COVID-19 has been a considerable major stress factor and has led to a great increase in psychological illnesses. Literature related to spirituality and philosophy can provide solace in times like these. We have taken excerpts from Bhagwad Gita which is a spiritual and philosophical scripture, existential philosopher Albert Camus’s La Peste and the myth of Sisyphus and writings of the philosopher Immanuile Kant. These literary masterpieces can provide a wealth of guidance and solace to both the medical fraternity and affected people and their caregivers.

“We tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn’t always pass away and from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away.”

–Albert Camus

Keywords: COVID 19; Pandemic; Morality
Learning related to the handling of “emotional turmoil” among “the chaos”

Humans apart from experiencing their pain and torment can also feel someone else’s ordeal. We can both sympathize and empathize with others; this can give us grief, and dealing with grief is a daunting task. Hence, we start our journey by elaborating on the conversation between Arjuna and Lord Krishna in Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna was in a state of “Vishada” which means a feeling of grief. He was unsure whether to fight or flight. This chapter is known as Arjuna’s “Vishada Yoga.”

Resembling Arjuna, doctors laboriously serving in this pandemic also have some worries, and the lord Krishna’s first answer is based on emotional ground and instead of replying to Arjun’s arguments, he touches the strings of Arjun’s mental ambivalence. In different terms, Lord Krishna found that Arjuna’s anxiety was due to emotional turmoil and internal conflicts. Arjuna as a “Warrior” was worried that impending war would cost him a loss of his near and dear ones. Similarly, during this pandemic of COVID, apart from their health, frontline workers are also worried about losing their family members or friends and the basic reaction to this scenario has been very much emotional and unprecedented. Speaking about duty Lord Krishna says that performing one’s duty is just like “personal dharma,” for example, Kshatriyas dharma is fighting and nothing is superior to this work for them. The current scenario is when the hospitals are overcrowded and we are lacking basic infrastructure while the death toll is continuously rising, yet, the doctors are performing their “DHARMA” (Duties) daily and leaving behind their feelings as if nothing has happened. After getting insight from Lord Krishna, Arjuna had to put his emotion behind and jumped into the war for the establishment of Dharma; similarly, health-care workers have a job of ‘saving lives in this critical situation, and that’s what they are doing from past 1 year.

Learning related to call of duty and consequences of actions

Doctors are transforming “KARMA” into “KARMA YOGA” by continuing to perform their duties (DHARMA) without any benefit or gain. Similarly, the practice of “KARMA YOGA” consists of the performance of duties in a mood of complete detachment without any wish of personal benefit and is unchanged by the success or failure. Some religious speakers also called it “NISHKAM KARMA.” This idea is especially resonating in the current circumstance of specialists serving in the COVID pandemic. There are few verses in Bhagwad Gita about the fulfillment of duties and expectation of rewards that apply to our current problems. Similarly, doctors also have some expectations of results but during the current scenario, expecting results can be a double-edged sword.

You have the right to execute your prescriptive duties, but not to the fruits of your actions. You should never ponder yourself to be the cause of the results of your actions, neither you should be attached to inaction.

Abide by your duties, O Arjun, abandon your attachment to success and failure. Such serenity is called Yoga.
Learning related to “control of self”

इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेभ्यस्तस्यप्रज्ञाप्रतिष्ठिता || 58 ||

The one who can withdraw the senses from objects, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs into its shell, his intelligence is established in spiritual wisdom.

Bhagavad Gita advocates that we should have control over our senses (IndriyaNigraha). It holds up in today’s condition as we have COVID-19-related restrictions and lockdowns. Humans are social animals and it is a daunting task for them to remain in constraints. This phase has been outstandingly hard for children and there have been numerous studies depicting the stress, anxiety, and harmful consequences of lockdown on them; phone, gaming, and Internet addiction are on the rise. Bhagwad Gita advises against this type of behavior and it seems apt considering that we cannot go outside and even if we go out, we need to follow social distancing at public places and wear a mask that can be an uncomfortable feeling, so we need to control our senses and follow these rules properly.

