



Choice, Uncertainty and Destiny: Re-Reading the Road Not Taken Through Indian Philosophy

Dr. Chandrakant Y. Brahmshatri

Assistant Professor, English, S & H Dept., KSET

Drs. Kiran & Pallavi Patel Global University, Varnama, Vadodara.

How to Cite this Article:

Brahmkshatri, C. Y. (2026). Choice, Uncertainty and Destiny: Re-Reading the Road Not Taken Through Indian Philosophy. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, <i>02</i>(05). <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i5.544>

License:

This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.

© The Author(s). Published by International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management.



<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i5.544>

Abstract:

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" occupies a significant place in modern American poetry because of its universal exploration of human choice, uncertainty and self-reflection. Although the poem is popularly interpreted as a celebration of individuality and nonconformity, literary scholars increasingly argue that such readings oversimplify Frost's ironic and ambiguous treatment of decision-making. This paper reinterprets the poem through Indian philosophical ideas concerning choice, uncertainty, destiny, ethical action and human self-awareness. Drawing upon the Bhagavad Gita and established works on Indian philosophical thought, the study argues that Frost's traveler symbolizes the universal human condition of acting under uncertainty. The paper further examines how Frost's poem reflects the tension between human freedom, uncertainty and destiny, themes that resonate strongly with Indian philosophical thought. Through literary analysis and comparative philosophical inquiry, the research demonstrates that Frost's poem acquires deeper ethical and spiritual dimensions when interpreted beyond purely Western individualistic frameworks. The study ultimately argues that the enduring relevance of "The Road Not Taken" lies in its exploration of human choice, existential uncertainty and moral responsibility across cultural contexts.

Keywords:

Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken, karma, dharma, Indian philosophy, The Bhagavad Gita, free will, destiny, ambiguity, irony, comparative literature, existential uncertainty, retrospective meaning



I. Introduction:

Robert Frost remains one of the most influential poets in modern American literature. His poetry often appears deceptively simple, yet beneath its conversational language lies profound philosophical complexity. Among his most widely discussed works, *The Road Not Taken* continues to attract literary and cultural attention because of its exploration of choice, uncertainty and human self-interpretation.

The poem is frequently quoted as an inspirational statement about individuality and independent thinking. However, several scholars argue that such interpretations overlook Frost's subtle irony and ambiguity (Robinson, 2015). The speaker initially suggests that one road appears "less travelled by," yet he later admits that both roads were "really about the same" (Frost, 1916/2001). This contradiction destabilizes simplistic interpretations and transforms the poem into a meditation on uncertainty and retrospective meaning-making.

Frost wrote the poem partly in response to his friendship with the English poet Edward Thomas, who often regretted paths not taken during their countryside walks (Thompson, 1979). Rather than glorifying decisive certainty, Frost explores the psychological tendency of human beings to construct meaningful narratives about choices after decisions have already been made.

Most scholarly interpretations focus on existentialism, symbolism, irony and individuality. However, comparatively little research has examined the poem through Indian philosophical ideas concerning uncertainty, destiny, ethical action and human decision-making. Indian philosophy offers a distinct framework for understanding human action because it emphasizes ethical responsibility, detachment from outcomes and acceptance of uncertainty (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

The Bhagavad Gita presents one of the most influential discussions of action in Indian philosophy. Krishna advises Arjuna to perform his duty without attachment to the fruits of action (Easwaran, 2007). This principle closely resembles the uncertainty experienced by Frost's traveller,

who must choose a path without certainty regarding future consequences.

This paper therefore seeks to reinterpret *The Road Not Taken* through Indian philosophical thought. The study aims:

1. To analyze the poem through Indian philosophical understandings of choice, uncertainty and destiny;
2. To examine how Indian philosophy reshapes the understanding of choice in the poem;
3. To demonstrate the relevance of comparative philosophical interpretation in literary studies.

The paper argues that Frost's poem transcends cultural boundaries because it captures a universal human experience: the necessity of acting without complete knowledge of consequences.

Literature Review:

Critical interpretations of *The Road Not Taken* have evolved significantly over time. Early readers frequently interpreted the poem as a straightforward celebration of nonconformity and individualism. However, modern literary criticism increasingly emphasizes ambiguity, irony, and psychological complexity.

