



Dharma as a Design Logic for Global Governance: An Indic Civilisational Framework for Innovation, Sustainability, and Institutional Trust

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Abstract. Contemporary global governance operates under conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) and of brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility (BANI) that expose a persistent deficit in prevailing paradigms: technocratic, legalistic, and economically instrumentalist approaches may improve procedure, yet they often lack ethical depth, relational sensitivity, and systemic resilience. This paper addresses that deficit by conceptualising Dharma as a civilisationally grounded governance philosophy and design logic, and by developing an Indic Civilisational Framework for Global Governance Design with three pillars. First, dharma-led institutional ethics reframes authority as responsibility, stabilising volatility and brittleness through legitimacy, moral coherence, and principled restraint, drawing on the Arthaśāstra and Advaita Vedānta's ātmabhāva. Second, subsidiarity-driven decentralisation, rooted in India's traditions of village assemblies and community institutions, strengthens contextual intelligence and relational accountability, thereby addressing anxiety and incomprehensibility in BANI conditions. Third, civilisational sustainability aligns governance with *rta* and *loka-saṅgraha*, embedding ecological consciousness, cultural continuity, and intergenerational responsibility into institutional design. Methodologically, the paper offers a conceptual and analytical synthesis of classical IKS governance literature, Nītiśāstra and Arthaśāstra traditions, VUCA/BANI discourse, comparative policy theory, and contemporary governance scholarship. It argues that Dharma provides a governance imagination that is civilisationally specific yet globally portable, addressing institutional trust through ethical grounding, innovation through decentralised agency, and sustainability through systemic balance.

Keywords: Dharma, Global Governance, Indian Knowledge Systems, VUCA, BANI, Civilisational Design Thinking.

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1 Introduction

The institutional architectures that took shape after the Second World War are in trouble. Built on multilateral rule-making, technocratic expertise, and economic liberalisation, they face a credibility crisis that runs deeper than any single policy failure. The VUCA framework, which grew out of United States military strategic planning and later entered management and policy scholarship [1], and Cascio's [2] BANI framework, a foresight heuristic that has gained traction in organisational and governance discourse [3], together describe a world where established governance logics buckle under pressure. Volatility collapses the planning horizons on which long-range policy depends. Brittleness shatters institutions optimised for efficiency while sacrificing resilience. Non-linearity defeats the causal prediction that orderly policy design takes for granted. Incomprehensibility chips away at the epistemological foundations of evidence-based policy itself.

The dominant response has been to double down: pile on more data, tighten regulation, deploy ever more sophisticated technocratic instruments. Yet the prevailing paradigms of institutional reform remain, as Fayard and Fathallah [4] argue, trapped in procedural rationality. Governance is treated as an engineering problem amenable to optimisation, while questions of meaning, trust, legitimacy, and moral coherence are systematically driven out of governance system design. Quality-of-government scholarship has shown that impartiality in the exercise of public authority, not efficiency or democratic procedure by themselves, constitutes the defining feature of high-quality governance [5]. Yet this literature, analytically powerful as it is, remains normatively thin. It identifies impartiality as the standard but leaves unspecified the deeper moral grammar from which impartial conduct can be generated and sustained across time.

It is this gap, the absence of a deeper moral grammar capable of generating and sustaining impartial conduct, that the present paper sets out to address. Its central contention is that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), and specifically Dharma understood as a design logic, offer governance theory a resource that is architecturally substantive, not ornamental. Dharma, as deployed here, is engaged for its governance-relevant dimensions rather than its mokṣa-oriented ones: the civilisationally grounded principle of contextual righteous conduct oriented towards systemic balance. This is an analytical choice rather than a claim about Dharma's essential nature; the sorting of traditions into 'religious' and 'secular' is itself a historically situated distinction that maps imperfectly onto Indic traditions, in which the ethical, the political, and the cosmological are not partitioned into separate domains [6]. The present argument therefore brackets the mokṣa-oriented dimension and develops the governance-design dimension, on reasoning that a reader outside the tradition can assess on its merits; the bracketing is methodological, the mokṣa-oriented dimension remaining, within the tradition, conceptually prior and in no way diminished. So construed, Dharma provides a governance logic capable of confronting the ethical deficit of contemporary institutions, the rigidity that BANI conditions expose, and the

sustainability imperative that climate change [7], ecological degradation, and intergenerational injustice have made non-negotiable.

1.1 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Three partially disconnected agendas dominate governance literature today. The first, anchored in institutional economics and quality-of-government scholarship, treats trust, impartiality, and procedural fairness as core mediators of governance performance [5, 8, 9]. The second, rooted in polycentric governance theory, contends that distributed decision-making improves responsiveness and adaptive capacity [10, 11]. The third, drawing on design thinking and systems thinking, seeks innovation methods suited to wicked problems [4, 12, 13]. Each of these agendas generates genuine and well-evidenced insights. Yet each also runs into a characteristic wall. Institutional economics identifies norms as preconditions for self-enforcing rules but cannot say where those norms originate. Polycentric governance establishes the structural advantages of distributed authority but offers no explicit ethical theory to discipline local power. Design and systems thinking provide powerful analytical repertoires for complexity but, when reduced to toolkit approaches, end up flattening politics, history, and the material conditions of implementation [4].

The conceptual gap sits at their intersection. Parallel civilisational-governance projects, among them Confucian political meritocracy [14], African Ubuntu, and Latin American Buen Vivir, pursue adjacent aims; what none has yet supplied is a single design logic that integrates ethical grounding, subsidiarity architecture, and systemic sustainability orientation in a form at once analytically rigorous and civilisationally sourced. Dharma is distinctively suited to supplying one, because it already coordinates these three registers within a single grammar.

Three research questions guide the inquiry:

RQ1: How can Dharma be formally operationalised as a governance design logic, distinguishable from a moral vocabulary, with identifiable constructs, mechanisms, and institutional correlates?

RQ2: Through what causal mechanisms do the three pillars of the proposed Indic Civilisational Framework address specific VUCA/BANI governance stressors, and under what boundary conditions do they fail?

RQ3: What institutional design features would enable the translation of a dharma-informed governance logic into operational governance systems amenable to empirical evaluation?

The paper develops an Indic Civilisational Framework for Global Governance Design, structured around three mutually reinforcing pillars: (i) dharma-led institutional ethics, which reframes authority as responsibility; (ii) subsidiarity-driven

decentralisation, rooted in India's historical tradition of village assemblies and community governance; and (iii) civilisational sustainability, anchored in the Vedic principle of *ṛta* (cosmic and systemic order) and the Bhagavad Gītā's *loka-saṅgraha* (sustenance of the world). Section 2 lays the theoretical foundations. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 develops the framework. Section 5 offers critical discussion with explicit boundary conditions. Section 6 sets out implications. Section 7 acknowledges limitations. Section 8 concludes.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it positions IKS as a substantive source of governance design logic with analytical precision, not as cultural heritage or historical curiosity. Second, it constructs a three-pillar framework that maps onto the VUCA/BANI governance challenge with specified constructs, mechanisms, propositions, and boundary conditions. Third, it opens a research agenda for comparative civilisational governance studies, inviting systematic dialogue between Indic, Confucian, African, and Euro-Atlantic governance traditions on terms of epistemic parity.

2 Theoretical Foundations: Governance Under Turbulence and the IKS Epistemic Gap

2.1 The VUCA/BANI Landscape and Its Governance Implications

The VUCA framework entered governance scholarship from the U.S. Army War College's lexicon for post-Cold War strategic uncertainty [1]. It describes environments where linear planning, hierarchical command, and predictive control fail. Volatility implies rapid, discontinuous change that outruns settled expectations. Uncertainty denotes the absence of reliable information about how outcomes will unfold. Complexity signals a dense web of interconnected causal factors that resist isolation. Ambiguity means that the same data admits several competing and equally plausible interpretations. Together, these conditions erode the foundational assumptions of Weberian bureaucratic rationality, Taylorist efficiency, and New Public Management models that have shaped institutional design since the mid-twentieth century [15].

Cascio's [2] BANI framework pushes the analysis further. Brittleness describes systems that appear robust but shatter under stress because they have been optimised for narrow efficiency while sacrificing adaptive capacity. Anxiety captures the paralysis of decision-makers confronted with threats they can perceive but can neither predict nor control. Non-linearity renders cause-and-effect relationships disproportionate and counter-intuitive. Incomprehensibility denotes conditions where the system's behaviour exceeds the cognitive and institutional capacity available to model it.

