

## Karma as Self-Realization: Tagore's Philosophical Perspective

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**Abstract:** Rabindranath Tagore's view on karma emphasizes personal responsibility, inner transformation, and spiritual growth. He interprets karma as an opportunity for individuals to exercise their freedom, make conscious choices, and contribute to universal harmony. By performing actions with detachment and a sense of moral responsibility, individuals can achieve self-realization and spiritual fulfillment. Tagore's perspective on karma is dynamic and transformative, encouraging individuals to break free from deterministic views and cultivate a deeper understanding of their actions and their impact on the world. Tagore's interpretation of karma also carries profound social implications. He rejects narrow self-interest and mechanical obedience to tradition, affirming instead that true freedom lies in realizing the spiritual unity of all beings. Through education, art and social engagement, he envisioned karma as a path of cultivating both individual freedom and collective harmony. In this way, self-realization is never an isolated inward state, but a flowering of the self in relationship with others and with the divine. Thus, Tagore's philosophy redefines karma as the highest form of human expression an act of realization where the finite self merges with the infinite, creating a life of beauty, responsibility, and spiritual liberation.

**Keywords:** Karma, Self-realization, Universal, Social inequality, spiritual, Bhagavad Gītā.

### I

Rabindranath Tagore, often referred to as the Bard of Bengal, was a multifaceted genius whose contributions spanned various artistic and intellectual domains. Born in Calcutta, India, Tagore was not only a poet but also an essayist, novelist, playwright, musician and social reformer. His works encompassed a wide range of themes, from love and nature to spirituality and social justice. One of the central ideas that permeated Tagore's creative end favors was the concept of the 'realization of life'. This concept, deeply rooted in the spiritual teachings of the East, particularly the monistic Hinduism found in the *Upaniṣads*, served as a guiding principle for Tagore's artistic and philosophical pursuits. It emphasized the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of self-realization and spiritual awakening. Tagore's exploration of the realization of life was evident in his poetry, where he delved into the depths of human emotions and experienc-

es. His poems often celebrated the beauty of nature, the complexities of love, and the search for meaning in life. Through his lyrical verses, Tagore sought to awaken the reader's consciousness and inspire a deeper understanding of the world and oneself; in addition to his poetry, Tagore's essays and novels also reflected his belief in the realization of life.

He used these mediums to explore social issues, challenge societal norms, and advocate for equality and justice. His novel "Gora," for instance, tackled themes of religious and cultural identity, highlighting the need for individuals to transcend narrow divisions and embrace a broader sense of humanity. Tagore's artistic talents are extended beyond the written word. He was an accomplished musician and composer, known for his creation of Rabindra Sangeet, a genre of songs that blended traditional Indian melodies with his own poetic lyrics. Through his music, Tagore aimed to evoke a sense of spiritual awakening and foster a deeper connection between individuals and the divine. Furthermore, Tagore's artistic pursuits were not limited to literature and music. He was also a skilled painter, whose works often depicted the beauty of nature and the human form. His paintings, like his other artistic endeavors, sought to capture the essence of life and convey a sense of spiritual realization. Beyond his creative pursuits, Tagore was deeply committed to social reform. He believed that the realization of life extended beyond individual enlightenment and encompassed the betterment of society as a whole. Tagore established educational institutions, such as Visva-Bharati University, which aimed to foster a holistic education.

The concept of karma has remained one of the most profound and enduring themes in Indian philosophy. Derived from the Sanskrit root *kri* meaning "to act" or "to do" karma is traditionally understood as action and its inevitable consequences. Within a wider spectrum of Indian thought, karma has been interpreted in multiple ways- ritual action in the Vedic tradition, ethical duty in the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* and causal law all its from, karma is inseparably linked to the quest for *mokṣa* or liberation, wherein action becomes not only a practical necessity but also a means of spiritual transformation. For Tagore, karma is not merely the mechanical outcome of deeds nor the rigid performance of prescribed duties. Rather, it is a dynamic process of creative action that fosters the realization of the self in its deepest sense. Unlike traditionally notion's that often emphasize renunciation or detachment from worldly activities, Tagore underscores the significance of active engagement with life, society and nature. Action for him, becomes a medium of expressing the divine within, a bridge between the finite reality. In this way, Tagore transforms the concept of karma from a deterministic or ritualistic framework into a living philosophy of self-expression, self-transcendence, and universal connectedness.

