

## Returning to *The Plague* and *The Bhagwad Gita* : New Meaning and “Existentialist Absurdity” amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचना

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥2.47॥

Meaning:

Your right is to perform your work but never be oriented to the results. Never be motivated by the results of your actions, nor should you be attached to not performing your prescribed duties.

The above mentioned philosophy however, can be best understood in the present scenario of the pandemic of COVID 19. The pandemic which has kept everybody unsettled, restless from within, *Shrimad Bhagwad Gita* serves a torchbearer to the humanity. It holds our faith in karma, the true meaning of life.

As WHO reported, 2020 gripped the whole world into the saga of darkness which is started with a disease from animal. Not only that in fact it has engulfed the whole world into it. The entire world it seems has locked and blocked not only its movements but life. The numbers of death and patients increasing every day and with this increase in number is

increasing the social stigma towards people. Health workers, women, children, sex workers, all are victim of it. This saga of disease has restricted not only our breathing but livelihood, happiness. We all succumb now to our own shell. Aristotle said once, “man is a social animal” and look at the world around today, a small little animal has brought that man to just a tiny individual who is always at the hands and prey to the nature. Be it Ebola Virus (EVD) of 1976 that was considered one of the deadliest viruses until then of its own kind, severely fatal to human illness or the Spanish Flu or the Bubonic Plague, Black Death epidemic. All these have always been fatal and deadliest in their own specific ways. Still, we human always feel surprised whenever we face such sudden outbreak of any disaster, what so ever. The catastrophic, xenophobic behaviour, subjects to be analysed from anthropological point of view try to justify one of the foremost evolution myths by Herbert Specncer, “Survival of the Fittest”. However, in literature, it is said that everything has a purpose in a narrative or a situation, it has a meaning to interpret. Things and situations are always interpretational. So is the case in this pandemic. This COVID-19 is much more than just a “disease”. It’s a social-cultural construct that shapes, reshapes or de-shapes humanities responses and behaviour.

The objective of this paper is to look these constructs from a different lens and analyse the underlying existential philosophy, an existential absurdity drawing adjacent connections between the age old two classics piece of literature, *The Bhagwad Gita* (a long conversation between Arjuna and Lord Krishna before the battle of *Mahabharata* in the battle field *Kurukshetra* and *The Plague* by Albert Camus.

Keywords: Existentialism, Absurdity, Philosophy, Health, Chaos, Epidemics etc.

## Introduction

Camus too reminds us that the “suffering is random and that is the kindest thing one can say about it.” In January 1941, Albert Camus started deal with a tale about an infection that spreads wildly from creatures to people and winds up devastating a large portion of the number of inhabitants in “a customary town” called Oran, on the Algerian coast. “The Plague,” distributed in 1947, is every now and again depicted as the best European tale of the after war time frame. As the book opens, a quality of ghostly ordinariness rules. The town’s occupants lead occupied cash focused and denatured lives. At that point, with the pacing of a spine chiller, the repulsiveness starts. The storyteller, Dr. Rieux, runs over a dead rodent. At that point one more and again. Before long a pestilence holds onto Oran, the illness communicating itself from resident to resident, spreading alarm in each road.

To the narrative, Camus drenched himself throughout the entire existence of maladies. He read about the Black Death that executed an expected 50 million individuals in Europe in the fourteenth century, the Italian plague of 1630 that slaughtered 280,000 across Lombardy and Veneto, the extraordinary plague of London of 1665 just as diseases that desolated urban areas on China’s eastern seaboard during the eighteenth and nineteenth hundreds of years. Camus was not expounding on one plague specifically, nor was this barely, as has some of the time been proposed, a figurative story about the Nazi control of France. He was attracted to his topic since he accepted that the real chronicled episodes, we call plagues are only convergences of a widespread precondition, emotional occasions of a never-ending rule: that all individuals are powerless against being haphazardly killed whenever, by an infection, a mishap or the activities of our kindred man. The people of Oran couldn’t accept the fatality of the disease. They witnessed the lots and lots of deaths of their fellows, families, friends, strangers yet they could not accept the reality, the truth of the deadly plague thinking that it won’t affect them ever and that they were saved. Yes, they were, until they too, died.

