

A Conceptual Study Of *Sattva-Rajas-Tamas* As Determinants Of Motivation In Self-Determination Theory

Dr. Neha Sule

PhD Scholar (Ayurveda)

Department of Ayurveda and Yoga, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune

Abstract

Motivation is a central construct in psychology, influencing behaviour, performance, and well-being across domains. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, conceptualizes motivation along a continuum ranging from intrinsic motivation to extrinsic motivation and amotivation, governed by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While SDT has been extensively validated, it assumes a universal structure of motivation and does not adequately account for inherent individual differences. In contrast, Ayurveda offers the concept of *Manas Prakriti*, defined through the three *Gunas*- *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*, which determine psychological tendencies and behavioural patterns. This paper presents a conceptual analysis proposing that *Gunas* may serve as fundamental determinants of motivational types described in SDT. *Sattva* is hypothesized to correspond with intrinsic motivation, *Rajas* with extrinsic motivation, and *Tamas* with amotivation. By synthesizing ancient Indian psychological thought with contemporary motivational theory, this study contributes to a more holistic, individualized understanding of human motivation and proposes a novel conceptual framework for future empirical research.

Keywords

Self-Determination Theory, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, *Gunas*, *Sattva*, *Rajas*, *Tamas*, Motivation Theory

1. Introduction

Motivation is a fundamental psychological process that underlies human behaviour, influencing how individuals initiate, sustain, and regulate goal-directed activities. It determines not only the direction of behaviour but also its intensity and persistence. Across domains such as education, healthcare, workplace productivity, and personal development, motivation plays a crucial role in shaping outcomes and overall well-being.

Among contemporary theories of motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has emerged as one of the most influential and empirically supported frameworks. Developed by Deci and Ryan, SDT considers that human beings are inherently oriented toward growth and self-regulation, driven by the need to satisfy three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness^[1,3]. When these needs are fulfilled, individuals exhibit intrinsic motivation, characterized by engagement in activities for inherent satisfaction. Conversely, when these needs are thwarted, individuals rely on extrinsic motivation or may experience amotivation.

Despite its robustness, SDT largely assumes universality in motivational processes. It does not fully explain why individuals differ in their baseline motivational tendencies, levels of engagement, or responsiveness to external conditions. This limitation points to the need for integrating frameworks that account for inherent individual variability.

Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine originating in India, offers such an individualised perspective through the concept of *Manas Prakriti*. According to Ayurvedic philosophy, the mind is governed by three fundamental qualities or *Gunas*- *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*- which influence cognition, emotions, and behaviour^[4]. These *Gunas* exist in varying proportions within individuals,

shaping their psychological disposition and behavioural tendencies. The present paper aims to bridge these two frameworks by exploring whether *Gunas* can serve as underlying determinants of motivational types described in SDT. By integrating ancient and modern perspectives, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of human motivation

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Self-Determination Theory

SDT is a macro-theory of human motivation that emphasizes the role of innate psychological needs in fostering motivation and well-being. According to SDT, individuals are naturally inclined toward growth, integration, and self-regulation when their psychological needs are satisfied ^[1].

The three core needs are:

- **Autonomy:** the need to experience volition and self-endorsement in
- **Competence:** the need to feel effective in interacting with the environment
- **Relatedness:** the need to feel connected to others

The satisfaction of these needs leads to intrinsic motivation, whereas their frustration results in controlled motivation or amotivation [3].

SDT classifies motivation along a continuum:

1. **Intrinsic Motivation** – engaging in activities for inherent or internal satisfaction
2. **Extrinsic Motivation** – engaging in activities for external rewards or pressures
3. **Amotivation** – absence of intention or motivation

Intrinsic motivation has been consistently associated with enhanced learning, creativity, persistence, and psychological well-being^[1,3]. Extrinsic motivation, although useful in certain contexts, often results in lower engagement and dependence on external reinforcement. Amotivation is linked to disengagement, reduced performance, and negative psychological outcomes.

Empirical studies across education, healthcare, and organizational settings have validated the principles of SDT, demonstrating that autonomy-supportive environments foster intrinsic motivation and improve outcomes^[2].