Central to Tagore's thought is the conviction that the individual self cannot be fully realized in isolation. Self-realization, in his philosophy, is the awakening of the inner spirit to its unity with the wider human commu-

nity and the universal order. This process is made possible through action infused with love, joy and creativity. Thus, karma is not simply external work or duty, but the active unfolding of the soul inherent potential. Education, art, social service, and devotion all become expression of this higher karma. In fact, Tagore's entire life and work from the founding of Santiniketan to his literary creations- reflect his belief that action, when guide by ethical and spiritual vision, is the truest of worship and the most authentic path to freedom. Moreover, Tagore's interpretation of karma carries both ethical and spiritual dimensions. On the ethical level, he insists that action must be selfless and oriented towards the welfare of others. Egoistic or purely self-service actions confine the self within narrow boundaries, while actions performed in a spirit of love and service liberate the individual. On the spiritual level, karma becomes a form of communion with the Divine. Through work done in joy and dedication, man attunes himself to the universal rhythm of existence, realizing his oneness with *Brahman*. In this sense, self-realization for Tagore is not a withdrawal from worldly duties but their transformation into acts of spiritual significance.

Tagore's philosophy of karma, therefore, stands at the intersection of tradition and modernity, individual and universal, spirituality and humanism. It echoes the Gita's doctrine of desireless actions but departs from rigid religious orthodoxy by celebrating creativity art and education as pathways to the infinite. At the same time, his view harmonizes with Western ideals of ethical action and individual freedom, thus offering a global vision of karma as self-realization. This paper seeks to analyze Tagore's philosophical perspective on karma as self-realization, exploring its conceptual foundations, ethical implications and relevance to contemporary thought. It will examine how Tagore reinterprets traditional Indian concept of karma, how he concepts action to the creative unfolding of the self and how his vision integrates ethical responsibility with spiritual fulfillment. In doing so the study aims to highlight the originality of Tagore's contribution to Indian philosophy and its enduring significance for the modern world.

## II

Yoga, originating from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', goes beyond its literal meaning of 'to join' or 'to unite'. It encompasses a profound philosophy and practice that aims to unite the individual self with the Universal Consciousness. This union is not merely a physical or superficial joining, but rather a deep merging of one's consciousness with the divine. The practice of yoga is not limited to physical postures or exercises but extends to various techniques and disciplines that cultivate self-awareness, self-realization, and spiritual growth. It is a holistic approach that encompasses the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of human existence. At the core of yoga is the concept of 'witness-consciousness', which refers to a state of detached self-reflection. In this state, one becomes an observer of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences without getting entangled or identified with them. It is a state of pure awareness, where one can witness the fluctuations

of the mind without being affected by them; by cultivating witness consciousness, yoga practitioners aim to transcend the limitations of the mind (*Citta*). The mind, with its constant chatter, desires, and attachments, often leads to suffering and discontentment. Through yoga, one learns to detach from the mind's fluctuations and find inner peace and contentment that is not dependent on external circumstances.

Furthermore, yoga teaches that suffering (*Dukkha*) is an inherent part of human existence. It acknowledges that life is filled with challenges, pain, and impermanence. However, through the practice of yoga, one can develop resilience, acceptance, and equanimity in the face of suffering. By cultivating a deep connection with the Universal Consciousness, individuals can find solace and transcend the limitations of their personal suffering. *Yoga* is not just a physical exercise or a set of postures. It is a profound spiritual practice that aims to unite the individual consciousness with the Universal Consciousness. Through the cultivation of witness consciousness and detachment from the mind, practitioners can find inner peace and liberation from suffering. *Yoga* offers a path to self-realization and a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings.

