NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
Volume 3, Issue 2, February, 2026 Pages: 220-229
ISSN: 3059-9148 (Online)
DOI: 10.3126/nprcjmr.v3i2.91297

The Bhagavad Gita as a Framework for Sattvic AI: Aligning Artificial Intelligence with Sustainable Development

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Received: January 31, 2026 Revised & Accepted: February 27, 2026

Abstract

Background: The current "move fast and break things" approach to technology and innovation is proving to be a significant threat to humanity, especially when artificial intelligence (AI) is considered to be a civilization-altering technology. In the absence of a robust ethical foundation, AI could potentially worsen the current sustainability crises and hinder the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The current state of AI ethics, where sustainability is considered a secondary principle, points to a critical need to develop foundational and value-based approaches.

Objective: This article aims to bridge the current gap between the technological advancement of artificial intelligence and sustainability wisdom. It aims to develop a new and unique ethical framework for sustainable artificial intelligence development based on the philosophical concepts of the Bhagavad Gita.

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Methods: This article uses a conceptual synthesis to apply three of the fundamental concepts of the Bhagavad Gita to the artificial intelligence development process: Dharma (Cosmic Duty) to redefine artificial intelligence's purpose; Nishkama Karma (selfless action) to discipline artificial intelligence development; and the three gunas of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas to evaluate artificial intelligence's impact.
Analysis: The synthesis creates a pathway to a new form of "Sattvic AI" – technology that promotes balance and regeneration. It offers a set of tools to support its implementation, including a Dharma Statement to inform purpose, Nishkama Development Protocols to ensure ethical development, and a Guna Impact Assessment (GIA) to measure success in relation to the SDGs.
Conclusion: The principles of the Bhagavad Gita offer a rich and profound philosophy upon which to base a transformation in the use of AI from a force of exploitation to one of world welfare (Lokasamgraha). The proposed pathway offers policymakers and developers a tangible means to create an AI that not only does not hinder, but actually supports, sustainable development.
Novelty: The paper offers the first application of Bhagavad Gita philosophy to create a structured and operational pathway to support the development of ethical and sustainable AI.
Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Bhagavad Gita, Dharma, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Three Gunas

Introduction

The narrative of modern technological advancement is best represented by the Silicon Valley mantra of "move fast and break things," which values speed, disruption, and market hegemony over careful consideration, ethics, and long-term thinking (Marcus, 2024; Swisher, 2024). This has led to incredible technological achievements but has also shattered social trust, deepened inequalities, and sped up the destruction of the planet. As the world rushes to leverage the revolutionary potential of artificial intelligence (AI), this mentality poses a dire threat: to unleash a civilization-transforming technology without a corresponding ethical guide to shape its course (Pinchbeck, 2019).

At the same time, humanity is beset by a triple crisis of ecological destruction, growing social inequality, and the crisis of meaning in the age of technology. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a global framework to address these interrelated crises. AI offers a double-edged potential at this critical juncture: it is a game-changing technology that can quicken the pace of progress for all 17 SDGs through predictive analytics, system optimization, and service democratization (Gehrke et al., 2024). Alternatively, if built on the "move fast" model, AI can potentially worsen these very crises through its massive energy footprint, biased algorithms, job destruction without just transition, and the concentration of digital power (Ernst, 2022).

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The core problem, therefore, is not a lack of technical intelligence, but rather a lack of wisdom to apply this intelligence correctly (Cianciolo et al. 2006). This is also highlighted by current research, which reveals a lack of effective linkages between state-of-the-art AI techniques and extensive, contextual sustainability expertise, as highlighted by a review of 792 articles on AI and the SDGs. The development of AI is also fragmented, often prioritizing technical and economic efficiency rather than a more comprehensive well-being approach, which is often a characteristic of sustainability science. The current ethical frameworks for AI, such as utilitarianism and deontology, are also often Western-centric and often place sustainability as a secondary concern (Singh & Krishnaiah, 2025), thus highlighting a need for foundational, value-based guidance to ensure a proper alignment of ends and means.

