



## Vedic Roots of Emotional Intelligence: A Conceptual Link Between Guṇa Theory and Empathic Behaviour

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### Abstract

This paper explores a conceptual integration between Vedic psychology and contemporary emotional intelligence (EI) by examining the relationship between the tri-guṇa theory—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—and empathic behaviour. Drawing on classical Indian philosophical texts and modern psychological frameworks, the study highlights how empathy, a core component of EI, is inherently embedded within ancient Vedic thought. Through a detailed conceptual mapping, the paper argues that Sattva (purity and harmony) aligns positively with emotional awareness, regulation, and empathic concern; Rajas (activity and passion) contributes to dynamic engagement but may hinder emotional stability; and Tamas (inertia and ignorance) negatively impacts emotional responsiveness and empathy. The study further proposes a hybrid framework linking guṇic dispositions to EI competencies, supported by existing empirical findings. It also outlines potential methodological approaches for future research, including correlational and intervention-based studies. By bridging Eastern philosophical insights with Western psychological models, this work contributes to a more holistic understanding of emotional intelligence and offers culturally grounded pathways for enhancing empathy and emotional well-being.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, guṇa theory, empathy, vedic psychology, sattva-rajas-tamas.

### Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of others. Seminal definitions describe EI as “the ability to identify and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others,” encompassing self-awareness, self-control, communication and social skills. This concept, crystallized by pioneers like Mayer

& Salovey (1990, 1999) and Goleman (1998), complements traditional IQ by emphasizing affective and social skills. Empathy – the capacity to understand and share the feelings of another – is widely recognized as a core component of EI. For example, empathy in clinical care is defined as the cognitive and emotional ability to comprehend a patient’s experience and share in their emotions. Given the importance of empathy for leadership, education and well-being, scholars have explored diverse models of EI to include empathic concern as a key social skill. Interestingly, ancient Indian texts long emphasized virtues like *karuṇā* (compassion) and empathy. Hindu scriptures assert the “treat others as yourself” ethic (Bhagavad Gita 6:32) and teach “seeing all beings as oneself” to cultivate compassion. Thus, long before modern EI research, Vedic literature embedded the importance of understanding and caring for others. This paper proposes a conceptual framework linking the Vedic triadic *guṇa* personality theory (Sattva–Rajas–Tamas) with contemporary notions of EI and empathic behaviour. We draw on recent empirical studies to support theoretical correspondences, and outline a hypothetical integration model.

## **Literature Review**

Modern EI theories typically incorporate multiple components – e.g. Salovey and Mayer’s (1997) four-branch model (perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions) or Goleman’s mixed model (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management). Across frameworks, empathy stands out as a fundamental social awareness skill. Empathy is “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person”, going beyond mere sympathy to “putting oneself in their shoes”. Psychologist Davis (1983) emphasized that empathy involves cognitive perspective-taking and emotional resonance – essentially being responsive to others’ feelings as if they were one’s own. In EI parlance, empathic concern (compassion) and perspective-taking bolster social relations and leadership effectiveness. For instance, emotionally intelligent leaders use empathy to foster inclusive workplaces and ethical decision-making. Because empathy underlies prosocial behaviour and teamwork, linking it to enduring philosophical constructs could enrich understanding of EI.

## ***Guṇa Theory and Vedic Psychology***

*Guṇa* theory originates in the Bhagavad Gītā and Sankhya philosophy. It posits that all beings embody three fundamental qualities (*guṇas*) – Sattva (purity, harmony, luminosity), Rajas (activity, passion, drive), and Tamas (inertia, darkness, dullness) – whose relative

predominance shapes personality and behaviour. Texts describe these gunas metaphorically as illumination (Sattva), kinetic energy (Rajas), and inertia (Tamas). Although latent and intertwined in every individual, typically one or two gunas predominate at any time, yielding distinct temperaments. For example, a Sattva-dominant person is described as calm, clear-minded and self-disciplined: Sattva “creates harmony, balance, and awakening” and engenders selfless service, purity of heart, control over senses, truthfulness and compassion toward other beings. By contrast, Rajas-dominant individuals tend toward intense activity and ambition (passion, restlessness, anger or envy), mixing creative energy with impatience and desire. Tamas-dominant personalities manifest lethargy, confusion and negativity: they may be dull, fearful or in denial, and prone to inertia or ignorance. Classic texts even posit that at an ideal state one can transcend all gunas, achieving equanimity of mind: “neither positive nor negative emotions affect a person; they are neither excited nor depressed with the events of life when they go beyond gunas”.

