

The Bomb of the Blue God

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By afternoon the wind had fallen silent over Pokhran. At 3.45 P.M., the timer detonated the three devices. Around 200 to 300 m deep in the earth, the heat generated was equivalent to a million degrees centigrade – as hot as temperatures on the sun. Instantly, rocks weighing around a thousand tonnes, a mini mountain underground, vapourised... shockwaves from the blasts began to lift a mound of earth the size of a football field by several metres. One scientist on seeing it said, "I can now believe stories of Lord Krishna lifting a hill." – India Today

Scientists speaking of Hindu mythology while dealing with modern technology may seem somewhat incongruous. However, the connection between Hindu mythology and atomic weapons goes back to the very first nuclear test at the Trinity Site in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan Project, claimed later that as the explosion went off, he was reminded of a passage from the *Bhagvad Gita*:

If the radiance of a thousand suns
were to burst into the sky,
that would be like
the splendor of the Mighty One

A little later as the cloud rose up in the sky, Oppenheimer thought of another line from the same source:

I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds.

The veracity of these claims have been questioned, but nevertheless have become part of popular nuclear folklore.

Describing the scene in *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, Robert Jungk goes on to say, "Sri Krishna, the Exalted One, lord of the fate of mortals, had uttered the phrase. But Robert Oppenheimer was only a man, into whose hands a mighty, a far too mighty, instrument of power had been given."

The interpretation of the latter *sloka* and its significance is interesting but not convincing. Oppenheimer had learned Sanskrit at Berkeley so as to read the *Gita* in the original; he always kept a worn pink copy of the bookshelf closest to his desk. It is therefore likely that he may have actually thought of the original, Sanskrit, verse rather than the English translation. The closest that fits this meaning is in the 32nd verse from the 11th chapter of the *Gita*.

kalosmi lokaksaya krt pravrdhho

This literally means: I am *kAla*, the great destroyer of Worlds. What is intriguing about this verse, then, is the interpretation of *kAla* by Jungk and others to mean death. While death is technically *one* of the meanings of *kAla*, a more common one is time. Indeed, the translations of the *Gita* by S. Radhakrishnan, A. C. Bhaktivedanta, Nataraja Guru and Eliot Deutsch say precisely that.

One exception to this, however, is the 1929 translation by Arthur Ryder. And, indeed, in a 1933 letter to his brother, Robert Oppenheimer does mention that he has “been reading the *Bhagavad Gita* with Ryder and two other Sanskritists.” The misinterpretation, therefore, may not have been the fault of Oppenheimer or Jungk.

Nevertheless, the verse does not have anything to do with an apocalyptic or catastrophic destruction, as most people have interpreted it in connection with nuclear weapons. When *kAla* is understood as time, the meaning is drastically changed to being a reminder of our mortality and finite lifetimes – as also the lifetimes of everything else in this world (including plutonium and uranium, despite their long, long, half-lives!). It then becomes more akin to western notions of the "slow march of time" and thus having little to do with the immense destruction caused by a nuclear explosion.

While the very first images that arose in the father of the atomic bomb are a somewhat wrong application of Hindu mythology, his recollection of the *Bhagavad Gita* may have been quite pertinent. As is well known, the *Bhagavad Gita* was supposedly intended to persuade *Arjuna* to participate in the *Kurukshetra* battle that resulted in the killing of thousands. Thus, Oppenheimer may well have been trying to rationalize his involvement in the development of a terrible weapon.

A similar kind of rationalization may be at work in India. The *Sangh Parivar* (or as some have suggested, the *Jung Parivar*) group of parties that champion Hindu nationalism pretend to be the real inheritor and upholder of India's traditions, which in their view is identical to Hindu traditions. Given the wide variety of beliefs, practices and philosophies that come under the general rubric of Hinduism, their notion of what it means to be Hindu is necessarily extremely narrow. Notwithstanding this, their claim to be speaking on behalf of all that is truly Indian has won them considerable support in recent years.

As a way of furthering their agenda, they also claim to combat all things that are non-Indian. This stands them in good stead in pursuing their exclusionist vision of India. For example, in opposing muslims and their traditions, one of their arguments advanced by the *Sangh Parivaris* is that they are not native to India. Likewise, the ideas of secularism and democracy are dismissed as "western" ideas, not applicable to Hindu India. At the same time, however, they are wedded to being militarily strong, which, in this nuclear age automatically translates to possessing atomic weapons. But, nuclear weapons, and the theology of deterrence that goes with it, *are* western notions. This is but one instance of a double standard – one for culture and one for technology – at work in the Hindu nationalist project. Their way out of it has been to take refuge in Hindu mythology.

Descriptions of wars in the mythological epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* often talk about the kinds of weapons used. Most Hindu Gods are said to be skilled at using the bow and arrow. Lord Rama, whose tale is recounted in the *Ramayana*, and Arjuna, one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, are praised as consummate archers. According to these myths, some archers, with practice and prayer,

learn the secrets of special kinds of arrows. Among these, the most powerful is said to be the *Brahmastra*. According to those who seek to embed nuclear weapons in Hindu traditions, the *Brahmastra* mentioned in ancient epics is the answer to the problem. The mythological accounts of the effects of the *Brahmastra*, it is claimed, are so like the general images of nuclear apocalypse that ancient Hindus must have known the secrets of nuclear weapons.

No proof is presented for this claim. Not even a quote from an ancient mythological text is provided to lend support. The actual descriptions actually are not suggestive of a weapon anywhere as destructive as a nuclear weapon. As with all arrows, the *Brahmastra* only affects the person it strikes (or is aimed at). (See, for example, *The Mahabharata*: translated and edited by J. A. B. van Buitener.) This is totally unlike the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One could also examine these claims by looking for radioactive traces, which would still be present had there really been nuclear weapons.

But attempts to pursue such an investigation are useless in trying to convince the *Sangh Parivaris*. Their notions of proof are like those in the old joke about archeologists: Two archeologists from different countries meet at a conference. One archeologist said to the other, "I was digging in my country and found an old piece of copper wire. That proves that we had telephones in our country a long time ago." The other replied, "Well, I was digging in my country and found nothing. So I decided they had wireless technology in my country." As Arundhati Roy said in *The End of Imagination*, "That's the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them - as long as you know what you're looking for."

It is worth clarifying that this is not an argument that you have to be a cultural nationalist to support the bomb. But if you are, then you have to find a way to embed it within your culture. And, the *Sangh Parivaris* and their ilk do that by invoking images of the *Brahmastra*. Like Oppenheimer, they interpret this in a totally wrong manner in order to obtain the historical precedent they seek. The difference, though, is that in this case the misinterpretation is likely to be deliberate and politically motivated.

The resort to religion to justify nuclear weapons is not specific to India. As the *Enola Gay* took off from Tinian Island to drop its deadly weapon over Hiroshima in 1945, a chaplain invoked God's blessings. President Truman, in announcing the use of the atom bomb, intoned: "We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes." The import of such sentiments was not lost on many, especially the elite. The business magazine *Fortune*, discussing the impact of the bomb early in 1946, predicted a "religious awakening" and a "reaffirmation of Christian values" that would sweep away the secularism, materialism, and political radicalism of the prewar years.

The last statement reveals one of the real factors behind the elite love for nuclear weapons – their fear of political radicalism. The arguments put forward to develop nuclear weapons – whether it be the security the bomb is supposed to provide or the achievement of great power status – or the methods used to garner support for this project, such as appealing to religious nationalism, must be seen in this light. And

resisted in the same way as resisting other attempts by the elite and the religious right to steer away attention from real problems.