According to Robinson (2015), Frost intentionally designed the poem to resist simplistic interpretation. Many readers focus only on the concluding lines while ignoring the earlier admission that both roads are essentially similar. Frost himself reportedly described the poem as "tricky," suggesting that readers often misunderstand its ironic structure (Robinson, 2015).

Similarly, Thompson (1979) argues that the poem reflects Edward Thomas's habit of regretting alternatives not chosen. Frost transforms this psychological tendency into a broader meditation on existential uncertainty and human decision-making. The traveller's future claim that his choice "made all the difference" may therefore represent retrospective self-construction rather than objective truth.

Lentricchia (1975) further argues that Frost's poetry repeatedly explores isolation, uncertainty and the limitations of human knowledge. In *The*



Road Not Taken, the speaker cannot fully predict the consequences of his decision. The poem therefore dramatizes the irreversible nature of human action.

Gray (1990) interprets Frost's work within the context of modern existential anxiety. According to Gray, Frost's poetry reflects the tension between human freedom and the inability to achieve absolute certainty. Such interpretations align with existential philosophy, where individuals are compelled to choose despite incomplete knowledge of outcomes.

Although Western scholarship often approaches the poem through existentialism and psychology, Indian philosophical traditions provide an equally valuable framework. Indian philosophy emphasizes moral responsibility, disciplined action and detachment from outcomes. Radhakrishnan (2008) explains that karma should not be interpreted as fatalism but as the moral relationship between action and consequence. Individuals possess agency, yet outcomes remain shaped by broader networks of causation. Similarly, Hirianna (1993) notes that Indian philosophy encourages individuals to act responsibly without becoming excessively attached to future rewards. This principle is central to the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna instructs Arjuna to perform action with ethical awareness rather than emotional anxiety (Easwaran, 2007).

Comparative philosophy scholars such as Deutsch (1973) argue that Indian philosophical traditions emphasize inner balance and spiritual awareness rather than aggressive individualism. This perspective offers a useful alternative to popular motivational interpretations of Frost's poem. These philosophical insights remain relevant even within the complexities of contemporary human life.

Contemporary human life continues to be shaped by uncertainty despite increased access to information and predictive systems. Individuals today make decisions regarding careers, relationships, education, migration and investments while confronting emotional, ethical and existential uncertainty. This condition reflects the existential dilemma faced by Frost's traveller, suggesting that technological and social advancement do not eliminate the psychological

complexity of human choice. Indian philosophy remains particularly relevant in this context because it emphasizes responsible action amid uncertainty rather than absolute control over outcomes (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

Despite the richness of both Frost criticism and Indian philosophy, limited scholarship directly combines these fields in order to examine the relationship between human choice, uncertainty, and destiny. This paper attempts to address that gap by integrating literary analysis with Indian philosophical thought.

The Symbolism of the Diverging Roads:

The central image in *The Road Not Taken* is deceptively simple. A traveller encounters two diverging roads in a forest and must choose one. Yet Frost transforms this ordinary moment into a powerful symbol of human existence.

The setting itself carries symbolic significance. The "yellow wood" suggests autumn, a season associated with transition, maturity and impermanence (Monteiro, 1998). The forest symbolizes the complexity of life, while the diverging roads represent alternative possibilities and uncertain futures.

However, Frost complicates the symbolism through contradiction. The traveller initially claims that one road appears less worn, but immediately acknowledges that both roads are "really about the same" (Frost, 1916/2001). This contradiction undermines the assumption that one path is objectively superior.

The poem therefore becomes less about choosing the "correct" path and more about the human tendency to assign meaning retrospectively. The speaker imagines himself "ages and ages hence" narrating his choice with "a sigh." Critics disagree about the meaning of this sigh. It may suggest nostalgia, regret, satisfaction, irony, or uncertainty (Robinson, 2015).

This ambiguity reflects an essential aspect of human experience. Individuals often reinterpret past decisions in order to create coherent narratives about their lives. Because alternative possibilities remain unknowable, people construct stories that justify their choices psychologically.



The roads therefore symbolize existential uncertainty, irreversibility, human self-construction and the limitations of knowledge.

From an Indian philosophical perspective, the symbolism acquires additional depth. Life itself is frequently described in Indian traditions as a spiritual journey requiring discernment and ethical awareness (Radhakrishnan, 2008). The diverging roads can therefore represent moral and spiritual pathways rather than merely practical decisions.