As it has also been well explained in the Yudhisthir and Yaksha riddle conversation in the epic Mahabharata, Yaksha asks, What is the most amazing thing in this world, Yudhisthir replies, The most amazing thing is, all human beings are mortal, yet, everybody goes about their life as if they are going to be here forever., Another question, what is the real treasure, health and what is the real happiness, contentment.

For Camus, with regards to passing on, there is no advancement ever, there will never be a way out from our delicacy. Being alive consistently was and will consistently stay a crisis; it is genuinely an unpreventable “hidden condition.” Plague or no plague, there is consistently, in a manner of speaking, the plague, if what we mean by that is a powerlessness to unexpected demise, an occasion that can deliver our carries on with immediately good for nothing. This is the thing that Camus implied when he discussed the “absurdity” of life. Perceiving this silliness should lead us not to surrender however to a dramatic reclamation, a conditioning of the heart, a getting some distance from judgment and admonishing to delight and appreciation.

“The Plague” isn’t attempting to freeze us, since alarm proposes a reaction to a risky however momentary condition from which we can in the long run discover wellbeing. However, there can never be security — and that is the reason, for Camus, we have to adore our kindred accursed people and work without expectation or despondency for the improvement of affliction. Life is a hospice, never a clinic.

At the large coverage of the disease, when 500 individuals are dying each week, a Catholic minister called Paneloux gives a message that clarifies the plague as God’s discipline for debasement. Be that as it may, Dr. Rieux has seen a child die and knows better: Suffering is arbitrarily dispersed, it has neither rhyme nor reason, it is essentially crazy, and that is the kindest thing one can say of it. The specialist works enthusiastically to diminish the enduring of people around him. However, he is no legend. “The whole thing is not about

heroism,” Dr. Rieux says. “It might appear to be a ridiculous idea but the only way to fight plague is with decency.” Another character asks what respectability is. “doing my job,” the doctor answers.

Inevitably, after over a year, the plague ebbs away. The residents celebrate. Enduring is finished. Ordinariness can return. However, Dr. Rieux “knew that this chronicle could not be a story of definitive victory,” Camus mentions. “It could only be the record of what had to be done and what, no doubt, would have to be done again, against this terror.” The plague, he proceeds, “never dies”; it “waits patiently in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers” for the day when it will indeed “rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city.” Camus addresses us in our own occasions not on the grounds that he was an enchanted diviner who could hint what as well as could be expected not, but since he effectively evaluated human instinct. He knew, as we don’t, that “everyone has it inside himself, this plague, because in the world, no one, is immune.”

Themes & Discussion:

Analysis of Absurdity

Cutting the philosophical statistics apart if we try to observe, we will be able to see that, yes, we all are ill, not only because of this COVID or any other virus but by our own thoughts. Stress is the just another outcome of any problems, or may be the foremost thing of not just this pandemic but every problematic unsolvable situation. During the pandemics, current or the previous many, what this stress leads us to is the kind of mad hysteric rat race. A race which leads us to no possible confirm solution but an escape. An escape as *Bhagwad Gita* also mentions is not the solution to our problems. Not the disease but this hysteric behaviour is what has plagued our mind, our thoughts. Camus’ *The Plague* and *Bhagwad Gita* draw parallels and set out that humans are the product of history. The knowledge, their

belief system and their memories are all constructs created of the live experiences from the war between the life and the plague. Plague being metaphorically used describes any critical situation that human beings have not been able to handle to resolve.

The psychological and social hysteric behaviour can always be attempted from the anthropological view. Other than the chaos, alienation, dissociation, hysteric approach towards the patients, the COVID 19 has given us all what we may call is the death anxiety, the fear of death. This anxiety has made us do the hoarding of all safety and sanitary measures, from toilet paper to hand sanitizers to such an extent where they became completely out of reach to a common mass. Despite knowing the absolute absurdity of life and death and the existentialist perspective of life and that the COVID 19 is not in all cases fatal, the higher the socio-economic class, the higher is the anxiety or fear of this death sweeps in. This novel coronavirus has not only controlled our respiratory system but our life. The whole life is plagued through it's fear. Increasing social stigma towards not only health care workers and doctors but also, patients, other countries have become an inseparable part of this COVID struggle.

