



Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas: An Evolutionary Perspective from Sāṅkhya to the Bhagavad Gītā

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Abstract – The Trigunās Sattva (purity and harmony), Rajas (activity and passion), and Tamas (inertia and ignorance) are central to understanding the metaphysical and psychological frameworks of Indian philosophy. This paper examines the evolutionary perspective of these three guṇas as they transition from their foundational exposition in Sāṅkhya philosophy to their dynamic and transformative interpretation in the Bhagavad Gītā. In Sāṅkhya, the guṇas are integral to prakṛti (nature), shaping the creation and function of the universe. The Bhagavad Gītā, however, extends this understanding by embedding the guṇas within a moral and spiritual framework, providing practical guidance for transcending their influence to attain self-realization and liberation (mokṣa). Through a comparative analysis, this study elucidates the interplay of the guṇas in shaping human behaviour, ethical decision-making and spiritual evolution. The paper also explores the guṇas relevance in contemporary contexts, offering insights into how this ancient framework can inform modern discussions on personality, ethics, and self-development.

Keywords: Trigunās, Sattva, Rajas, Tamas, Sāṅkhya philosophy, Bhagavad Gītā, prakṛti, mokṣa, Indian philosophy, ethics, spiritual evolution, self-realization, human behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "guṇa" (quality or attribute) has been interpreted differently by various Indian philosophical schools. Each darśana (philosophical tradition) assigns a distinct meaning to the concept of guṇa. According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, guṇa refers to 24 attributes, including form, taste, etc. In the Sāṅkhya philosophy, three guṇas sattva, rajas, and tamas are described. From the perspective of Vyākaraṇa (grammar), short vowels (hṛasva), the vowels "a," "e," and "o" are referred to as guṇas.¹ In literary texts, guṇas are identified as ojas (vigor), prasāda (clarity), and mādhyā (sweetness).²

This examination suggests that the concept of guṇas is studied in various śāstras (disciplines) and darśanas, but Sāṅkhya's treatment of guṇas is unique, assigning them significant importance. In Sāṅkhya philosophy, the universe is considered to be constituted of the three guṇas. Based on these guṇas, the world is perceived as comprising happiness (sukha), sorrow (duḥkha), and delusion (moha). The distinction between pradhāna (unmanifest) and vyakta (manifest) nature is also determined by these three guṇas. The Sāṅkhya philosophers assert that no element in the universe is beyond the influence of the trigunās.

Pradhāna, or primordial nature, is described as the state of equilibrium among sattva, rajas, and tamas. In this state, no dynamic activity occurs. The Sāṅkhya aphorism "hetumad-anityam-avyāpi"³ establishes that activity exists only in manifest forms like mahat (the great principle). This idea is also supported by the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, which describes the primordial nature as "ajām ekām lohita śukla kṛṣṇām"⁴ (the unborn one, red, white, and black).



When disturbance (kṣobha) arises in this primordial nature, diverse transformations occur, leading to activity. When imbalance or inequality arises among the guṇas, the primordial nature transforms into manifold forms. While Sāṅkhyācāryas regard pradhāna as singular, they hold that buddhi (intellect) is not singular. People experience intellect influenced by different guṇas. For instance: A person with sāttvika buddhi (sattva-dominated intellect) aspires to benefit the world. A person with rājasika buddhi (rajas-dominated intellect) pursues action and experiences a restless life filled with ambition and anger. A person with tāmasika buddhi (tamas-dominated intellect) becomes aimless and wanders in a world of despair.

In the functioning of the cosmos, sattva, rajas, and tamas are equally important. These guṇas cannot exist in isolation. Where there is sattva, rajas and tamas will also be present.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE GUṆAS

Sattva: Light, illuminating, and pleasing. Due to these qualities, sattva facilitates perception and cognition. When sattva increases in the body, knowledge arises. As stated in the Bhagavad Gītā, when sattva predominates in the senses, illumination manifests.

Rajas: Dynamic and active. It causes motion in other objects. Both sattva and tamas are inert by themselves, and rajas activates them. However, rajas is associated with suffering. An increase in rajas leads to greed, a tendency toward excessive action, and an insatiable desire for material gains.

