KEYWORD

Kāl

The A-Z of Temporality?

Here are just a dozen of the most commonplace words out of the hundreds of words for 'time' (see **Appendix I**) used on the Indian subcontinent:

ab (now)
aaj/aaj kal (today, these days)
ghanti/ghanta (hour, bell)
ghari (clock)
itara (iteration, repetition)
kaal(time, age, period, era
time (English word - how is it used in the Indian languages?)
time-pass (meaning?)
tithi/a-tithi (date/guest)
samay (time)
yug: (age)
zamana (age)

Of the above, we'll consider just **one** as a possible entry for the BA 'Time Keywords' project today.

A commonplace but hugely significant word for 'time' in modern Hindi as well as in classical Sanskrit, ***Kāl*** has a complex and super-productive morphological and semantic structure that has evolved across millenia. As in many cultures, the notion of ***Kāl*** or 'Time' has several fascinating mythological and deeply narrativised associations. As it turns out, this word is also intimately linked to the Sanskrit/Hindi word for '**famine'**, which is ***Akāl*** (***A*** **+*Kāl***, meaning 'non-time' or 'cessation of time'). This is an important connection in terms of my own contributionto the present '**Times of a Just Transition**' project (Appendix II) on the phenomenon of hunger.

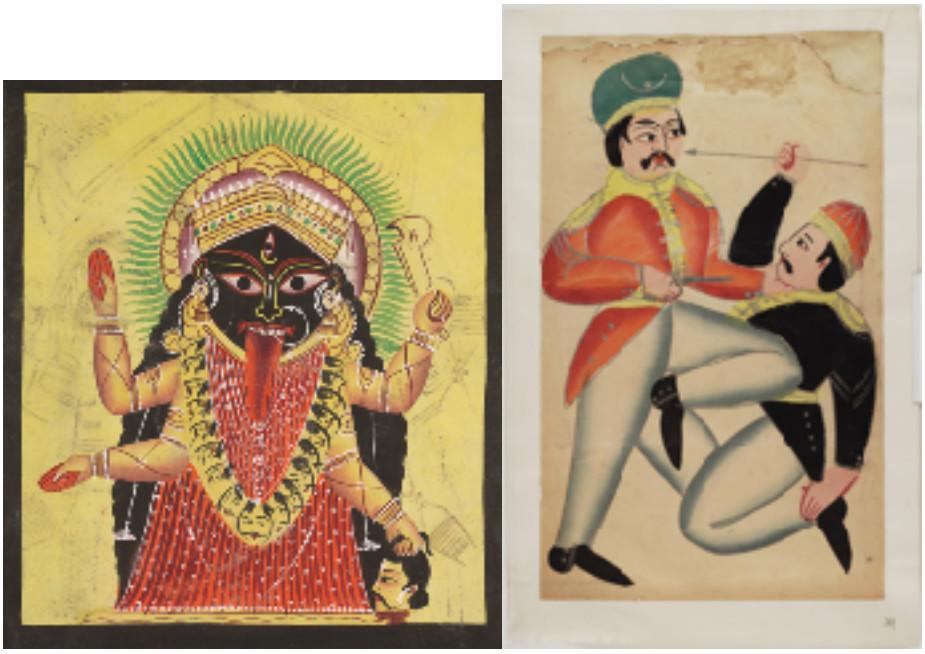
Kāl Grammar, Meaning, Implications:

1. **Grammatical restriction:** this word cannot ever be used interchangeably with, let's say, any of the dozen words listed above, except perhaps, on rare occasions, with the Urdu word *zamana*. For example, if you want to ask someone the time, you just cannot say *'kaal kya hai?'**** Instead you have to say '*samay kya hai?*' or '*time kya hai*?' In effect, becoming acquainted with the 'grammar of time' in India, means having 'insider

knowledge' or 'implicultural access' (Nair, 2003, 2014, 2022 etc.) that enables you to use words that denote time in well defined cultural contexts of 'use' (Wittgenstein, 1953).

