# DHARMA, KARMA AND COMPASSION: INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ETHICAL AI

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**Abstract**

"Dharma protects those who uphold it (Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitah)." – Manusmriti. This paper examines how Indian philosophical ideas can contribute to the ethical design and use of artificial intelligence. It focuses on three central concepts: Dharma as duty and justice, Karma as accountability of action and consequence, and Compassion (karuna) as empathy in practice. Drawing on texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, the paper shows how these principles encourage fairness, transparency, and human-centered design. The metaphor of AI as a "digital Krishna" is introduced to suggest that intelligent systems should assist human beings in making wise choices without reducing human freedom. Further, the values of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family) and Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) highlight the potential of India's cultural heritage and technological ecosystem to guide ethical innovation. The paper concludes that by grounding AI in Dharma, Karma, and Compassion, India can offer a practical and inclusive framework for shaping technology that upholds human dignity and promotes collective well-being.

**Keywords**: Compassion, dharma, ethical AI, indian philosophy, karma.

## Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming various sectors across the world, raising challenging ethical questions about justice, accountability, and the protection of human dignity. While Western philosophical frameworks extensively shape AI ethics, there is a compelling need to examine and incorporate alternative epistemologies and ethical systems. Indian philosophy, with its rich tradition centering on Dharma (righteous duty), Karma (the law of actions and consequences), and Compassion (karuna), offers a profound ethical foundation that

remains relevant to contemporary technological governance. This study explores how these principles can construct an ethical framework for AI, emphasizing fairness, accountability, and empathy, while respecting human autonomy.

Drawing from scholarly interpretations of foundational Indian scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, this research aims to bridge timeless wisdom with modern AI ethics challenges. It also employs the metaphor of Krishna as a representation of AI's role: an ethical advisor facilitating human choices without imposing decisions. This paper further situates the discussion within a global vision of interconnectedness, inspired by values such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Sarvodaya, thus positioning India as a key contributor to global ethical AI development.

**Literature Review**

The ethical discourse around AI increasingly recognizes the potential of Indian philosophy to enrich and diversify existing frameworks. Sharma, Agrawal, and Gupta highlight how Dharma, Karma, and Ahimsa serve as essential pillars for articulating fairness, responsibility, and sustainability in AI ethics. Their study emphasizes the need to integrate these principles into AI regulatory mechanisms and system designs to foster transparency and equitable outcomes.

Sarkar contributes a nuanced interpretation by positioning Krishna's role in the Mahabharata as an apt metaphor for AI decision support systems (DSS). Krishna's counsel to the Pandavas underscores a dynamic balance: providing advice enriched by moral reasoning while preserving human agency. This contrast highlights the intrinsic limitations of AI, which, despite its computational power, cannot substitute human wisdom and ethical judgment (Sarkar).

Chaturvedi et al. delve into AI value alignment through Indian philosophical schools such as Vedanta, Nyaya, and Samkhya. They argue that insights on consciousness, mind-body dualism, and liberation can help address AI ethics dilemmas. Their study emphasizes compassion and interconnectedness, suggesting that mindfulness practices could reduce systemic biases.

Buddhist perspectives on compassion also enrich this discourse. Yan highlights relationality and situational wisdom in technology governance, aligning with the triad of Dharma, Karma, and Compassion (Yan). Lin adds to this view by foregrounding compassion as a necessary virtue in AI ethics, while offering practical strategies for embedding ethical AI use in real-world practices (Lin).

Vijayakumar highlights India's pluralistic diversity as both a challenge and an opportunity for cultivating inclusive AI ethics. This research affirms India's unique position in developing locally resonant but universally applicable frameworks. However, the literature also identifies critical gaps: the need for

frameworks that operationalize ancient principles, and the importance of balancing cultural particularism with global ethical standards (Vijayakumar).

**Research Gap**

Despite advances in this field, several gaps persist. Research exploring how Dharma, Karma, and Compassion translate into actionable guidelines across AI lifecycle stages remains limited. Governance frameworks often overlook Karma's comprehensive accountability, especially where actions have cascading societal impacts. Compassion as an explicit design principle or governance mandate is rarely integrated in engineering and policy discourse. The interplay between India's cultural ethics and global AI standards is also underexplored. Addressing these gaps, this paper proposes an integrative and context-aware ethical framework grounded in Indian philosophy while responsive to contemporary technological realities.

**Research Statement**

This study investigates how Indian philosophical ideas of Dharma, Karma, and Compassion can be applied to contemporary AI ethics to build frameworks that uphold justice, accountability, and empathy, thereby promoting equitable and human-centric AI governance.

**Research Questions**

1. How can the principle of Dharma be operationalized as an ethical guideline in the development and deployment of artificial intelligence systems?
2. In what ways can the concept of Karma inform accountability and responsibility frameworks in AI ethics?
3. How does the value of Compassion guide the development of human-centered AI technologies in the contemporary Indian context?