Tamas: Heavy and obstructive. It opposes illumination and regulates the activity of rajas. Tamas induces moha (delusion) and ajñāna (ignorance). As described in the Bhagavad Gītā, tamas arises from ignorance and leads to pramāda (heedlessness), ālasya (lethargy), and nidrā (sleep).

Verse from the Sāṅkhyakārikā to explain these concepts, Īśvarakṛṣṇa presents the following kārikā:

*prītyaprītiṣādātmakāḥ prakāśapravṛttinīyamārthāḥ /
anyo'nyābhibhavāstrayajanana mithunavṛttayaśca guṇāḥ //⁶*

This verse highlights the functions and interplay of the guṇas. Sattva is light and pleasing, enabling perception. Rajas is dynamic and causes activity, while tamas is obstructive, producing delusion and ignorance. Their interdependence and mutual influence ensure the harmonious functioning of the universe.

Purpose of the Guṇas

According to the Sāṅkhyā philosophers, Prakṛti is inherently composed of the three guṇas sattva, rajas, and tamas. The functions and purposes of these guṇas are succinctly explained by Īśvarakṛṣṇa in the following verse:

*sattvaṁ laghu prakāśaṁ iṣṭamuṣṇaṁ ṣṭambhakaṁ calaṁ ca rajaḥ /
guru vaṁakam eva tamaḥ pradīpavac cārthato vṛttīḥ //⁶*

This means: Sattva is light and luminous, and thus it enlightens. Rajas is active and mobile, generating stimulation. Tamas is heavy and obstructive, serving as a regulator. The three guṇas work together, much like a lamp, to achieve a unified purpose.

Characteristics of Sattva

The Sāṅkhyā school describes sattva as light and luminous. Its inherent laghutā (lightness) opposes gurutā (heaviness) and facilitates upward motion. For instance, the flames of a fire rise upward due to this quality of lightness. Similarly, this lightness may cause lateral motion, such as the horizontal movement of wind. In



humans, the quick functionality of the senses can also be attributed to sattva. Without this lightness, the senses would struggle to promptly perform their functions, such as perceiving objects or revealing their attributes. This quality of lightness is why sattva is called "prakāśaka" (illuminator).

Guṇas in the State of Equilibrium

In the primordial state of Pradhāna (the unmanifest form of Prakṛti), the guṇas exist in perfect balance, remaining in a latent state of potential energy.

Detailed Analysis of the Three Guṇas

Sattva

Sattva is the element of Prakṛti that brings joy, clarity, and contentment to the mind. It fosters emotional states such as happiness, satisfaction, inner peace, and ultimate bliss. These qualities arise under the influence of sattva.

Rajas

Rajas embodies dynamism and activity. It facilitates motion and transitions, influencing change in other entities. When sattva and tamas are passive or inert, rajas acts as the catalyst to stimulate them into activity.

Tamas

Tamas represents inertia, negativity, and obstruction. Its heaviness opposes the illuminating quality of sattva and impedes the expression of objects. It symbolizes ignorance and is metaphorically linked to darkness. Tamas binds the soul through qualities like pramāda (negligence), nidrā (sleep), and ālasya (laziness). It fosters lethargy, confusion, ignorance, and distorted thinking in the individual.

Interactions and Influence of the Guṇas

The three guṇas coexist in both conflict and cooperation. They are interdependent yet distinct from one another. None of them can operate in isolation. The functioning of Prakṛti and all its processes are governed by these guṇas. The classification of all phenomena whether good, bad, indifferent, intelligent, pure, impure, active, or passive is determined by the dominance and interplay of sattva, rajas, and tamas.

The Three Guṇas in the Bhagavad Gītā

The concept of triguṇa (three qualities) is extensively discussed in Indian philosophical texts, including the Bhagavad Gītā. These three guṇas sattva, rajas, and tamas constitute not only human nature but the entirety of material existence. It is believed that the unique combination and predominance of one or more guṇas determine a person's nature and character. Every individual is composed of these guṇas, which are qualities of the material world. Sattva represents well-being, rajas symbolizes activity, and tamas signifies ignorance or darkness.

The development of sāttvic qualities in one's personality is highly emphasized. As the saying goes, what matters most is not merely who we are but how we are. Purification of the mind (citta-śuddhi) is achieved through various spiritual disciplines, which aim to reduce rajasic and tamasic tendencies while fostering the growth of sattva. This leads to greater self-control over the mind and senses, naturally guiding a person toward equanimity. Such individuals embody truthfulness, non-harm, and a deep effort to understand the true nature of existence. Their very presence brings peace to the environment.

