

From Stillness to Struggle: The Role of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* in Shaping Emotional Experience

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Abstract

The eternal struggle between mind and soul shapes human existence. We have long pondered whether the soul guides our lives or the mind holds ultimate control. Picturing the soul as a constant, universal device, an observer that lacks the means to perceive the world. In contrast to the soul, the mind is a composite of three elements, which are *Sattva* (intellect), *Rajas* (activity), and *Tamas* (inertia). These three elements define our complete human experience, influencing our reactions based on their combination. When the mind receives observations from the soul, it responds, creating an effect that the soul feels. Emotions like happiness, sadness, anxiety, and anger are not inherent to the soul; instead, they are reflections of the responses of the mind. At an individual level, the soul remains silent, merely mirroring the reaction of the mind. The balance of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* shapes the human mind, influencing how we perceive and react to situations in life. These elements coexist in varying degrees, rendering emotions complex and blurring introspection through cognitive dissonance. Attachments formed during this struggle impact well-being, yet understanding the root of our actions can empower us to face challenges more wisely. This study explores how the interplay of *Guṇas* creates dissonance and shapes existence, examining whether our actions stem from true awareness or shifting mental tendencies. By analyzing this dynamic, the research offers deeper insights into emotional and psychological conflicts, highlighting the transformative power of self-awareness in navigating the complexities of life.

Keywords: Cognition, Discrepancies, Dissonance, *Rajas* (Activity), *Sattva* (Intellect), *Tamas* (Inertia).

Introduction

Human cognition is not a passive mechanism that merely receives impressions from the external world; rather, it is an active, interpretive faculty that shapes the way individuals perceive, engage with, and construct reality. The mind does not function as a neutral container of sensory input but as a dynamic processor that continuously organizes, evaluates, and interprets stimuli through cycles of perception (*pratyakṣa*), judgment, emotion, and volition. This understanding of cognition as an ongoing interaction between subject and environment resonates with contemporary theories of embodied and enactive cognition, while also finding deep roots in classical Indian philosophical systems, particularly in *Sāṃkhya* and *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* traditions (1, 2). Both perspectives reject the notion of cognition as a detached or purely computational mechanism, instead foregrounding its dynamic, relational, and value-laden character. The study of cognition in Indian philosophy is fundamentally tied to the concept of the three *Guṇas*- *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*, which are

intrinsic, dynamic qualities of *Prakṛti* (primordial nature). Unlike fleeting moods or temperaments, the *Guṇas* are ontological constituents that form the very basis of the material cosmos as well as the mental and psychological apparatus (3). *Sattva* is associated with clarity, harmony, wisdom, and ethical discernment; *Rajas* with restlessness, activity, desire, and ambition; and *Tamas* with inertia, ignorance, and confusion. Although these three are always present in the psyche, their proportions shift constantly, and the dominant *Guṇa* at any moment decisively shapes cognition, motivation, and behavior (4).

This framework highlights an essential insight: cognition is never uniform or universally stable but is conditioned by the fluctuating interplay of the *Guṇas*. For example, a *Sattva*-dominant mind tends toward accurate perception, calm reasoning, and moral clarity, while a *Rajasic* mind may distort reasoning through restlessness or ambition, and a *Tamasic* mind may succumb to lethargy, delusion, or misperception. Thus, epistemic processes are not merely functions of the intellect but are always

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intertwined with the qualitative constitution of the mind. This perspective positions the *Guṇas* not only as psychological tendencies but also as epistemic determinants that shape both what is known and how it is known (5). Indian epistemology further supports this connection by identifying *pramāṇas* (means of valid knowledge), with perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and reliable testimony (*śabda*) being the most prominent (6). A mind dominated by *Tamas* may misinterpret reality, a *Rajasic* disposition may lead to overextension of inference or distorted logic, while a *Sattvic* disposition encourages coherence, accuracy, and ethical evaluation. This recognition of cognition as a value-laden and quality-conditioned process complicates the simplistic assumption that knowledge is universally accessible in a uniform manner. Instead, it underscores the importance of cultivating the right mental balance for authentic knowledge acquisition.

Human cognition has been a central theme of inquiry in both classical Indian philosophy and modern psychology. Across traditions, the question of how thought, emotion, and identity are shaped by internal dispositions and external contexts has guided the development of explanatory models. While Indian frameworks such as the theory of the three *Guṇas* (*Sattva*, *Rajas*, *Tamas*) sought to classify the qualitative conditions of consciousness, contemporary psychology has focused on cognition, personality, and emotion through empirical and cross-cultural approaches. An integrative review of the scholarship reveals important convergences, gaps, and possibilities for synthesis between these domains.

