A study in karma
When people say, ‘It is my karma,' they are usually referring to a causal connection between action and consequence. They are looking at karma in terms of reward or punishment, the consequences of actions past and present. But karma means act, action, performance so why the shift in emphasis to consequences? I believe it is because consequences help us understand the nature of the choices for action that we make.

As our choices are based on imperfect knowledge, there are always unforeseen circumstances and there can be no guarantee that we have made the right choices. Our actions, therefore, represent leaps of faith and we get things right or wrong; even our belief in the ‘rightness'/‘wrongness' of our actions and judgments cannot be taken for granted.

Nevertheless we believe and that is what Hindus call ‘maya' (illusion), mistaking relative for absolute truth.
Though defined as act, action, performance, karma incorporates choice based on uncertainty, and points to the ambiguity of our actions and of our existence. It indicates the human paradox, human finiteness in an infinite universe.

The mystery of our existence makes it impossible for worldly truth to be anything but relative.

So we cannot avoid karma.

And karma is the tool by which to examine the complexity of our being in the world.

In our worldly existence, we have created superstructures over uncertainty and mystery to give meaning and stability to our existence. Naming, classifying and categorising give fixity and order to the conduct of our lives and provide us with the alphabet to make sense of our world and the universe. We rely on names, classes and categories for the truth of our beliefs. Though such definition does not represent absolute knowledge, we nevertheless use the term ‘categorical' synonymously with ‘absolute'.
But as worldly truth is relative not absolute, our ability to classify leads not only to the ability to interpret, but also to misinterpret and therein lies karma - choice and action based on incomplete knowledge, on ignorance.

Our ability to misinterpret becomes pronounced when we apply classifications and categories to human beings. In *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster brings makers of definitions to a world that defies definition.

‘India has few important towns. India is the country, fields, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills and more fields.

The branch-line stops, the road is only practicable for cars to a point, the bullock-carts lumber down the side-tracks, paths fray out into the cultivation, and disappear near a splash of red paint.
How can the mind take hold of such a country?

Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile.

The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home.

India knows of their trouble.

She knows of the whole world's trouble to its uttermost depth.

She calls ‘Come' through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august.

But come to what?

She has never defined.

She is not a promise, only an appeal.'

(p. 120)
The novel portrays people caught in the twilight of relative truth, who seek to limit infinity in definitions, their own culturally constructed definitions, and are defeated when confronted by the Marabar Caves.

Mrs Moore is terrified:

‘...while she was pottering about, the Marabar struck its gong.

What had spoken to her in that scoured-out cavity of granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small.

Before time, it was before space also.

Something sub-nosed, incapable of generosity - the
undying worm itself.

Since hearing its voice, she had not entertained one large thought...
(p. 184)

Adela is traumatised:

‘... I remember scratching the wall with my fingernail, to start the usual echo, and then as I was saying there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance tunnel, bottling me up. It seemed like an age, but I suppose the whole thing can't have lasted thirty seconds really. I hit at him with the glasses, he pulled me round the cave by the strap, it broke, I escaped, that's all.

He never actually touched me once.

It all seems such nonsense.’
(p. 171)
Fielding is unimpressed. The Caves do not speak to him.
He is not looking for infinite truths.
For him India is its people.

But the Caves speak to Mrs Moore and Adela. Each finds meaning in the Caves relative to her own existence.
For one it is the undying worm, for the other it is a bottling up and an escape.
They bring their own unspoken fears to resound like thunder in the Caves and are overwhelmed.
They do not find the meaning of the Caves; they find only themselves, relative rather than infinite truths.
The main focus of the novel is on three people, all on different quests, consciously and unconsciously in search of themselves: Cyril Fielding, the atheist, seeking freedom from restricting social definitions, Dr Aziz, the Muslim, seeking brotherhood, and Adela Quested seeking the meaning of life.

They live in the little town of Chandrapore.

The British contingent at the Civil Station represent people who live within categorisations of race and class and therefore find it impossible to interact on anything but
a business level with Indians. The Civil Station represents their own group area where they try to recreate the life they knew in Britain.