What does this mean for governance? If institutions cannot rely on prediction, efficiency-maximisation turns into a liability: it breeds brittleness. If publics experience anxiety, procedural compliance without ethical grounding erodes trust. If outcomes are non-linear, centralised governance loses its informational advantage over decentralised alternatives. And if incomprehensibility becomes the new baseline, then epistemological humility, the willingness to draw upon multiple knowledge traditions rather than a single technocratic orthodoxy, becomes a strategic necessity.

Figure 1 frames the problem the framework is built to solve. The two panels collect the eight stressors named by the VUCA and BANI vocabularies, and the converging arrows show how, taken together, they produce a single governance deficit: a simultaneous erosion of ethical depth, relational sensitivity, and systemic resilience that efficiency-centred technocratic design is poorly equipped to repair. The figure previews the response argued for below: that an Indic, Dharma-grounded design logic speaks directly to exactly these three shortfalls.

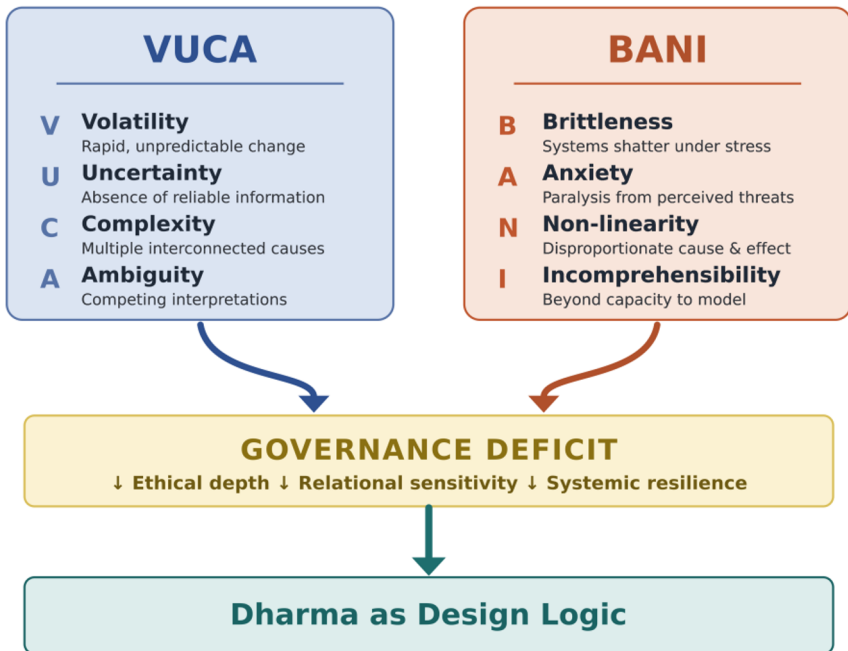


Fig. 1. The VUCA/BANI governance challenge and the IKS epistemic response.

2.2 The Ethical and Epistemic Deficit in Contemporary Governance

Several strands of governance scholarship have diagnosed the ethical deficit that VUCA/BANI conditions bring to the surface. Ostrom's [10] work on polycentric governance demonstrated that centralised, state-monopoly resource management

often fails precisely where community-governed systems succeed, because community systems embed relational trust and contextual knowledge that bureaucratic systems cannot replicate. North's [8] institutional economics showed that formal rules are insufficient without the informal norms, shared beliefs, and ethical substrates that make institutions self-enforcing. Meadows [12] argued from a systems thinking perspective that the highest leverage points for systemic change lie not in parameter adjustments but in paradigm shifts: changes in the goals, mental models, and value orientations that shape how institutions actually behave. Rothstein and Teorell [5] contend that impartiality in public authority is the defining feature of high-quality governance. Tyler [9] demonstrates empirically that citizens comply with authority because they perceive the process as fair, grounding procedural justice as a governance design variable.

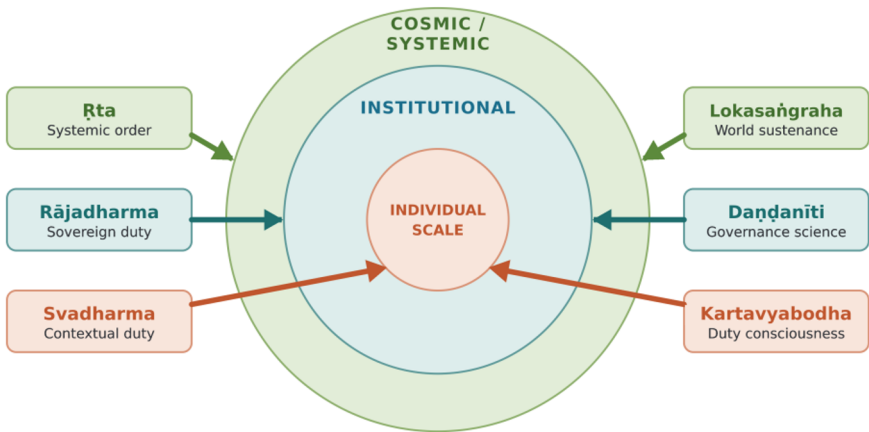
Despite these insights, governance theory has been strikingly parochial in its epistemic sources. The comparative governance canon draws overwhelmingly on Euro-Atlantic intellectual traditions. When non-Western traditions do surface, they tend to be cast as cultural heritage or objects of anthropological study, not as intellectual resources for governance design. Malhotra [16] identifies this as 'epistemic asymmetry': the structural condition in which Indic knowledge traditions are studied within Western analytical categories but are never permitted to generate categories of their own. This diagnosis is neither isolated nor merely polemical; it converges with a substantial body of peer-reviewed scholarship. Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialise' the universalising claims of European social theory [17], Pollock's reconstruction of the Sanskrit cosmopolis as a sophisticated transregional order of culture and power [18], and the field of comparative political theory, which treats non-Western traditions as sources of political concepts in their own right rather than as ethnographic raw material [19], together establish the same point on independent grounds: epistemic parity is a methodological commitment with wide scholarly warrant, not a partisan slogan.

This epistemic exclusion is not merely an academic oversight; it carries concrete practical consequences. The Weberian emphasis on rational-legal authority generates institutional predictability but deprioritises relational trust. The New Public Management paradigm [15] produces measurable efficiency gains but struggles with non-quantifiable goods: social cohesion, cultural dignity, ecological reciprocity. Śrī Aurobindo [20] made the same point when he argued that the ideal of human unity could not be achieved through political or economic organisation alone but required a spiritual foundation that respected the civilisational individuality of different peoples.

Dharma, in the sense deployed here, is the generative category that governance theory lacks: a design logic irreducible to Western governance concepts, yet squarely addressed to the structural deficits those concepts leave unresolved. Dharma is not a synonym for 'ethics' or 'duty'. It is a civilisational grammar of contextual righteous conduct (*svadharma*), systemic balance (*rta*), and relational responsibility (*kartavya*) operating at individual, institutional, and cosmic scales [21]. Dharma is among the

most conceptually rich and widely debated terms in Indian thought: Mīmāṃsā defines it through Vedic injunction (codanā-lakṣaṇo 'rtho dharmah), the Dharmaśāstra tradition ties it to varṇāśrama-ordered duty, and the Mahābhārata repeatedly wrestles with the subtlety (sūkṣmatā) and internal conflict of dharma. The governance-oriented reading adopted here, which foregrounds contextual conduct and systemic balance, is therefore a reasoned selection among these strands rather than an uncontested definition, chosen because it is the strand most pertinent to institutional design [22]. This multi-scalar, context-sensitive, ethically grounded character is what makes it architecturally relevant to governance under turbulence.

Figure 2 renders this multi-scalar structure as three nested rings. Dharma operates simultaneously at the cosmic or systemic scale (the outermost ring), the institutional scale (the middle ring), and the individual scale (the centre), and each ring is populated by specific IKS categories: ṛta and loka-saṅgraha at the systemic level, rājadharmā and daṇḍanīti at the institutional level, and svadharma and kartavya-bodha at the individual level. The design claim the diagram encodes is that these scales are not separable; a reform that is institutionally efficient but ecologically blind, or personally virtuous but institutionally unaccountable, fails the integration that Dharma as a design logic requires.



Dharma operates across all three scales at once; governance design must address each.

Fig. 2. The multi-scalar operation of Dharma as governance design logic.

A fair pūrvapakṣa (prior objection) must confront the strongest version of the worry head-on: the claim that Dharma is culturally particular, perhaps even religious, and on that ground unsuited to serve as a universal governance principle. The objection has real force and deserves a direct answer. Yet on closer inspection it proves too much. Global governance discourse already relies on thick moral concepts, including human dignity, rights, stewardship, and intergenerational justice, none of which reduce to pure proceduralism. The real question is not whether governance can

be value-grounded, but whether its value grounding is coherent, publicly defensible, and institutionally operational. Dharma is advanced here as a public reasoning resource: it specifies what kinds of actions remain legitimate even when efficient, and what kinds are illegitimate even when popular.