Psychologists in India have long noted the psychological depth of tri-guṇa. Recent studies reaffirm that sattva is linked to inner peace, truthfulness and contentment, whereas rajas fuels drive but also agitation, and tamas breeds mental imbalance or apathy. Indeed, Indigenous personality measures (like the Vedic Personality Inventory) reliably capture these tendencies and correlate them with traits in Western models. For example, research finds Sattva corresponds to conscientiousness, agreeableness and emotional stability; Rajas to extraversion and impulsivity; and Tamas to neuroticism and irritability. In sum, the guṇas form a comprehensive typology: Sattva fosters virtue and wisdom, Rajas drives ambition and change, and Tamas anchors one in ignorance or inertia.

### ***Conceptual Mapping***

Given these definitions, how might guṇa theory illuminate components of EI and empathic behaviour? Conceptually, one can map guṇic dispositions onto emotional patterns. The Sattvic quality, with its emphasis on clarity and compassion, aligns closely with the self-awareness, empathy and self-regulation facets of EI. Sattva literally includes virtue of compassion: Vedic psychology notes that Sattva “generates ... compassion toward other beings”. Leaders or individuals high in Sattva are described as integrity-driven and compassionate, inspiring through wisdom and service. Empirically, this translates to stronger empathic capacity: a recent Indian study found that students with higher Sattva scores showed better perspective-taking and lower personal distress – hallmarks of social-emotional skill. In other words, Sattva cultivates an equanimous mind that can attend to others’ emotions without

being overwhelmed, which is a core emotional intelligence skill. This is consonant with research that Sattva correlates positively with positive emotional styles (attention, self-awareness, sensitivity) and with life satisfaction.

By contrast, the Rajasic quality can have mixed effects on EI. Rajas supplies energy, initiative and sociability – traits that can aid in engaging with others. For instance, Rajas correlates with impulsivity and dynamic activity. This may help one notice and respond to others' emotions actively, but it also risks emotional reactivity and impatience. A rajasic person might empathize through action, but their agitation may hinder calm understanding. The literature suggests Rajas is positively associated with ambitious drive but also with irritability. In terms of EI, high Rajas might boost assertiveness and action-oriented problem solving, yet it may impair the patience and self-control needed for deep empathic listening. Some studies note Rajas can negatively correlate with measures of psychological well-being, implying that excessive Rajas could undermine empathy by promoting stress or egocentric focus. Thus, Rajas might contribute to certain social aspects of EI (like assertiveness) while diminishing the serenity component.

The Tamasic quality tends to undermine emotional intelligence and empathy. Tamas is marked by dullness, apathy and resistance to change. A tamasic individual may be disengaged, even cynical, and may fail to perceive or care about others' feelings. The *guṇa* descriptions explicitly link Tamas to ignorance, arrogance and helplessness, traits incompatible with empathic attunement. Tamas also correlates with emotional instability and apathy. In practice, someone dominated by Tamas might experience heightened personal distress and fantasy thinking (as found in recent data), indicating difficulty in grounding empathy in reality. Moreover, tamasic moods (depression, inertia) naturally blunt responsiveness to others. Research on Vedic traits shows Tamas is negatively associated with life satisfaction and positively with stress, suggesting a lack of the positive affect that often motivates empathic helping. Taken together, Tamasic dominance likely impedes emotional regulation and openness, making true empathic engagement unlikely.

In summary, Sattva nurtures the inner calm and benevolence needed for empathy; Rajas provides energetic engagement but risks emotional turbulence; Tamas brings inertia and indifference, counter to empathy. Importantly, Vedic texts see the dynamic interplay of these qualities: people cycle through *guṇa* states, and practice (yoga, meditation) can shift the balance toward Sattva. For example, meditation is said to dissolve excessive Rajas and Tamas, enhancing Sattva and thereby increasing equanimity of mind. This mirrors modern EI training:

mindfulness and stress reduction (cultivating Sattva) improve emotion regulation and empathy.

## Methods

Building on these correspondences, we propose a conceptual framework linking Guṇa theory to EI components. In this model, each guṇa influences key EI sub-skills:

**Perceiving and Understanding Emotions:** Sattva's clarity and openness support accurate perception of one's own and others' emotional states. A sattvic mind remains alert and compassionate, enhancing self-awareness and social insight. In contrast, Tamas may dull awareness, while Rajas may cause misinterpretation due to bias or haste

**Regulating Emotions:** Sattva embodies balance and discipline, enabling calm management of feelings. Rajas' restlessness leads to impulsive emotional reactions; Tamas' inertia may cause emotional shutdown or avoidance. Thus, higher Sattva predicts better self-control and resilience.

