

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S VIEW OF UPANISHADIC RELIGION: AN
ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING**

Dr. Debraj Chakraborty

*satyaṁ brūyāt priyaṁ brūyāt,
na brūyāt satyamapriyam;
priyaṁ ca nāṅṛtaṁ brūyāt,
eṣa dharmah sanātanaḥ ||*

Introduction

Nobel laureate, poet, and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore is renowned for his close study of the Upanishads, age-old Indian manuscripts that address existential issues, spirituality, and morality. Tagore's understanding of Upanishadic religion influenced his intellectual and literary writings throughout his life, demonstrating his abiding respect for these writings. His interpretation of the Upanishadic teachings provides a distinctive ethical framework based on the search of truth, the interdependence of all things, and the universality of human values.

Tagore described the Upanishads as: "India's most precious gift to the world. Their thoughts are unfathomable, their words full of mystery. They contain the wisdom of the universe." (Tagore, 2010, p. 5). This passage demonstrates Tagore's conviction in the Upanishads' everlasting significance and great intellectual depth. The idea of oneness and connectivity is central to Tagore's reading of the Upanishads. He says, "The Upanishads teach us that the individual self is an inseparable part of the cosmic whole. They reveal the principle of unity that underlies all existence" (Tagore, 2010, p. 15). Furthermore, Tagore emphasized that the Upanishads place a strong focus on harmony and moral behaviour, saying that "The Upanishads teach us to live in harmony with all beings. They emphasize non-violence, compassion, and empathy as the foundations of a meaningful life" (Tagore, 2010, p. 78). In his poetry and philosophical writings, Tagore examines the essence of reality and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, demonstrating his emphasis on the pursuit of truth. His interpretations, which are based on his intense respect for the Upanishads, offer insightful perspectives on the moral implications of traditional Indian knowledge and its applicability to today's issues.

1. Universality and Unity of the Self in Rabindranath Tagore's View of Upanishadic Religion

The Upanishads serve as a source of inspiration for Tagore. "To me the verse of Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha have always been things of the spirit, and therefore, endowed with boundless vital

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

growth; and I have used them both in my life and preaching, as being instinct with individual meaning for me, as for others, and awaiting for their confirmation, my own personal testimony, which may have its value because of its individuality" (Sadhana, Author's Preface, VIII) is how he acknowledged the influence of Upanishads. This section delves into Tagore's understanding of universality and the interdependence of all existence, as demonstrated by his interaction with the Upanishads.

Tagore's Reverence for the Upanishads

In his renowned work *A Vision of India's History*, Tagore expresses his belief in Vedantic principles: "I love India, not because I cultivate the idolatry of geography, nor because I have had the chance to be born in her soil, but because she has saved through tumultuous ages the living words that have issued from the illumined consciousness of her great sons: 'Satyam, Jnanam, Anantam, Brahma'. Brahma is truth, Brahma is wisdom, Brahma is infinite" (p.72). According to Vedanta, the fundamental essence of the universe is Brahma, meaning that the entire universe is Brahma and nothing else. The Sruti and various experienced teachers affirm that Brahma, the pure consciousness, permeates the entire universe, encompassing all objects and beings within it. The Purusha Sukta asserts that everything in the universe is essentially Purusha, and emphasizes that all that we observe is merely Purusha. The central message is 'Sarvam Purush Eva' or 'Purush Eva Idam Sarvam', signifying that everything—whether manifest or unmanifest, moving or stationary, static or dynamic, finite or infinite, destructible or indestructible—is ultimately Purusha alone. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states that Purusha or Self is self-illuminating. Vedanta teaches that the unchanging Atman serves as the foundation for all transient phenomena. In alignment with the Upanishads, Rabindranath Tagore posits that the divine essence resides within every individual. Tagore writes: "Whatever I truly think, truly feel, truly realize - its natural destiny is to find true expression. There is some force in me who continually works towards that end, but is not mine alone - it permeates the whole universe. When this universal being is manifested within an individual, it is beyond his control and acts according to its own nature; and in surrendering our lives to its power is our greatest joy" (Sadhana, p.5).