Tagore articulates his purpose as the 'realization of action', emphasizing that individual can only draw closer to the distant future by actively engaging in action and bringing forth their latent potential. He rejects the notion that solitary meditation aimed at attaining the absolute or the Brahman is the correct path, denouncing isolation as 'inaction' and escapism that only leads to self-indulgence. This concept may appear perplexing considering Tagore's acknowledgement of the integral role played by ancient Aryan sages in his other essay 'relation of the individual to the universe'. In this essay, he explores how these sages achieved oneness with the universe through a life of isolation. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Tagore's rejection of isolation as a path to realization is not a complete dismissal of the value of solitude. Tagore's rejection of isolation as 'inaction' and escapism stem from his belief that true realization can only be achieved through active engagement with the world. He argues that by immersing oneself in action and bringing forth their latent potential, individuals not only to the progress of society but also come closer to realizing their own true selves. In this sense, action becomes a means of self-discovery and self-actualization.

On the other hand, Tagore's acknowledgement of the ancient Aryan sages' achievement of oneness with the universe through isolation does not contradict his emphasis on action. Instead, it highlights the diversity of paths to realization. Tagore recognizes that different individuals may have different inclinations and capacities, and therefore, the path to realization may vary for each person. Although the Aryan sages were able to achieve oneness with the cosmos by living a life of seclusion, Tagore contends that isolation usually results in passivity and self-indulgence. According to him, people can only truly realize themselves by actively participating in the

world, where they can develop their innate potential and advance society. To sum up, Tagore's notion of 'realization in action' underscores the need for proactive interaction with the world in order to facilitate self-exploration and self-actualization. Although he concedes that seclusion plays a part in the realization of some people, he disapproves of isolation as a viable option for the majority, labeling it as 'inaction' and escape. Tagore's viewpoint emphasizes the variety of routes to fulfillment and the necessity for everybody to discover their own.

### **III**

Tagore argues that dharma is not merely a set of religious rituals or beliefs, but rather a universal principle that underlies the entire fabric of existence. It is the fundamental order that governs the cosmos and provides a moral compass for human conduct. Dharma is not limited to any particular religion or culture; it transcends boundaries and encompasses all aspects of life. According to Tagore, dharma is not something external that is imposed upon us, but rather an inherent quality that resides within each individual. It is the innate sense of right and wrong, the inner voice that guides us towards righteousness and moral conduct. When we act in accordance with dharma, we align ourselves with the natural order of the universe and experience a sense of harmony and fulfillment. However, when we deviate from dharma and engage in acts of wrongdoing, we create disharmony and disrupt the balance of the cosmos. Tagore suggests that this deviation occurs when we lose touch with our authentic nature and succumb to selfish desires and ego-driven actions. In such moments, we disconnect from the intrinsic truth of our being and become disconnected from the larger purpose that guides us. Tagore's exploration of dharma goes beyond the conventional understanding of religion as a set of dogmas or rituals. He emphasizes the importance of self-realization and the cultivation of inner wisdom in order to align ourselves with dharma. By recognizing and embracing our true nature, we can live in harmony with the universe and fulfill our ultimate purpose. In his remarkable masterpiece '*Sādhanā*' "Tagore invites us to reflect on the profound significance of dharma in our lives. He encourages us to go beyond the superficial understanding of religion and delve into the deeper essence of our existence. By embracing dharma, we can tap into our innermost truth and live a life of purpose, integrity, and fulfillment".

He consistently advocated for the betterment of humanity and strived to liberate individuals from superstitious beliefs rooted in various religions. His focus was on encouraging logical thinking and presenting unique perspectives within contemporary Indian philosophy. The teachings of the *Upaniṣads* greatly influenced Tagore from an early age, shaping his philosophical journey. Additionally, *Vaishnavism*, *Brahmo Samāj*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* had a profound impact on him. Tagore's intellectual and philosophical development was also influenced by modern Western thought, culture, literature, Christianity, *Brahmo Samāj*'s humanist philosophy, and Vedic thought. His approach to Hinduism was a blend of *Brahmo Samāj*'s

principles and the norms of the Hindu orthodox system. The enduring influences in Tagore's life include the profound teachings of Buddha and Raja Ram Mohan Ray, which are evident in his works. He is widely regarded as a theistic philosopher, perceiving God as the ultimate reality, neither detached from the world nor confined to transcendence.