In Indian traditions, the *Guṇas* were never conceived merely as abstract metaphysical entities but as practical determinants of human behavior and mental life. *Sāṃkhya* philosophy places the *Guṇas* at the heart of its ontology and psychology, explaining that all mental activity, from perception to judgment, is conditioned by the interplay of *Sattva* (clarity, balance), *Rajas* (activity, passion), and *Tamas* (inertia, ignorance) (1). This triadic model accounts for variations in personality, ethical tendencies, and cognitive orientation. *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* thought complements this perspective by examining how epistemic processes such as perception (*pratyakṣa*),

inference (*anumāna*), and testimony (*śabda*) are shaped by internal states, underscoring that cognition is inseparable from broader ontological and moral contexts (2). Thus, Indian psychology embedded cognitive theories within a holistic account of consciousness, personality, and ethics. A key insight of this tradition is that cognition is never value-neutral. Knowledge acquisition is not only a logical process but also a moral and affective one. For example, the predominance of *Sattva* enables clarity, detachment, and truth-seeking, while an excess of *Rajas* may lead to impulsive reasoning driven by ambition, and *Tamas* may cloud judgment through lethargy or delusion (3). This anticipates the modern psychological recognition that emotion and disposition play central roles in shaping perception, decision-making, and belief formation. By framing cognition as both epistemic and ethical, Indian psychology offered an integrative approach that resonates with contemporary concerns in personality and emotional studies.

Modern cognitive science, particularly the paradigm of embodied cognition, echoes these insights. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch argued that cognition is not simply the manipulation of symbols or disembodied reasoning but arises from the dynamic interaction of body, environment, and lived experience (4, 5). This framework rejects earlier computational models of the mind, emphasizing instead that perception, action, and emotion are deeply interwoven. In this sense, embodied and enactive approaches parallel the Indian notion that cognition is always conditioned by qualitative states (*Guṇas*) that mediate not only reasoning but also affective and moral dimensions. Cognition, whether understood in Indian or modern contexts, emerges as context-sensitive, dynamic, and embodied.

Several comparative scholars have sought to build bridges between Indian theories and contemporary psychology. Some studies interpret the *Guṇas* as phenomenological categories mapping onto affective-cognitive dispositions that influence knowledge acquisition and personality formation (6). Larson underscores the role of *Sattva* as a regulative principle that fosters clarity and coherence, drawing parallels with theories of cognitive balance and emotional regulation in psychology (7). Sharma extends this analysis by proposing that *Guṇic* dispositions

provide a framework for understanding cognitive dissonance, self-regulation, and decision-making (8). These studies suggest that the Guṇas can enrich modern models of personality and emotional studies by offering a typology of internal dispositions that dynamically structure cognition. At the same time, research in modern psychology has developed its own typologies of personality and emotion. Trait theories such as the Big Five (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) have sought to provide universal frameworks for personality (9). Emotional regulation theories explore how individuals manage affective states to maintain cognitive balance (10). However, critics argue that these models often lack the integrative ethical and metaphysical dimensions that Indian psychology provides. Whereas the Guṇas explain not only how people think and feel but also why certain cognitive states align with liberation (*mokṣa*) or delusion (*moha*), modern psychology tends to compartmentalize cognition, emotion, and morality into separate domains (11). This creates space for cross-cultural dialogue in which Indian frameworks may supply missing integrative elements.

The theory of cognitive dissonance in psychology provides a striking case of such dialogue. Festinger described dissonance as the psychological discomfort that arises when individuals hold conflicting beliefs or when behavior contradicts belief, leading to attempts at restoring equilibrium through rationalization or behavioral change (12). This concept resonates with the Indian idea that inner conflict emerges when *Guṇic* dispositions clash. An individual may, for example, possess Sattvic awareness of ethical duty yet feel overpowered by *Rajasic* ambition or Tamasic inertia, resulting in fragmentation and indecision. Indian texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* illustrate this vividly in *Arjuna's* dilemma, where conflicting dispositions of compassion (*Sattva*), attachment (*Rajas*), and despair (*Tamas*) generate cognitive paralysis until higher discernment resolves the dissonance (13). Thus, the *Guṇic* model adds a qualitative dimension to cognitive dissonance by explaining not only the presence of conflicting beliefs but the dispositional roots that underlie them.

Cross-cultural psychology further enriches this discussion by demonstrating that cognition, affect,

and identity are shaped by cultural frameworks. Nisbett showed that East Asian holistic cognition, which emphasizes relational reasoning, differs significantly from Western analytic reasoning, which privileges categorical logic (14). Markus and Kitayama highlighted that independent and interdependent self-construals profoundly affect emotional expression, motivation, and cognition (15). These findings challenge the assumption of universal cognitive processes, pointing instead to culturally mediated variations. This insight resonates strongly with the *Guṇic* theory, which emphasizes variability in cognition according to dispositional qualities. Just as cultural contexts modulate cognitive styles, the Guṇas describe internal contexts that modulate clarity, motivation, and ethical judgment.

Scholars in Indian psychology have argued that integrating the Guṇas with cross-cultural psychology can provide a richer account of personality and emotion. Misra and Giri proposed that the Guṇas represent an indigenous personality framework that complements the Big Five by capturing dynamic, situational qualities rather than static traits (9, 16). This model allows for greater sensitivity to cultural and contextual variability, offering tools for understanding personality beyond Western-centric models. Moreover, in applied contexts such as counseling and psychotherapy, *Guṇic* theory has been used to design interventions that promote Sattvic dispositions, thereby enhancing emotional regulation, resilience, and ethical awareness (17). Such applications illustrate how indigenous frameworks can complement and extend cross-cultural psychology.

Embodied cognition research has also intersected with studies of mindfulness and meditation, often drawing on Indian philosophical resources. Varela and Thompson's enactivist approach has been applied to phenomenological accounts of meditative practice, suggesting that the cultivation of awareness restructures cognitive-affective patterns (18). Neuropsychological studies of yoga and meditation further demonstrate changes in attention, emotion regulation, and self-perception, supporting the claim that dispositional qualities can be intentionally transformed (19). These findings align with Indian psychology's insistence that *Guṇic* dispositions are not fixed traits but

dynamic patterns subject to cultivation through practice, discipline, and self-awareness.