. But, if we look at the other sides of this scenario, not only the disease has plagued us of social stigmatic thoughts, our hysteric behaviours but also plagued the other species (birds, animals etc.) of a kind of rejuvenation, a life. The life of these birds and animals are again seen back on the earth, the water is clean, the environment is clean, the air is clean. There is no or very minimal pollution. The river Ganga, which remained holy and clean only in literature is now naturally clean like ever before. So, like two sides of a coin, this pandemic too, has made us realise that it is not just the saga of despair and alienation. It's a saga that all of us can sing together. This COVID-19 has definitely locked us in our own spheres but has brought people and family closer again.

Albert Camus' words in *The Myth of Sisyphus*- "There is nevertheless one really genuine philosophical issue, and that is self-destruction" nails the existential air. The reason for human presence comes down to this announcement. Existential logicians state that the individuals who understand the craziness of life in their apathy additionally understand the significance of 'individual' and opportunity. What's more, that is Camus' contention in its residue that life's silliness and insaneness become even more motivation to acknowledge it and live it completely, and that we should envision Sisyphus upbeat.

### Existentialist Philosophy

The existential way of thinking can be induced as-in light of the fact that everyday routine is ludicrous we should experience it joyfully and carry out our responsibilities, and that is the thing that gives a man an over-arriving at quality and opportunity (Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the over man). Existentialism has had numerous advocates in nineteenth and twentieth hundreds of years however on following the agenda of Indian way of thinking it's discovered that foundations of existentialism can be found in numerous Indian traditional writings and logicians too. For example, when Arjun experienced a sense confusion and internal psychological chaos before the battle in Kurukshetra, Krishna's words, scratched with an intensity of existentialism came as an answer for his issues.

Arjun asks :

निमित्तानि च पश्यामि विपरीतानि केशवा

न च श्रेयोऽनुपश्यामि हत्वा स्वजनमाहवे॥1.31॥

Translation: I see inauspicious portents, Keshava, and I see nothing good achieved by killing my family in battle.

Shri Krishna to this asks him back about his reasons for such delusions right before the battle in the battleground calling it disgraceful. Shree Krishna further says :

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः।

उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः॥2.16॥

Translation: There is no becoming from the non-existent, nor is the unbecoming from the existent. The boundaries between these two has been perceived by those who see the basic principles.

And he further suggests Arjuna to just keep doing his duty in this battle ground.

The philosophy of atheist existentialism and that of Hippyism, would recoil from the way of fundamental thinking of Bhagavad-Gita. Existentialism could never concede to an Absolute which makes presence significant. The existential origination of man's opportunity as the main philosophical chance in a silly universe would be compromised by the absolutism of Krishna. In the Gita Lord Krishna says that nature is working under His course, which implies that the universe isn't purposeless however it has an importance known to its creator. People are undulated by his power years after years. This hinders any supreme control of man over himself, for this makes man reliant on an outside imaginative, and demolishing power.

The Bhagavad Gita features three parts of activity one should zero in on. Is the activity, right? Does it serve the government assistance of the world? Is it propelled by adoration? Krishna's message to Arjuna is that, even in fight, astute activity comprises in surrendering childishness and carrying out one's responsibility out of a feeling of adoration and duty to the benefit of all. In the two messages, the world is perceived as an interconnected snare of circumstances and logical results, satisfaction and enduring, life and passing. In such a world, acting from obliviousness or childishness prompts languishing over oneself as well as other people. Acting from shrewdness and an affection for the benefit of everyone can prompt feeling of inward opportunity, even in troublesome conditions. In our interconnected world, ordinary activities can have sweeping outcomes. Besides, as the

Bhagavad Gita and the Guide remind us, we are profoundly interlaced with each other and the characteristic world.