2. **Primary meaning:** time, period, age, era
3. **Secondary meanings**: cessation, death, seasonal endings, a calmitous circumstance, dark
4. **Mythological meanings:** these are strongly associated with:

a. the Goddess Kāli, who is held to be black and is the obverse image of the 'white' goddess Durga who signifies the benign aspects of nature. ***Kaal+i = Kaali***, the morphological particle /***i***/ added to the word ***Kāl*** indicates a **feminisation** and **personification** of the concept Time. Indeed, it is common practice even today to have girls' names ending in /i/ or /a/ (e.g. Rukmini, Nalini, Kamala, Radha etc.) This is the case with the goddess Kāli as well. In popular mythology, Kāli is associated with time and its ending, with mortality and with death. She presides over cremation *ghats* (burial and burning grounds). Kāli *is* used as a gendered slur in common parlance but note that: **i.** the first postcolonial feminist press in India self-consciously called itself *Kāli for Women* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kali_for_Women; **ii.** that my own poem *Kāli* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kali_(poem) won the All India British Council/Poetry Society First Prize and **iii.** that when Calcutta or Kolkata (btw, a popular folk etymology for the name of this city is ***Kāli + kata*** (meaning 'Kali cut to pieces') was the imperial capital, a favourite pasttime of British officials was to have themselves painted by local painters at the temple of Kāli, which led to a very distinctive style of colonial portraiture known as 'Company' Kalighat Paintings https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalighat_painting



All of this wealth of material seems to indicate that the concept of ***Kāl*** (Time) possesses significant resonance within the cultural geography of the Indian subcontinent. F**irstly**, it resonates with people's **everyday experience**. For example, ***Kāl+u*** or ***Kālu*** is a common name endearingly used for pet dogs and cats as well as for humans; it is also a caste/racial slur used for dark-skinned individuals across northern India; ***Kalu Madari is*** a popular children's song, and so on. **Secondly**, the mythogical status of the word ***Kāl*** reveals a deep **community engagement** with overarching and highly abstract concepts such as **mortality** and **memory**. **Thirdly**, the idea of ***Kāl*** is also heavily narrativised, which is a great advantage as far as I'm concerned, since **narrative analysis** is a main investigative tool in my BA research project on 'Hunger'. **Fourthly and finally** (for now!), we could categorise ***Kāl*** as a cultural '**niche meme**', alongside other keywords such as *saree, avatar, dharma, karma* etc. (see Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene*, 1976; Dennett, D. C. 'Darwin's Dangerous Idea' *The Sciences* 35, no. 3, 1995, 34–40; Nair & deSouza 2020 on the role of memes in **cultural evolution** and their impact on **social media** today).

Other mythological and culturally embedded ideas of ***Kāl*** include:

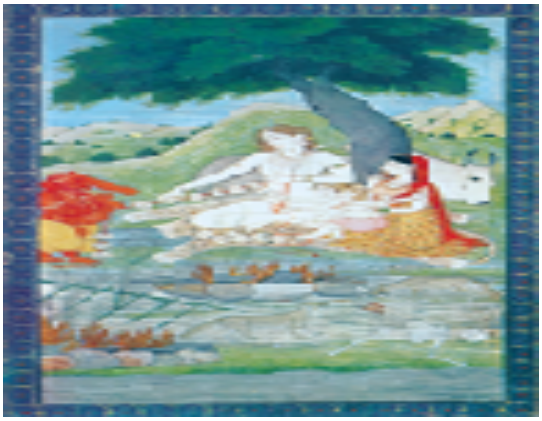
b. ***Kāl*** or 'Time' is one of the main titles of **Yama** or the **King of Death**

Yama (Sanskrit) is also known as **Kala,** the Hindu god of **Death and Justice**, responsible for the dispensation of law and the punishment of sinners in his abode Naraka (Hell). He is often identified with Dharmaraja, the personification of *Dharma* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/

