

Integrating Triguna Theory in Understanding Personality and Treating Personality Disorders

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the integration of the ancient Triguna theory from Hindu philosophy with contemporary psychological frameworks to enhance our understanding of human personality and improve the treatment of personality disorders. Triguna theory posits that personality is shaped by the interplay of three fundamental qualities: Sattva (purity and harmony), Rajas (activity and passion), and Tamas (inertia and ignorance). The study investigates how these gunas correspond with modern personality models, such as the Big Five traits, and examines their relevance in diagnosing and treating disorders like borderline personality disorder (BPD) and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Through a holistic approach, the paper highlights how Ayurvedic practices such as yoga, meditation, and dietary modifications can help balance the gunas, promoting mental clarity and emotional stability. By integrating Triguna into modern psychotherapy, this research offers a culturally sensitive model that addresses both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of mental health, providing new pathways for effective interventions. Future research directions and the need for empirical validation across diverse populations are also discussed to broaden the applicability of Triguna-based treatments in global clinical practice.

Keywords: *Triguna Theory, Personality, Treating Personality Disorders*

Personality, as a concept, has been the subject of intense study in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. Within Hindu philosophy, the Triguna theory—derived from Samkhya philosophy—offers a different lens through which one could see human behavior and personality. According to the idea, the universe and human psychology are governed by three essential qualities: Sattva (purity), Rajas (activity), and Tamas (inertia) (Suneetha and Srikrishna, 2009). Every person has these traits, sometimes known as gunas, which shape their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Culturally based personality theories have drawn more attention in modern psychology, and Triguna offers a holistic framework closely related to both psychological well-being and psychopathology (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014). The integration of Triguna with psychological treatment plans offers potential avenues for addressing personality disorders, such as

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borderline personality disorder (BPD) and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), through holistic interventions (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

The rationale for this study is to explore the link between Triguna and personality, identifying how this ancient theory can inform modern approaches to personality disorders. This inquiry is particularly relevant in an increasingly globalized world where mental health professionals are looking for culturally sensitive approaches to treatment.

2. Understanding Triguna in Hindu Philosophy

2.1. The Concept of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas

The Triguna theory in Hindu philosophy which holds that three basic traits—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—drive all human experiences and actions—Singh, 2008. These three gunas are present in everyone, but in varying proportions, and they govern the mental and emotional state of individuals:

1. Sattva is the quality of purity, harmony, and balance. It is associated with wisdom, clarity, and ethical behavior. People who are predominantly Sattvic are calm, compassionate, and often introspective.
2. Rajas represents energy, activity, and passion. It drives ambition and desire, but an overactive Rajas can lead to anxiety, restlessness, and attachment to material pursuits.
3. Tamas is the quality of darkness, inertia, and ignorance. It causes confusion, lethargy, and negative emotions, often resulting in a lack of motivation and destructive habits (Suneetha & Srikrishna, 2009).

These gunas are fluid and dynamic, which means they change based on psychological condition, surroundings, and life situation. An individual's personality and general well-being are much shaped by the balance of these gunas (Gaur, 2024).

2.2. Historical and Philosophical Context of Triguna

One of the six classical schools in Indian philosophy, the Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy provides the Triguna theory. Samkhya philosophy, developed by the sage Kapila, is a dualistic framework that describes the universe as an interaction of Purusha (pure consciousness) and Prakriti (nature or matter). Comprising the three gunas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

Sacred Hindu books including the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads also contain the idea of Triguna, in which three attributes are said to be fundamental in the moral and spiritual evolution of the soul (Singh, 2008). Particularly the Bhagavad Gita addresses how these gunas confine the soul to the material world and provides means of transcending the gunas via spiritual disciplines such yoga and meditation (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014).

In the context of personality, the Triguna theory suggests that achieving a balance between these three qualities leads to mental clarity and emotional well-being, while an imbalance can cause psychological distress (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

3.1. Overview of Triguna in Psychological Studies

Integration of Triguna theory into the discipline of modern psychology has attracted an increasing amount of attention during the last few decades. Studies has explored how the gunas might be mapped onto existing personality models including psychodynamic theory and the Big Five personality traits. For instance, whereas Rajas corresponds with

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extraversion and neuroticism (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017), Sattva aligns quite well with the qualities of conscientiousness and openness. Tamas, the meanwhile, is linked with low conscientiousness and neuroticism.

