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The Kali Yuga and Camus' *The Plague*

Shantanu Jain '12

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

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Shantanu Jain

Idea of the Individual

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Mr. Kotlarczyk

The Kali Yuga and Camus' *The Plague*

Hinduism is a religion in which scientific observations play an important role. Through extensive observation of astronomical phenomena, Hindu cosmologists created a calendar based on the relative positions of planets to the moon. This calendar played an important role in understanding the Hindu cycle of the creation and destruction of the universe. This cycle is referred to as the cycle of the Yugas, in which the increasingly vice-ridden world is destroyed and replaced with a morally and religiously pristine one. Camus' *The Plague* explores this cycle of human malice and immorality, which is corrected by natural or supernatural forces as an allegory for the Hindu cycle of the Yugas.

The Hindu cycle of the Yugas is a concept that is derived from Hindu cosmology and describes the changing temperament of humans. By extrapolating the Hindu calendar based on important patterns and observations in Hindu religious texts such as the ancient epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana, Hindu scholars were able to divide time into four consecutive Yugas, which translates to eras or ages - Satya-Yuga, Treta-Yuga, Dvapara-Yuga, and Kali-Yuga. They occur in this order. While each Yuga has its unique characteristics, most notably, each Yuga becomes progressively more immoral and irreligious (Yogananda 23).

In particular, the Kali-Yuga is the most corrupt and immoral of the Yugas. It is a period during which rulers will levy unfair taxes, will fail to promote spirituality and morality, and will fail to protect their citizens. Citizens will express animosity towards one another and will lose

their moral sense, because their sense of religion will be replaced with worldly desires. Gurus and other important people will be disrespected, insulted, and even killed. In the final days of the Kali-Yuga, Lord Krishna, in the avatar of Vishnu, will arrive and will destroy and recreate all life in the universe (Yogananada 42). Each cycle is estimated to take between 4.1 to 8.2 billion years (Bhaskarananda 76).

Camus' *The Plague* exposes to its readers how people behave in uncertain crisis situations. Readers note the evolving role of religion and family in the book, which moves from being an afterthought or burdensome responsibility during the pre-plague times to a light of morality and hope during the plague. Immediately after the townsfolk officially were informed that there was an epidemic, "the collapse of their courage, willpower, and endurance was so abrupt that they felt they could never drag themselves out of the pit of despond into which they had fallen," (Camus 72) a period during which religion was largely overlooked. While describing his first plague-time sermon, it is noted that "it must not, however, be assumed that in normal times, the townsfolk of Oran are particularly devout. On Sunday mornings, for instance, sea-bathing competes seriously with churchgoing" (Camus 93). Even after Father Paneloux's fiery sermon, readers are told that "it is hard to say if this sermon had any affect on our townsfolk" (Camus 100).

However, these attitudes noticeably shifted after the citizens realized that religion was their only relief from an omnipresent epidemic. Many of the churchgoers were impressed with Father Paneloux's bluntly stated commitment to faith – "When an innocent youth can have his eyes destroyed, a Christian should either lose his faith or consent to having his eyes destroyed. Paneloux declines to lose his faith, and he will go through with it to the end" (Camus 229). This is a radical shift from Oran's prior opinion of not paying any heed to religion. This change in

opinion on religion is caused by an enormous external stress which forced the citizens to reconsider their priorities. While Camus chose inescapable disease to explore the human response to extreme stress, this external stress could be an extreme natural event, such as an earthquake, tsunami, or volcanic eruption, or it can be a manmade event, such as a nuclear disaster or severe power outage.

The Plague's events are analogous to the cycle of the Yugas on a small scale. In the same way that Camus exposes the shift back to fundamental values during times of crisis, the end of the cycle of the Yugas is a return to ideal form. In both, people increasingly become immoral and irreligious. The return to form generally occurs when people are most caught up with their own excess – during the Kali-Yuga and immediately before a disaster. Camus' references to previous plagues made the cyclical nature of human vice even more apparent. He referred to a man who was charged with washing the plague ridden bodies in a prior epidemic in Persia a century before the book's present – “the sole survivor was precisely the man whose job it was to wash the dead bodies, and who carried on throughout the epidemic” (Camus 56). With this statement, he implied the nobility of the man, who endangered his life to the greatest degree possible in order to carry on with his critical job. These references serve to set examples for the townspeople, who organize volunteer teams to help fight the plague. However, in normal times, men would have likely never taken on these selfless tasks, showing how human morality and generosity is cyclical in nature.

Thus, humans experience the cycle of Yugas on a small scale; the cyclical changing of priorities that people experience when they are faced with extreme situations is analogous to the cycle of the Yugas. By exploring this cycle on a small scale, readers are better able to relate their experiences to the Hindu concept and gain a better understanding of its significance in their life.

Additional parallels can be drawn between the cyclical nature of the plague, Dr. Rieux's sense of moral obligation to help those affected by the plague, and the Hindu concept of reincarnation. The Hindu ideas of Dharma and Karma, which refer to one's personal obligations and religious duties, are essentially a Hindu way of providing a 'moral compass' (Bhaskarananda 101). In Dr. Rieux's case, the readers take note of the importance of morals in his life. He explains why he continues to work in spite of the risks when he is asked "Do you believe in God, doctor?" (Camus 54) by Tarrou, he responds that "No – but what does the really mean? I'm fumbling in the dark, struggling to make something out. But I've long ceased finding that original" (Camus 54), suggesting that his sense of morality transcended religion. This is why he chooses to continue to help the people of Oran, even though his individual effort may only make a marginal difference. By making an effort to help mankind in a selfless manner, he is fulfilling karma and dharma. By performing these deeds, he is attempting to break the cycle of samsara, the torturous process of the cycle of death and rebirth. Hindu scriptures state that people cannot break the cycle of samsara during the Kali-Yuga, because the period is so contaminated and impure (Yogananada 111). Interestingly, Dr. Rieux's noble actions occur during a period of transition – just as a new period of morality and idealism begins. This draws another parallel to the cycle of the Yugas – Dr. Rieux's efforts are timed correctly to yield religious benefits. Additionally, the ultimate goal of a Hindu is to break this cycle and achieve a state of moksha, when one has reached an extremely high level of purity by breaking through samsara. Readers can observe additional parallels even at the scale of the actions of individual characters.

The Plague can be viewed as a microcosm of the cycle of the Yugas. While it is unlikely that Camus wrote *The Plague* intending it to be an allegory for the Hindu cycle of the Yugas, his writing and the cycle of the Yugas reflect the universal experience of refocusing our lives on our

core values when we are faced with times that test our extremes. Ultimately, we are reminded to keep in mind our core values of faith and family, even in today's Kali-Yuga plagued world.

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