Yama

Dharma-raja, a form of Yama, presides over a 'hell' of punishments for the wicked; bazaar art, c.1960

c. ***Kāla*** or ***MahaKāla*** is also an epithet for Shiva, whose 'Third Eye' can cause death and destruction in an infinitesimal instant (***kshana***). The painting below shows Shiva and his family coolly relaxing at a cremation site. Parvati, Shiva's wife, holds Skanda (her baby son) while looking towards Ganesha (her other elephant-headed son). Shiva meanwhile, busily strings together the skulls of the dead. The bull Nandi, Shiva's sacred animal, rests behind a tree.



Kangra painting, Himachal, C18 V&A Museum, London

d. ***Kāl*** is also cognate with another embedded cultural meme, that of **Kalki** or the **Apocalypse**.

Kalki is the final **Avatara** or incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. Hindus believe that there are **four stages of time**. The stage of time we are in is called the **Kali Yug** (Dark or Bad Times) In this stage of time, people are very bad. To make the world good, Kalki will come to Earth, and will destroy bad things

and kill bad people. People will change then, and become good. A new stage of will begin, called the or the first stage of life. He is deciding to only come when everybody on Earth is very **cruel**. Kalki will come after **Buddha** and his work is to punish people who not changed their behaviour even after Buddha taught the right way. Kalki will come within this millennium. He will take birth in **India.** Lord Kalki will be expected to incarnate on the **Shukla Paksha Dwadashi Tithi(12th day of the bright fortnight)** in the Hindu month **Vaishakha**... he will appear at the end of this Kali Yuga which is about **432,000 years** away. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalki

Temple Carving of Kalki, Gujarat

Painting by Raja Ravi Varma, Kerala

Kalki 2898 AD Upcoming Mythological Film https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalki_2898_AD

Current Usage

Modi's ***Pran Pratishtha*** Speech at the inauguration of Ram temple, Ayodhya, **22 January 2024**.

1. **Kālachakra** – the cycle of time
2. **Sarvakālik** – of every time/ age/ period
3. **Kālakhaṃḍa** – a part of time/ during a specific or ascribed time
4. **Prācīn Kāl** – ancient times
5. **Anantkāl** – everlasting/time without an end
6. **Kālajayī** – a winner over time/age, one unaffected by time
7. **Amṛtakāl** – a most fortunate or auspicious period, literally a time of immortality; also used during the Union Budget Speech in 2023 to refer to the future period **2023-2047**, i.e. from 75 years after Indian Indepedence (2023) to a full 100 years of freedom from colonial rule (2047).

The Newly Built Ram Temple, **2024** **PM Modi performing 'consecration rites' at the site** **installed idol of *Ram Lalla* (Baby Ram)**

The photos above provide a snapshot of a heady and winning blend of Indian 'nationalist' politics, religion, legal pronouncements, and performativity, all involving various aspects of time:

1. present time (January 2024); **2. future time** (August, 2047); **3. historical time** (the medieval Mughal period is invoked by the fact that the new Ram Temple has been erected, with legal permission, on the very spot where a 16th century mosque built by Emperor Babur was violently pulled down in 1992; at the same time, British colonial rule is also simultaneouschallenged); **4. prehistoric and geological time** (the Ram Lalla idol is carved out a **2-3 million year old** slab of granite; as a rough comparison, the granite in the US Grand Canyon, is 'only' around 2 million years old or less - and now a **fun fact:** some of the oldest peaks in the Grand Canyon are also, rather surprisingly, named after Hindu deities, e.g. the Rama schist, the Vishnu schist etc.); and finally, of course, there's **5. mythological time,** as in Time personified by Kali, Kalki etc.

A Note on Time in Sikhism

Sikhisim is a subcontinental religion adjacent to, but distinct from, Hinduism, beginning circa 15-16th century CE. In its tenets, we find the word ***Kāl*** positively encoded via its opposite ***Akāl***.