3 Methodology

Research design and epistemic stance. This study adopts a conceptual theory-building design appropriate for governance scholarship where the core contribution lies in specifying constructs, mechanisms, and testable propositions rather than in causal estimation [23]. The epistemic stance is interpretive and analytical, combining hermeneutic reading of classical Indic texts with comparative institutional reasoning. In weighing the textual sources, the analysis follows the traditional Indic hierarchy of *pramāṇa* (accepted means of valid knowledge): where *śruti* (Vedic and Upaniṣadic warrant), *smṛti* (the remembered tradition of Dharmaśāstra and epic), and *yukti* (reasoned inference) bear differently on a question, they are weighted accordingly. Crucially, the governance-design proposals advanced here are carried on *yukti*, itself one of the tradition's own accepted *pramāṇas*, so that the argument is answerable to reasons a reader can assess on their merits whatever their civilisational starting point, while the canonical sources supply its grounding rather than its sole warrant. Governance is treated throughout as a designed socio-institutional system, following design science reasoning [24, 25]. The analytical stance draws also on 'designerly ways of knowing' as an epistemic mode distinct from both scientific explanation and artistic expression, and therefore apt for theory-building in governance design [26]. The paper explicitly employs *pūrvapakṣa-siddhānta* logic as a theory-building discipline: the opposing argument is reconstructed fairly, critiqued for specific failures in addressing legitimacy, trust, and resilience under VUCA/BANI conditions, and then resolved through a coherent alternative framework.

Corpus and source selection. The classical IKS corpus comprises: (i) the *Arthaśāstra* in critical scholarly translations [27, 28], treated as a primary governance text for institutional design, incentive architecture, and welfare-security orientation; (ii) representative *Nītiśāstra* materials, principally the *Kāmandakīya Nītisāra* [29], with the *Vidura-nīti* [30] and *Śukranīti* [31] as supplementary witnesses, for ethical constraints and leadership duties; and (iii) *Advaita Vedānta* sources, principally the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* [32] (a work traditionally ascribed to Śaṅkara, though its authenticity is contested in *Advaita* scholarship; the *ātmabhāva* reading advanced here does not depend on the attribution and is corroborated by the securely authentic *Upadeśasāhasrī* [33]), for the moral psychology of *ātmabhāva* as restraint and relational responsibility. The contemporary corpus spans: (a) quality-of-government and institutional trust literature [5, 8, 9, 34]; (b) polycentric governance and decentralisation theory [10, 11, 35]; (c) design and policy design scholarship [4, 24, 26]; (d) systems thinking and resilience literature [12, 36, 37]; and (e) civilisational

epistemology [6, 16]. Discourse sources are treated explicitly as framing inputs, not as evidentiary foundations for empirical claims.

Analytical procedure. The analysis proceeds through five steps designed to make conceptual synthesis auditable [38]. First, construct extraction: governance-relevant concepts are drawn from the classical corpus (*rājadharmā*, *yogaśśema*, *daṇḍanīti*, *ṛta*, *ātmabhāva*) and translated into candidate institutional constructs. Second, mapping to contemporary problem structure: extracted constructs are mapped to VUCA/BANI stressors and to governance variables such as legitimacy, trust, capacity, and resilience. Third, framework synthesis: constructs are integrated into a three-pillar architecture with specified definitions, boundaries, and inter-relationships [39]. Fourth, proposition formulation: testable mechanism claims are specified following established criteria for theoretical contribution [23]. Fifth, system logic check: causal claims are tested against systems reasoning, including feedback loops, delays, and unintended consequences, to guard against presuming linearity in non-linear domains [12].

Validation plan. Each major claim is supported by at least one classical source anchor and one contemporary governance literature anchor, achieving triangulation through corpus diversity. The framework anticipates failure modes and treats them as boundary conditions rather than exceptions. Future validation should pursue Delphi-style expert review panels bringing together IKS scholars, public administration practitioners, and policy economists, alongside comparative case studies with indicator-based evaluation.

4 The Indic Civilisational Framework for Global Governance Design

4.1 Dharma as Design Logic: Construct Definition

The central theoretical move here is to treat Dharma as a design logic for governance rather than as a moral vocabulary. Design scholarship, following Simon [24], treats governance as ‘the artificial’: a domain where the central problem is purposeful arrangement under constraints, evaluated by criteria of fit, robustness, and feasibility rather than by descriptive truth alone. A design logic, in this register, is a generative grammar: a set of ordering principles that constrain the exercise of power, distribute obligation, and align institutional means with systemic ends. Dharma-as-design-logic is therefore defined as: a multi-scalar normative ordering principle, derived from Indic civilisational sources, that constrains the exercise of public authority through duty-bound stewardship (*rājadharmā*), aligns institutional action with welfare-security ends (*yogaśśema*), and orients governance towards systemic equilibrium (*ṛta*), thereby specifying both permissible means and obligatory ends for institutional design.

What separates this from a moral vocabulary is institutional translatability. A moral vocabulary articulates the values a community professes. A design logic, by contrast, generates the institutional features through which those values are made operative. Dharma-as-design-logic generates, at minimum: (i) constrained discretion, the principle that authority must be bounded by duty rather than expanded by opportunity; (ii) enforceable accountability, the requirement that office-holders discharge *kartavya* (obligation) or forfeit legitimacy; (iii) systemic orientation, the insistence that institutional action be evaluated against long-horizon consequences (*ṛta*) and not merely short-term outputs; and (iv) relational governance, the recognition, grounded in *ātmabhāva*, that the governor and the governed are structurally interconnected. The compound Sanskrit terms used below to label these parameters (*niyama-nīyantraṇa*, *kartavya-bodha*, *satya-niṣṭhā*, *ṛta-anusāraṇa*, and *paramparā-rakṣā*) are analytical constructs coined for this framework rather than established śāstric categories.

Table 1 operationalises these constructs with definitions, Indic textual anchors, and indicative proxies suitable for future empirical work.

Table 1. Constructs, definitions, Indic anchors, and indicative operational proxies.

Construct	Working Definition	Indic Textual Anchor	Indicative Operational Proxies
Dharma as design logic	Constraint-and-duty grammar disciplining the exercise of public power; aligns authority with responsibility and limits permissible means	Rājadharmā; <i>yoga-kṣema</i> mandates; <i>loka-saṅgraha</i> (BG 3.20, 3.25); <i>Arthaśāstra</i> 1.19	Explicit duty statements; constrained discretion; enforceable ethics codes; grievance redress effectiveness
Pillar I: Dharma-led institutional ethics	Integrity-oriented institutional operating system emphasising principled restraint, duty consciousness, and truth-orientation	<i>Arthaśāstra</i> (<i>daṇḍanīti</i> , <i>gūḍhapuruṣa</i> system); <i>Viveka-cūḍāmaṇi</i> (<i>ātmabhāva</i>); operationalised as <i>niyama-nīyantraṇa</i> , <i>kartavya-bodha</i> , <i>satya-niṣṭhā</i>	Integrity infrastructure strength; ethics enforcement; audit quality; conflict-of-interest controls; procedural fairness
Pillar II: Subsidiarity-driven decentralisation	Allocation of decision authority to the closest competent level, combined with dharmic accountability and anti-capture safeguards	<i>Grāma-sabhā</i> ; <i>sabhā</i> and <i>saṃiti</i> (Vedic polity); <i>swarāj</i> (Gandhi); <i>janapada</i> governance (<i>Arthaśāstra</i>)	Functional assignment clarity; fiscal transfer adequacy; local capacity; participatory forums; social audit mechanisms

Construct	Working Definition	Indic Textual Anchor	Indicative Operational Proxies
Pillar III: Civilisational sustainability	Long-horizon constraint satisfaction across ecological, social, and cultural domains; sustainability as ontological orientation	Rta (Rgveda); loka-saṅgraha (BG 3.20, 3.25); welfare of the vulnerable (Arthaśāstra Bk 2); antyodaya	Long-term budgeting; ecological guardrails; intergenerational impact assessment; cultural continuity safeguards
Institutional trust (intermediate)	Perceived rightfulness of authority and reliability of institutions under stress	Prajāsukhe sukhaṁ rājñāḥ (Arthaśāstra); dharma as legitimacy source	Trust survey measures; compliance rates; dispute resolution fairness; procedural consistency
Governance innovation (emergent property)	Capacity for context-sensitive institutional experimentation within ethical and sustainability constraints	Viveka (discernment); polycentric learning within rājadharma constraints	Iteration cycles; adaptive policy updates; local innovations scaled; learning networks

The three pillars are not independent modules but mutually constitutive elements of a coherent governance imagination. They function much as the *trivarga* (dharma, artha, kāma) of classical Indian thought operates: as a dynamic equilibrium requiring continuous calibration rather than as a static hierarchy.

