings gleaned from contemporary community-based and idiosyncratic interpretations of the epic—especially the Gītā—rather than by espousing

---

<sup>58</sup> Frank R. Chappell, “Negotiating Contemporary Hindu Beliefs and Practices in the United States,” *Religions of South Asia*, Vol. 12.1, 2018, 88-89.

<sup>59</sup> Bibek Debroy, trans., *The Mahabharata* Twenty-first Edition, Vol. III (New York: Penguin, 2015)

594(297), 596-597.

<sup>60</sup> Chappell, 78-99.

a singular track of historical or culture-bound exegesis. The manner in which the text has been engaged with throughout history, as a polysemous and synthetic source for living cosmologies, should continue today in the discourses of Hindu traditions.