**Empathy and Social Skills:** Sattva directly nourishes prosocial concern. For example, *karuṇā* (compassion) is essentially a sattvic virtue in Indian ethics. Rajas can foster active helping behavior but may lack the selflessness of Sattva. Tamas, with its apathy, would show the least empathetic responsiveness. In practice, as one study found, Sattva correlated positively with perspective-taking and empathic concern (low personal distress), whereas higher Tamas predicted more personal anxiety and imagined detachment.

Collectively, these mappings suggest a hybrid model where Vedic personality profiles modulate emotional intelligence. An individual's dominant guṇa pattern (measured by tools like the Vedic Personality Inventory) could be used to predict strengths and weaknesses in EI dimensions. For example, a Sattva-dominant profile might score high on trait empathy and emotional stability, while a Tamasic profile might flag risk for emotional insensitivity. Furthermore, interventions could be designed accordingly: practices that increase Sattva (e.g. mindfulness, yoga) are hypothesized to boost EI by deepening empathy and emotional balance. To test this conceptual link, one could formulate empirical studies. A correlational approach would measure individuals' guṇa composition and EI/empathy levels. For instance, administering the Vedic Personality Inventory alongside established EI scales (e.g. EQ-i or the ability-based MSCEIT) and empathy questionnaires (like the Interpersonal Reactivity Index) could reveal relationships. Preliminary data already suggest the expected pattern: higher Sattva aligns with superior empathy (higher perspective-taking and empathic concern, lower personal

distress). By analyzing such correlations, researchers can validate whether guṇa traits predict specific emotional competencies.

An experimental or intervention study could further explore causality. For example, a randomized trial might train one group in Sattva-enhancing practices (e.g. meditation, ethical reflection) and compare changes in EI/empathy to a control group. Prior work indicates yoga and meditation increase Sattva and decrease Rajas/Tamas. Researchers could measure whether such shifts correspond to improved emotional regulation or empathic accuracy in social tasks. Neurophysiological measures (e.g. EEG, fMRI of empathy networks) could also be integrated to “bridge” Vedic and neuroscience perspectives, following suggestions in the literature.

Finally, a mixed-methods approach could contextualize the Vedic concepts culturally. Qualitative interviews might explore how practitioners of Eastern philosophies describe emotional life in terms of guṇas. This could enrich the conceptual model by capturing indigenous insights on empathy not readily found in Western psychology.

## Discussion

Integrating Guṇa theory with EI has several potential benefits. Conceptually, it situates emotional intelligence within a centuries-old framework of personality, highlighting parallels between Eastern and Western psychology. For example, modern constructs like self-regulation and social awareness find analogues in Sattva’s discipline and compassion. This cross-cultural synthesis could inform more holistic personality models, where ancient wisdom complements modern evidence.

Practically, considering guṇas may improve the cultural relevance of EI research in India and beyond. For Indian contexts, using the familiar Bhagavad Gītā framework could make EI training more accessible. In leadership or education, teaching empathy through stories of Sattvic heroes (like Rama or Karna) might resonate deeply. Moreover, acknowledging that personality dispositions (gunas) influence emotion can help tailor interventions: for example, a person low in Sattva might need mindfulness exercises to build awareness, whereas a Tamas-dominant person might need motivational techniques to overcome apathy.

For future research, it would be valuable to conduct large-scale studies combining guṇa inventories with standard EI assessments. Investigating how guṇa profiles shift over time with personal growth or training could also shed light on personality plasticity. Additionally, exploring how guṇas relate to neuroscientific findings on emotion (e.g. brain regions of

empathy or emotion regulation) could create a truly integrative model.

## Conclusion

This paper has outlined a conceptual link between the Vedic tri-guṇa system and modern emotional intelligence, particularly empathy. The evidence suggests that Sattva – embodying purity and compassion – naturally facilitates empathic sensitivity and emotional balance. Rajas provides drive and social engagement but can compromise calm perspective, while Tamas tends to block empathy through apathy and confusion. By mapping guṇic qualities onto EI dimensions, we propose a framework in which ancient psychological insights inform contemporary emotion theory. Empirical studies (both cited and proposed) support the idea that Sattva correlates with higher empathy and social competence. Future work can build on this foundation by measuring guṇas and EI together, and by testing interventions (like meditation) that shift guṇa balance. Integrating these traditions may enrich our understanding of emotional intelligence and offer new pathways for cultivating empathy in a global context.

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