They are censorious of those who mix with Indians - Fielding, Mrs Moore and Adela Quested.

They believe in the superiority of their cultural definitions and judge others by their ability to adapt to them.

The failure of Indians to live up to their expectations confirms them in their attitudes of superiority, condescension and contempt.

They live in karmic self-satisfaction, unaware that it is karmic.

Then Adela arrives on the scene. She is the catalyst of British pretentions especially in Aziz and he in turn becomes the catalyst of her attitudes to India.

Aziz and Adela, Indian and Briton, passion and intellect, obverse sides of the human coin are involved in searches
for definitions in each other's cultures.

Both are divided people, he from his self-respect, she from her emotions.

Aziz wants to be defined in British terms. He is a passionate man whose feelings dictate his actions - his instinctive, impulsive love for Mrs Moore, Fielding and Godbole - and lead to his desire to please.

His interactions with Mrs Moore, Adela and Fielding appear to be attempts to ingratiate himself with them and the trip to the Marabar Caves seems to be his ultimate act of ingratiation.

But it is also an act of love and a demonstration of his understanding of honour in British terms.

Its outcome leads to disgrace in the eyes of the very people whom he has sought to emulate and leads to his hatred of them, especially of Adela, whose cold reason and judgment are abhorrent to him.
It is this reversal of his esteem for the British that eventually opens his eyes, allows him to accept the diversity of his own world, India, and overcome the hatred that was really self-hatred.

Adela Quested wants to find definitions of India. Hers is a purely intellectual pursuit but in the Marabar Caves she confronts the force of repressed emotions.

Confused by this infusion of feeling, she blames Aziz.

His passion and emotion have subconsciously penetrated through to her cold rationalism and made her emotionally vulnerable. So she blames him without understanding why.

Aziz's trial is really her trial where she comes to understand intellectually the mistake she has made.

She has still to learn to allow her feelings to play a part in her understanding.

That is why she cannot remain in India, India demands emotional involvement of which she is still not capable.
‘If she had shown emotion in court, broke down, beat her breast, and invoked the name of God, she would have summoned forth his imagination and generosity - he (Aziz) had plenty of both. But while relieving the oriental mind she had chilled it, with the result that he could scarcely believe she was sincere, and indeed from his standpoint she was not. For her behaviour rested on cold justice and honesty; she had felt while she recanted, no passion of love for those whom she had wronged. Truth is not truth in that exacting land unless there go with it kindness and more kindness and kindness again, unless the Word that was with God also is God.

And the girl's sacrifice - so creditable according to Western notions - was rightly rejected, because though it came from the heart, it did not include her heart.

A few garlands from students were all that India ever gave her in return. (p. 217)
The Brahmin, Godbole, is the only character in the novel who does not succumb to the need to define. He gives no description of The Caves, gives no judgment on others.

Fielding finds frustrating his unwillingness to pronounce on things.

‘Fielding sunk his head on his arms; really, Indians were sometimes unbearable.’ (p.156)

The name Godbole (God=sweet, bole=talk) means sweet talk.

Godbole, who does not use words that are reductionist, karmic, is the personification of mystery and Fielding finds him impossible.

For Fielding there is no mystery; existence is simply a
muddle and therefore not worth pondering.

Fielding has yet to discover that ‘there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' In the end Fielding, the atheist, marries Stella Moore, who has embraced Hinduism with its hundreds of manifestations of the ultimate mystery.

We have to assume that he has embarked on a quest to discover that mystery and infinity are not divorced from our existence.

In the novel we meet characters looking for balance in their lives, looking for the synergy of their individual diversities, the balance between love and understanding, self-esteem and self-criticism, similarity and difference. In the end, Aziz seeks it in his association with Godbole, Fielding in his marriage to Stella Moore and Adela in her heart.

For Godbole there are no boundaries; for all the others boundaries define their existences and they have to learn
to overcome the limitations they impose.