Despite these convergences, gaps remain. Modern psychology, while acknowledging the role of affect and context, lacks a systematic typology of dispositions that condition cognition across epistemic, affective, and ethical dimensions. The *Guṇic* framework provides such a typology, yet its integration into scientific models has been limited. Conversely, Indian psychology has historically lacked large-scale empirical validation in cross-cultural settings, which modern psychology could help provide. Bridging these traditions requires methodological pluralism: hermeneutic analysis of texts, phenomenological descriptions of experience, and empirical testing of dispositional models.

In sum, the literature reveals a growing but incomplete dialogue between Indian psychology, personality studies, emotional research, and cross-cultural psychology. Indian traditions emphasize that cognition is not only epistemic but affective and moral, structured by the interplay of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. Modern psychology corroborates these insights through embodied and cross-cultural approaches but often lacks the integrative depth of the *Guṇic* model. Comparative research suggests that the *Guṇas* can illuminate phenomena such as cognitive dissonance, personality variability, and emotional regulation while also providing culturally sensitive frameworks for understanding identity and selfhood. The convergence of these fields presents an opportunity for developing an interdisciplinary psychology that is at once empirically grounded and philosophically rich.

Despite substantial scholarly interest in both embodied cognition and Indian philosophical psychology, several gaps remain. First, most existing comparative studies have focused on surface-level parallels between Indian traditions and Western theories, without developing a systematic framework that integrates *Guṇic* psychology with modern cognitive models. Second, the notion of *Guṇa*-dissonance has been largely overlooked, even though it provides a unique explanation for cognitive instability, ethical hesitation, and identity fragmentation that cannot be fully accounted for by existing Western theories of dissonance. Third, while classical texts emphasize the epistemic and ethical implications

of the *Guṇas*, modern studies have rarely explored how these insights can be operationalized in contemporary contexts such as decision-making, moral judgment, and mental health.

The present study seeks to address these theoretical and methodological gaps by developing an integrative framework that connects the Indian theory of the *Guṇas* with contemporary embodied and enactive models of cognition. By foregrounding the *Guṇas* as epistemic determinants, the study aims to show how they shape not only the outcomes of knowledge but also the modes of reasoning, affective dispositions, and moral orientation through which cognition unfolds. In doing so, it introduces and conceptualizes the idea of *Guṇa*-dissonance, understood as the internal conflict that arises when competing dispositions of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* create instability in thought, emotion, and ethical judgment. Through this lens, the study explores the interdependence of cognition, morality, and identity formation, while also bridging classical philosophical insights with current debates in cognitive science. Ultimately, the objective is not only to enrich comparative philosophy but also to contribute to interdisciplinary cognitive research by highlighting how ancient epistemological categories can provide explanatory depth for understanding decision-making, self-regulation, and the dynamics of belief revision in modern contexts.

By foregrounding the *Guṇas* as qualitative regulators of cognition, this study seeks to move beyond a purely descriptive account of knowledge processes and toward a normative-phenomenological framework that emphasizes balance, clarity, and ethical discernment. Such an approach has the potential not only to expand our theoretical understanding of cognition but also to offer practical insights into cultivating stability of mind, resolving dissonance, and fostering holistic self-development. Ultimately, the integration of Indian epistemological categories with modern scientific models promises a richer, cross-cultural understanding of how human beings perceive, reason, and act within an ever-changing world.

Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology that integrates classical Indian philosophical

inquiry with contemporary cognitive science and phenomenological analysis to explore the relationship between cognition, the *Guṇas* (*Sattva*, *Rajas*, *Tamas*), and epistemic dissonance. Drawing from the *Sāṃkhya* and *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* traditions, the approach is hermeneutic and epistemological, grounding knowledge acquisition in *Anumāna* (reasoning), *Pratyakṣa* (direct perception), and *Āpta Pramāṇa* (authoritative testimony).

Textual analysis is central to this inquiry, with primary focus on the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* and classical commentaries by thinkers such as *Vācaspati Miśra*. These texts inform a metaphysical and cognitive model that explains how the *Guṇas* affect perception, emotion, volition, and judgment. These classical insights are mapped onto modern cognitive frameworks, particularly Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson's enactive and embodied cognition models, and David Chalmers' dual-aspect theory of consciousness, allowing for dialogue between Indian and contemporary paradigms (4).

A critical element of this methodology is the phenomenological reflection on subjective experience, used to correlate the theory of *Guṇas* with lived emotional states and patterns of cognitive dissonance. This includes analyzing first-person experiential structures through descriptive introspection, exploring how internal conflicts emerge from imbalance among the *Guṇas*. These experiences are further contextualized within social, moral, and existential settings, such as forced conformity, trauma, decision-making, and addiction, highlighting how the *Guṇas* modulate perception, emotion, and judgment.

Situational examples are epistemic tools to concretize abstract ideas. For instance, the interpretive analogy of a woman's qualities generating different responses- pleasure, pain, and despair, demonstrates the subjective and context-sensitive nature of *Guṇas* expression. These analogies function as heuristic devices within a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, illustrating how the fluctuating dominance of the *Guṇas* shapes epistemic subjectivity.