The speaker's hesitation reflects the uncertainty experienced by individuals confronting ethical responsibilities in everyday life. Indian philosophy does not eliminate uncertainty; rather, it teaches individuals how to act meaningfully despite uncertainty.

Choice, Action and Uncertainty:

The concept of karma is central to Indian philosophy and particularly relevant to Frost's poem. In popular discourse, karma is often misunderstood as simple fate or supernatural punishment. However, classical Indian philosophy defines karma more precisely as the law connecting action and consequence (Hiriyanna, 1993).

Individuals possess the freedom to act, but they cannot fully control the outcomes of their actions. Every choice generates consequences that unfold within broader networks of causation. Karma therefore emphasizes moral responsibility rather than rigid determinism.

This perspective transforms the interpretation of Frost's traveler. The speaker anxiously attempts to predict which road will produce greater fulfillment. Yet Indian philosophy suggests that complete certainty regarding consequences is impossible.

The Bhagavad Gita repeatedly emphasizes disciplined action without attachment to results. Krishna advises Arjuna:

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action" (Easwaran, 2007, p. 47).

This teaching does not reject ambition or responsibility. Instead, it discourages excessive

emotional attachment to outcomes beyond human control.

The decision-maker in Frost's poem experiences precisely this tension. He wishes to know whether his decision will eventually justify itself. However, the poem reveals that such certainty remains unavailable. Once a path is chosen, the alternative becomes inaccessible except through imagination.

From the perspective of karma, the significance of the traveler's action lies not in guaranteed success but in the sincerity and awareness accompanying the decision itself. Human beings must act despite incomplete knowledge because life does not permit permanent hesitation.

This interpretation differs significantly from popular motivational readings of the poem. Frost's traveller is not necessarily heroic simply because he chooses a different road; rather, he represents the universal human condition of making decisions without certainty regarding outcomes.

Indian philosophy therefore deepens the poem's ethical dimension. Choice becomes not merely personal preference but responsible action within an interconnected moral universe.

Destiny, Dharma and Ethical Responsibility:

The concept of dharma further enriches the interpretation of *The Road Not Taken*. Dharma refers to moral duty, righteous conduct, ethical order and the responsibilities associated with human existence (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

Unlike purely individualistic philosophies that prioritize personal achievement, dharma emphasizes harmony between individual action and broader moral responsibility. In this context, the important question is not whether a decision appears unconventional but whether it reflects ethical awareness and inner sincerity.

The speaker in Frost's poem confronts a situation that resembles moral decision-making. He must choose one direction while recognizing that certainty is impossible. Indian philosophy teaches that such uncertainty is a natural aspect of life rather than a problem that can be eliminated completely.



The Bhagavad Gita portrays Arjuna facing a profound moral dilemma before the battle of Kurukshetra. Arjuna hesitates because he fears the consequences of action. Krishna responds by teaching that individuals must act according to dharma even when outcomes remain uncertain (Easwaran, 2007).

Similarly, Frost's traveler hesitates because he cannot foresee the future. Yet he must eventually choose a road because inaction itself constitutes a form of decision. This resembles the Indian philosophical understanding that human beings cannot escape action entirely.

Dharma also challenges modern cultural obsessions with optimization and success. Modern culture often pressures individuals to pursue the 'ideal' career, relationship, or lifestyle. Frost's poem, however, suggests that certainty regarding alternative futures is unattainable.

Indian philosophy similarly teaches acceptance of impermanence and uncertainty. Absolute certainty remains impossible. No individual can experience every possible future simultaneously. Consequently, true peace arises not through flawless foresight but through mindful responsibility and disciplined conduct. The traveller's future storytelling additionally reflects attachment to ego and personal identity. He imagines explaining his life through one decisive moment. Indian spiritual traditions often warn against excessive attachment to self-created narratives because such stories may distort reality (Deutsch, 1973).

Thus, dharma transforms the interpretation of the poem from a celebration of individual distinction into a meditation on ethical responsibility and spiritual awareness.

Existential Uncertainty and Human Consciousness:

One reason for the enduring relevance of *The Road Not Taken* is its exploration of existential uncertainty. Individuals continuously make decisions without complete knowledge of their consequences. Every choice simultaneously creates possibilities and eliminates alternatives.