2.2 Concept of *Gunas* in Ayurveda

Ayurveda conceptualizes *Manas* (the human mind) as being governed by three fundamental qualities known as *Gunas-Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas*. These *Gunas* are considered the basic constituents of mental functioning and are responsible for shaping cognition, emotional responses, behavioural patterns, and overall psychological disposition. Rooted in classical Indian philosophy and described extensively in texts such as the *Charaka Samhita* and the *Bhagavad Gita* (particularly Chapter 14), the theory of *Gunas* provides a dynamic framework for understanding individual differences in mental and behavioural tendencies.

Unlike static personality traits in modern psychology, the *Gunas* are fluid, interactive, and context-dependent, continuously influencing and modulating one another. Every individual possesses all three *Gunas* in varying proportions; however, the predominance of one or a combination determines the individual's *Manas Prakriti* (mental constitution). This dynamic interplay not only governs habitual patterns of thinking and behaviour but also determines how individuals respond to internal and external stimuli.

Sattva

Sattva is regarded as the quality of purity, harmony, clarity, and equilibrium. It represents the highest state of mental functioning and is associated with qualities such as wisdom, discernment (*Viveka*),

contentment, and emotional stability. A *sattvic* mind is characterized by lucidity, awareness, and balance, enabling individuals to perceive reality accurately and respond appropriately.

From a psychological perspective, *Sattva* is associated with:

- Enhanced cognitive clarity and attention regulation
- Emotional stability and resilience
- Ethical orientation and prosocial behaviour
- Self-regulation and introspection

Individuals with a predominance of *Sattva* tend to exhibit calmness, patience, compassion, and a strong sense of purpose. Their actions are often guided by internal values rather than external pressures. They are naturally inclined toward activities that promote personal growth, knowledge acquisition, and well-being. This state reflects an optimal integration of cognition and emotion, facilitating adaptive and meaningful engagement with life.

Rajas

Rajas represents the quality of activity, movement, and dynamism. It is associated with energy, ambition, desire, and outward-directed behaviour. While *Rajas* is essential for initiating action and achieving goals, its dominance can lead to restlessness, agitation, and emotional instability.

Psychologically, *Rajas* is linked with:

- High levels of drive, ambition, and competitiveness
- Emotional reactivity and fluctuations
- Desire for achievement, recognition, and control
- Increased mental activity and distractibility

Rajasic individuals are typically goal-oriented and action-driven. They are motivated to achieve success, often seeking validation through external rewards such as status, recognition, or material gains. While this can result in productivity and accomplishment, excessive *Rajas* may lead to stress, dissatisfaction, and dependency on external outcomes. Thus, *Rajas* represents a double-edged quality, essential for action but potentially destabilizing when unregulated.

Tamas

Tamas is characterized by inertia, heaviness, and resistance. It represents the lowest state of mental functioning and is associated with ignorance (*Ajnana*), confusion, lethargy, and lack of awareness. *Tamasic* dominance results in reduced cognitive clarity and diminished capacity for purposeful action.

From a psychological standpoint, *Tamas* is associated with:

- Low levels of motivation and initiative
- Cognitive dullness and impaired decision-making
- Emotional withdrawal and apathy
- Resistance to change and lack of engagement

Individuals with predominant *Tamas* often exhibit passivity, procrastination, and disengagement from meaningful activities. Their behaviour may be characterized by avoidance, dependency, and lack of direction. In extreme cases, tamasic states may resemble psychological conditions such as depression, learned helplessness, or chronic demotivation. However, it is important to note that *Tamas* also plays a functional role in providing rest, stability, and grounding, particularly when balanced with *Sattva* and *Rajas*.

Dynamic Interplay of Gunas

A key feature of the *Guna* theory is its emphasis on dynamic interaction rather than fixed categorisation. The *Gunas* are constantly fluctuating in response to factors such as diet, lifestyle,

environment, emotional experiences, and cognitive processes. At any given moment, one *Guna* may dominate, influencing the individual's thoughts, emotions, and actions.

- A predominance of *Sattva* leads to clarity, balance, and adaptive behaviour
- Dominance of *Rajas* results in activity, desire-driven behaviour, and restlessness
- Excess *Tamas* leads to inertia, confusion, and disengagement

Importantly, Ayurveda emphasises that the goal is not the elimination of any *Guna* but the cultivation of *Sattva* while maintaining a functional balance of *Rajas* and *Tamas*. *Rajas* is necessary for action, and *Tamas* is necessary for rest; however, both must be regulated by *Sattva* to ensure optimal mental functioning.