The article posits that one of the greatest sources of such wisdom can be located in the ancient Indian philosophical text known as the Bhagavad Gita, which is part of the Indian epic known as the Mahabharata. This ancient Indian text is more than just a religious text; rather, it can be considered a philosophical text that discusses the nature of duty, action, and reality. This paper makes the first ever systematic use of the philosophy presented in the Bhagavad Gita to create a framework for the development of sustainable AI. The main argument presented in this paper is that the philosophy presented in the Bhagavad Gita forms a crucial part of the development of AI that can positively contribute to sustainable development through a balanced approach (Sattvic) as opposed to an extractive (Rajasic) or destructive (Tamasic) approach.

The analysis is informed by three research questions:
1. How do the concepts of Dharma and Karma redefine the role of AI in sustainable development?
2. What does an AI development process based on Nishkama Karma look like?
3. How does the typology of the three Gunas provide a framework for assessing the impact of AI on the SDGs?
By providing answers to these three questions, this study attempts to bridge the space between a centuries-old philosophy and our most pressing technological concern, providing a way to develop AI that heals, rather than hurts.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded at the intersection of three changing fields of scholarship: the current state of AI-for-SDG scholarship, the emerging discourse around ethical and sustainable AI, and the emerging discussion around Hindu philosophy and technology.

The AI-for-SDG Landscape: A Gap Between Tool and Purpose. Systematic reviews of recent scholarship reveal the potential and limitations of the field. There are currently many applications of AI in all domains of SDG challenges, from climate modeling to personal education and health diagnostics. Deep learning and supervised machine learning are the most

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prominent approaches. These approaches are currently mostly applied to forecasting and optimization tasks. However, a review of 792 peer-reviewed articles reveals a critical gap in the field: most articles are divided into two clusters based on disciplinary and focus axes (Gohr et al., 2025). The gap is that few articles combine technical excellence in AI with nuanced, contextualized understanding of SDG challenges. The technical focus in most articles does not account for the so-called "structural turn" in sustainable development, which requires consideration of all dimensions of the socio-technical system. The field is also marred by considerable empirical uncertainty and adversarial debate about the ecological footprint of AI itself.

Ethical Foundations and the Search for Wisdom. The AI ethics tradition has, in the past, emphasized principles such as fairness, accountability, and transparency, while the role of sustainability is less prominent. However, this situation has led to the search for better value-based foundations, as the role of technology is seen as having very philosophical implications for the search for meaning, autonomy, and our relationship with the non-human world. There is an increasing recognition of the value of interdisciplinarity in addressing the questions raised by technology, including the value of wisdom traditions (Frodeman & Mitcham, 2007). It is in this context that the Gita is brought in, not as a religious document, but as a manual of practical philosophy about action, duty, and the qualities of nature.

Hindu Philosophy and Technology: An Emerging Dialogue. Initial groundwork has been laid to examine this interface. Hindu philosophy understands technology to be an extension of a fundamental unity, regulated by cosmic law (ṛta) and the law of cause and effect (karma) (Sodeke, 2020). It provides a comprehensive critique of materialistic technological advancement and promotes a balanced approach to technology that corresponds to spiritual advancement and morality. Scholars have made comparisons between the teachings of the Gita and contemporary issues, suggesting that the emphasis of the Gita on duty, action, and mastery of the mind offers an "original life algorithm" for the digital age. In addition, the practical implementation of Hindu philosophy indicates that, although technology such as AI is an extension of God's intelligence, it can result in the destruction of humanity and its purpose if not created with conscious ethics (Neupane, 2026). This article advances from commentary to a systematic and detailed application of the fundamental principles of the Gita to the field of AI and sustainable development.

Foundational Concepts: Gita Philosophy for the Digital Age

For applying this wisdom to Artificial Intelligence, a proper understanding of its philosophical concepts is a prerequisite, and these concepts are pillars of the Sattvic AI model (Garg, 2024). Dharma and Cosmic Order: Redefining Technology's Purpose. Dharma, as a concept, is more than just one's individual duties, as discussed in the Gita. Dharma is a principle of cosmic order and righteousness, which keeps the universe running, much like the concept of ṛta, inherent harmony found in nature, as discussed in the Vedas (Panda, 2025). Every being, individual,

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and entity has a svadharma, a specific function to maintain this cosmic order. Thus, development is not just a human need-satisfaction process, but a process of participating in maintaining cosmic harmony. The Dharma of technology, and hence Artificial Intelligence, is to be redefined, and its purpose is to assist humanity to perform its Dharma as a conscious being on this earth, rather than being a tool for maximizing profit and providing a competitive edge to a company. The success of an Artificial Intelligence system is determined not by its profitability, but by its contribution to Lokasamgraha, "the holding together of the world" or the welfare of all beings (Gita, verse 3.20).

