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How J. Robert Oppenheimer Was Influenced by the Bhagavad Gita

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Op-Ed: The Concept of Dharma, the Manhattan Project, and Oppenheimer's Well-Worn Copy of the Gita

By Alok Khorana*

My mother read the Bhagavad Gita every day as part of her morning rituals. Belonging to the last generation of Indians born into colonialism, she had trained as a clinical psychologist but learned Sanskrit both at home and in college. Modernity had begun but not yet broken millennia-old chains of generational transmission of indigenous knowledge.

Each morning, in her little prayer nook, she would quietly read two to three verses in the original Sanskrit, making her way through all seven hundred over the course of a year or so. When complete, she would go back to the beginning, cycling over and over for as long as I ever knew her.

I did not study the text with her during her lifetime. (The memory of this angsty adolescent rebellion still makes my heart sting in shame.) Yet, almost by osmosis, I absorbed the story and the lessons of the Gita through my childhood growing up in 1970s/1980s India. Like most Indian children, I knew the Gita as part of the epic Mahabharata appearing at the beginning of the Great War between two groups of warring cousins, scions of a storied dynasty.

I knew that it begins with Arjuna—perhaps the greatest warrior of them all—falling into despondency at the thought of having to kill his own relatives and teachers just when the battle lines are drawn. It is his decision to seek counsel from his friend and charioteer Krishna (unbeknownst to him, an avatar of the god Vishnu) that leads to a dialogue between the two, conducted in the no-man's land between two puzzled, impatiently waiting armies. This conversation, written in sublime poetry, centers on this question: should Arjuna fight in a war that will inevitably lead to heartbreaking loss, or should he withdraw and relinquish his duty as a warrior?

I also understood—even as a child—that Krishna's instructions

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to Arjuna were not intended solely for warriors amid a war. Rather, the war was a metaphor for the struggle that is life, and Krishna's guidance to Arjuna was also for ordinary people. It would only be decades later that I would learn that the Gita is a masterful weaving together of the many different strands of Hindu philosophical thought that had preceded it, eliding seeming contradictions by a rich synthesis of all that is complementary between them. In philosopher Sri Aurobindo's words, it is "a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas…a rich synthetic experience… It does not cleave asunder, but reconciles and unifies."

Perhaps I would have learned more, but a rapidly changing world was calling to me. India's several-thousand-year-old texts suddenly seemed archaic as the opening up of free markets in the early 1990s brought shopping malls on the streets outside and cable television on screens inside. Capitalism was it. An introduction to Ayn Rand's books in medical school followed by a hasty decision to emigrate for training to the United States set me on a different sojourn altogether. Over the next two decades, I moved with an autodidact's eclecticism from one Western philosopher to another, intrigued but always left wanting.

I would eventually return to my mother's Gita, and its underlying philosophy of Advaita Vedanta or non-dualism. It was during this second phase of learning—still ongoing—that I delved deeper into the profound questions that were being asked and answered. I understood that the chief concern of the Gita was how best to follow one's dharma—the untranslatable Sanskrit word incompletely referred to in English as duty. Individual sentient beings each have different dharmas, and these can change at different stages of life. (Consider, for instance, that the dharmas of a worker bee and a queen bee are quite different.)

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The world is messy—right and wrong are not always clear. Withdrawing from the world, however, is not the answer for the space left behind may be filled by adharma, the opposite of dharma. How does one live a life that fully engages with the world yet remains detached from the vicissitudes of material successes and losses? How can one fight against wrong, even kill—as Arjuna is being asked to do—and yet accept the divine

Oneness of all sentient beings?

These are the concerns of the Gita: One believes he is the slayer, another believes he / is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer/nor slain (2.19, in Eknath Easwaran's translation).

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Robert Oppenheimer was born to Jewish parents affiliated with the Ethical Culture movement, in which he would receive his schooling. At Harvard, he was drawn to the Hindu philosophical classics—seemingly more interested in these than even physics. In his thirties, on the faculty at Berkeley, his curiosity deepened. He studied Sanskrit weekly with a Sanskrit professor. It was here that he was first introduced to the Gita, which he thought "quite marvelous"; later he would call it "the most beautiful philosophical song existing in any known tongue."

He kept his worn version close at hand by his desk, and often gave copies to friends. Even late in life, he listed the Gita, along with another Sanskrit classic and Eliot's The Waste Land—itself inspired by an Upanishad—among the ten books that most shaped his life

I have often wondered what eerie prescience led Oppenheimer to the dilemma at the center of the Gita. Merely a decade later, Oppenheimer would find himself in nearly the same quandary—figuratively and literally. Asked to lead the Manhattan Project amid another Great War, he became a scientist given a warrior's task. The War would continue whether Oppenheimer took part in it or not, as it had been for Arjuna. There would be loss of life with or without him.

Should he participate, or should he withdraw? Considering your dharma, you should not/vacillate. For a warrior, nothing is higher than a/war against evil. (2.31)

That Oppenheimer understood the concept of dharma is clear from an anecdote highlighted by historian James Hijiya. When, in 1943, Oppenheimer was being pushed by an Army intelligence officer to name potential security risks at Los Alamos, the officer wondered if Oppenheimer "picture[d] me as a bloodhound on the trail." Oppenheimer responded, "That's your duty.... [M]y duty ([s] not to implicate these people.... [M]y duty is to protect them."