Psychological studies focusing on the application of Triguna suggest that individuals who exhibit a predominance of Rajas and Tamas are more prone to personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder (BPD) and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) (Maurya, Singh, & Gowda, n.d.). Empirical research has highlighted the relevance of Ayurvedic practices, such as diet, meditation, and yoga, in balancing the gunas to improve mental health and well-being (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014).

3.2. Comparative Analysis of Triguna and Western Personality Theories

Several comparative studies have examined how the Triguna model aligns with established Western theories of personality. Researchers have found parallels between Triguna and the Big Five personality traits. For example, Sattva can be linked to the trait of agreeableness due to its association with harmony, altruism, and ethical behavior. Rajas, on the other hand, has been compared to extraversion and openness to experience, given its energetic and dynamic nature. Tamas, characterized by lethargy and ignorance, corresponds to low conscientiousness and low openness (Suneetha & Srikrishna, 2009).

Psychodynamic theory, rooted in the work of Sigmund Freud, emphasizes the influence of unconscious drives on behavior, which can be compared to how the gunas affect subconscious tendencies. Similar to Freud's idea of balancing the id, ego, and superego, the Triguna model suggests that mental health can be achieved by balancing the gunas (Singh, 2008).

3.3. Triguna in Contemporary Psychological Research

Contemporary research on Triguna has taken a cross-cultural approach, examining how the theory applies to both Indian and Western contexts. Several studies have developed Triguna-based scales to measure personality traits, and these have been validated against widely used psychological tools like the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017).

Moreover, the role of Ayurvedic interventions in promoting mental health has gained attention. Integrating yoga, meditation, and diet as part of a holistic treatment plan has shown promising results in regulating the gunas and improving overall psychological well-being (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY

4.1. Trait Theory

Trait theory in psychology focuses on the identification and measurement of consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that define personality. Pioneers like **Gordon Allport** and **Raymond Cattell** introduced the concept that personality is composed of broad traits, which are enduring and observable across different situations (Allport, 1937). The most widely accepted model of trait theory is the **Big Five** personality traits: **Openness**, **Conscientiousness**, **Extraversion**, **Agreeableness**, and **Neuroticism** (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

In relation to **Triguna theory**, the traits of **Sattva**, **Rajas**, and **Tamas** may align with various dimensions of the Big Five model. For instance, **Sattva** may correspond to

conscientiousness and **agreeableness**, **Rajas** with **extraversion** and **neuroticism**, and **Tamas** with **low conscientiousness** and **low openness** (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017). Trait theory offers a useful framework for comparing how consistent personality characteristics across cultures can be linked to ancient concepts like the gunas.

4.2. Psychodynamic Theory

Psychodynamic theory, primarily developed by **Sigmund Freud**, posits that personality is shaped by unconscious drives and early childhood experiences. Freud's model of the psyche, consisting of the **id**, **ego**, and **superego**, highlights the tension between unconscious desires and moral reasoning (Freud, 1923). Later psychodynamic theorists, such as **Carl Jung**, expanded on this by introducing the concept of **archetypes** and a collective unconscious that governs personality.

In relation to **Triguna theory**, the **id** can be compared to the dominance of **Tamas**, the **ego** with **Rajas**, and the **superego** with **Sattva**. Similar to how the balance of id, ego, and superego leads to psychological well-being, Triguna theory suggests that a balance of gunas results in a harmonious personality (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018). Both frameworks emphasize the importance of inner conflict resolution in achieving mental health.

4.3. Humanistic Approaches

Humanistic psychology, championed by **Carl Rogers** and **Abraham Maslow**, emphasizes the importance of free will, personal growth, and self-actualization. According to Rogers, humans have an inherent drive toward self-improvement, and achieving congruence between one's self-concept and experiences leads to psychological health (Rogers, 1961). Maslow's **hierarchy of needs** also underscores the quest for self-actualization as the highest human goal (Maslow, 1943).

In the context of **Triguna**, **Sattva** reflects qualities of self-actualization and balance, as individuals dominated by Sattva pursue knowledge, altruism, and harmony. Humanistic psychology's emphasis on personal growth mirrors the objectives of balancing the gunas to achieve spiritual and psychological well-being (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014).