Unity, Interconnectedness and Tagore's Poetic Expression in Gitanjali

Rabindranath Tagore was profoundly influenced by the teachings of the Upanishads. Each mantra of the *Ishavasya Upanishad* left a significant mark on Tagore's mind. The opening mantra of the *Ishavasya Upanishad*: "Ishawasyamidam Sarvam" serves as the central theme of his renowned lyrics. Tagore believed that since all things are permeated by God, we should love every being. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore states: "In love there is no separation, but commingling always. So I rejoice in song and dance with each and all" (p. 109). He celebrates divine immanence, asserting that everything in the visible world is merely a manifestation of a single divine life. The first lyric of *Gitanjali* offers this

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

metaphorical insight: "This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life" (*Gitanjali*, p. 19), suggesting that God is immanent and all-pervasive. God is present not only in the simple playroom of a child but also in the heavens, influencing the stars' paths. Tagore reflects: "Thou didst not turn in contempt from my childish play among dust, and the steps that I heard in my playroom are the same that are echoing from star to star" (*Gitanjali*, p. 11). Tagore views creation as Maya or illusion. Humans, as parts of the creator, often elevate their ego out of ignorance and pride. When ignorance fades, the true self—unadulterated by multiplicity—emerges clearly, much like the sun appearing when clouds disperse. Tagore expresses this in lyric No. 71 of *Gitanjali*: "This screen that thou hast raised is painted with innumerable figures with the brush of the night and the day. Behind it thy seat is woven in wondrous mysterious of curves, casting away all barren lines of straightness. The great pageant of thee and me has overspread the sky with the tune of thee and me; all the air is vibrant, and all ages pass with the hiding and seeking of thee and me" (*Gitanjali*, p. 20). Tagore earnestly prays for God to remove his ego, pride, and vanity, which hinder his union with the Divine. He desires for his worldly self to diminish so he can attain freedom from the illusory self-creation: "I live in this little world of mine and am afraid to make it the least less. Lift me into thy world and let me have the freedom gladly to loose my all" (*Stray Birds*, p. 257).

Ethical Implications of Unity and Interconnectedness

According to Tagore, man has the infinite, but not in the sense that it is fully realized; rather, it exists inside him as potential. Once the curtain of "Avidya" is lifted, each person's soul becomes one with God. There is a gap that can be filled between God and humanity. Man can attain God's level of perfection. According to the Taittiriya Upanishad (p. 77), "He who knows Brahma obtains liberation" According to the Mundaka Upanishad, " He who knows that highest Brahman becomes like unto Brahman (153). Rabindranath Tagore declares with great fervour, "Yes we must become Brahma, we must not shrink from avowing this. Our existence is meaningless, if we never can expect to realize the highest perfection that there is" (*Sadhana*, p. 54).

Moreover, Tagore does not accept this doctrine of Man's sinfulness. In *Sadhana* he puts forward an interesting argument, when he says:

"It has been held that sinfulness
Is the nature of man and
Only by the spiritual grace of God
Can a particular person be saved?
This is like saying that the nature
Of seed is to remain enfolded within

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Its shell, and it is only by some
Special miracle that it can be grown
Into a tree" (*Sadhana* p154-55)

In Tagore's worldview, oneness is proclaimed, and everyone is taught to love and enmity should not exist. He claims that God is among the lowest and most humble people. He is never encountered by those who avoid the lowly and meek. When God is all-pervading, He basically coexists with the affluent and the poor, sharing their intelligence. The full communion with all people on the basis of equality and brotherhood is the essence of real worship of God.