The classical sources on which the framework draws come primarily from the *Nītiśāstra* (political wisdom) and *Arthaśāstra* (political economy) traditions, supplemented by the Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic philosophical foundations that underpin them. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is engaged here as a governance text, following the activist interpretive tradition that runs from Tilak's *Gītā-Rahasya* [40] through Śrī Aurobindo [20] and Mahātmā Gandhi [41], which reads the *Gītā* as a treatise on *niṣkāma karma* (desireless action) with direct implications for public leadership and institutional responsibility. This karma-yoga reading is a modern and avowedly action-oriented hermeneutic, and the paper adopts it deliberately rather than by default: the classical commentarial tradition, most notably Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya*, ultimately subordinates action to *jñāna* (knowledge) and renunciation, so the trusteeship reading invoked here is a reasoned interpretive choice among the tradition's own alternatives, not the single settled meaning of the text.

Figure 3 presents the framework as a whole through the architecture of a classical temple, a deliberate metaphor: such a structure is intelligible only as an integrated form in which no element stands on its own. The base is Dharma itself, the civilisationally grounded design logic on which everything else rests. Rising from it

are the three pillars elaborated in the sections that follow: dharma-led institutional ethics (Pillar I), subsidiarity-driven decentralisation (Pillar II), and civilisational sustainability (Pillar III), each displaying the governance constructs it contributes (for instance *niyama-niyantraṇa*, *grāma-sabhā*, and *ṛta-anusāraṇa*) above the classical sources from which those constructs are drawn. The entablature the pillars jointly carry names the outcome the framework is meant to deliver: governance that is at once competent, trusted, and sustainable. The visual grammar is itself the argument: remove any one pillar and the structure it supports cannot stand.

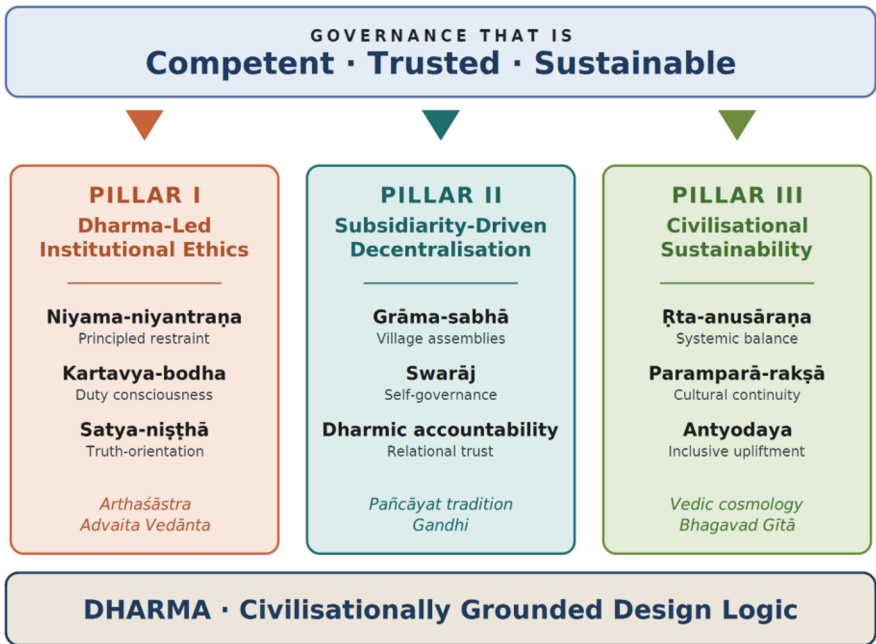


Fig. 3. The three-pillar architecture of the Indic Civilisational Framework for Global Governance Design.

4.2 Pillar I: Dharma-Led Institutional Ethics

The first pillar takes aim at the crisis of institutional legitimacy and trust. When institutions built for predictability confront rapid, non-linear change, their authority erodes, not for lack of technical capacity but for lack of moral coherence.

In the *Arthaśāstra*, the foundational treatise of Indian statecraft conventionally attributed to Kauṭilya (and now widely read as a layered composition redacted over time [28]), governance authority is conceptualised as sovereign obligation, not sovereign power. As *Arthaśāstra* 1.19.34 puts it, ‘*prajāśukhe sukhaṃ rājñāḥ prajānāṃ ca hite hitam | nātmapiyaṃ hitaṃ rājñāḥ prajānāṃ tu priyaṃ hitam*’: in the happiness of the subjects lies the king’s happiness, and in their welfare his welfare; what is dear

to the king is not his good, but what is dear to the subjects is his good [28, 42]. The second hemistich carries the governance-critical claim: it subordinates the ruler's personal preference to the public good, recasting authority itself as a duty owed rather than a prerogative held. Kauṭilya constructs an elaborate apparatus of welfare administration, resource management, and regulatory oversight because governance legitimacy depends on demonstrated commitment to collective welfare. Authority that ceases to serve *yogakṣema* (material welfare and security of the populace) forfeits its dharmic warrant. Awasthi et al. [43] carry this orientation into contemporary policy through their Arthaśāstra-based 'Dharmicism' model, which recasts the state as an ethical trustee rather than a coercive controller and reconciles market freedom with moral restraint. On their account, prosperity (*saṃrddhi*), justice (*nyāya*), and order (*sthiti*) advance together when production is decentralised through guild-like bodies (*śreṇis*), the rule of law (*daṇḍanīti*) is impartially enforced, and taxation is kept just and proportionate. Their framework thus offers a contemporary, worked-through instance of *yogakṣema*-oriented governance, in which authority is legitimated by demonstrated welfare provision rather than by control. This conception of authority as obligation rather than prerogative is not Kauṭilya's alone. The Śāntiparvan of the Mahābhārata, the locus classicus of rājadharmā in which the dying Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhira on the duties of kingship, likewise grounds royal authority in the protection (*pālana*) of subjects, binds the king to *daṇḍa*, the rod of governance, exercised under dharma rather than above it, and develops *āpad-dharma*, the ethics of action under exception and crisis, which bears directly on governance under turbulence [44]. The Dharmaśāstra corpus codifies the same constraint in normative form: the rājadharmā chapter of the Manusmṛti makes the protection of subjects the king's defining obligation and subordinates *daṇḍa* to dharma, warning that the rod wrongly wielded recoils upon the ruler who bears it (Manusmṛti 7), and the parallel rājadharmā sections of the later Yājñavalkyasmṛti restate the same duty-bound conception of kingship [45].

Advaita Vedānta deepens the principle through *ātmabhāva*, the recognition of empathetic interconnectedness. For Śaṅkarācārya [32], the apparent separateness of individual beings is a function of *avidyā* (ignorance); the fundamental reality is non-dual (*advaita*). When transposed into institutional design, *ātmabhāva* implies that governance systems which treat citizens as atomised utility-maximisers are operating on a flawed ontology. The transposition is deliberate rather than loose. In its primary register *ātmabhāva* is a realisation about the non-dual ground of being; the governance reading developed here carries that same insight into institutional life, where it operates as a regulative disposition, a trained recognition of shared interest that disciplines how authority treats those subject to it. This transposition rests on a specific textual warrant rather than on analogy alone: in the tradition the realisation of the non-dual Self issues directly in *samadarśana* (equal vision), which the Bhagavad Gītā renders as seeing the one Self in all beings and all beings in the Self (BG 6.29) and as regarding the learned and the outcaste with a single, undivided eye (BG 5.18); it is this movement from non-dual recognition to impartial regard, not a leap from metaphysics to administration, that the governance reading carries forward. So

rendered, the principle does genuine design work while remaining continuous with its source: the governor and the governed are recognised as structurally, not merely contingently, interconnected. This bears directly on Tyler's [9] procedural justice findings: citizens comply because they perceive the process as fair. *Ātmabhāva* supplies a moral psychology that can sustain fairness as an institutional disposition, not merely as a compliance mechanism.