8. The Shiromani ***Akāli*** Dal (SAD, trans.'Supreme Army of God') is an influential centre-right Sikh-centric state political party in Punjab, India.
9. ***Akāl Purakh***, meaning 'The Timeless Being', is interchangeable with the Sikh name used to denote God, or 'the omnipresent divine'.

10. The word ***Akāl*** literally means timeless, not bound by past, present or future. However, by prefixing *Srī* (meaning), it becomes a proper noun – ***Srī Akāl,*** meaning God.
11. ***Sat Srī Akāl*** is the commonest form of greeting in Sikhism (like Namaste or Good morning) and is perhaps best translated as, 'Truth is God' or 'God is Truth'.

Half a dozen other common modern Hindi words, possibly deriving from ***Kāl***:

1. ***kal*** common noun, masc., meaning both 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' (deictically located time?)
2. ***kali (kal + i)*** common noun, fem., meaning a flower bud (nurtured in phases of seasonal time?)
3. ***kalā*** (***kal + ā)*** common noun, feminine, meaning art; skill, related to ***kalpanā*** (common noun, feminine, meaning 'imagination') and ***kalpataru***, lit. 'the imagination/wish-fulfillment tree'
4. ***kālaka*** (***kāla*** + ***ka***) common noun, masculine, meaning eyeball (seeing time?)
5. ***kālīya*** (***kāl***+***a***), proper noun, masc. mythological name of a snake living in/by the river Jumna, killed by Kr̥ṣṇa (signalling the epochal victory of good over evil, humans/gods over nature?)
6. ***kalam*** or ***qalama***, Urdu, common noun, masc., pen (writing as a form of temporal preservation?)

My specific question on this project: how are the concepts of 'time' and 'hunger' related?

This research, focuses on the word ***Akāl or A+kāl***, a derivation from the root-word ***Kāl***.
In everyday usage, this word means **famine**, scarcity, an inopportune time. If an implication of ***Kāl*** as a large abstract concept that is also embodied in everyday practices and signals a common evolutionary inheritance across cultures and species, is that it is a primary medium for a flourishing of life on earth, ***Akāl*** denotes the polar opposite: a negation or cessation of time. However, since adding the prefix **/a/** to nouns in many Indian languages morphologically denotes '**not**' or '**non**', that is, a state of 'timelessness' and/or 'an out of time' state, it can also paradoxically refer, as we have observed in the case of Sikhism, to being immortal or godlike.

Famine, meaning extreme, widespread food-scarcity, obviously halts the normal progression of life. It creates conditions wherein Time's arrow is apparently paused, resulting in a noticeable suspension of regular social and biological activities and the production, instead, of an 'unnatural' embodied state where hunger is normalised. Metaphorically, famine constitutes a violent negation of temporality insofar as it disrupts for a protracted period, natural cycles of growth, harvest, and renewal and creates an unpredictable future. At such times, the 'Darwinian'

struggle for survival can result in immediate, and often overwhelming, **negative affect** (e.g. feelings of fear, anger, helplessness, resignation and even an active 'desire for death').

In our research, we hope to create an archive of 'hunger texts', as well as compile and analyse contemporary empirical data on food preferences, disorders and malnutrition. These are meant to record hunger in its various phases across time or ***Kāl***. As part of this effort, we'd like, for instance, to organise a **public exhibition** around **three critical events** along India's **hunger narrative timeline**:

i. the catastrophic manmade '**Bengal Famine' of 1943**

ii. the writings of the **Hungryalist poets of the 1960s and 70s**

iii. the vivid songs and artwork that gave voice to the '**migrant crisis' of 2020-2022** when urban labour across India trekked home for 100s of miles without food or basic amenities during Covid.

Writers of 'Hungry Generation' or *Bhook Peedhi.* From the top left moving clockwise: Saileswar Ghose, Malay Roy Choudhury, Subhas Ghose Basudeb Dasgupta, David Garcia and Subimal Basak

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