2. Harmony and Ethical Living in Rabindranath Tagore's View of Upanishadic Religion

As the leading proponent of the theory that holds that God is immanent throughout the universe, present within, and manifests Himself through every natural object, Tagore discovered God in both man and other natural objects. The God of Tagore is not exclusive to kings; rather, He resides in the hearts of the lowly and humble, as evidenced by the exquisite dialogue he presents in 'Fruit Gathering' between the king and the saint Narottam:

"Sire, announced the servant to the king, the Saint Narottam has never deigned to enter your royal temple. He is singing God's praise under the trees by the open road. The temple is empty of worshippers. They flock round him like bees round the white lotus, leaving the golden jar of honey unheeded. The King, vexed at heart, went to the spot where Narottam sat on the grass. He asked him, Father, why leave my temple of the golden dome and sit on the dust outside to preach God's love? 'Because God is not there in your temple', said Narottam. The King frowned and said, 'Do you know, twenty millions of gold went to the making of that marvel of art, and it was consecrated to God with costly rites?' 'Yes, I know it', answered Narottam. 'It was in that year when thousands of your people whose houses had been burnt stood vainly asking for help at your door'. 'And God said, 'The poor creature who can give no shelter to his brothers would build my house'. 'And He took his place with the shelter less under the trees by the road". (*Fruit Gathering*, Lyric 34.)

Thus, we see that his poetry is imbued with a unique brand of spirituality that links us with humanity at large. Tagore feels the presence of God everywhere.

Compassion and Empathy

The Upanishads highlight the virtues of empathy (*daya*) and compassion (*karuna*), which are closely connected. It is made very evident in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (5.2.1-3) that a person has to acquire "these three—self-control, charity and compassion." According to Tagore, these virtues are necessary for leading a moral life and fostering social harmony. Tagore wrote, "Compassion is the hallmark of ethical conduct according to the Upanishads. It is through compassion that we acknowledge

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

our interconnectedness with all beings and act for their welfare" (Tagore, 2010, p. 92). Tagore's love for God includes love for everything else which he has created. The following lines reveal the mystical experience of Tagore:

"My poet's vanity dies in shame
Before thy sight.
O Master poet, I have sat down at thy feet.
Only let me make my life simple and
Straight, like a flute of reed for
Thee to fill with music" (Gitanjali, Poem 7)

The central theme of Tagore's poetry is realization through self-purification, love, constant prayer, dedication and surrender unto the Lord. In his superb lyrics Tagore explores the relationship of God and the human soul. There is a yearning of the individual soul for union with the Divine:

"I am restless, I have a thirst for faraway things
My soul goes out in longing to
Touch the skirt of the dim distance
Great Beyond, O the keen call of thy flute!
I forget, I ever forget, that I have no wings
To fly, that I am bound in this spot evermore!" (The Gardener. Lyric 5)

However, he never suggests giving up on life. He does not have the perspective of a traditional ascetic on life. Through unity with his fellow humans, Tagore aspires to unite with God. Not as a state citizen, but as a human being, was his interest. For him, humanity is the most important thing. He overcame regionalism's narrowness to become an advocate of mankind. He was deeply hurt by the unfair treatment and exploitation of the weak by the powerful, and he vigorously supported the cause of humanity. To Tagore 'Sabar Upar Manush Satya' or 'Man is the highest truth'. He writes,

"Pride of patriotism is not for me,
I earnestly hope that I shall find
My home everywhere in the world.
Before I leave it we have to
Fight against wrongs and suffer
For the cause of righteousness, but we should
Have no petty jealousies or quarrels with
Our neighbour merely because we
Have different names". (22)

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Tagore is a universal poet who has articulated the desire and ambition of all mankind. Tagore is a poet of 'Man'. He sympathizes with the suffering people, the impoverished and oppressed, the underdog and exploited. He saw the caste system and its associated practices of untouchability as among the worst blots on Indian civilization. It had hindered the Indian community from becoming a cohesive and homogenous whole, and it was a primary source of India's long-standing misery, destitution, and shame. In 'Atonement', which is in the original Gitantali but not included in the English version, he states:

"Those whom you have oppressed will certainly not pardon you. Those whose plight you have ignored, whose personality you have thwarted, whose human dignity you have usurped and whose humour you have denied will soon come in power because in the righteous judgement of the divinity controlling this universe, the unfortunate lot will also one day come to power. When they regain their dignity and prestige, they would like to crush and hit back those who stood in the way of their progress and prosperity for Centuries." (26)

Rabindranath Tagore thinks that the 'Supreme' exists in each individual. Our love should extend to all creatures, including the naked and hungry, the ill and the stranger. He thinks that service and generosity are universal. He is excited about the collaborative efforts to rebuild human civilization, where each person will be able to live with the respect and entitlements of a civilized man in a civilized planet. He aspires to create the bondage of love and friendship and drive hatred from the face of the planet.

Harmony with Nature

As for Tagore Nature, man, and God are all part of one undivided oneness. Tagore believes wholeheartedly in the immanence of God. God never fails to provide. He works nonstop everywhere, causing seeds to sprout, buds to open into flowers, and flowers to mature into fruits. God, therefore, is present in all of the universe's phenomenal vicissitudes.:

"Hidden in the heart of things thou art
Nourishing seeds into sprouts, buds into blossoms,
And ripening flowers in fruitfulness" (9)

The reiteration of the above expression is noticeable in the Upanishads, which states "Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma" (Everything is Brahman) and 'tat sristva ta devanu pravisat' (After creating the universe, He entered into every object created)

In his preface to Banabani, Tagore speaks of the dignity of nature and acknowledges that the element of spirituality lies latent or hidden in the natural world. Tagore treats nature as an integral part of God, fully adhering to the Vedanta philosophy which calls Nature and God "Prakriti" and "Purusha." In fact, Nature and God, or "Prakriti" and "Purusha," are the two aspects of the Absolute. Hence, nature

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

in Tagore's poetry is not something imposed from outside, but rather the very core of the Spirit. Tagore's thought is distinguished by the way he visualizes not only a relation of interdependence prevailing between spirit and nature, but also that of a unified harmony. Tagore discusses the value of nature and admits that spirituality is a latent quality that is concealed in Mother Nature's everlasting embrace. Realizing the worth and sacredness of nature is the first step in realizing this innate spirituality. Accordingly, Tagore believes that in addition to acknowledging the power of universal nature over universal mind, humanity must also answer the call of nature, for to ignore it is to lose the meaning of one's own existence. Assimilation, not rejection of nature, can nourish even the higher aspects of a man's life, which elevate him above the everyday aspects of life. He is both transcendent of nature and immanent in it at the same time.

Non-Violence (Ahimsa)

Ahimsa, or non-violence, is a central ethical principle in the Upanishads that Tagore embraced. He viewed ahimsa not only as a moral duty but as an expression of reverence for life itself. Rabindranath raised his voice wherever there was cruelty, barbarity, exploitation, atrocity, or aggression. For him, the entire world was a family and barriers of caste, creed, language, race, or religion were non-existent. In addition to epitomizing the soul of India through his poetry, Tagore also ushered it into the age of "one-world-ness.": Tagore emphasized, "Non-violence is the ethical imperative of the Upanishads. It teaches us to respect and protect all forms of life, recognizing the interconnectedness of all existence" (Tagore, 2010, p. 85).

Ahimsa, according to Tagore, is a way to achieve inner peace as well as peaceful coexistence with nature and other people. He thought that living an ahimsa-centered life develops empathy and a compassionate outlook.

