

Original Paper

Between Battle and Bhakti: Cognitive Crisis and Spiritual

Rebirth in Tagore's Gitanjali and the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate and one of the defining voices in world literature, frequently engaged with India's philosophical and spiritual heritage, drawing deeply from foundational texts like the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. This research paper closely examines Tagore's interpretation and creative recontextualization of the Bhagavad Gita, focusing especially on how he weaves its core themes into his poetry, prose, and broader philosophical outlook. By delving into textual comparisons, intertextual resonances, and Tagore's own writings—most notably "Gitanjali"—this study demonstrates both Tagore's fidelity to and his innovation upon the Gita's teachings. Through a synthesis of spirituality, universalism, and poetic imagination, Tagore refashions the Gita's doctrine of duty, detachment, and devotion for the modern world, emphasizing an inner transformation that transcends sectarianism, ritualism, and fatalism. The analysis traces the evolution of central ideas—dharma and cognitive crisis, the human-divine relationship, creative evolution, and the poeticization of surrender—illustrating Tagore's singular role in rendering ancient Indian wisdom both globally accessible and existentially relevant.

Keywords

Rabindranath Tagore, Bhagavad Gita, reinterpretation, dharma, spirituality, universalism, Gitanjali, Indian philosophy, intertextuality, poetic transformation

1. Introduction: Tagore, Modernity, and the Indian Philosophic Tradition

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was raised at the intersection of tradition and modernity, in a family deeply immersed in the study of sacred Hindu texts. While his father held the Upanishads in especially high regard, the Bhagavad Gita also shaped the spiritual and philosophical climate around Tagore. In his mature works, Tagore moves beyond mere reverence, aiming to re-articulate the ethical-spiritual insights

of the Gita in a voice that harmonizes with twentieth-century anxieties, global movements, and individual yearnings. This paper explores how Tagore engages creatively with the Gita's teachings, reinterpreting its motifs of crisis, action, and transcendence within the context of poetic realization and humanism.

2. Tagore's Hermeneutics: Approaching the Gita through Modern Eyes

Tagore's approach to the Gita is best understood through a hermeneutic, or interpretive, lens. He resists dogmatic readings, instead seeking out the vital spirit of the text. For Tagore, the Gita's central predicament—Arjuna's paralyzing doubt upon entering the battlefield—mirrors the existential impasse of modern humanity: the tension between inherited conventions and the demand for creative self-actualization.

Tagore interprets Arjuna's crisis not merely as a historical or mythic drama, but as a representation of psychological and spiritual crisis—akin to what modern psychology names “cognitive dissonance” (2021). Just as Krishna in the Gita guides Arjuna beyond mere compliance with duty to a sense of detached action (*nishkama karma*), Tagore understands true fulfillment as an active—yet ego-free—participation in the cosmic order.

3. Method: Thematic Parallels: Duty, Detachment, and Surrender

3.1 *The Ethics of Action: Dharma Redefined*

The Bhagavad Gita emphatically urges Arjuna to “do your duty, but do not concern yourself with the results” (2.47). Tagore finds in this mandate a call to embrace life's challenges as opportunities for self-discovery and divine cooperation. He adapts the Gita's doctrine into a poetic-theological framework where dharma is not externally imposed, but emerges from the soul's yearning for wholeness.

In works like “Gitanjali,” the surrender to God is depicted as creative freedom—the poet is not bound by fatalism, but is liberated through spiritual alignment. This is especially evident in the recurrent motif of offering, where life and work become “songs” dedicated to the divine.

Example:

In “Gitanjali” poem 50, Tagore writes,

“I have made my life a string of pearls to be clasped together by the thread of your will.

The world is yours.”

This poetic gesture transforms the Gita's message of action-without-attachment into an intimate, aesthetic act.

3.2 *Bhakti and Universal Love*

The Gita is celebrated for its emphasis on Bhakti, or loving devotion to the divine (notably in chapters 9-12). Tagore's interpretation, however, is neither ritualistic nor sectarian. For him, the divine is not a distant, formless absolute, nor a punitive authority, but a personal, immanent presence—intimately involved in the unfolding of life.

Example:

Tagore's poems rarely name "Krishna," but the divine is felt everywhere, as a companion, beloved, and teacher. In his lectures, Tagore explains, "My religion is the reconciliation of the Upanishads and the Gita with the exigencies of modern life: love that aspires not for heaven, but for the realization of the divine in humanity" (2021).

3.3 Cognitive Crisis and Spiritual Rebirth

Tagore brings to the fore the process of inner crisis and resolution, paralleling Arjuna's battlefield paralysis and subsequent emergence into knowledge. Tagore extends the motif—found in both the Gita and mystic traditions such as the Bhakti movement—of agonized surrender leading to spiritual rebirth.

Example:

In "Gitanjali" poem 96, he writes:

"When my heart is dry and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy."

The crisis is not simply intellectual, but existential and affective, illustrating how the frameworks of the Gita are mapped onto modern spiritual longing.

3.4 The Human-Divine Relationship: Tagore's Poetics of Immanence

Tagore's reimagining of the Gita departs in striking ways from the prevailing Vedantic orthodoxy of his time. He insists that the ultimate reality is personal; that the divine has "joy in his creation" and delights in beauty, growth, and creativity.