Relevance to Psychological Functioning

The concept of *Gunas* provides an all-inclusive and integrative framework for understanding mental processes.

It accounts for:

- Individual variability in behaviour
- Differences in emotional regulation
- Variations in motivation and engagement
- Adaptive and maladaptive psychological patterns

Unlike many modern psychological models that separate cognition, emotion, and behaviour, the *Guna* framework views them as interconnected manifestations of underlying mental qualities. This makes it particularly valuable for integrative approaches that seek to bridge traditional knowledge systems with contemporary psychology.

2.3 Existing Research on *Gunas*

Modern research has attempted to operationalize the concept of *Gunas* as a psychological construct. Studies suggest that the *Gunas* can be measured using standardized scales and may serve as a framework for understanding personality and behaviour ^[5,6].

Research indicates that:

- *Sattva* is associated with well-being, emotional stability, and ethical behaviour
- *Rajas* is associated with ambition, stress, and external orientation
- *Tamas* is associated with depression, inertia, and lack of motivation

However, despite these findings, the relationship between *Gunas* and modern motivational theories remains underexplored.

2.4 Need for Integration

While SDT provides a structured understanding of motivation, it does not explain inherent individual differences in motivational tendencies. Conversely, Ayurveda explains behavioural variability through *Gunas* but lacks a formal classification of motivation.

The absence of integration between these frameworks represents a critical gap. Bridging this gap may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of motivation that incorporates both universal principles and individual variability.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual mapping between the *Gunas* and SDT motivation types:

<i>Guna</i>	Characteristics	SDT Equivalent
<i>Sattva</i>	Clarity, balance, awareness	Intrinsic Motivation
<i>Rajas</i>	Activity, desire, ambition	Extrinsic Motivation
<i>Tamas</i>	Inertia, passivity, confusion	Amotivation

3.1 Sattva and Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in activities for inherent satisfaction, curiosity, and enjoyment. It is characterized by self-direction, autonomy, and alignment with personal values^[1,3].

Sattva, with its qualities of clarity, awareness, and balance, closely aligns with intrinsic motivation. Individuals with a *sattvic* predominance engage in activities with a sense of purpose and internal fulfilment. Their actions are guided by knowledge and self-awareness rather than external rewards.

3.2 Rajas and Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation involves engagement in activities for external rewards, recognition, or avoidance of punishment. It is associated with goal-oriented behaviour and external regulation [3]

Rajas, characterised by activity, desire, and ambition, aligns with extrinsic motivation. *Rajasic* individuals are driven by outcomes, achievements, and external validation. While this can lead to productivity, it often results in dependency on external factors and increased stress.

3.3 Tamas and Amotivation

Amotivation represents a lack of intention or motivation, often arising from perceived incompetence or lack of value^[1].

Tamas, characterized by inertia and lack of clarity, closely corresponds to amotivation. *Tamasic* individuals exhibit passivity, disengagement, and lack of initiative, reflecting a diminished capacity for goal-directed behaviour.

4. Proposed Representation

The study proposes the following representation:

***Gunas* → Motivation Type → Behavioural Outcomes**

- *Sattva* → Intrinsic Motivation → Engagement, creativity, well-being
- *Rajas* → Extrinsic Motivation → Achievement, stress, competition
- *Tamas* → Amotivation → Withdrawal, inactivity, poor outcomes

This representation suggests that motivation is not solely determined by external factors but is rooted in an individual's inherent mental constitution.

5. Discussion

The present conceptual integration of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the Ayurvedic framework of *Gunas* offers a novel perspective on understanding human motivation by combining universal psychological principles with individualized mental constitution. This synthesis not only bridges two distinct knowledge systems but also addresses certain conceptual limitations inherent in each when considered independently.

5.1 Reconceptualising Motivation: From Universal to Individualized

SDT assumes that motivation exists along a continuum from Intrinsic motivation to Extrinsic motivation and Amotivation primarily influenced by the satisfaction of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While SDT assumes these needs to be universal across individuals, it does not sufficiently explain **why individuals differ in their baseline motivational tendencies**, even when exposed to similar environments.