3. Aesthetics and Ethics in Rabindranath Tagore's View of Upanishadic Religion

The foundation of Tagore's artistic theory is his idea of the personal man. The pinnacle of humanity, this guy dissolves the polarities inside himself and the cosmos. Scientific explanations describe the material universe. We are able to understand it intellectually and apply it to our advantage. However, the mind alone is unable to fully comprehend one aspect of the material universe. Instead, it requires a different degree of involvement, or more precisely, an emotional connection to the outside world. The foundation for the development of the human personality is provided by this latter aspect of human perception.

The universe of creation, or the world of art, is this one (What is Art, 349). The most common questions about the origins of art and its purpose are whether it stems from a social good, whether it was created

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

for human aesthetic enjoyment, or whether it is a reflection of the creative urge that is innate in all people.

Tagore believes that creation began with joy. Limiting the genesis of creativity to the pursuit of social welfare or knowledge narrows its scope. Ancient Indian rhetoricians believed that selfless delight is the essence of creating. However, Tagore cautions against using the term 'enjoyment' since it can have several connotations (What is Art, 351). Man has an emotional vitality that is not depleted in his quest for self-preservation. This overabundance of energy is vented via creativity. Human personalities grow and develop, and the world becomes more explored as a result. Our emotions transform the world of appearances into a more personal world of feelings. Speaking on the occasion Tagore writes: "Our emotions are like gastric juices which transform this world of appearance into the more intimate world of sentiments. On the other hand, this outer world of has its own juices, having their various qualities which excite our emotional activities. This is called in our Sanskrit rhetoric *rasa*, which signifies outer juices having their response in their inner juices of our emotions." (What is Art, p. 353)

The Art in Tagore's Concept

According to Tagore, creation is only possible when man rises above his everyday wants and discovers the delight of the surplus. This realization is achievable via the cultivation of compassion and fellow-feeling, or, more specifically, the cultivation of a sense of oneness with every being and object in the entire cosmos. Tagore contends: "...as the illumination of man's personality throws its light upon a wider space, penetrating into hidden corners, the world of art crosses its frontiers and extends to boundaries into unexplored regions.... Even the spirit of the desert has owned its kinship with him, and the lonely pyramids are there as memorials of the meeting of nature's silence of the human spirit. The darkness of the caves has yielded its stillness to man's soul, and in exchange has secretly been crowned with the wrath of art" (What is Art, p. 358-9).

Man becomes faithful to his nature when he recognizes his innate divinity and infinity. Man's intrinsic divinity serves as the source of creation. Realizing the divinity inside himself drives man to extend it to all aspects of his existence. Thus, man creates a living universe of truth and beauty, which Tagore claims is the role of art (What is Art, p. 359)." However, the situation begins to change once human concepts are freed from the constraints of knowledge. Humanity helps him to see that beauty does not reside in the dazzling look of this or that specific thing. Rather, beauty consists in the harmony of all, in the coherence of each and every element of creation, each of which may appear ordinary to the human eye (if taken individually), but when they coherently exist with one another, the truth of the creation is revealed, as is the beauty (The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, 335).

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Self-Realization

Tagore's approach to the concept of beauty might be compared to that of truth and goodness. He believes that the law of creation may be realized through the sense of truth, while the harmony of the cosmos can be understood through the feeling of beauty. Furthermore, only by realizing the rule in our moral nature can we gain power over ourselves and become truly free. Understanding the harmony in the physical world allows for a more unrestricted representation of beauty in art.

It is with the understanding of the harmony in our soul that the manifestation of beauty in our existence moves toward righteousness and love for the Infinite (The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, 335-36).

Cultivation of Ethical Virtues

Tagore thinks that only love allows us to have empathy for all objects and beings in the cosmos. According to the emission of this element of empathy, the concepts and representations of beauty in art(s) take on additional moral dimensions. Refined beauty creates 'joy' or ānanda, which differs from 'pleasure' as it is unaffected by nature. The thrill of creative achievement is inextricably linked to the joy of achieving Brahman, the underlying principle of the Cosmos, also known as Ultimate Reality. Tagore compares the nature of delight in art to encountering Reality (Brahmāvādasvarūpa).