Hijiya is quite certain (other historians are not) that Oppenheimer used the same self-taught concept when leading

the Manhattan Project. He separated his own dharma—to help create the bomb—from that of Government leaders, who would decide if, when and how it should be used. As he would later state, “I did my job which was the job I was supposed to do.” In Hijiya’s summary, “It was the duty of the scientist to build the bomb, but it was the duty of the statesman to decide how to use it. Oppenheimer clearly and repeatedly acknowledged these very different dharmas.”

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Oppenheimer remained certain about this decision for the remainder of his life. “At Los Alamos,” he would say two decades later to Newsweek, “there was uncertainty of achievement but not of duty.” In Oppenheimer’s mind, then, there was certainty about his dharma. Thus it was that Oppenheimer used his deep reading of the Gita to determine the most consequential decision made by a scientist in the twentieth century. The decision, however, was made in the abstract: how would Oppenheimer grapple with its earth-shattering consequences?

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The footage is old and grainy, the black-and-white film flickering ominously like lights in a horror movie. A wizened-appearing Oppenheimer is the sole focus of the camera, as the clip begins ominously with his words: “We knew the world would not be the same.”

Millions of viewers have watched versions of this footage on YouTube, as I did for the first time one evening having disappeared down some now-forgotten internet rabbit-hole. The recording is two decades removed from the event, when the physicist is suffering from the throat cancer that will eventually take his life, but this fact is not immediately obvious to the casual viewer.

“A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent,” Oppenheimer goes on. Then this quote, seemingly out of nowhere: “I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, ‘Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’”

The weight of those last words hangs in the air during the

slightest of pauses. Then this: “I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.” The silence at the end of the clip is filled in by the observer’s foreknowledge of what happened a few weeks after the events being recounted, of the vast crematoriums created by the Little Boy and the Fat Man, cities teeming with life incinerated in a matter of seconds.

The teachings of Krishna reach a crescendo in the eleventh chapter of the Gita. In the preceding verses, Krishna has elevated Arjuna’s awareness of his purpose in life while revealing his own divinity. Now, Arjuna asks to see Krishna in his real form. The sublime language of the Gita ascends to an even higher plane, producing some of the most beautiful passages ever written in Sanskrit. Arjuna sees initially the splendor of Krishna’s supreme spirit as a divine light, as if a thousand suns were to rise in the heavens at the same time; then, within Krishna’s body Arjuna sees all the manifold forms of the universe / united as one (11.13).

Once the war was over, Oppenheimer was no longer a warrior. He was a citizen of this planet. His dharma, he recognized, had changed.

Arjuna is initially awestruck, hair on end, in ecstasy. This initial response, however, transforms almost immediately into terror as he sees also the Lord’s destructive aspect: I see our warriors and all the kings… are passing into your fiery jaws; all creatures / rush to their destruction like moths into a flame… Filled with your terrible radiance / O Vishnu, the whole of creation bursts into flames. (11.26-30). Begging for mercy, he asks this “terrible” form, “Who are you?”

It is in response to this question that Krishna replies with the “I am become Death” quote. As we understand Oppenheimer’s deep absorption in the Gita, we see that with these words he was attempting to convey not hubris but rather the paradoxical sense of both awe and terror that he felt upon witnessing the Trinity test explosion.[1] Many human philosophies hide from the destructive aspect of Nature or God, but non-dualism has to acknowledge that creation and destruction alike are inseparable

from the One.

As Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo has articulated in his Essays on the Gita, “Nature devouring her children, Time eating up the lives of creatures, Death universal and ineluctable…are also the supreme Godhead in one of his cosmic figures.” Indeed, Krishna’s words immediately following “the destroyer of all” verse make this clear: …Even without your participation/all the warriors gathered here will die…I have already slain / all these warriors; you will only be my instrument (11.32-33).

Did Oppenheimer find solace in this aspect of the Gita’s teachings? In public, he remained steadfast. “I never regretted, and do not regret now, having done my part of the job,” he told the Times. In private, however, he is known to have infuriated President Truman by declaring that “I have blood on my hands.” (Truman called him a “cry-baby scientist.”) The rightness and wrongness of the government’s terrible decision has been debated endlessly and to my thinking is not, even today, fully measurable.

We are not even a century removed from the invention of the atomic bomb. We know neither what horrors may have been prevented because of its creation nor what horrors may yet occur. Similarly, it is not for us to judge whether someone else discharged their dharma well or poorly; following our own dharma is work enough. Nor is it possible to calculate the tragedy of each life lost in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to weigh the pain of each one of those families and balk at the more recognized distress that Oppenheimer’s story elicits.

Yet, I think, one can also feel sympathy for the burden placed upon this singular scientist, a weight no lone human can or should carry. In the years that followed, Oppenheimer reverted to his pacifist nature, fighting to contain the very same forces of Death he had worked so hard to release, taking in stride persecution by the same government that had once valorized him. Some may view Oppenheimer’s continued lack of regret over his original decision as being in contradiction to his opposition to nuclear proliferation.

From a dharmic viewpoint, however, I can consider an alternate perspective. Once the war was over, Oppenheimer was no longer a warrior. He was a citizen of this planet. His dharma, he recognized, had changed. He would continue to follow it.

* [1] The word translated by Oppenheimer as death is kaala, which does refer to Death but obliquely, through Time. Easwaran’s more accurate rendering has it as: I am time, the destroyer of all / I have come to consume the world (11.32). In

the context of an atomic bomb explosion, I think it is safe to venture that Oppenheimer's translation has the greater resonance.

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