Tagore's book- "*Religion of Man*" is a profound exploration of his understanding of religion, which he likens to that of a poet. According to Tagore, his religion encompasses the fundamental principles that guide a poet's religious beliefs and practices. Just as a poet draws inspiration from intangible and untraceable sources for his music, Tagore's understanding of religion is also transmitted through these mysterious affairs. Tagore's spiritual journey has evolved in a manner similar to his poetic exploration. Both have followed a path that cannot be easily explained or understood. They are intricately interconnected, with each influencing and shaping the other. Despite this deep and lasting connection, the true nature of this spiritual and poetic ceremony has remained hidden from Tagore's consciousness. In his book, Tagore delves into the essence of religion, exploring its meaning and purpose. He emphasizes the importance of love, compassion, and unity as the core principles of his religion. These principles, he believes, are not confined to any particular religious tradition but are universal and applicable to all of humanity.

Tagore's understanding of religion as a poet goes beyond the confines of organized religion. He sees religion as a deeply personal and individual experience, one that is not bound by dogma or rituals. For him, religion is a way of connecting with the divine and finding meaning in the world. Through his poetic exploration, Tagore seeks to uncover the mysteries of existence and the divine. He believes that poetry and religion are intertwined, both serving as vehicles for expressing and understanding the deeper truths of life. Just as a poet uses words and imagery to convey emotions and experiences, Tagore uses his understanding of religion to express his spiritual insights and experiences. Tagore's book "*Religion of Man*" is a testament to his unique perspective on religion and spirituality. It is a reflection of his deep connection to the poetic and the divine, and his belief in the power of love and unity to transcend religious boundaries. Through his exploration, Tagore invites readers to embark on their own spiritual journey, one that is guided by the principles of a poet's religion.

Tagore's philosophy delves into the profound nature of God and the interconnectedness of all beings. He believes that God, as the creator and source of unity, is not something that can be fully understood or grasped through reason or logic alone. Instead, God is immanent, meaning that His presence can be felt and experienced within the very fabric of existence. According to Tagore, the creation itself is a reflection of God's divine nature. Every aspect of nature, from the smallest blade of grass to the vastness of the cosmos, is a manifestation of God's beauty and wisdom. Human beings, being created in God's image, are therefore the embodiment of His

essence. This understanding highlights the inherent divinity within each individual and the potential for spiritual growth and realization. In Tagore's philosophy, God is not a distant and separate entity, but rather intimately intertwined with human life. He sees God as the very foundation of the universe and our existence, permeating every aspect of our being. This perspective emphasizes the importance of recognizing and cultivating a deep connection with the divine within ourselves and in the world around us.

#### IV

Tagore also draws inspiration from the concept of *Bhakti* in *Vaishnavism*, a devotional path to attaining divine realization. He admires the idea of personally experiencing the existence of God, as it allows for a deeper understanding and connection with the divine. Through devotion and surrender, one can truly comprehend the presence of God and find solace and fulfillment in His divine love. Overall, Tagore's philosophy beautifully illustrates the harmonious connection between nature, the human self, and God. He invites us to explore the depths of our own spirituality and to recognize the divine presence within ourselves and in the world. Through personal experience and devotion, we can come to a profound realization of God's existence and find true fulfillment in His divine love. The *Upaniṣads* teach that the purpose of human existence is to attain spiritual enlightenment and understand the true nature of the self. This leads to inner peace and a profound connection with the divine. Those who achieve this purpose are serene and united with God, experiencing love, compassion, and interconnectedness with all of creation. This state transcends boundaries and guides the individual's actions. So according to Rabindranath, Love represents the highest level of joy that humanity can attain, enabling individuals to recognize their authentic nature and embrace a sense of interconnectedness with every living creature.