5. Triguna and Personality Traits

5.1. Correlations and Associations with Western Personality Models

Several studies have attempted to draw parallels between the **Triguna model** and Western personality frameworks like the **Big Five**. Research suggests that **Sattva** can be associated with high levels of **agreeableness** and **conscientiousness**, as well as **openness** to experience due to its emphasis on harmony, morality, and wisdom (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017). **Rajas** corresponds to **extraversion** due to its association with activity and ambition, and **neuroticism** as it often leads to anxiety and emotional instability. **Tamas**, with its qualities of inertia and ignorance, can be mapped onto **low conscientiousness** and **low openness** (Maurya, Singh, & Gowda, n.d.).

The **Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ)**, which measures **extraversion**, **neuroticism**, and **psychoticism**, has also been linked to the gunas. For example, high **psychoticism** and **neuroticism** scores have been associated with a predominance of **Rajas** and **Tamas**, respectively, while **Sattva** is related to emotional stability and lower psychoticism scores (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014).

5.2. Cultural and Cross-Cultural Relevance

The **Triguna theory** is deeply rooted in **Indian cultural psychology**, but it has shown potential for cross-cultural relevance. Comparative studies have highlighted those certain aspects of Western personality **models**, such as the Big Five, can be mapped onto the Triguna framework, suggesting universal applicability (Suneetha & Srikrishna, 2009). For example, **Sattva** as an ideal trait reflects qualities that are valued across many cultures, such as altruism, wisdom, and balance.

Furthermore, studies on **cultural differences** in personality traits have shown that people from collectivist cultures may exhibit more **Sattvic** traits, while individualistic cultures may align more with **Rajasic** qualities, such as ambition and competitiveness (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018). However, more cross-cultural empirical research is needed to validate these findings and explore the global applicability of the Triguna model.

6. Personality Disorders: Types and Characteristics

6.1. Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is characterized by instability in moods, behavior, self-image, and interpersonal relationships (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). People with BPD often experience intense episodes of anger, depression, and anxiety, which can last from a few hours to a few days. Common features include fear of abandonment, impulsive behaviors, and a pattern of unstable relationships.

In the context of Triguna, individuals with BPD may exhibit an excess of **Rajas** and **Tamas**, leading to emotional instability, impulsivity, and a lack of mental clarity. A balanced **Sattva** may help to stabilize the emotional extremes seen in BPD (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017).

6.2. Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized by grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others (APA, 2013). Individuals with NPD often have an inflated sense of their own importance and may exploit others to achieve their own goals. From the **Triguna perspective**, NPD can be seen as an extreme manifestation of **Rajas**, where ambition, desire for recognition, and self-centeredness overshadow more harmonious traits like empathy and wisdom. Balancing **Rajas** with **Sattva** might foster empathy and self-reflection in individuals with NPD (Singh, 2008).

6.3. Other Relevant Disorders

Other personality disorders, such as **antisocial personality disorder (ASPD)** and **obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD)**, also exhibit traits that can be linked to imbalances in the gunas. For instance, **ASPD** is associated with **high Rajas** and **low Sattva**, resulting in impulsivity, lack of empathy, and antisocial behaviors. In contrast, **OCPD** may be linked to excessive **Sattva**, where an overemphasis on perfectionism and order can become dysfunctional (Maurya et al., n.d.).

7. Triguna and Personality Disorders

7.1. The Role of Gunas in Mental Health

The balance of the **three gunas** plays a critical role in maintaining mental health. In traditional **Ayurvedic psychology**, mental disorders are often attributed to an imbalance of **Rajas** and **Tamas**, with a deficiency in **Sattva** (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014). **Rajas** can lead to restlessness, overactivity, and impulsiveness, while **Tamas** results in lethargy, confusion,

and depression. **Sattva**, on the other hand, is the guna that brings balance, promoting peace, wisdom, and clarity (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

In clinical settings, practitioners can use the concept of gunas to assess the emotional and cognitive state of their clients, guiding therapeutic interventions aimed at increasing **Sattva** and reducing **Rajas** and **Tamas** for improved mental health.

7.2. Implications and Connections Between Gunas and Personality Disorders

Research suggests that individuals with **borderline personality disorder** (BPD) or **narcissistic personality disorder** (NPD) exhibit imbalances in **Rajas** and **Tamas** (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017). These disorders can be linked to impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and self-centeredness—qualities associated with **excessive Rajas**. Conversely, **Tamas** can exacerbate feelings of confusion, lethargy, and emotional numbness seen in many personality disorders (Singh, 2008).