The Ayurvedic concept of *Gunas* provides a compelling explanatory layer to this gap. By proposing that individuals possess a unique mental constitution (*Manas Prakriti*) defined by varying proportions of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*, Ayurveda introduces the idea that **motivation may be constitutionally predisposed rather than solely situationally determined**.

- Individuals with ***Sattva* dominance** may naturally incline toward intrinsic motivation due to their clarity, self-awareness, and internal orientation.
- Those with ***Rajas* dominance** may be predisposed toward extrinsic motivation, driven by achievement, recognition, and external rewards.

- Individuals with **Tamas predominance** may exhibit amotivation, characterized by inertia, disengagement, and lack of initiative.

Thus, motivation can be reconceptualized as an **interaction between internal constitution (*Gunas*) and external psychological needs (SDT)**.

5.2 *Gunas* as Determinants of Motivational Quality

The proposed mapping between *Gunas* and SDT constructs highlights that **not all motivations are qualitatively equal, and that** the underlying mental state significantly influences the nature and sustainability of motivation.

Sattva and Sustainable Motivation

Sattva aligns closely with intrinsic motivation, which is considered the most self-determined and psychologically beneficial form of motivation. Individuals with *sattvic* dominance are likely to:

- Engage in activities for inherent satisfaction
- Exhibit long-term persistence
- Demonstrate emotional stability and resilience

This suggests that *Sattva* may serve as a **psychological foundation for optimal motivation**, supporting well-being and adaptive functioning.

Rajas and Conditional Motivation

Rajas corresponds to extrinsic motivation, which, although effective in driving performance, often depends on external reinforcement. *Rajasic* individuals:

- Are highly productive and goal-oriented
- Seek validation through achievement
- May experience stress, competition, and dissatisfaction

This indicates that *Rajasic* motivation is **conditionally effective but potentially unstable**, as it relies heavily on external outcomes.

Tamas and Motivational Deficit

Tamas aligns with amotivation, representing a state where individuals lack intention or drive. *Tamasic* predominance may lead to:

- Withdrawal and disengagement
- Reduced cognitive and emotional responsiveness
- Poor goal-directed behaviour

From a psychological standpoint, *Tamas* may represent a **state of motivational impairment**, requiring intervention at both cognitive and behavioural levels.

5.3 Dynamic Nature of Motivation: A *Guna*-Based Perspective

A key strength of the *Guna* framework is its emphasis on **dynamic fluctuation rather than fixed categorization**. Unlike static personality traits, *Gunas* are continuously influenced by factors such as lifestyle, diet, environment, and mental practices.

This introduces an important implication:

Motivation is not fixed—it can be transformed by altering the dominance of *Gunas*.

For example:

- Increasing *Sattva* (through mindfulness, discipline, ethical living) may enhance intrinsic motivation
- Excess *Rajas* may be moderated to reduce stress-driven behaviour
- Reducing *Tamas* may help overcome amotivation and inertia

This dynamic representation provides a **mechanism for motivational change**, which is not explicitly detailed in SDT.

5.4 Integration with Basic Psychological Needs

The relationship between *Gunas* and the three psychological needs of SDT (autonomy, competence, relatedness) can be further explored:

- **Sattva** naturally supports all three needs:
 - Autonomy → self-awareness and volition
 - Competence → clarity and effective functioning
 - Relatedness → empathy and connection
- **Rajas** may partially satisfy competence but often undermines autonomy due to external pressures and over-identification with outcomes.
- **Tamas** tends to obstruct all three needs, leading to disengagement and lack of psychological fulfilment.

6. Future Scope

Future research could focus on:

- Empirical validation using standardised scales
- Cross-cultural studies
- Application in clinical and educational settings
- Longitudinal studies examining changes in *Gunas* and motivation

7. Conclusion

Motivation is a multifaceted construct influenced by both psychological and constitutional factors. While SDT provides a robust framework for understanding motivation, it does not fully account for inherent individual differences. The concept of *Gunas* offers a complementary perspective by explaining behavioural tendencies in terms of mental constitution.

This study proposes that *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* correspond to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation, respectively. By integrating these frameworks, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of human motivation and opens new avenues for research and application.

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