In bridging classical and contemporary thought, the study applies comparative analysis, aligning Indian epistemological categories (e.g., *Vyāpti*, *Sāmānyato-dṛṣṭa*, *Śeṣavat*) with modern cognitive constructs such as cognitive bias, emotional regulation, and moral dissonance. Moreover, the

role of the *Prekṣāvat* (actual seer) versus the *Parīkṣaka* (ignorant examiner) is operationalized to explore the epistemic difference between authentic insight and distorted perception, offering a basis to study behavioral discrepancies through the epistemic constitution of the subject (17).

Lastly, the methodology remains non-reductive, preserving the ontological dualism of *Sāṃkhya* between *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (matter) while integrating embodied cognition to emphasize the inseparability of mind, body, and environment. This hybrid framework allows for a robust analysis of how inner psychological states are shaped by external forces and how introspective clarity (through *Sattva*) may resolve epistemic and moral dissonances.

Results

The Act of Three *Guṇas*

Cognition plays a foundational role in shaping how we perceive and engage with reality. It enables humans to infer causes from effects, such as understanding that oil comes from seeds or that a chick emerges from an egg. Conscious animate beings possess this cognitive capacity, distinguishing themselves from *avivekin* entities, which exist without discernment (20). Through cognition, humans can perceive the structure of *Pradhāna* (fundamental substance) via observable outcomes. Even though causes and effects may not entirely share characteristics, their underlying regularities allow inference. This understanding aligns with the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* epistemic framework, which recognizes *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (comparison), and *śabda* (scriptural testimony) as valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) (21). Cognition is thus not a passive receiver of sensory data but an active interpreter of causal relationships.

The interpretive process of cognition is profoundly shaped by the three *Guṇas*: *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. These are not only ontological constituents of nature but also epistemological filters that influence perception, emotion, and reasoning. *Rajas* manifests as agitation, pushing the mind outward into restlessness, impulsivity, and desire-driven cognition. *Tamas*, in contrast, operates through withdrawal and inertia, producing confusion, cognitive dullness, and passive

disengagement. *Sattva* fosters equanimity, illuminating perception and enabling reflective, ethically informed reasoning. Cognition emerges as the arena of interaction between these forces, with *Rajas* overactivating, *Tamas* suppressing, and *Sattva* balancing and clarifying mental processes. This interplay is further enhanced by *Pauruṣa*, the inherent human capacity for discernment and rational thought, which allows humans to recognize the mechanics of the *Guṇas* and modulate their influence (22). Each *guṇa* shapes cognition in distinct ways: *Sattva* fosters clarity, insight, and ethical awareness; *Rajas* stimulates desire, activity, and reactive perception; *Tamas* clouds reasoning, promoting inertia and misidentification. These dynamics govern not only intellectual inference but also emotional regulation and behavioral choice. *Vyāpti* (state of pervasion) operates in parallel, connecting causes and effects: *Anvyavyāpti* affirms causal relationships, while *Vyatirekavyāpti* signals absence-based correlation (23). Thus, cognition is both a tool for understanding the world and a mechanism through which the mind navigates internal states.

From a behavioral perspective, the predominance of a particular *guṇa* dictates cognitive tendencies: *Rajas* promotes hyperactive, desire-driven reasoning, often accompanied by emotional turbulence; *Tamas* fosters stagnation and misperception; *Sattva* allows for reflective discernment and measured action. These *guṇa*-driven states underpin internal conflicts, decision-making discrepancies, and the tension between self-affirmation and societal expectations. Recognizing this mechanics-based interplay provides insight into human behavior and offers a path toward more harmonious engagement with life.

Classical Indian philosophy offers frameworks for resolving the cognitive and emotional effects of *guṇa* influence. *Sāṃkhya*, for instance, presents a dualist model distinguishing *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness) from *Prakṛti* (matter), which includes the *Guṇas*. Liberation occurs through *Viveka* (discernment), wherein the intellect (*Buddhi*) ceases to identify with the shifting states of *Prakṛti*, observing the fluctuations of *Rajas*, *Tamas*, and *Sattva* without attachment. Here, the mechanics of *Guṇas* are central: *Rajas* agitates, producing desire-driven cognition; *Tamas* clouds

perception; *Sattva* stabilizes and clarifies insight. By recognizing these forces, the aspirant disengages from reactive thought and emotional turbulence, allowing reflective cognition to emerge.

Advaita Vedānta extends this insight through a non-dual framework. While *Sāṃkhya* maintains multiple *Puruṣas*, *Advaita* posits Brahman as the singular, unchanging reality. The *Guṇas* still operate as mechanisms affecting perception and cognition—*Rajas* excites attachment, *Tamas* obscures clarity, *Sattva* illuminates—but the ultimate aim is to transcend all *guṇic* influence. As the *Bhagavad Gītā* (14) (19–20) emphasizes, recognizing that all action is driven by the *Guṇas* while the Self remains untouched allows the aspirant to attain liberation (24). In this state, cognition transforms: it no longer reacts mechanically to *guṇic* fluctuations but serves as a conduit for apperception of the Self.