Shrewd opportunity is to be found amidst this interconnectedness, by the basic food item specialist keeping individuals took care of, the coordinator serving his locale, or the specialist treating her patients. Old style messages can't show us virology or the study of disease transmission, however they can assist us with seeing our profound relationship and the proper behaviour all the more shrewdly and mercifully considering it. To state the present reality is interconnected is a platitude. At no other time have endless individuals been connected by their exercises and outcomes. Be that as it may, realizing how to think and go about as a resident of this little world is no simple issue.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the regular world is perceived to be a dynamic, advancing embroidery. Our human bodies, psyches and activities are inseparable from the bigger examples of circumstances and logical results in nature. However, the most fascinating subject of interconnectedness with regards to the content isn't causal yet social and good. The content opens toward the beginning of a fight between factions for the destiny of a realm. Portraying the scene to his visually impaired lord, the diviner Sanjaya alludes to the war zone as a field of dharma, the otherworldly and good request that maintains the world. That is, a site of looming struggle, passing and tumult is additionally one of relationship, obligation and good decision.

This is a focal message of the Bhagavad Gita. The human world is inseparable from nature. However, as a human world it is maintained by our connections and obligations to each other. The savvy individual must see their own jobs – as parent, kid, labourer, resident – considering this field of connections. In the midst of war, or the vulnerability and enduring of a pandemic, the focal inquiry is: What would it be able to never really right associations with others?

Pain and loss are something that humans can never escape as stated by many Indian thinkers and philosophers. Human selfishness and ignorant behaviour are deeply rooted in the tapestry of life. For Indian rationalists, one must see the world plainly so as to act carefully in it. What, at that point, is the savvy reaction to an interconnected world that definitely incorporates the great and terrible – even pandemics? In the Bhagavad Gita, the way to inward opportunity in an unsure and clashed world is to change one's focus when acting. Actions on the planet is unavoidable. So as opposed to fixating on the “natural products” of action for oneself, for example, commendation or fault, one should zero in on the ethical nature of that.

#### Conclusion:

Every coin has two sides and so does our life and its struggles. Where there is a will, there is a way is a proverb that can summate the idea of clinging onto the positivity of our psychology during this pandemic. It is because not only does this positivity of minds can give humans a way but also a new meaning to their existence. This makes us aware of the existentialist view that even adversities that happen can also give some positive lesson to all of us. It helps us find some newer horizons to explore. Sublimation of our fears to providing us new meaning to live is the whole basis of the discussion in my paper. As the holocaust survivor, Eva Mozes Kor narrates in her autobiography *Surviving the Angel of Death* that each day when she was a little close to the extermination of life, her intense desire to live grew deeper giving her all the mental strength to fight back one more step and try come out of the struggle, not just alive but more energised than ever. Not only this, she also learns the act of forgiving to all those German Nazis for it gave her the peace of mind, healing of her soul from her pain and sufferings.

To sum up my point I would like to zero to the idea of exploring new meanings even out of this existential absurdity of life. Like is mentioned before in this paper, we should always try to look at the how much the glass has filled with water than to observe the empty space in it and feel distressed. Unlike any other time, we understand the importance of relationships and human bonding, the importance of health which is the prime objective over any other matter in lives. We have learnt to live with maximum adjustments and minimal luxuries what so ever. The absurdity of this COVID 19 phase can always be resolved through our trial of finding new meanings in the creativity, growth and development, more, individual, spiritual. Difficulties and battle for endurance have shaped the face of human progress for quite a long time; ‘pandemic episodes’ are only tokens of the equivalent. The way of thinking of Camus can by and by be returned to build up a non-judgemental way to deal with counter the intrinsic dread, uneasiness and sadness for the possible delight and appreciation, that human flexibility has consistently been prepared to do. The biopsychosocial harm done by COVID-19 can’t be fixed. Be that as it may, similar to ‘The Plague’, let this additionally be a ‘story of reclamation and endurance’ and not that of unhappiness and despair.

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