What does this look like in operational terms? *Niyama-niyantraṇa* (principled restraint): governance authority must be bounded not merely by law but by ethical norms that precede and exceed legal codification. *Kartavya-bodha* (duty consciousness): institutional culture must orient its members towards obligation rather than entitlement, towards service rather than extraction. *Satya-niṣṭhā* (truth-orientation): institutional decision-making must privilege transparency and veracity over strategic communication. These are structural design parameters that shape institutional architecture, recruitment, evaluation, and accountability. The *Nītiśāstra* tradition extends the same demand to the ruler's own conduct: the *Kāmandakīya Nītiśāra* makes *vinaya*, the disciplining of the senses, the precondition of legitimate command, holding that one who has not first governed himself can scarcely be trusted to govern others [29]. The *Vidura-nīti*, counselling *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* in the *Udyoga Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, reinforces the demand from the side of counsel: it makes the ruler's mastery of his own senses the ground of fit rule and sharply distinguishes the minister who speaks salutary but unwelcome truth from the flatterer who, in pleasing the powerful, acts as an enemy in a friend's guise [30].

Kauṭilya's governance apparatus supplies historical evidence that these were operational realities. He designed institutional checks against the misappropriation of public resources: an *akṣapaṭala* (records-and-audit office) and a detailed taxonomy of 'the forty ways of embezzlement' (*Arthaśāstra* 2.8), paired with the candid recognition that an official handling revenue can no more avoid tasting at least a little of it than the tongue can avoid tasting honey placed upon its tip (2.9) [28, 42]. This audit machinery is analytically distinct from the *gūḍhapuruṣa* (covert agents, 1.11–1.12), whose remit was intelligence and the testing of officials' loyalty rather than financial oversight; conflating the two collapses an institutional division of labour the text takes pains to maintain. Together these mechanisms were meant to ensure that office-holders discharged their *kartavya* rather than converting authority into personal advantage. The system thus recognised institutional corruption (the conversion of public trust into private gain) and engineered structural safeguards against it. Contemporary governance theory captures this under principal-agent problems and institutional capture, but the *Kauṭilyan* approach embeds the solution within an ethical framework rather than relying solely on incentive alignment. Integrity scholarship reinforces the insight: ethical performance is an institutional configuration that makes integrity easier and misconduct costlier [46]. The later *Nītiśāstra* tradition systematises this administrative concern: the *Śukranīti* sets out in detail the duties of the king and his officers and devotes sustained attention to the maintenance of the treasury and the conduct of revenue officials, treating ordered record-keeping and the

supervision of accounts as constitutive functions of the state rather than incidental ones [31].

Proposition 1 (Ethics, Trust, Resilience). In governance domains with stronger dharma-led institutional ethics, defined as the presence of integrity systems, constrained discretion, and enforceable accountability, institutional trust is predicted to be higher. That trust mediates greater resilience [36, 37], because citizens cooperate voluntarily when they perceive authority as principled rather than arbitrary [5, 9]. The mechanism is procedural and relational: consistent rule-following, impartiality, and restraint increase perceived legitimacy, which lowers enforcement costs and improves compliance, especially during crises when coercion without legitimacy proves brittle. Disconfirmation test: the proposition would be weakened if governance domains scoring high on integrity infrastructure (ethics codes, audit capacity, grievance redress) showed no significant difference in citizen trust or crisis-period compliance relative to domains scoring low, controlling for economic development and regime type.

To show that this proposition is evaluable rather than merely suggestive, consider one illustrative measurement model. The construct dharma-led institutional ethics can be indexed through existing integrity and impartiality measures, for example the rigorous-and-impartial-administration and corruption indicators of the V-Dem dataset together with Transparency International's control-of-corruption scores; institutional trust can be operationalised through the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions [47] and the trust items of the World Values Survey; and resilience can be proxied by crisis-period compliance and recovery indicators drawn from established governance and disaster-response datasets. The proposition then specifies a testable association, estimable across governance domains while controlling for economic development and regime type, in which the integrity index predicts institutional trust and trust in turn mediates resilience. Articulating the model at this level does not amount to a completed empirical test, but it shows that the framework's constructs can be tied to named instruments, identified data sources, and an explicit comparison design rather than remaining at the level of rhetoric; the same construct-to-indicator template extends to Propositions 2 and 3.

4.3 Pillar II: Subsidiarity-Driven Decentralisation

The second pillar confronts the governance challenges of complexity, anxiety, and incomprehensibility. Centralised systems fail under complexity because they cannot process the contextual information that effective local decision-making requires. They worsen anxiety because distant institutions feel unresponsive to lived concerns.

India's civilisational history contains extensive evidence of decentralised, community-governed institutions. The *sabhā* and *samiti* of Vedic polity [48], the village assemblies (*grāma-sabhā*) documented in the *Arthaśāstra* and, most richly, in the Cōḷa-period inscriptions of bodies such as the Uttaramerūr *sabhā* [49, 50], the

pañcāyat institutions that recur across centuries of political change, and the indigenous systems of education and local self-governance documented by Dharampal [51] collectively demonstrate that subsidiarity was indigenous institutional architecture, not a modern European import. Two qualifications keep this claim historically honest without diminishing it. First, the design logic extracted here is one of nested, locally accountable authority, and that logic is separable from the franchise of any particular historical body; those franchises were indeed often narrow, the Cōḷa sabhās largely brahmadeya assemblies with jāti- and property-qualified membership and the Vedic sabhā and samiti aristocratic rather than broadly participatory, so what the framework adopts is the accountable, subsidiary form, not those membership bases, a point the boundary-conditions section develops further. Second, the picture of an unbroken ‘village republic’ is partly a colonial-era and nationalist construction, and the modern Panchayati Raj of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment is institutionally discontinuous with its pre-colonial antecedents; the continuity claimed here is one of recurring design principles, not of unbroken institutional descent. Oates’s [35] fiscal federalism provides the contemporary analytical frame. The Indic tradition, however, adds a dimension this framework lacks: dharmic accountability. In the IKS governance tradition, the village assembly’s authority derives from its members’ dharmic obligation to the community, not merely from proximity to local conditions.

Ostrom’s [10] research on common-pool resource governance converges on a finding the Indic tradition reaches by a different route: decentralised, community-governed systems outperform centralised bureaucratic management under conditions of complexity and local variation. The convergence is instructive precisely because the routes differ, since Ostrom specifies the structural conditions under which self-governance succeeds, whereas the Indic tradition locates the binding force of those conditions in a constitutive dharmic obligation rather than in an externally engineered incentive. The Arthaśāstra’s model of provincial governance displays a working grasp of what contemporary institutional economics calls ‘nested hierarchies’: local decision-making authority embedded within broader frameworks of coordination and accountability [28]. Kauṭilya designed a governance architecture in which janapada (territorial) governance operated with substantial autonomy within parameters set by rājadharmā (sovereign obligation). This model, which Olivelle [28] places in its redacted form in the early centuries of the Common Era, distributes authority polycentrically while binding each level by rājadharmā, so that accountability is internal to the structure rather than an external safeguard added to it. The contrast with the Bloomington School is one of grounding rather than chronology: where Ostrom’s principles describe the conditions for stable self-governance, the Kauṭilyan architecture supplies the constitutive obligation those conditions presuppose but do not themselves generate.

Subsidiarity grounded in dharmic accountability addresses anxiety by making governance relational and proximate: the decision-maker belongs to the community, accountable through face-to-face relationships and shared norms. Incomprehensibility

is mitigated because decentralised governance requires contextual intelligence, not comprehensive system-wide modelling, and community institutions possess that intelligence by virtue of their embeddedness. Meadows [12] captures exactly this point when she identifies ‘the mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises’ as the highest leverage point for systemic change. Subsidiarity grounded in dharma operates at that paradigm level.

Gandhi’s [41] concept of *swarāj* (self-rule) extends this logic. His vision of the village republic was a governance design argument: self-governing communities, empowered with resources and authority, form more resilient governance systems than centralised bureaucracies because they combine local knowledge with moral accountability.

Proposition 2 (Subsidiarity, Responsiveness, Innovation). Greater subsidiarity-driven decentralisation, conditional on anti-capture safeguards and adequate fiscal and administrative capacity, increases perceived comprehensibility and citizen agency, generating context-sensitive innovations implementable at scale. Decentralised nodes detect local signals earlier, iterate solutions with shorter learning cycles, and reduce centre-level overload [10, 11]. The boundary condition is critical: decentralisation without dharmic accountability merely relocates domination from centre to periphery. The model therefore requires clear functional assignment, minimum capability thresholds, fiscal transfers aligned to functions, and anti-capture safeguards including transparency mandates, social audit, appeals, and open data [35]. Disconfirmation test: the proposition would be weakened if decentralised governance units meeting the stated safeguard conditions showed no improvement in local innovation rates, citizen satisfaction, or signal-detection speed compared with centralised comparators, or if decentralisation with safeguards consistently produced elite capture at rates comparable to decentralisation without them.