He consistently endeavored to instill a sense of freedom in individuals when it came to practicing their religion. In his perspective, a life devoid of the love of God is riddled with suffering and misery. Therefore, the ultimate aspiration of mankind should be to attain God's love. He believes that one can envision the epitome of humanity in their imagination, but it cannot be fabricated into existence. Our inner selves are divine and inseparable from God. God, being infinite, is a part of our finite selves. God has bestowed all of his potentialities upon humanity, with the highest creation being the human being. Our inner selves which are divine, reside within us. He acknowledges that the self of man encompasses all the qualities required to become *Brahman*.

Tagore's religious philosophy is deeply rooted in the concept of Man, which he considers to be the foundation of his entire belief system. He introduces the term '*Jivana Devotā*' to describe the God of life, who is believed to dwell within the innermost recesses of the human heart. This term signifies Tagore's profound understanding of the personal and intimate nature of God, who has the power to transform individuals. In Tagore's philos-

ophy, God is not an external entity or a distant deity, but rather an intrinsic part of human existence. This concept bears resemblance to the humanistic principles of *Advaita Vedānta*, a school of thought in Hindu philosophy, which asserts that God always resides within the human being. According to Tagore, the divine essence is present at the core of every individual, making each person a manifestation of God. *Jivan Devotā*, therefore, represents the divine presence within human beings and embodies the highest essence of man. It is important to note, however, that *Jivan Devotā* does not precisely denote the Infinite Absolute, as Tagore acknowledges that God can be referred to by various names and manifestations. One such name is Universal man, which suggests that God is not limited to any particular form or identity but encompasses the entirety of humanity.

Tagore's religious philosophy also draws inspiration from *Vedic* thought, an ancient Indian tradition that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. The influence of *Vedic* teachings can be seen in Tagore's belief in the divine potential of every individual and his emphasis on the unity of all creation. Overall, Tagore's religious philosophy revolves around the idea of Man as the embodiment of God and the recognition of the divine within oneself and others. It is a deeply personal and transformative understanding of spirituality that seeks to bridge the gap between the individual and the divine, ultimately leading to a greater sense of interconnectedness and harmony.

The philosophy of *Gītā* revolves around the fundamental belief of *Vaishnavism*, emphasizing that love serves as the ultimate means to establish an unbreakable connection between the finite and the infinite. These two entities are interdependent and forever intertwined. Tagore held the belief that the Supreme self, referred to as *Parāmtman* or *Brahman* in his religious philosophy, is of utmost importance. According to the legends, our self is characterized as *māyā*, limited to being an individual entity. However, when it acknowledges its interconnectedness and recognizes its true essence in the infinite and universal, it attains the state of *Satyam*. It is in the Supreme self, known as *Parāmatman*, that this realization is ultimately achieved. Therefore, *Brahman* is considered to be the ultimate soul.

## V

Tagore's interpretation of karma as self-realization does not exist in isolation. His vision draws inspiration from India's spiritual traditions while also entering into dialogue with modern Western thought. To understand the distinctiveness of Tagore's perspective, it is important to situate it within both Indian philosophical heritage and comparative global frameworks. By doing so, we can highlight how his conception of action as self-realization harmonizes continuity with innovation, tradition with creativity, and spirituality with humanism.

Classical Indian philosophy, karma has been largely understood in two major senses: as ritual action in *Vedic* tradition, and as the moral law of causation in systems such as *Vedānta*, Buddhism, and Jainism. The *Bhaga-*

*vad Gītā*, perhaps the most influential text on the subject, offers to doctrine of karma yoga in which liberation can be attained by performing one's duties selflessly and without attachment to outcomes. This doctrine of action without desire emphasizes inner detachment even amidst worldly duties. Tagore accepts the ethical spirit of the *Gītā*'s teaching but modifies its orientation. From him, karma is not merely an obligation performed with detachment; it is an act of joy, creativity, and self-expression. He resists the tendency to treat karma as a mechanical duty imposed by society. Instead, action becomes an unfolding of the inner spirit, a means of communion with the Divine through love and harmony. Thus, while classical thought tends to frame karma in terms of liberation from bondage, Tagore reimagines it as the realization of one's unity with the infinite within the very process of living and creating.