***Nishkama Karma*: The Discipline of Selfless Action.** The ethical dictum of the Gita is "Nishkama Karma": do your duty with the highest degree of excellence, but without attachment to the fruits of the actions (Gita, Ch.2, Verse 47). This is not passive but the highest form of active, responsible, and engaged doing. This is the antidote to the "move fast" culture's attachment to the fruits of actions, like "market share," "valuation," "first-mover advantage." If applied to the development of AI, "Nishkama Karma" will demand a process-oriented culture. It will demand from the developers/corporations that the process of ethical review, bias review, environmental review, and consent from the community be built into the very process of the "Sadhna" (discipline) of creating the AI, even if it takes longer. It will celebrate the spirit of open-source, not proprietary, culture. It will celebrate the integrity of the process, not the fruits of the actions.

The Three *Gunas*: A Typology for Systemic Evaluation. The theory of the Three Gunas, as presented in the Gita, can serve as a diagnostic tool. "The Gunas are the three basic qualities that make up material nature. They are Sattva (goodness, balance, clarity), Rajas (passion, activity, desire), and Tamas (inertia, ignorance, destruction). All systems, including technology, manifest the dominance of these Gunas." This typology helps us go beyond the simplistic "good" vs. "bad" dichotomy for AI and consider a more nuanced assessment of the essential energy of a system (see Table 1).

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Table 1:The Three *Gunas* as an Evaluative Framework for AI Systems

Guna	Core Qualities	Manifestation in AI Systems	Example Applications	Primary Impact on SDGs
Sattva	Balance, harmony, wisdom, regeneration, clarity.	AI designed for clarity, equity, and holistic well-being. Aligns with *Dharma* and *Lokasamgraha*.	Predictive models for biodiversity conservation; AI for circular economy logistics; diagnostic tools for equitable healthcare.	Net Positive. Directly enables environmental and social targets through regenerative design.
Rajas	Activity, passion, desire, acquisition, growth.	AI designed to stimulate consumption, maximize growth, and optimize for competitive advantage. Often "value-neutral" in design.	Hyper-personalized advertising algorithms; high-frequency trading systems; engagement-maximizing social media feeds.	Mixed/Ambivalent. May drive economic growth (SDG 8) but often undermines responsible consumption (SDG 12), well-being (SDG 3), and reduces inequalities (SDG 10).
Tamas	Inertia, ignorance, delusion, destruction.	AI that causes active harm, spreads falsehood, or exploits vulnerability. Misaligned with *Dharma*.	Autonomous weapons; AI-generated disinformation networks; exploitative surveillance systems.	Net Negative. Actively undermines peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) and erodes social fabric.

This Guna analysis enables policymakers, investors, and developers to make informed decisions about the essential nature of an AI project and guide its development toward Sattvic AI while managing or controlling Tamasic AI.

Synthesis: A Framework for Sattvic AI Development

By integrating the above principles, we have developed a framework for Sattvic AI, or technology developed consciously for balance, wisdom, and regenerative results. This framework is developed at the levels of purpose, process, evaluation, and governance.

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Dharma-Based Design: From Profit to Regenerative Purpose. The first step in developing Sattvic AI is the foundation, or the redefinition of the project's "Why." Every AI project should have a Dharma Statement, formally developed before the writing of any code. It is the explicit articulation of the AI's dharma, or duty, in the cosmic and social order. For instance, the Dharma of an agricultural AI is not to produce maximum yield for the corporation's shareholders but rather "to serve as a tool for stewards to enhance the land's fertility, support biodiversity, and produce nourishing food for the community."