The *Guṇas* also offer a systematic account of cognitive-emotional dynamics. *Rajas* produces agitation, restlessness, and hyperactive desire; *Tamas* produces withdrawal, confusion, and inertia; *Sattva* fosters equanimity, clarity, and ethical reflection. The interaction of these forces produces *guṇa*-dissonance, a misalignment between perception, desire, and clarity, leading to cognitive and emotional tension. Consider the example of a woman whose devotion evokes *Sattva* (pleasure) in her partner, *Rajas* (desire or agitation) in other observers, and *Tamas* (despair or frustration) in someone unable to attain similar qualities (25). Here, the mechanics of *guṇa* influence operate both intrapersonally and socially, demonstrating their role in shaping perception, judgment, and emotional experience.

These classical insights resonate with modern cognitive theories, particularly embodied cognition (26). Varela and Thompson argue that cognition is inseparable from bodily states and environmental context—a domain precisely where *Guṇas* exert influence. *Rajas* manifests as hyperactivity and distractibility, *Tamas* as cognitive dullness and inertia, and *Sattva* as reflective awareness and ethical clarity. Both traditions highlight that cognition is situated, mechanically responsive, and actively shaped by internal and external conditions.

Further, the *Guṇas* serve as amplifiers and regulators of mental states. *Sattva* cultivates

insight (*Prakāśa*), *Rajas* drives engagement (*pravṛtti*) and emotional arousal, while *Tamas* promotes inertia and constriction (*Niyama*) (27). When *Tamas* dominates, *Niyama* manifests as rigid adherence to routine, limiting creative and flexible cognition (28). Thus, cognition is not a static faculty but a dynamic system constantly modulated by the relative predominance of the *Guṇas*, producing cycles of agitation, withdrawal, and balance.

The interdependence of the *Guṇas* underscores their systemic mechanics: *Sattva* without *Rajas* may produce serene but inactive reflection; *Rajas* without *Sattva* results in chaotic overactivity; *Tamas* without either produces dull stagnation. Analogies, such as wick, flame, and fuel, illustrate how cognition and emotion are emergent properties of *guṇa* interaction. Applied socially, this mechanics can be observed in relational dynamics, where *guṇic* states in one individual trigger complementary or opposing states in others, reinforcing the systemic nature of cognitive-emotional influence.

In sum, the mechanics of *Guṇas* provide a non-reductive, systematic model of cognition: *Rajas* agitates, *Tamas* withdraws, *Sattva* equilibrates. These forces govern perception, reasoning, emotion, and behavior, shaping both individual experience and social interaction. By attending to these dynamics and cultivating *Viveka* and *Vairāgya*, cognition can shift from mechanical fluctuation toward reflective clarity, ethical discernment, and ultimately, liberation. The *Guṇas* thus offer a classical, mechanistic understanding of cognition that complements modern perspectives, demonstrating that the mind is both an instrument and a system dynamically influenced by internal qualities and external context.

Discussion

The Play of Prekṣāvat (seer) and Parīkṣaka (Ignoramus) in Creating Dissonance

To truly understand the world around us, we must use the three main *Pramāṇas*- *Pratyakṣa* (direct perception), *Anumāna* (inference), and *Āpta* (authoritative testimony)- in a balanced way. *Pratyakṣa* relies on sensory experience. *Anumāna* *Pramāṇa* depends on inference, where understanding arises from observed patterns and is validated through *Vyāptijñāna* (correlation and

pervading knowledge) (29). Meanwhile, *Āpta* *Pramāṇa* rests upon the credibility of verbal testimony, which requires that the source embody genuine knowledge, clarity of expression, freedom from malice, and sincerity in communicating truth (30). Yet, these means of knowledge can be distorted if dominated by the *guṇa* *Rajas*, which fuels restlessness and a hasty desire for certainty. A mind dominated by *Rajas*, though ambitious, risks drawing impulsive inferences and trusting fragmented, unreliable sources without adequate reflection. This corresponds with dual-process theories of cognition, particularly Kahneman's distinction between *System 1* (fast, intuitive) and *System 2* (slow, deliberate) thinking. *Rājasic* dominance parallels over-reliance on fast, intuitive *System 1* processing, leading to impulsivity and bias, whereas *Sattva* supports the deliberate, reflective reasoning of *System 2*, ensuring more balanced judgment (4, 31).

Sattva, representing clarity and balance, helps harmonize the three *Pramāṇas*. It ensures that perception remains clear, inference is logical, and testimony is carefully evaluated. This harmonization mirrors embodied cognition models of Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson, who argue that knowledge is shaped through active interaction with the world rather than detached abstraction (25). Likewise, David Chalmers' dual-aspect theory suggests that true understanding arises when we integrate both subjective experience (*Pratyakṣa*) and objective reasoning (*Anumāna*), a process that *Sattva* facilitates (4, 32). Such integration also aligns with cognitive dissonance theory, where conflict between perception, inference, or testimony generates psychological discomfort. *Rajas* often responds by distorting or rejecting evidence to restore coherence, while *Sattva* enables reconciliation by integrating conflicting sources of knowledge into a coherent whole (33).

Building upon this, the role of *Sattva* becomes essential in guiding epistemic processes. A mind enriched with *Sattva* directs perception (*Pratyakṣa*), reasons carefully through inference (*Anumāna*), and trusts credible testimony (*Āpta*) with thoughtful evaluation. This balance reflects the dynamics described in self-determination theory, where intrinsic motivation flourishes under conditions of autonomy and competence, much like the *Sāttvic* pursuit of truth free from

external distortions (34). By contrast, *Rajas* corresponds to extrinsic motivation driven by restlessness and desire for outcomes, and *Tamas* parallels apathy or learned helplessness, phenomena also well-documented in modern clinical psychology (35).