By incorporating **Ayurvedic principles** and Triguna theory into the treatment of personality disorders, clinicians can work toward restoring **Sattva**, or balance, which may mitigate the symptoms of these disorders.

8. Applications in Psychotherapy

8.1. Integrating Triguna Theory in Treatment Plans

The integration of **Triguna theory** into psychotherapy presents a holistic approach to treating **personality disorders**. By identifying which guna is predominant in a client, therapists can tailor interventions to encourage the cultivation of **Sattva** and the reduction of **Rajas** and **Tamas** (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014). This can be achieved through lifestyle changes, dietary recommendations, and mindfulness practices that promote mental clarity and emotional stability (Maurya et al., n.d.).

For example, individuals with excessive **Rajas**, such as those with **narcissistic personality disorder**, might benefit from mindfulness practices that promote humility, self-awareness, and empathy. Similarly, those with a predominance of **Tamas**, such as individuals with **borderline personality disorder**, may benefit from physical activity, healthy diet, and yoga practices that increase **Sattva** and reduce emotional volatility (Swaroop & Salagame, 2017).

8.2. Ayurvedic Approaches to Mental Health and Personality Disorders

Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between the three gunas for physical and mental well-being. Ayurvedic treatments for mental health involve a combination of **diet, yoga, meditation, and herbal remedies** aimed at enhancing **Sattva** and reducing the negative effects of **Rajas** and **Tamas** (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

Modern psychotherapists who integrate **Ayurvedic principles** into their practice may encourage clients to adopt **Sattvic diets** (composed of fresh, wholesome foods), engage in regular yoga and meditation, and use herbal supplements to restore mental and emotional balance. Such holistic approaches can help address the underlying imbalances in the gunas that contribute to personality disorders (Shilpa & Murthy, 2014).

9. Research Studies and Findings

9.1. Empirical Evidence Supporting Triguna in Psychology

Empirical studies have increasingly supported the relevance of **Triguna theory** in understanding personality. **Mohan and Sandhu (1988)** were among the early researchers to develop standardized scales to measure the gunas, and their studies revealed significant correlations between the gunas and mental well-being. They found that individuals with higher levels of **Sattva** scored higher on measures of emotional stability, while **Rajas** and **Tamas** were associated with neurotic and psychotic tendencies, respectively (Mohan & Sandhu, 1988).

Further research by **Das (1991)** supported these findings by comparing the **Triguna model** with the **Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ)**. The study showed a positive correlation between **Sattva** and **emotional stability**, while **Rajas** and **Tamas** were linked to **extraversion** and **neuroticism** (Das, 1991). Recent studies, such as those by **Swaroop and Salagame (2017)**, have confirmed these patterns, suggesting that Triguna provides a culturally relevant approach to personality psychology, particularly in Indian populations.

In terms of **clinical applications**, **Srinivasan and Kumar (2015)** explored the role of **Ayurvedic practices** grounded in **Triguna theory** in treating anxiety and depression. Their study found that interventions aimed at increasing **Sattva** (such as mindfulness meditation, dietary modifications, and yoga) led to significant reductions in symptoms of emotional dysregulation (Srinivasan & Kumar, 2015). Similarly, **Rajpurohit and Satpathy (2018)** found that patients with **borderline personality disorder (BPD)** and **narcissistic personality disorder (NPD)** exhibited marked improvements when holistic Ayurvedic interventions were integrated into psychotherapy.

9.2. Case Studies and Practical Applications

Mohan and Sandhu (1986) documented several case studies in which patients diagnosed with **schizophrenia** and **bipolar disorder** underwent **Sattvic interventions** to manage symptoms. These interventions, which included lifestyle changes, yoga, and meditation, resulted in reduced emotional volatility and improved cognitive clarity (Mohan & Sandhu, 1986).

In another case study by **Singh and Misra (2001)**, a 45-year-old male with **obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD)** was treated with **Ayurvedic therapy** alongside **cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)**. By focusing on reducing **Rajas** (manifested as compulsive behaviors) and increasing **Sattva** through mindfulness exercises, the patient reported fewer intrusive thoughts and an increased sense of control over daily activities (Singh & Misra, 2001).

Additionally, **Gaur (2024)** reported the successful integration of **Triguna-based interventions** in group therapy settings. The study found that clients with **narcissistic traits** benefited from group discussions focused on cultivating **Sattva**, which encouraged greater self-awareness, reduced egocentricity, and promoted healthier interpersonal relationships (Gaur, 2024).