The *Upaniṣads* emphasize that the highest goal of life is to realize the identity of the soul with the universal spirit. This realization is often described as transcending worldly action in favor of knowledge and meditation. Tagore, however, refuses to sever the connection between knowledge and action. He maintains that realization of the infinite is not achieved by renunciation life but by fully participating in it. Action, when infused with love and creativity, becomes itself a path to *Brahman*. In this sense, Tagore democratizes the *Upaniṣadic* insight by making self-realization accessible through ordinary, ethical, and artistic engagement with the world.

Buddhism interprets karma as intentional action that shapes the cycle of rebirth, with liberation possible through the cessation of craving and attachment. Jainism similarly stresses strict ethical discipline to purify the soul from karmic bondage. Compared to these traditions, Tagore's view is more life affirming. He does not see karma as a burden to be shed but as a joyous opportunity to express the divine within. Liberation, in his view, is not escape from the cycle of existence but the realization of harmony within it. Thus, his perspective avoids the world negating tendencies often associated with Indian ascetic traditions.

A direct-comparison with the *Bhagavad Gītā* reveals both convergence and divergence. Like the *Gītā*, Tagore emphasizes selfless action and the futility of egoistic desire. However, where the *Gītā* tends to frame action as duty or dharma to be performed without attachment. Tagore stresses the creative and aesthetic dimension of action. For him, karma is not a discipline of restraint alone but a celebration of human creativity. This marks a subtle but important shift; karma becomes not just a path to freedom from bondage but also a means to cultivate beauty, joy, and community.

The uniqueness of Tagore's perspective lies in his ability to synthesize insights from diverse traditions without being confined by any. From the *Gītā* he inherits the principle of selfless action, from the *Upaniṣads* the ideal of unity with the infinite, and from modern Western thought the emphasis on freedom and individuality. But he integrates these into a distinctive humanism where action is simultaneously ethical, creative, and spiritual. For

Tagore, karma is not destiny to be passively endure nor mere duty to be performed; it is the conscious and joyous unfolding of the self in relation to others and the Divine. His interpretation thus offers a comparative bridge between Indian spiritual traditions and global humanistic values, making his philosophy deeply relevant for an age that seeks harmony between individuality, society, and spirituality.

## VI

In conclusion, Tagore's philosophical perspective on karma offers a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the concept, diverging from traditional interpretations that often emphasize determinism and retribution. By reinterpreting karma through the lens of self-realization, Tagore's views underscore the potential for personal growth, spiritual transformation, and freedom. This perspective not only resonates with the broader themes of Indian philosophy but also aligns with Tagore's own literary and poetic works, which frequently explore the human condition, the pursuit of truth, and interconnectedness of all existence. At the heart of Tagore's philosophy is the belief that karma is not merely a mechanical process of cause and effect but a dynamic and transformative journey. This journey is marked by the individual's pursuit of self-awareness, moral responsibility, and spiritual enlightenment. Tagore's emphasis on the inner dimensions of karma encourages individuals to look beyond the external consequences of their actions and to cultivate a deeper understanding of their motivations, desires, and intentions. By doing so, individuals can transcend the limitations of a deterministic worldview and embrace a more liberated and empowered approach to life.

Tagore's perspective on karma also highlights the interconnectedness of all existence. By emphasizing the universal harmony that arises from individual actions, Tagore's views underscore the importance of living in harmony with nature and society. This holistic understanding of karma encourages individuals to consider the broader consequences of their actions and to strive for a more compassionate and sustainable way of living. In an age marked by environmental degradation, social inequality, and personal discontent, Tagore's perspective on karma offers a timely and profound reminder of the need for balance, harmony, and mindfulness. Through his works and ideas, Tagore continues to inspire and guide individuals on their journey towards self-realization and enlightenment, offering a timeless and universal message of hope, freedom, and transformation.

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