As with Proposition 1, these constructs can be tied to named instruments rather than left at the level of assertion. Subsidiarity-driven decentralisation can be indexed through the Regional Authority Index [52], which scores subnational self-rule and shared-rule, together with expenditure- and revenue-decentralisation ratios from the OECD Fiscal Decentralisation Database and the IMF Government Finance Statistics. The safeguard conditions on which the proposition is made conditional, namely transparency mandates, social audit, appeals, and open data, can be operationalised through the local-government and transparency indicators of the V-Dem dataset, and administrative capacity through own-source revenue and staffing thresholds. The outcomes can be proxied through citizen-perception items on comprehensibility and agency drawn from local-governance survey modules, through documented rates of locally originated and scaled policy innovations, and through time-to-response measures for local shocks. The proposition then specifies a testable association, estimable across subnational units and around decentralisation reforms such as India’s 73rd Amendment through a difference-in-differences design, in which subsidiarity

raises responsiveness and innovation only where the safeguard and capacity conditions hold, controlling for economic development and regime type.

A worked instance shows the proposition operating rather than merely asserted. Following India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the south Indian state of Kerala launched its People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in 1996, devolving a substantial share of state plan resources, on the order of a third to two-fifths, to elected *grāma pañcāyats*, and pairing that fiscal devolution with precisely the anti-capture safeguards on which the proposition is made conditional: mandatory *grāma-sabhā* deliberation, participatory needs assessment, and beneficiary and social audit of local works [53]. The mechanism the proposition specifies is observable in what followed. Moving decision rights to the most competent local level raised perceived comprehensibility and citizen agency, while the deliberative and audit machinery constrained elite capture; the documented result was a marked rise in context-sensitive local provision, from watershed, sanitation, and housing works to locally designed welfare and service delivery in health and education, that centrally administered planning had not produced. The case also bears out the boundary condition rather than evading it: where comparable devolution elsewhere proceeded without equivalent deliberative and audit machinery, gains in responsiveness were weaker and capture more frequent, exactly the contrast the disconfirmation test anticipates. Within the difference-in-differences design described above, Kerala thus furnishes an interpretable positive case in which subsidiarity raised responsiveness and innovation because, and only because, the safeguard and capacity conditions held.

4.4 Pillar III: Civilisational Sustainability

The third pillar takes on sustainability in its broadest sense: ecological, cultural, and intergenerational. Mainstream sustainability governance, as codified in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, operates primarily through regulatory targets, economic incentives, and technological innovation. These instruments are necessary but insufficient, because they treat sustainability as a problem of resource management when the deeper issue is one of civilisational orientation.

IKS offers a foundational principle in *ṛta*. In Vedic cosmology, *ṛta* denotes the fundamental order that sustains the cosmos: the regularity of seasons, the balance of ecosystems, the reciprocity between human action and natural consequence [21, 54]. The term recurs widely across the *R̥gveda*, where *ṛta* and *satya* are said to arise together from primordial *tapas* (RV 10.190.1) and where Varuṇa is figured as the divine guardian who upholds it (RV 1.24) [55]; the classic philological study of the *ṛta*–*satya* relation remains Lüders' Varuṇa [56]. *R̥ta* makes an ontological claim about the nature of reality. Governance systems that violate *ṛta*, that extract without replenishment or privilege the present over the future, are not merely unjust. They are *adharmic*: out of alignment with the structure of reality itself. This ontological framing runs parallel to Rockström et al.'s [57] 'safe operating space' concept and the planetary boundaries framework [58], though the parallel should not be mistaken for

identity. Planetary boundaries are empirical thresholds: quantified limits whose transgression carries measurable risk, external constraints on an activity that is otherwise unconstrained. *Rta* makes a different and stronger claim, holding that systemic order is constitutive of reality itself, so that remaining within limits is not risk management but alignment with the way things are, and transgression is not merely hazardous but adharmic. The contribution of the *rta* framing is therefore not that it arrived earlier, but that it supplies an ontological grounding for ecological limits that an empirical boundary concept leaves unmotivated, answering why the boundaries bind and not only where they lie.

This ontological register may seem to strain against the methodological bracketing announced in Section 3, where the governance proposals were said to rest on *yukti* that any reader can assess on its merits. The tension is only apparent, and turns on keeping two claims distinct. The design proposal Pillar III actually advances, that institutions embed long-horizon systemic constraints as constitutive commitments rather than as external add-ons, is carried on *yukti* and is assessable without metaphysical assent; a reader can grant that limit-respecting, self-correcting institutions are more durable on wholly secular grounds. The ontological claim about *rta* is not offered as a premise the reader must share, but as the tradition's own account of why the constraint binds with the force it does, the motivational thickness that, as the portability argument below makes explicit, does not travel automatically and is re-grounded by each recipient context in its own idiom. The bracketing therefore holds: what the argument asks the reader to accept stands on reason, while *rta*'s ontological depth is reported as the tradition's internal warrant rather than smuggled in as a shared foundation.

The Bhagavad Gītā's concept of *loka-saṅgraha* (the holding-together of the world, invoked at BG 3.20 and 3.25) provides the governance corollary: the obligation of those who hold power or knowledge to act for the sustenance and welfare of the world, even when personal interest might dictate otherwise. The intervening verse is, for governance, the most pointed of all: 'whatever the eminent person does, others do likewise; the standard he sets, the world follows' (BG 3.21), an explicit claim that those in authority function as exemplars whose conduct propagates through the system they govern. In essence, it is a principle of trusteeship: the governor holds authority in trust for present and future generations.

Transposed into governance design, civilisational sustainability implies three operational commitments. First, *rta-anusāraṇa* (alignment with systemic balance): governance decisions must be evaluated for their systemic consequences across ecological, social, and temporal scales. Second, *paramparā-rakṣā* (cultural continuity): governance must actively preserve and transmit knowledge traditions and civilisational wisdom. Third, *antyodaya* (upliftment of the last person): sustainability is meaningful only when its benefits reach those most vulnerable. This commitment has deep classical roots rather than merely modern ones: the Arthaśāstra obliges the state to maintain orphans, the aged, the infirm, and the destitute, and to support

women left without means [27, 28], while the *dāna* tradition treats provision for the vulnerable as a constitutive duty of legitimate authority rather than discretionary charity. The same orientation was renewed in the twentieth century by Gandhi's talisman test and, in an explicitly political register, by Deendayal Upadhyaya's integral humanism [59]; the framework draws on the structural principle of last-person upliftment while remaining independent of any particular modern political programme.

The SDG approach treats sustainability as measurable targets achieved through policy intervention and compliance. The *ṛta*-based approach treats it as an ontological orientation: governance systems must be designed to maintain systemic balance as a constitutive feature of their operation, not as an externally imposed constraint. In systems thinking terms, this parallels the difference between managing system parameters and changing the paradigm from which the system arises [12]. When sustainability is embedded as an ontological commitment, governance systems become self-correcting: deviations from *ṛta* generate internal feedback that triggers institutional adjustment, rather than requiring external enforcement.

Proposition 3 (Ṛta-Alignment, Durability, Sustainability). Stronger embedding of *ṛta*-aligned sustainability constraints in governance design is associated with greater intergenerational policy durability, expressed as lower risk of ecological overshoot, reduced volatility in long-run outcomes, and governance systems that self-correct when systemic balance is violated [57, 58]. The trade-off is slower short-term throughput and potentially higher upfront administrative costs, justified by reduced fragility and lower tail-risk. Disconfirmation test: the proposition would be weakened if governance systems embedding long-horizon ecological and intergenerational constraints showed no reduction in overshoot indicators or policy reversal rates relative to systems without such constraints, or if the administrative cost penalty consistently exceeded the fragility reduction, rendering the trade-off net-negative over a twenty-year horizon.

The same template applies to Proposition 3. The embedding of *ṛta*-aligned constraints can be indexed by the presence and bindingness of long-horizon ecological and intergenerational provisions in law and budgeting, for example statutory carbon budgets, green-budgeting tags, and dedicated future-generations institutions such as Wales's Well-being of Future Generations commissioner or analogous offices. Intergenerational durability and overshoot can be proxied through Ecological Footprint-to-biocapacity ratios from the Global Footprint Network and the Environmental Performance Index, while policy durability and self-correction can be measured through policy-reversal rates and event-history analysis of environmental legislation over the twenty-year horizon the disconfirmation test specifies. The comparison contrasts jurisdictions that embed such constraints with those that do not, controlling for income, resource endowment, and regime type, so that the proposition's claim, that *ṛta*-alignment lowers overshoot and long-run volatility at the

cost of slower short-term throughput, becomes empirically decidable rather than merely asserted.