This balanced approach distinguishes the *Prekṣāvat*, one who truly perceives and understands reality, from the *Parikṣaka*, who, driven by desire or distortion, misinterprets the world. The *Prekṣāvat* embodies flourishing akin to Seligman's PERMA model of well-being, while the *Parikṣaka*, swayed by *Rajas* or *Tamas*, falls into cognitive distortions. Such individuals, clouded by personal biases, construct flawed interpretations and remain *Laukika*- immersed in worldly concerns and distanced from authentic philosophical contemplation. Their mismanagement of *Pramāṇas* generates a cycle of confusion and unresolved problems, echoing findings in existential psychology, where avoidance of meaning-making intensifies existential dilemmas (36). These problems, in turn, generate questions, as the general idea is that through inquiry, one may find resolution (37). Yet without *Sattva*, inquiry remains reactive and fragmented.

The Dilemma in Belief

The dilemma in belief further highlights the active role of consciousness. Awareness imbues motion and meaning into the seemingly static world (38). Consciousness, as Evan Thompson argues, is not a detached observer but a co-creator of meaning through perception and experience (39). This view resonates with constructivist theories of perception, where cognition is understood as an active construction shaped by prior knowledge, expectations, and cultural frameworks. It also parallels social constructivist psychology, which emphasizes that testimony (*Āpta*) and cultural tools mediate understanding (40). Thus, epistemic frameworks are always co-created through interaction between individual awareness and cultural context.

This dynamic interplay is evident in both empirical and metaphysical domains. Inference tells us that the sun must be hot because other luminous objects emit heat. Yet *Vedic* testimony points to entities like the *Gagana-Kusuma* (flower of the sky) or the tortoise's hair, whose symbolic existence exceeds general observation. Here, *Āpta Pramāṇa*

affirms that absence of perception does not equal non-existence. This corresponds with Chalmers' critique of reductive science: consciousness cannot be explained solely through empirical observation but requires an integrative framework incorporating subjective, intuitive, and ethical dimensions (41). In psychology, this resembles the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) model, where unseen values and commitments shape cognition and action beyond what is directly perceived (42).

The *Sāṃkhya Darśana* reinforces this broader epistemic stance by acknowledging that certain truths exist beyond ordinary perception or inference. Vācaspati Miśra, in his commentary on the sixth *kārikā*, noted that objects too close or too distant escape our senses yet still exist. Similarly, modern psychology emphasizes that human perception is inherently limited and often biased, a recognition that fosters intellectual humility. When guided by *Sattva*, one accepts that reality is not restricted to what is immediately sensed or inferred, allowing testimony and reflective awareness to enrich understanding. This harmonization of classical *Pramāṇas* with contemporary psychological insights thus offers not only a methodology for knowledge acquisition but also a framework for cultivating wisdom, resilience, and existential clarity.

The Silent Struggle: How Internal Conflicts Reshape Perception and Identity

Cognitive dissonance has always been one of the prominent reasons in shaping an individual's beliefs and personality. Cognitive dissonance reflects the conflicts that an individual goes through. The change in attitude-behavior happens when there is a difference between the personal belief and the sudden change or threat one feels in the cognitive space (43). There could be many instances where the dissonance could be felt, starting from essential daily routine activities to making decisions at the professional level. There could be several factors that could lead to cognitive dissonance:

Forced Compliance Behavior: When individuals act against their values due to societal pressure, it creates internal conflict (44). This tension between conformity and authenticity is shaped by the *guṇas*. *Tamas* causes passive acceptance, *Rajas* drives anxious self-performance, while *Sattva*

promotes mindful engagement. *Sattva* allows individuals to adapt to expectations, such as gender roles, without losing their sense of self. A clear case is Arjuna's hesitation in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (3) (33–35), where he struggles to comply with the social role of warrior against his personal grief (45). His *Tamasic* withdrawal fosters inertia, his *Rajasic* anxiety fuels despair, but *Kṛṣṇa* urges him to act from *Sattva*- with clarity, balance, and detachment from results.

Decision Making: The dilemma that leads to dissonance also arises when choices are too similar, making the decision process challenging. This uncertainty causes individuals to second-guess their decisions as they begin to perceive more drawbacks than advantages in their chosen option (46). The repentance comes from not selecting the other options. This internal conflict can be understood through the lens of the three *guṇas*. *Tamas* fosters self-doubt and paralysis, *Rajas* drives anxious overanalysis, while *Sattva* enables clarity and confident decision-making. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (18, 31–32), *Kṛṣṇa* distinguishes the intellect dominated by *Rajas*, which wavers in confusion, and by *Tamas*, which mistakes right for wrong, from the *Sāttvic* intellect that discerns duty with steadiness) (45).

Effort Justification: When efforts fail to meet expectations, individuals often face discomfort and self-doubt. This response is shaped by the *guṇas*: *Tamas* leads to passive denial, *Rajas* to frustration and overexertion, while *Sattva* fosters calm reflection and emotional balance. To cope, people may overvalue outcomes to justify their efforts (47). In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2, 47), *Kṛṣṇa* reminds *Arjuna*: “You have the right to action, but never to the fruits thereof” (45). This teaching reframes failure by reducing *Rajasic* obsession with results and *Tamasic* despair, guiding individuals to cultivate *Sattva*, which transforms failure into learning and resilience.