**Theoretical Framework**

Employing a postcolonial theoretical lens, this research critically examines the dominance of Western frameworks in AI ethics and emphasizes the importance of including Indigenous philosophical traditions. Postcolonialism helps us understand the power dynamics shaping technological development and knowledge production. Applying this framework illuminates how Indian philosophy, with its rich plurality and ethical depth, can contest intellectual hegemony and contribute to decolonizing AI ethics.

**Methodology**

This research uses qualitative methods centered on close reading and thematic analysis of secondary sources comprising scholarly articles, commentaries, and policy papers relating to Indian philosophical ethics and AI. The study refrains from direct exegesis of historical texts but critically engages contemporary

interpretations of Indian ethical thought. The selected literature reflects diverse perspectives to ensure comprehensive analysis. The approach is grounded in rigorous hermeneutics and interpretive frameworks consistent with humanities scholarship.

**Discussion and Analysis**

Dharma as Ethical Duty and Justice

Dharma articulates a normative framework obliging individuals and systems to act according to virtue, context sensitivity, and social roles that maintain cosmic and societal order. When extended to AI, Dharma demands the embedding of justice and fairness into every stage: from data collection to algorithm design to deployment. It challenges the neutrality fallacy sometimes claimed by AI designers, insisting on proactive measures against bias and inequality.

Dharma's pluralistic ethos resonates strongly with India's socio-cultural milieu: a tapestry of diverse languages, castes, beliefs, and economic stratifications. Such pluralism encourages the development of AI systems responsive to varied moral landscapes, fostering social cohesion and justice. By embedding Dharma, AI can be designed not only as technically efficient but as socially responsible, attending to the lived realities of diverse users.

**Karma and Accountability for Actions and Consequences**

Karma highlights the causal chain of actions bearing moral weight and extending consequences beyond immediate agents. This philosophy urges an expansive accountability model within AI governance. Responsibility cannot be confined solely to developers or end-users but must consider institutional, systemic, and long-term societal effects.

Practical implications include designing AI systems with traceability and explainability so that decisions can be audited retrospectively. Regulatory structures informed by Karma call for mechanisms to mitigate harms and support reparations. In this sense, Karma promotes ethics as an ongoing commitment rather than a fixed compliance requirement. For instance, predictive policing algorithms that disproportionately target marginalized communities can be held accountable through audits, reparations, and corrective policies, mirroring the karmic principle of cause and consequence.

**Compassion as Analytical and Ethical Imperative**

Compassion (karuna) mandates empathetic consideration and active care to alleviate suffering. Incorporating compassion into AI ethics means prioritizing human dignity, safeguarding vulnerable users, and fostering technology that enhances human thriving.

In design terms, compassion promotes user-centric paradigms emphasizing accessibility, privacy, and empowerment. For example, AI-based healthcare applications can be designed to adapt to patients' cultural contexts, literacy levels, and emotional states. Compassionate AI adapts to human expectations and emotional realities, facilitating trust and ethical responsibility throughout AI's lifecycle. This principle not only enriches AI governance but also harmonizes with global calls for human-centered AI design.

**Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Sarvodaya: A Universal Ethical Vision**

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family) extends ethical concern to global interconnectedness, while Sarvodaya (welfare of all) prioritizes collective wellbeing and social equity. Integrating these principles connects local Indian ethics to global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and peace-building.

This vision encourages India to contribute meaningfully to global AI governance by blending indigenous values with universal moral commitments. For instance, embedding Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in AI policy would advocate for equitable access to technology across borders, while Sarvodaya would emphasize AI innovations that uplift the most marginalized communities. Together, these ideals form a bridge between local philosophy and global ethics.

**Insights**

Indian philosophical concepts provide a robust, nuanced framework for AI ethics that balances universal principles with local specificity. Dharma, Karma, and Compassion collectively cultivate an ethic overlaying legalistic compliance with moral reasoning, empathy, and social harmony. The metaphor of AI as a digital Krishna highlights the ideal of AI as a wise consultant upholding human autonomy rather than a deterministic engine.

**Limitations**

Being a qualitative study dependent on secondary sources, the research does not engage in empirical data collection or direct scriptural analysis. Its focus on Indian philosophy, while central, limits the comparative scope. Furthermore, practical implementation aspects require interdisciplinary collaboration beyond this study's boundaries.

**Scope for Further Research**

Future research should empirically evaluate how AI practitioners and regulators understand and integrate Indian ethical principles. Developing concrete frameworks and computational tools incorporating Dharma, Karma, and Compassion remains crucial. Comparative studies with other cultural philosophies and active stakeholder engagement can broaden applicability. Moreover, engaging

with India's national AI policies, such as NITI Aayog's National Strategy for AI, could demonstrate how ancient ethics can shape modern technological governance.

**Conclusion**

This study reaffirms the enduring relevance of Dharma, Karma, and Compassion in framing ethical AI. Grounded in rich Indian philosophical traditions and critically amplified by postcolonial insights, these ideals offer compelling guidance for global AI governance. By emphasizing justice, accountability, and empathy, India's heritage can shape AI development that respects human dignity and catalyzes collective well-being. This study positions Indian philosophy not merely as cultural heritage but as a viable framework for global AI ethics.

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