A person who has cultivated an abundance of sattva transcends the three guṇas and becomes triguṇātīta beyond the guṇas. This state is referred to as the turīya (fourth) state, representing pure consciousness, free from the influences of rajas and tamas. This sāttvic state is inherently pure and remains unaffected by



the disturbances of the other two guṇas. Thus, both the human mind and the physical universe are constituted by these three guṇas, influencing decision-making and behavior in myriad ways.

Characteristics of the Guṇas

Sāttvic Personality: The term sattva is derived from the root "sat," meaning existence or truth. Sattva signifies purity, clarity, and goodness. It generates happiness in various forms, such as contentment, joy, and serenity. These feelings arise through the operation of sattva within the mind. As described:

*tatra sattvaṃ nirmalatvāt prakāśakam anāmayam /
sukhasaṅgena badhnāti jñānasāṅgena cānagha //⁷*

"Sattva, being pure and luminous, is free from ailments. It binds the soul through attachment to happiness and knowledge."

A personality dominated by sattva experiences freedom from agitation (rajas) and desire. In this state, the soul attains supreme bliss. Another verse explains the nature of sāttvic happiness:

*sukhaṃ tvidānīm trividhaṃ śṛṇu me bhārataḥ abha
abhyāsād ramate yatra duḥkhāntaṃ ca nigacchati /
yat tadagre viṣam iva pariṅāme 'mṛtopamam
tat sukhaṃ sāttvikaṃ proktam ātma-buddhi-prasādajam //⁸*

"The happiness that arises from practice in devotion, meditation, and service, leading to the cessation of sorrow, is initially like poison but ultimately like nectar. Such happiness, born of a serene intellect, is called sāttvic."⁹ True happiness involves minimal disturbance and points to noble outcomes. Sattva is also the source of knowledge:

*sarva-dvāreṣu dehe 'smin prakāśa upajāyate /
jñānaṃ yadā tadā vidyād vivṛddhaṃ sattvam ityuta //¹⁰*

"When light illuminates all the doors of the body, know that sattva has increased."

Rājasic Personality: Rajas symbolizes activity, ambition, and restlessness. Such individuals are often likened to a king or an executive, always pursuing wealth, fame, and material pleasures. They derive joy primarily from external achievements and are driven by their desires.

Tāmasic Personality: Tamas denotes lethargy, inertia, and ignorance. Individuals dominated by tamas are inactive, indifferent, and fail to understand the necessities of personal growth. They remain engrossed in delusion and darkness, often mistaking their inactivity for tranquility comparable to that of a sāttvic individual. However, this misconception arises from self-deception and hypocrisy.

The Guṇas and the Self

The Bhagavad Gītā states:

*sattvaṃ rajas tama iti guṇāḥ prakṛti-sambhavāḥ /
nibadhnanti mahā-bāho dehe dehinam avyayam //¹¹*

"Sattva, rajas, and tamas these guṇas born of nature bind the eternal soul to the body, O mighty-armed one."



In essence, the interplay of these guṇas governs all material phenomena and binds the imperishable soul to the transient world. However, one can transcend these guṇas by cultivating sattva and pursuing the higher state of realization.

Rajasic Personality

The quality of rajas is a driving force for action; it is inherently dynamic and stimulates movement in other objects. Its nature is described as mobile and supportive. Since it is self-driven, it also imparts dynamism to other entities. According to the Bhagavad Gītā:

*rajo rāgātmaḥ vidhi tṛṣṇāsaṅgasamudbhavam /
tannibadhnāti kaunteya karmaśaṅgena dehinam //¹²*

This means, "Understand rajas to be characterized by passion and desire, arising from attachment. It binds the soul to actions and their results, O Kaunteya." Here, it is explained that desires and attachments lead to the increase of rajoguṇa.

Elaborating on the traits of rajoguṇa, the Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā states:

*lobhaḥ pravṛttir ārambhaḥ karmaṇām aśamaḥ spṛhā /
rajasy etāni jāyante vivṛddhe bhāratarṣabha //¹³*

This implies, "When rajas predominates, greed, intense activity, selfish initiation of actions, restlessness, and desires for sensory pleasures arise." The fulfillment of materialistic needs and the resulting pleasure are manifestations of rajoguṇa. However, this quality ultimately brings dissatisfaction and despair.