New Information: The involvement in learning new things also becomes one of the reasons for dissonance with oneself. The latest knowledge that might not match one's existing understanding creates differences in belief systems (48). This cognitive conflict can be understood through the interplay of the three *guṇas*. *Tamas* resists change, causing confusion and self-doubt when facing new or conflicting information. *Rajas*, marked by restlessness, leads to impulsive belief shifts for

quick validation. *Sattva*, however, supports calm and thoughtful evaluation. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4, 38), knowledge is described as the purifier that removes confusion when received with *Sāttvic* patience and faith. Arjuna's initial resistance to *Kṛṣṇa*'s teachings shows *Tamasic* doubt and *Rajasic* agitation, but he gradually attains *Sattva*, embracing new knowledge with clarity (45).

Social Pressure: As social beings, humans are expected to conform to societal norms, with deviation often seen as social incompatibility (49). To preserve validation, individuals may conform despite inner disagreement, resulting in dissonance (37). This tension is modulated by the *guṇas*: *Tamas* induces fear and suppresses self-expression, *Rajas* fuels ambition and the need for approval, intensifying conflict (43). *Sattva*, however, brings clarity, enabling individuals to critically engage with norms without compromising authenticity. Arjuna's admission in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2, 7) — “I am confused about my duty and am besieged with weakness” - reflects this struggle (45). His *Tamasic* despair and *Rajasic* attachment to reputation create inner conflict, but through cultivating *Sattva*, he learns to align personal authenticity with social duty.

Trauma and Past Experience: The past, present, and future are deeply interconnected, with each shaping the other through impressions on thought and belief systems (44). This dynamic interplay is governed by the *guṇas*: *Tamas* binds to the past, *Rajas* fuels unrest, and *Sattva* promotes integration and clarity. When present realities contradict past experiences, belief systems may shift, causing dissonance (46). The *Bhagavad Gītā* (6, 41–44) describes how even a failed yogi resumes practice in another birth, showing how past *saṃskāras* influence present struggles (45). Childhood trauma, like *Arjuna*'s memory of familial duty, may trigger *Tamasic* retreat or *Rajasic* overreaction, but *Sattva* enables integration of the past into mindful growth, turning conflict into insight.

Addiction: When a need becomes habitual, it can lead to addiction, either physical or mental. Mental addictions, like constant fantasizing, detach individuals from reality, offering escape but deepening dependence. This creates internal conflict between wanting to quit and being unable to stop. The *guṇas* influence this cycle: *Tamas* fuels escapism and inertia, while *Rajas* drives compulsive desire and restlessness. Cultivating

Sattva fosters awareness, balance, and self-control, enabling recognition of harmful patterns. In the *Mahābhārata*, Duryodhana epitomizes this dissonance, admitting: “I know what is dharma, yet I cannot bring myself to act upon it”. His *Rajasic* desire and *Tamasic* inertia trap him in addiction to power, while the absence of *Sattva* prevents liberation.

Fear of Change: Change is the only constant, yet embracing it is often difficult (38). Humans naturally seek comfort in familiar spaces, limiting exposure to new experiences. While stepping out of one’s comfort zone opens opportunities, it can also cause discomfort and resistance (49). The *guṇas* explain this resistance: *Sattva* brings clarity and balance, aiding smooth adaptation; *Rajas* drives change but can cause anxiety; *Tamas* clings to the known, avoiding transformation. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (2, 14) advises equanimity amid change, seeing pleasure and pain as transient (45). Bhīṣma’s rigid vow of celibacy is an example of *Tamasic* resistance to change, which ultimately created dissonance in the Kuru dynasty. By contrast, Kṛṣṇa embodies *Sattva*, teaching that embracing change as part of *dharma* leads to resilience and harmony.

Navigating Moral Dilemmas: Cognition, Behavior, and Self-Affirmation

Discrepancies in human behavior often emerge when there is a gap between pre-decision expectations and post-decision outcomes (50). Such discrepancies frequently generate cognitive dissonance, as individuals attempt to reconcile the disjunction between what was anticipated and what ultimately occurred. In pursuit of desirable results, individuals may choose easier or more expedient paths, which are not always aligned with moral or ethical ideals. Favorable outcomes can retrospectively justify ethically questionable actions, while unfavorable results often intensify the discomfort of dissonance (51). The way in which individuals navigate these discrepancies depends not only on cognitive maturity but also on the underlying psychological dispositions described in the Indian *guṇa* framework.

Within this framework, *Tamas*, characterized by inertia, ignorance, and rigidity, creates resistance to change and restricts adaptive self-reflection. This produces inner turmoil and exacerbates behavioral struggles when confronted with dissonance (50). In contrast, *Sattva*, associated

with clarity, balance, and harmony, enables individuals to reassess situations constructively, fostering resilience and the possibility of transformative growth even in moments of conflict (52). *Rajas*, marked by dynamism, passion, and restlessness, often leads to choices guided by self-interest or subjective convenience, creating tension between internal self-perception and external societal expectations (53). *Rajasic* individuals may prioritize their own sense of righteousness, even at the expense of ethical or objective truth, blurring the line between self-affirmation and self-verification (54). In such states, self-perception dominates, producing the illusion of correctness regardless of external judgment.