3.5 The Divine in Nature and Art

Tagore's poems, with their constant reference to the natural world—trees, rivers, light—universalize the divine. This echoes the Gita's claim (10.20-10.42) that all wonders are manifestations of Krishna, the Supreme. Through landscape and lyricism, Tagore democratizes spiritual experience, inviting everyone to recognize the infinite in the everyday.

Example:

In Gitanjali 1:

"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. ... At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy."

Tagore's God is the musician, the artist, the silent friend—never distant, but always present.

3.6 The Synthesis of Science and Spirit

Tagore's modernity is further seen in his reconciliation of science and spirituality. The Gita's metaphysics is often read as antagonistic to scientific rationalism, but Tagore's engagement with evolution (in both natural and creative terms) re-grounds Gita's insights in a contemporary idiom. He speaks of divine life as the principle of evolution, "rising from matter to consciousness and from self to selflessness."

4. Literary Transcreation: Innovation through Poetic Form

4.1 From Dialogue to Monologue: Transforming Gita's Discourse

Whereas the Gita's wisdom emerges as a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, Tagore's spiritual drama unfolds in a poetic monologue—an internal conversation with the divine. The dialogue becomes a lyrical journey, mirroring the solitary quest of the modern soul (2023).

4.2 The Lyricization of Duty and Surrender

A notable literary achievement in Tagore's transcreation is his ability to infuse abstract doctrines with concrete imagery. He translates the Gita's call for surrender (*sarva dharman parityajya*, 18.66) into human experiences of loss, hope, and creativity.

Example:

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

... Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground ...” (“Gitanjali”, poem 11).

This powerful re-articulation transforms the Gita's call for karma yoga into a poetry of active compassion.

4.3 Comparative Analysis: The Gita and Gitanjali Side by Side

While much literary criticism notes the Upanishadic influences on Tagore, a systematic comparative approach reveals illuminating parallels and creative divergences vis-à-vis the Gita.

Aspect	Bhagavad Gita	Tagore's Gitanjali
Form	Philosophical dialogue	Lyric monologue
Crisis	Arjuna's paralysis, moral struggle	Poet's longing, existential yearning
Resolution	Intellectual reasoning, duty, surrender	Emotional catharsis, creative release
Divine presence	Avatar (Krishna), cosmic absolute	Personal, immanent, the beloved
Bhakti Concept	Surrender to Krishna	Universal love, creative surrender
Action	Nishkama karma (action without desire)	Offering life as a song to the divine

In the broader context of Indian reform movements, Tagore's reinterpretation stands against both mechanical ritualism and the rigidities of inherited authority. He learns from the Gita that the real enemy of spiritual growth is not desire itself, but clinging to the fruits of desire and refusing open-ended relationship with the divine.

This is evident in his critique of traditionalism in poetry and essays—“Let the old forms die if they cannot serve life!”—and in his practical experiments with Santiniketan, where education, art, and service become united acts of devotion.

4.4 Illustrative Case Studies: Individual Poems and Prose Examples

To see Tagore’s engagement with the Gita in action, individual poems from “Gitanjali” and less-studied essays (such as “The Religion of Man”) bear deeper scrutiny.

In “Gitanjali” 75, Tagore writes:

“Deliverance is not for me in renunciation.

I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.”

This neatly turns the ascetic interpretation of the Gita’s teachings on its head, promoting a joyful embrace of worldly involvements—a hallmark of Tagore’s spiritual humanism.

Tagore’s essay “The Religion of Man” frames Krishna not as a sectarian god but as an image of the Supreme Person (Purushottama), the creative principle in all beings, attuned to the “unending music” of the universe. Here the Gita becomes a living text—constantly evolving in meaning as human self-understanding grows.

4.5 Globalization and the Recontextualization of the Gita

Tagore was keenly aware of the need to make Indian spiritual insights accessible to a global audience. His English translations of “Gitanjali,” and cross-cultural lectures, such as those at Oxford and Harvard, reframe the Gita’s teachings for seekers of all backgrounds, stripping away dogmatic apparatus and emphasizing universality (Lakshmi, 2023).

Through a “religion of man”—neither dogmatic theism nor empty secularism—Tagore channels the Gita into a vision of spiritual democracy: each person must find and follow the divine within, regardless of historical or cultural boundaries.

4.6 Critical Appraisal: Limitations and Critiques of Tagore’s Approach

Scholars occasionally critique Tagore’s poetic universalism as risking vagueness or overlooking harsh realities found in the Gita’s context of warfare and crisis. While Tagore embraces the agony of doubt and longing, some may contend that his lyricism softens the Gita’s existential realism. However, as Amartya Sen and others note, Tagore’s aestheticization is itself an ethical and philosophical strategy, reframing violence and strife as inner psychological drama, open to catharsis and transformation.

5. Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore’s reinterpretation of the Bhagavad Gita is as much an act of poetic creation as it is of philosophical exegesis. By moving the battle from Kurukshetra to the interior life, Tagore universalizes the Gita’s dilemmas and aspirations, making them legible and urgent for modern humanity. Through an original synthesis of action, surrender, love, and creativity, Tagore not only preserves but rejuvenates one of India’s foundational texts. His works urge ongoing renewal of spiritual tradition—rooted in but never shackled by the past.

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