Rajasic activities are deeply rooted in self-interest, driven by greed, and therefore lead to sorrow. As noted:

*rajasi pralayaṁ gatvā karmaśaṅgiṣu jāyate /
tathā pralīnas tamasi mūḍhayoniṣu jāyate //¹⁴*

"When influenced by rajas at the time of death, a soul is reborn among those attached to action; but if dominated by tamas, it takes birth in ignorant or lower forms such as insects and animals."

When rajas is dominant, it disrupts the connection between the soul and its physical body, including the mind, senses, and life energy, ultimately leading to death under its influence.

Tamasic Personality

The term tamas literally translates to "darkness" and represents inertia. According to the Sāṅkhyakārikā, tamoguṇa makes a person lazy and indifferent. It creates a state of inactivity and apathy, leading to ignorance and sloth. As the Bhagavad Gītā explains: "Tamas arises from ignorance. When tamas dominates, it destroys the discerning intellect, enveloping the mind and senses in unconsciousness, and gives rise to lethargy.¹⁵ Its function is to obscure knowledge and divert one from duty, leading to pointless endeavors."

The Bhagavad Gītā further elucidates:

*tamastvajñānaḥ vidhi mohanaṁ sarvadehinām /
pramādālasya-nidrābhis tannibadhnāti bhārata //¹⁶*

This means, "Know tamas to be born of ignorance, deluding all beings. It binds the soul through negligence, laziness, and sleep."



Tamoguna arises from ignorance and traps living beings in confusion, sloth, and negligence, making it a cause of suffering. Its symptoms, as described in the Bhagavad Gītā, include:

aprakāśo'pravṛttiś ca pramādo moha eva ca /
tamasy etāni jāyante vivṛddhe kurunandana //¹⁷

"When tamas grows, it brings darkness to the intellect and senses, inactivity, negligence, and delusion."

A person influenced by tamas experiences ignorance, lethargy, sleep, inertia, and confusion, which results in an inability to fulfill duties. This leads to a sense of unease and instability. The tamasic individual becomes like a lifeless object in the world.

The Bhagavad Gītā states: "When dominated by tamas at the time of death, one takes birth in lower forms of life such as insects, animals, or plants these are called tamasic births."

Integration of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas

The Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā identifies sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic dispositions, which Ayurveda refers to as manas prakṛti. Sattva, rajas, and tamas are intrinsic to all objects in the universe, but their proportions vary. One of these qualities generally predominates, defining the nature of an entity.

An entity with a dominance of sattva is considered auspicious, while one with rajas is attached, and one with tamas is deluded. Despite their opposing natures, the three qualities coexist and are interdependent.

The Sāṅkhya Darśana explains this dynamic through the analogy of oil, a wick, and fire: though they counteract each other oil extinguishes the wick, and fire consumes the wick they work together to produce light. Similarly, sattva, rajas, and tamas may conflict but harmoniously cooperate to shape the nature of all objects. Their interdependence ensures the manifestation of creation.

3. CONCLUSION

The concept of the Trigunas Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas serves as a profound philosophical framework for understanding the dynamics of the universe and human behavior. Sāṅkhya philosophy presents the guṇas as the foundational constituents of prakṛti, responsible for creation, sustenance, and dissolution in the cosmos. This static and universal perspective highlights their metaphysical significance in maintaining the balance of existence.

The Bhagavad Gītā, building on Sāṅkhya's foundation, transforms the guṇas into a dynamic and practical tool for ethical living and spiritual growth. By interpreting the guṇas within the moral and spiritual realms, the Gītā offers a roadmap for individuals to recognize their guṇic tendencies, cultivate Sattva, and ultimately transcend all three guṇas to realize the Self (ātman) and achieve liberation (mokṣa). This evolutionary perspective underscores the flexibility of Indian philosophical thought, where theoretical frameworks are seamlessly integrated into practical applications for human upliftment.

The relevance of the Trigunas extends beyond their philosophical roots, offering insights into personality dynamics, ethical decision-making, and self-development in contemporary contexts. This study reaffirms the enduring significance of the Trigunas as a comprehensive model for understanding and navigating the complexities of life, bridging the metaphysical and the pragmatic.

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