Western psychological frameworks offer useful points of comparison that strengthen the explanatory value of the *guṇa* model. For instance, Cloninger’s temperament theory highlights dimensions such as novelty-seeking and harm-avoidance, which parallel the impulsivity of *Rajas* and the withdrawal of *Tamas*, respectively (55, 56). Similarly, emotion regulation research demonstrates that strategies such as suppression often mirror *Tamasic* rigidity, whereas cognitive reappraisal reflects *Sattvic* clarity and adaptability (57). The Big Five personality traits provide further insights. Conscientiousness resonates strongly with *Sattva*, as it is characterized by self-discipline, moral awareness, and responsibility (58). Neuroticism, by contrast, overlaps with *Tamasic* tendencies, manifesting in instability, pessimism, and heightened inner conflict. Extraversion reflects *Rajasic* qualities of energy and assertiveness, which may foster engagement and leadership when balanced but devolve into aggression or restlessness when unchecked (59). Agreeableness, marked by empathy and cooperation, aligns with *Sattvic* equanimity, while openness to experience suggests a higher degree of reflective awareness, often associated with transcending rigid patterns of cognition (60, 61).

This comparative perspective illustrates that both *Guṇas* and Western models converge on the idea that behavioral discrepancies are managed through dispositions that either constrain or expand cognitive flexibility. Where the *guṇa* framework emphasizes an integrative, moral-spiritual dimension- *Sattva* as clarity, *Rajas* as passion, *Tamas* as inertia- Western frameworks

rely on empirical personality traits or regulatory mechanisms to explain adaptability and conflict. Together, they underscore the role of underlying dispositions in determining whether cognitive dissonance leads to growth, rigidity, or rationalization.

The dynamics of self-affirmation also highlight the interplay of these frameworks. Self-affirmation can create an illusory self-concept in which individuals expect others to validate their subjective identity (55). When such validation conflicts with societal feedback, dissonance emerges. In the guṇic model, *Rajasic* passion fuels defensiveness and self-righteousness, while *Tamasic* inertia fosters denial. *Sattvic* balance, however, allows for more objective self-assessment and adaptation. In Western frameworks, this process is captured in theories of self-regulation, where biased self-perceptions may distort reality, but adaptive emotion regulation and conscientious personality traits facilitate balanced responses (57, 58, 62).

In sum, both Indian and Western perspectives reveal that discrepancies between expectation and outcome, self-concept and social opinion, are not merely situational but deeply mediated by dispositional tendencies. The guṇa framework enriches this understanding by emphasizing the moral and spiritual orientation of these dispositions, while Western models contribute empirical specificity regarding temperament, emotional control, and personality structure. Recognizing these convergences and divergences offers a more comprehensive account of how individuals can navigate cognitive dissonance, balance illusion and reality, and move toward adaptive personal growth.

Conclusion

The human condition is defined not by compulsive answers but by the capacity to witness uncertainty with awareness and grace. This study, though largely conceptual and interpretive, faces limitations in empirical validation and risks ambiguity when aligning Sanskrit categories with modern psychology. Future research may empirically assess Yogic practices, compare guṇic psychology with Western models, and integrate neuroscience, positioning this framework as a foundation for dialogue and transformative insights into cognition and liberation. The mind functions through five Vṛttis- pramāṇa (valid

cognition), viparyaya (error), vikalpa (imagination), nidrā (sleep), and smṛti (memory) (62, 63). These processes are shaped by the interplay of the Guṇas- Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Sattva, marked by clarity and harmony, refines cognition and opens the mind to truth. Rajas, driven by desire and restlessness, distorts perception through agitation and projection. Tamas, bound to inertia and ignorance, clouds discernment and breeds delusion. According to Vedāntic and Yogic psychology, these fluctuations are not merely psychological, they are ontologically rooted in avidyā (misidentification), which creates conflict and cognitive dissonance.

When Sattva predominates, mental clarity (citta-prasādana) arises, enabling insight and discernment. In contrast, Rajas binds the mind to craving, while Tamas resists change through stagnation. Yogic practices- pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, and samādhi- stabilize the Guṇas, transforming the seeker (Parīkṣaka) into the discerning knower (Prekṣāvat). This transformation is not only epistemic but ethical and ontological. In Sāṃkhya it leads to kaivalya; in Advaita, to Brahman-realization; in Yoga, to stillness through vṛtti-nirodha. Yet cognition is dynamic, deeply tied to decision-making. Sattva fosters reflective choices, Rajas impulsive ones, and Tamas resists change. When outcomes diverge from expectations, dissonance emerges, forcing reevaluation. In modern life, distractions and desires magnify this conflict, distancing individuals from authentic selfhood. Desire (kāma), born of lack, perpetuates restless searching, where each answer breeds further questions, entangling us in cycles of uncertainty (61).

Here Sāṃkhya offers clarity that the problem lies not in questioning but in the fixation on final answers. True liberation begins with viveka (discernment) and vairāgya (dispassion), enabling one to witness guṇic fluctuations without attachment. Thus, freedom is not found in certainty but in awareness itself. The shift from restless knowing to conscious being transforms dissonance into wisdom and suffering into liberation.

Abbreviations

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