अन्गरेजः । क्रोधाद्वः भवतः सम्मृततिविभिर्म ।

Anger leads to the fogging of judgment, which results in the perplexity of the memory. When the memory is bewildered, the intellect vanishes; and when there is no intellect, one is ruined.

Through this verse, we can understand that stress and emotionally overwhelming situations lead to a state of helplessness which can transform itself into anger. Subsequently, Lord Krishna explains that anger leads to the clouding of judgment, and in that moment, a person does not use cognition in making decisions, rather the decisions stem from emotions. As of now, doctors are enduring extreme stress, sleepless nights, and deaths. According to Bhagwad Gita, we should be cautious while making decisions at times like these. This also holds up for other people as several incidents are surfacing where relatives of COVID patients are attacking doctors and medical staff. The repercussions of these actions taken in the wake of emotional reasoning should be well thought; otherwise, it can lead to disastrous consequences.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM PHILOSOPHY DURING THIS PANDEMIC?

Albert Camus and “absurdist point of view”

The Plague (LaPeste in French) was written by Albert Camus in 1947 when Europe was recuperating from the horrors of World War II. It tells a story of a protagonist Dr. Rieux set in an Algerian town named Oran that was suddenly hit by a mysterious plague. Dr. Rieux tries to warn the authorities about this mysterious plague, but all his efforts go in vain as higher officials remain negligent and fail to acknowledge what this plague can do to humans and only recognize that it affects rats and not humans. This story explores human efforts, emotions, and solidarity of the world in the time of a pandemic and quarantine. The doctor tells that the only way to fight this plague is by decency and not by heroism. By decency, he meant to say that we only have to do our job and this is what the medical fraternity is doing all around the world. The novel also depicts a situation when a person comes face to face with death. The plague strongly explores deep questions such as religion and death and splendidly holds love, hope, and human solidarity in the time of isolation and separation from loved ones. It tells us how the disease can reshape society. Likewise, we can see how this pandemic has reshaped our society. The plague as a disease is being used by Albert Camus to explore how our lives are fragile and can end instantaneously in a blink of an eye leaving all materialistic things meaningless.

Even though Dr. Rieux tries to warn about the plague, everyone just negates the existence of pestilence, all are busy making plans and forget one important fact that we all are vulnerable. No one wants to give importance to the plague and why would they? The very existence of the plague negates the existence of the future, journeys, and society as a whole. One theme that becomes apparent is the overconfidence of humans in their mortality. If we compare this to the present situation, many people all around the world are doing similar things. The time has come to accept the COVID-19 situation as a threat to our very existence and instead of denial, we should do our prescribed duties and as a responsible citizen, people can
CONCEPT OF MORALITY: LEARNINGS FROM IMMANUEL KANT

In his book named “Metaphysics of Morals,” Kant talks about the “categorical imperative” that can be formulated as acting out similarly as if we want the action to become a universal law. In other words, we should act in a way as if we want others to act similarly; meaning our actions should have a universal application. Let us apply this to today’s condition; suppose if one person starts to hoard medicines, grocery items, and other essential commodities, it can trigger other people to do the same. According to Kant, this corresponds to irrationality and this is akin to the vexation of human dignity. When people disregard the categorical imperative, they generally do so by implementing a different standard to their own actions than they would apply to everyone else. Kant also talks about creating a moral community where every being would govern himself through rationality. This can be utilized in urging people to follow proper social COVID norms such as social distancing and wearing a mask.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has indeed checked the limits of coping of all humankind. In this dreadful time, when hopelessness and helplessness are on the rise, we have tried to compile some of the insights from both Eastern and Western literature. The knowledge from these literary masterpieces can provide closure for people under great stress mainly due to their adversity or observing someone else is suffering from a personal tragedy. Furthermore, we can learn that the best way to deal with this pandemic is not through any heroism, just we have to do our duties with decency. More research should be done on psychotherapy based on these themes.

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