4.5 Innovation as Emergent Property of Constrained Polycentric Experimentation

Governance innovation, as theorised here, is an emergent property of the interaction between the three pillars, not a standalone toolkit or method. When ethical guardrails (Pillar I) and sustainability constraints (Pillar III) define the safe operating space for institutional action, subsidiarity-driven decentralisation (Pillar II) enables polycentric experimentation within those constraints. Multiple centres of decision-making learn, iterate, and adapt without collapsing into incoherence, because the ethical and sustainability parameters define non-negotiable boundaries while permitting maximal variation within them. The Indic concept of *viveka* (discernment), the capacity to distinguish the essential from the contingent, provides the epistemic register for this kind of learning: polycentric governance informed by *viveka* does not merely iterate; it iterates with judgement about what constitutes genuine improvement rather than mere change.

The argument engages the critique Fayard and Fathallah [4] level against mainstream design thinking: that innovation methods, when reduced to decontextualised toolkits, produce attractive artefacts without durable governance change. What this architecture identifies are the structural preconditions for durable innovation: ethical integrity so that innovation serves public purpose, subsidiarity so that innovation is context-sensitive, and *rta*-alignment so that innovation produces long-run durability rather than short-run novelty. Innovation in this framework is an outcome, not an input. Rittel and Webber's [13] characterisation of governance challenges as 'wicked problems' supports this framing: wicked problems resist linear solution paths and demand the kind of distributed intelligence that polycentric systems operating within ethical guardrails can generate.

Figure 4 makes the logic of this section visible by depicting innovation not as an input or a method but as a property that emerges between two constraints. The upper band is the ethical guardrail supplied by Pillar I (constrained discretion, integrity infrastructure, and accountability), and the lower band is the sustainability boundary supplied by Pillar III (*rta*-alignment, intergenerational durability, and ecological limits). The space enclosed between them is the safe operating space within which Pillar II's polycentric subsidiarity can run an iterative cycle of experiment, evaluation, and scaling, trying many approaches locally and retaining only those that work. Because the ethical and ecological limits are held fixed while variation inside them is actively encouraged, the system can adapt continuously without sliding into incoherence; the discernment that separates genuine improvement from mere novelty is, in IKS terms, *viveka*. Durable governance innovation, shown at the base, is therefore the output of the architecture as a whole rather than a separate instrument added to it.

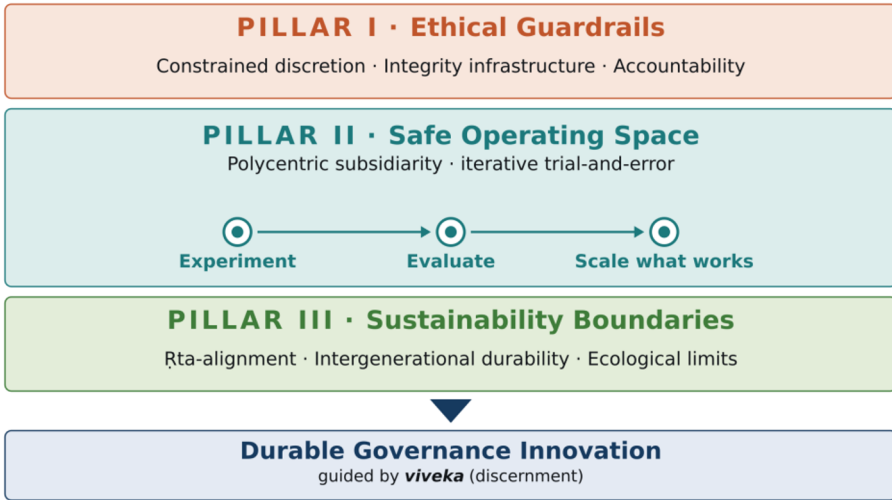


Fig. 4. Innovation as an emergent property of the three-pillar architecture.

5 Discussion

5.1 Analytical Contributions

The three-pillar architecture addresses the ethical deficit that VUCA/BANI scholarship diagnoses but does not resolve. The VUCA and BANI frameworks are descriptive; they characterise conditions of turbulence but do not prescribe governance architectures. By grounding governance design in Dharma, the framework supplies a prescriptive logic that is ethical, structural, and systemic at once.

The framework also closes the disconnect between governance theory and civilisational knowledge systems. Malhotra [16] and Balagangadhara [6] have argued that Western social science systematically misrecognises Indian traditions by subsuming them within its own analytical categories. This framework responds by allowing Dharma to generate its own governance categories: *kartavya-bodha*, *niyama-niyantraṇa*, *ṛta-anusāraṇa*. IKS concepts are allowed to do their own analytical work, not merely to illustrate or validate Western constructs. The insistence throughout is on epistemic symmetry rather than subordination.

The three pillars map coherently onto VUCA/BANI challenges (see Figure 5). Dharma-led institutional ethics stabilises volatility and brittleness through moral coherence. Subsidiarity-driven decentralisation addresses uncertainty, complexity, anxiety, and incomprehensibility through contextual intelligence. Civilisational sustainability addresses ambiguity and non-linearity through systemic orientation and intergenerational commitment.

Figure 5 sets out this correspondence cell by cell, so that the division of labour among the pillars can be read at a glance. Each row is one VUCA or BANI condition and each column one pillar; a filled marker indicates that the pillar is the primary response to that condition, an open marker a supporting role, and a short dash an indirect or minor contribution. Reading across the rows shows that no single pillar answers every stressor and that each condition is met by one primary pillar reinforced by the others; it is the coordinated configuration, not any pillar in isolation, that gives the framework full coverage of the turbulence that VUCA and BANI describe.

VUCA / BANI governance condition		PILLAR I Ethics	PILLAR II Subsidiarity	PILLAR III Sustainability
VUCA	Volatility	●	—	○
	Uncertainty	○	●	—
	Complexity	—	●	○
	Ambiguity	○	—	●
BANI	Brittleness	●	○	—
	Anxiety	○	●	—
	Non-linearity	—	○	●
	Incomprehensibility	—	●	○

● Primary response ○ Supporting role — Indirect / minor

Fig. 5. Mapping the three framework pillars to VUCA/BANI governance conditions.

The framework opens an alternative design space for the emerging literature on civilisational design for governance: ethically grounded in dharma, structurally informed by centuries of institutional experimentation, and systemically oriented towards *ṛta*. The argument is not for rejecting modernity or evidence-based governance. It is for expanding the epistemic foundations upon which modern governance draws. North's [8] insight that institutions are 'the rules of the game' is foundational, but his framework does not specify where the norms that make rules self-enforcing originate. Dharma supplies an answer: they originate in the civilisationally embedded sense of righteous conduct that precedes legal codification and survives institutional disruption. Dharmic accountability, the culturally embedded sense of obligation to the collective, is a critical enabling condition that Ostrom's [10] descriptively powerful design principles presuppose but cannot explain.

This bears on the paper's central tension: how a structure rooted in specific cultural content can travel beyond it. The resolution lies in distinguishing the design grammar from the vocabulary that first expressed it. What ports is a set of formal relations: that authority is held as responsibility rather than possessed as prerogative, that decision rights belong at the most competent level under binding accountability, and that institutional action is answerable to long-horizon systemic order. These relations can be stated, defended, and adopted without assent to any Indic metaphysical premise. What does not port automatically is the motivational thickness, the felt bindingness that *ṛta*, *svadharma*, and *ātmabhāva* supply from within the tradition. The transmission mechanism is therefore not wholesale adoption but re-grounding: a recipient context instantiates each relation in its own thick sources of obligation, ecological reverence, and civic duty, much as a grammar generates well-formed sentences in more than one vocabulary. On this account Dharma's portable contribution is precisely its integrative achievement. It shows that ethical restraint, subsidiarity, and sustainability can cohere within a single ordering logic rather than competing as separate imperatives, and it is that template, not the Sanskrit lexicon, that other civilisational traditions can take up and render in their own terms.

5.2 Boundary Conditions and Failure Modes

No framework that claims analytical seriousness can dodge the question of its own failure conditions. The discussion that follows therefore applies the *pūrvapakṣa* discipline introduced in Section 3 pillar by pillar, stating the strongest objection to each before offering the framework's resolution. That this discipline of structured self-objection is itself drawn from IKS is part of the argument: the tradition contributes not only governance content but a method of reasoning, a claim to epistemic parity at the level of method as well as substance. At the level of the individual propositions, the same discipline is carried by the disconfirmation tests attached to each: every proposition is paired with the precise conditions under which it would fail, so that its strongest objection is not merely entertained but made empirically decidable.