Holistic Approach to Well-Being

Human existence is a journey from the finite to the infinite, from law to love, and from flaws to purity. This is the accomplishment of Brahma, or unlimited love. When a person reaches the level of infinity, his love has no limits. This affection for him spreads to all beings and objects, distant and close, all around him. He considers everything as an extension of himself³⁸⁰. Therein lies his genuine redemption. In creation, the creator may relate to the other. Because love is the fundamental nature of creation, the creator may see himself in every being and object that exists. As a result, the self-versus-other dilemma, or the duality between the subject and the object, is resolved.

Implications for Contemporary Society

Tagore's ethical framework encourages individuals to cultivate empathy, compassion, and nonviolence towards all beings. He advocated for a worldview that prioritizes kindness and understanding, which is crucial for addressing conflicts and injustices prevalent in contemporary society. For example, his writings frequently include individuals that attempt to learn and sympathize with others, regardless of their origin or circumstances, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society. Tagore's teachings on environmental sustainability highlight the interdependence of all life forms as well as the significance of living in peace with the natural world. He thought that people are an inherent component of the ecosystem and, as such, have a responsibility to conserve and maintain the natural

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

world. This viewpoint is becoming increasingly relevant as we confront global environmental concerns such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Tagore's philosophy advocates for a sustainable and balanced relationship with the Earth, encouraging activities that respect and protect natural resources for future generation

Furthermore, Tagore's focus on nonviolence as a core ethical value is consistent with the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., both of whom were influenced by his beliefs. Tagore defines nonviolence as more than just the absence of physical violence; it also includes the growth of understanding, empathy, and respect for the dignity of others. In a society plagued by conflicts and tensions, Tagore's ideology of nonviolence provides a compelling alternative way to settling disputes and fostering peace. Tagore's literary masterpieces, such as "Gitanjali" and "The Religion of Man," vividly depict individuals that embody these ethical values in their interactions and decisions. Characters in his works frequently express empathy and compassion for others, calling for understanding and reconciliation above conflict and aggressiveness. These vignettes demonstrate how Tagore's ethical principles may be implemented in real-life circumstances to achieve societal peace and fairness.

Thus, Rabindranath Tagore's ethical interpretation of Upanishadic teachings provides a compelling foundation for addressing current ethical concerns. His emphasis on harmony, nonviolence, compassion, and empathy offers useful insight for building a more just, sustainable, and humane society in today's linked world. Individuals and societies who embrace Tagore's concept may endeavor to promote social justice, environmental sustainability, and global solidarity, resulting in a more harmonious and peaceful world for years to come.

References

- Das, S. K. (2012). Ethical Perspectives in Rabindranath Tagore's The Religion of Man. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 2. (12), 1-6. Retrieved from <http://www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-1212/ijsrp-p1251.pdf>
- Neogy, Prithwish (Ed.). Rabindranath Tagore: On Art and Aesthetics, A Selection of Lectures, Essays and Letters. India, Orient Longmans, 1961.
- Tagore, R. *The Religion Of Man: Being The Hibbert Lectures For 1930*. Kessinger Publishing, 2010
- Tagore, Rabindranath, "Personality". *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Academy, 2017
- Tagore, Rabindranath, "Sadhana", *The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Sahitya Academy Publications, edited by Sisir Kumar Das, 2017.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Stray Birds*. 1916. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

<https://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/rt/stray.htm>

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali*. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1915.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Sadhana: The Realisation Of Life*. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1915.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *A Vision of India's History*. India, Visva-Bharati, 1962.

Taittiriya Upanishad. [Aitareya and Taittiriya Upanishads with Shankara Bhashya](#). Trans. S. S Sastri.

Vol.5, The India printing Works, 1923.

Mundak Upanishad. *The Upanishads*. Trans. Swami Paramananda. Vol.1. 3rd Ed. The Vedanta Centre, 1941.