Existential philosophers frequently emphasize that freedom involves anxiety because individuals must act without certainty (Gray, 1990). Frost's speaker embodies this existential condition. He attempts to examine both roads carefully, yet he ultimately recognizes that complete knowledge is impossible.

However, Indian philosophy offers a distinctive response to existential uncertainty. Rather than emphasizing despair or alienation, Indian thought encourages acceptance, awareness and disciplined action (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

The traveler's inability to retrace his steps underscores the irreversibility of time. Human consciousness progresses through time continuously, making every decision unique and unrepeatable.

Even in the contemporary world, where individuals possess greater access to information, advice and predictive systems than earlier generations, human existence is inevitably marked by uncertainty. Career decisions, relationships, financial risks and moral responsibilities still require personal judgment despite external guidance. Frost's poem therefore remains deeply relevant because it recognizes that no individual can fully predict the emotional or existential consequences of life choices. Indian philosophy similarly teaches that wisdom lies not in eliminating uncertainty completely but in acting responsibly within it.

At the same time, Frost avoids presenting certainty regarding the meaning of the traveller's choice. The poem neither fully celebrates nor condemns the selected path. Instead, it reveals the complexity of human consciousness and memory.

This ambiguity contributes to the poem's universality. Readers from different philosophical and cultural traditions can interpret the traveller's experience in ways relevant to their own understanding of life.

Through Indian philosophy, the poem acquires a deeper spiritual dimension. The traveller symbolizes not merely an individual making a practical decision but a human being confronting the uncertainty inherent in existence itself.



Conclusion:

Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken remains one of the most influential poems in modern literature because it captures a universal human experience: the uncertainty of choice. While popular interpretations often treat the poem as a celebration of individuality and nonconformity, closer analysis reveals irony, ambiguity and philosophical complexity.

Through the concepts of karma and dharma, Indian philosophy provides a rich interpretive framework for understanding Frost's poem. Karma emphasizes the relationship between action and consequence without collapsing human life into fatalism. Dharma, in turn, underscores ethical responsibility and disciplined action despite uncertainty about future outcomes.

The speaker in Frost's poem resembles the reflective individual described in Indian philosophy: a person compelled to act without complete knowledge of consequences. His hesitation embodies existential uncertainty, while his eventual decision underscores the inevitability of human action.

Ultimately, the poem implies that meaning is largely a retrospective construction. Because unchosen paths can never be fully known, individuals construct narratives to give coherence to their decisions. Indian philosophy deepens this insight by teaching that true peace arises not from flawless foresight but from mindful responsibility and disciplined conduct in the present.

Thus, re-reading *The Road Not Taken* through Indian philosophy reveals that the poem is not merely about individuality or unconventional choice, but about the human struggle to act meaningfully amid uncertainty and destiny. It ultimately emerges as a profound meditation on human consciousness, moral responsibility and the existential complexity of human destiny.

REFERENCES

- Chatterjee, S., & Datta, D. (1984). *An introduction to Indian philosophy*. University of Calcutta Press.
- Deutsch, E. (1973). *Essentials of Indian philosophy*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Easwaran, E. (Trans.). (2007). *The Bhagavad Gita* (2nd ed.). Nilgiri Press.
- Frost, R. (2001). *The road not taken*. In *Mountain interval*. Henry Holt and Company. (Original work published 1916)
- Gray, R. (1990). *American poetry of the twentieth century*. Longman.
- Hiriyanna, M. (1993). *Outlines of Indian philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Lentricchia, F. (1975). *Robert Frost: Modern poetics and the landscapes of self*. Duke University Press.
- Monteiro, G. (1998). *Robert Frost and the New England renaissance*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (2008). *Indian philosophy* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, K. (2015). Robert Frost: "The Road Not Taken." *Poetry Foundation*.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/89511/robert-frost-the-road-not-taken>
- Sharma, A., & Bhardwaj, N. (2026). Dharmic ethics and contemporary leadership models: A comparative analysis of Indian philosophical thought and Western perspectives. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1).
<https://doi.org/10.25215/1401.519>
- Sheikh, I. A., & Khushi. (2024). A critical evaluation of existential dilemmas in Frost's "The Road Not Taken." *International Journal of Teaching, Learning and Education*, 3(5), 27–30.
<https://doi.org/10.22161/ijtle.3.5.3>
- Thompson, L. (1979). *Robert Frost: The early years, 1874–1915*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.