***Nishkama* Development Protocols: Cultivating Ethical Process.** In order to implement Nishkama Karma, the following protocols need to be followed during the development process:

- Pre-Mortem for Ethical Failure: It is important that the team thinks of the ways their project can fail because of ethical failure. This will make the negative karma concrete, helping them to prevent it from occurring.
- Blind Ethical Review: The model cards and the system need to be reviewed by an independent body before the performance metrics are reviewed by the business leadership, so that there is no attachment to the "better" but unethical system.
- Open-Source by Default for Public Good: It is important that the AI systems working towards the achievement of the public good SDG be open-sourced by default, with proprietary licensing requiring special justification.

***Guna* Impact Assessment (GIA): A Practical Diagnostic Tool.** In a similar manner to Environmental Impact Assessments, a Guna Impact Assessment (GIA) should be a necessary requirement prior to any training or deployment. Developers should forecast and score their system's predicted impacts across Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic dimensions based on the typology presented in Table 1. A project should prove to have a net positive Sattvic impact and have plans to mitigate any Rajasic and Tamasic impacts (e.g., "Our model will have energy impacts; our plan is to use 100% renewable compute and publish efficiency metrics").

Governance and Incentive Structures: Aligning Systems with *Rta*. A Sattvic framework cannot be based on individual goodwill; rather, new structures of governance need to be put in place to institutionalize wisdom:

- Dharma Councils: In tech organizations, sovereign ethics councils should be created to have veto powers, comprised of ethicists, ecologists, community leaders, and spiritual practitioners to voice Lokasamgraha.
- Incentive Realignment: The current incentive structure in the market creates a "first-mover disadvantage" for sustainability; policy needs to be designed to provide "carrots and sticks" to change the Nash Equilibrium towards ethical behavior, such as mandating sustainability disclosures and certification for Sattvic AI.

This policy is in alignment with the message of the Gita that all action happens within a field of influences and needs to be designed to enable dharmic action.

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Conclusion and Future Directions

This article has proposed a new paradigm for sustainable AI development based on the ancient wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita and has shown how the concepts of Dharma, Nishkama Karma, and the three Gunas can be used to redefine the very purpose of AI, guide the process of AI development, and offer a tool to assess the systemic impact of AI.

This Sattvic AI framework addresses the critical research need where advanced AI and deep sustainability expertise are divorced from each other and offers a cohesive and value-based approach to the field of AI, quite different from the Western-dominated models of ethics.

This proposed framework has many implications for the field of AI and sustainability. It offers a new way of looking at interdisciplinary analysis for researchers working at the nexus of AI and sustainability and offers practitioners and policymakers tools to implement ethics through the Dharma Statement, Guna Impact Assessment, and Nishkama protocols. It asserts that sustainable AI requires more than just technological solutions; it requires a foundational change in the very purpose and role of technology in the cosmic order from an instrument of extraction to that of sacred offering (Yajna) and world-welfare (Lokasamgraha).

1. This conceptual study suggests important directions for future research:
2. 1. "Empirical and Case Study Validation": The developed GIA rubric and governance models should be empirically validated through the application of the same in real-world AI projects in domains such as agriculture, energy, healthcare, etc.
3. 2. "Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue": While the Gita is one such rich perspective, the development of a global AI ethic would involve an intense dialogue with other wisdom traditions, such as Buddhism, Indigenous, Islamic, African, etc., to arrive at a pluralistic worldview.
4. 3. "Political Economy of Implementation": Future research would involve an examination of the mechanisms through which Sattvic AI can be incentivized at scale, including economic systems such as Steward Ownership, Data Cooperatives, international governance, and the current Rajasic equilibrium.

The AI revolution offers humanity a choice point. We can let our most advanced technology be guided by a philosophy of fragmentation and short-term advantage, or we can steer it by a wisdom of unity and long-term harmony. The Bhagavad Gita, with its eternal algorithm for righteous behavior, offers us not a blueprint, but a compass for this journey. By aligning our artificial intelligence with the Sattvic values of balance, duty, and selfless service, we can hope to build a digital future that lifts up, rather than down, the evolution of all life.

Transparency Statement: The authors confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.
Data Availability Statement: Authors can provide data.
Conflict of Interest: The authors declare there is no conflicts of interest.
Authors' Contributions: The authors jointly conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.

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