10. Challenges and Future Directions

10.1. Limitations in Current Research

Despite growing interest in **Triguna theory**, several limitations hinder its broader acceptance and application. One challenge is the **subjective nature of self-reported**

questionnaires used to measure the gunas. **Mohan and Sandhu (1988)** acknowledged that cultural biases and social desirability may affect the accuracy of self-assessment in Triguna scales, calling for the development of more objective measurement tools.

Another limitation is the **lack of cross-cultural research**. While **Das (1991)** and **Swaroop and Salagame (2017)** have explored correlations between **Triguna** and **Western personality models**, more studies are needed to validate these findings in non-Indian populations. This gap makes it difficult to generalize the applicability of Triguna theory beyond its cultural context.

The **biological basis of the gunas** remains underexplored. Research on the neurobiological underpinnings of personality traits, such as **Gray's reinforcement sensitivity theory** (Gray & McNaughton, 2000), could be integrated into future studies of Triguna to examine how **brain activity** corresponds to **Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas**. Without this, the theory remains largely philosophical and psychological, lacking empirical support from the biological sciences.

10.2. Future Research Directions and Practical Implications

Future research should focus on **cross-cultural validation** of the **Triguna model**. Studies by **Triandis (1994)** suggest that culturally bound concepts of personality may limit the universal application of indigenous psychological theories. Thus, exploring how **Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas** manifest in Western populations will help broaden the utility of the model.

Further, **longitudinal studies** are essential to determine the long-term impact of **Triguna-based interventions** on mental health outcomes. Research by **Srinivasan and Kumar (2015)** has shown promising short-term results, but the durability of these interventions remains unknown. Additionally, integrating **neuroscientific methods** such as **fMRI** and **EEG** could shed light on the biological and cognitive mechanisms that underlie the gunas, as suggested by **Gray & McNaughton (2000)**.

Finally, more **clinical trials** involving **Ayurvedic treatments** for personality disorders should be conducted. Current research supports the effectiveness of these interventions, but **randomized controlled trials (RCTs)** are needed to provide robust evidence for their integration into mainstream psychotherapy (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

11. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

11.1. Summary of Findings

The **Triguna theory** provides a valuable framework for understanding personality and mental health. Empirical studies by **Mohan and Sandhu (1988)**, **Swaroop and Salagame (2017)**, and **Das (1991)** have demonstrated that the gunas—**Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas**—correlate significantly with **Western personality traits**. Higher levels of **Sattva** are associated with emotional stability and psychological well-being, while **Rajas** and **Tamas** are linked to neurotic and psychotic tendencies.

Case studies have further shown that **Triguna-based interventions** can be successfully integrated into **psychotherapy** to treat personality disorders like **BPD** and **NPD**. By focusing on **balancing the gunas**, clients have reported improvements in emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal functioning (Singh & Misra, 2001).

11.2. Implications for Clinical Practice

For mental health professionals, the **Triguna theory** offers a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to personality assessment and treatment. Clinicians can integrate **Ayurvedic practices**—such as yoga, meditation, and dietary modifications—into their treatment plans to increase **Sattva** and reduce **Rajas** and **Tamas**. This approach aligns with evidence-based practices that promote mindfulness and emotional regulation, which are critical in the treatment of **borderline personality disorder** and **narcissistic personality disorder** (Srinivasan & Kumar, 2015).

Psychometric tools based on the **Triguna model** should also be incorporated into personality assessments to better understand clients' psychological states from a **holistic perspective**. This can provide mental health professionals with additional insight into clients' behaviors, motivations, and emotional needs (Rajpurohit & Satpathy, 2018).

11.3. The Role of Triguna in Enhancing Psychological Treatments

The **Triguna theory** has the potential to enhance existing psychotherapeutic frameworks by offering a model that addresses the **emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions** of mental health. Its focus on achieving **balance** through the cultivation of **Sattva** aligns with contemporary therapeutic approaches like **cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)** and **mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)**, both of which emphasize self-awareness and emotional regulation (Gray & McNaughton, 2000).

In the future, more **clinical trials** should be conducted to test the efficacy of **Triguna-based interventions** in various populations. If supported by robust empirical evidence, the **Triguna model** could offer a **culturally inclusive framework** for mental health professionals around the world.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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