Ethics-without-enforcement: Any ethical vocabulary, dharma language included, becomes moral cover for arbitrary power when it is deployed rhetorically without institutional enforcement mechanisms. Dharma-led ethics requires integrity infrastructure: codes with enforcement, conflict-of-interest controls, whistleblower protection, transparent procurement, audit and prosecution capacity, and credible grievance redress [46]. Kauṭilya's own *gūḍhapuruṣa* system recognised that delegation requires oversight, not naive trust [28].

Subsidiarity as local capture: Decentralisation without anti-capture safeguards can entrench local elites. The model presumes clear functional assignment, minimum capability thresholds, fiscal transfers aligned to functions, and transparency mandates including social audit, appeals mechanisms, and open data [35]. Decentralisation that

merely relocates domination from centre to periphery is fragmented authoritarianism, not subsidiarity.

Moralistic instrumentalization: Like any morally weighty vocabulary, dharma categories can be misappropriated by majoritarian or identity politics, a distortion that would convert governance ethics into cultural assertion. The argument here insists that Dharma operates as a public reasoning resource specifying duty-bound restraint and procedural fairness, not as an identity claim. The *pūrvapakṣa-siddhānta* methodology is itself a safeguard: it requires that opposing arguments be reconstructed fairly before being resolved.

The svadharma-loka-saṅgraha relation: Contextual duty (*svadharma*) and universal welfare (*loka-saṅgraha*) can pull in different directions, but the tradition does not leave the two unranked: the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teaching of *loka-saṅgraha* orients *svadharma* towards the holding-together of the world, so that contextual duty is performed in service of, and bounded by, the welfare of the whole. The framework institutionalises exactly this ordering. Subsidiarity without *ṛta*-alignment could produce locally rational but systemically harmful outcomes, just as *ṛta*-alignment without subsidiarity could produce centrally imposed sustainability regimes that override local knowledge and agency; the dynamic calibration between pillars is the design expression of the classical priority of *loka-saṅgraha* over unmediated *svadharma*.

Sustainability constraints reducing short-term responsiveness: Long-horizon guardrails may slow short-term throughput. That is a design trade-off, not a failure. It becomes a failure mode only when crisis conditions demand rapid action and sustainability constraints are applied rigidly rather than adaptively.

On cultural essentialism: The historical societies in which these institutions operated were neither uniform nor uniformly just; *varṇa-jāti* hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and exclusionary practices were real features of their social order. These belonged to the social ordering of their times and are not entailed by the governance design logic extracted here; the tradition is itself internally plural, its hierarchical strands standing alongside universalist ones, among them the *sādhāraṇa-dharma*, the common duties binding on all irrespective of station, and the epics' sustained interrogation of the subtlety (*sūkṣmatā*) of dharma. These furnish internal grounds for criticising exclusion rather than a standard imposed from outside, and the argument accordingly draws on the design logic these traditions articulated, judged against their own universalist norms, not on an uncritical endorsement of their social outcomes.

On civilisational framing: the term is used here in a design-logic sense, denoting a coherent body of institutional reasoning, and it carries none of the essentialist or conflictual freight of the clash-of-civilisations thesis; civilisations are treated as reservoirs of design knowledge to be placed in dialogue, not as bounded units in competition.

On portability: as argued above, what travels is the design grammar rather than the cultural content, each recipient context re-grounding it in its own idiom.

On operationalisation: extensive further work is required, including case-study validation, comparative institutional analysis, and engagement with practitioner communities.

6 Implications for Policy, Scholarship, and Practice

For policymakers, the framework suggests that institutional trust cannot be engineered through compliance mechanisms alone; it requires ethical architecture. The concepts of *kartavya-bodha* and *niyama-niyantrana* offer design principles for civil service reform and governance training, with India's Mission Karmayogi initiative [60] representing one contemporary institutional context where such principles could be operationally integrated. Trust and legitimacy metrics should be institutionalised in programme monitoring alongside outcome indicators [47]. Subsidiarity mapping exercises for priority sectors should assign functions to the lowest competent level and align funds, data access, and accountability with that assignment. Sustainability should be treated as governance architecture: ecological and intergenerational constraints embedded in budgeting and regulation through explicit triggers [57, 58].

For scholars, this paper invites comparative civilisational governance research: systematic studies that bring IKS, Confucian, African Ubuntu, and Indigenous governance traditions into dialogue with Euro-Atlantic governance theory as co-equal epistemic resources. It also invites the development of evaluative instruments capable of assessing governance systems for ethical grounding, relational accountability, and civilisational sustainability.

This claim can be made good by contrast rather than by assertion. Confucian political meritocracy, in its recent statements by Bell [14] and Bai [61], grounds legitimate authority in the cultivated virtue and tested competence of those who govern; it is strong on ethical grounding but organises power vertically, and supplies neither a developed subsidiarity architecture nor an ecological-systemic constraint. Ubuntu grounds governance in relational personhood and communal solidarity, and is correspondingly strong on relational accountability, yet it is articulated chiefly as an interpersonal and communal ethic rather than as a multi-scalar institutional-design grammar. *Buen Vivir* [62], constitutionalised in Ecuador and Bolivia, is strongest precisely where liberal frameworks are weakest, in its ontological grounding of the rights of nature, and is in that respect the closest analogue to *rta*, but it remains comparatively underdeveloped as an account of institutional integrity and anti-capture design. Each parallel tradition thus carries one or two of the three registers with real force; what distinguishes the Dharmic framework is not priority over them but the integration of all three, ethical restraint, subsidiarity, and systemic sustainability, within a single ordering grammar.

For practitioners, the framework recommends designing governance interventions that integrate competence, trust, and sustainability. Competence alone breeds technocratic alienation; trust without long-horizon constraints degenerates into short-term populism; and sustainability mandates fail without institutional capability to implement them.

A further implication concerns governance education. If the argument holds, governance training programmes that draw exclusively on Euro-Atlantic public administration theory are epistemically incomplete. India's National Education Policy 2020 [63], with its emphasis on IKS integration, provides an institutional opening for curricular transformation.

7 Limitations and Future Research

The paper is conceptual and analytical; it constructs a framework but does not empirically validate it. The propositions remain mechanism claims awaiting systematic testing. The IKS sources engaged are selective. A comprehensive treatment would need to address Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh governance traditions, regional variations in Indian institutional history, and the complex politics of IKS interpretation. The rendering of Dharma, *ṛta*, and *ātmabhāva* into institutional constructs may omit semantic nuance or invite contested interpretations, and different *śāstra* selections could yield alternative emphases. Subsidiarity and ethics infrastructure interact with political settlement and administrative capability, limiting cross-context generalisation. The VUCA/BANI frameworks themselves, though widely cited, are contested [3].

Future research should pursue four directions. First, empirical case studies applying the framework to specific governance contexts, using process tracing and institutional ethnography to test propositions against observable outcomes. Second, comparative civilisational analysis examining how IKS governance principles relate to Confucian [64] and African Ubuntu [65] governance traditions. Third, evaluative instrument development: constructing metrics that operationalise the three pillars for quantitative and mixed-method assessment. Fourth, participatory design research engaging governance practitioners in co-designing systems informed by the framework. A particularly promising avenue is systems modelling using causal loop diagrams and system dynamics to simulate unintended consequences of decentralisation and sustainability triggers under different incentive regimes.

8 Conclusion

Dharma, conceptualised as a design logic rather than a moral vocabulary, addresses governance deficits that the dominant paradigms cannot resolve on their own. The Indic Civilisational Framework, structured around dharma-led institutional ethics,

subsidiarity-driven decentralisation, and civilisational sustainability, responds to VUCA/BANI conditions not by intensifying technocratic control but by embedding ethical purpose, distributing agency, and orienting institutional action towards *rta*. What Dharma offers is not one resource among many but an integrative achievement the dominant paradigms have not matched: where they treat ethical grounding, subsidiarity, and sustainability as separate and often competing imperatives, Dharma coordinates all three within a single ordering logic. Governance theory that leaves such civilisational knowledge systems out of its repertoire impoverishes itself, foreclosing precisely the integrative resource its present crisis most demands. In an era defined by brittleness, anxiety, and incomprehensibility, governance systems that draw upon diverse civilisational traditions are better equipped to sustain themselves, and the peoples they serve, than those confined to a single epistemic inheritance. Three audiences stand to gain: policymakers, who might consider ethical architecture and decentralised resilience as strategic stabilisers in an era of turbulence; scholars, who might pursue the comparative civilisational governance research that the framework demands; and practitioners, who might design governance systems that are trusted, sustainable, and civilisationally grounded. In the grammar of Dharma: governance that sustains *rta* will itself be sustained.

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