

Time and Eternity described in the Kāla-Sūkta of Atharvaveda : An Analytical Approach

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Abstract

Bhavabhūti one of the illustrious poets in the history of the classical Sanskrit literature penned in the *Mālatīmādhava* that '*kālo hyaṃ niravadhir bipulā ca pṛthvī*' it indicates time is eternal whereas Earth is huge. It is platitude to say the concept of time or *Kāla* has a multi-dimensional, multi-conceptual and multi-existential phenomenon which is yet to be discovered. The English word 'time' does not fulfil all its innermost perspectives whereas the Sanskrit word '*Kāla*' is able to touch its natural phenomena. In this paper our endeavour is to focus on a synchronic study regarding the concept of time or *Kāla* since Vedic era to modern. Now, at a glance question should be arisen 'what is time and what is Eternity'? Is it synonymous or different concepts? In the Atharvaveda, time or *Kāla* is signified as primordial source that is an unremitting process encompassing this whole universe. So, is there any beginning of time or is it an everlasting process? Here the concept of Eternity which is beyond our knowledge i.e., *avānmanasagocaram* is associated with the time to described it as an eternal or so-called infinite. In various portion of the Vedas the concept of time is commingled with the 'concept of eternity' which is also described as *Parabrahman*. So, the concept of time and eternity or 'eternal time' created a form of equilibrium which is 'absolute' or 'singular'. Let's discuss all these before-said points briefly.

Full-Paper

Among all the Vedas, Atharvaveda is vastly popular in different fields because of its several implementations even in modern time. A good number of cosmological and theosophical hymns indicate heightened intellectual observations as postulated in the field of epistemology and cognitive science. The concept of 'Space-Time' theory is one of the most researchable issues in the domain of modern science; surprisingly since 3 to 5 thousand years ago it also attested to the Vedic seers that strikes us most. The mystery of time and the secret of creation were discussed not in very details but in various portions of the Vedas that had been interpreted through several outlooks. Bhartṛhari in his *Vākyapadīya* described it as a *Śakti*. He opined it is an independent power of Brahman that segregated in various forms like month, year, day, night etc.¹ The *Kāla-Sūkta* holds time or *Kāla* created all creatures (*prajāḥ*); time is also beginning (created) and the lord of entire creatures (*prajāpati*) emerged from the time². In the *Asyavāmīya-sūkta* of the Ṛgveda an image was grappled by sage Dīrghatamas where time was described as a wheel with twelve spokes, revolving un-decayed round of *Ṛta* even time was described as five footed and having twelve faces, becoming visible with seven wheels and six spokes and its nave remains unbroken.³ Quite equal phenomena also found in the *Atharvavedic Kāla-sūkta* which might be borrowed from the Ṛgveda as our assumption. So, various introspective thoughts emerged in the mind of Vedic seers which had been floated forward since time bygone and some of them were reflected in several hymns of the Vedas. The *Kāla-Sūkta* or the Hymn to Time (which was specifically found in the *Śaunaka Śākhā* (19.53) and also in the *Paippalāda Śākhā* (11.8) in the Atharvaveda) is one of the echoes of that mystic voices.

Kāla: What does it mean?

Before we go into the deeper sense of *Kāla* let's talk about the etymological meaning of time or *Kāla*. It derived from the root *kal* which means to count (Latin *calculo*). According to our old traditions *Kāla* has different connotations like to calculate or enumerate; sometimes it associated with absolute destruction e.g., '*abhy adhāvata prajāḥ kāla ivāntakaḥ*' i.e; he attacked the people like time; the destroyer (RV-3.7.9). In the Mahābhārata (*Vanaparva*) Yakṣa once asked several questions to Yudhiṣṭhira like who is truly happy? What is the most wonderful thing? What is the path? And what is the news?⁴ Here we only referred the answer of what is the news? According to Yudhiṣṭhira the world is full of different types of ignorance is like a pan. The sun is fire and days and nights are dealing with fuel. The month and the seasons constitute the wooden ladle. *Kāla* or time is the cook

that is cooking all creatures in the pan; this is the news.⁵ So, here *Kāla* indicates as ultimate death or destruction. In later Indian mythology time or *Kāla* was personified with lord Śiva. It is said in the *Śivamahāpurāṇa* that *Kāla* is Śiva and his consort is Kālī i.e., '*kāla śiva tasya patnīti kālī*'. Here Śiva is personified as *Kāla* and that became *Mahākāla* or end of the creation. It holds when he steps forward his leg it means birth, when he settles his balance on both feet that means stability of the universe and when he withdrawn his foot that indicates the destruction or death. It is a striking fact that generator, operator and destructor; this whole cosmic order which is eternal is personified in the cult of *Naṭarāja*. Here, Time or *Kāla* is nothing but the image of eternity or infinity. One of the luminous grammarians as well as philosophers in the history of Indian tradition, Bhartṛhari here prescribed time is eternal and all pervasive. It is said in the *Kālasamuddeśa* (3.9.14) that

jalayantrabhramāveśasadrśībhiḥ pravṛttibhiḥ |
sa kalāḥkalayan sarvāḥ kālākyāṃ labhate vibhuḥ ||

It means with motion to the agitation of water wheel, through all pervading or all penetrating and eternal obtains the appropriate name *Kāla*. He also described *Kāla* as a soul of the universe i.e., *Viśvātmā*. *Atharvavedic Kāla-sūkta* has profoundly esteemed *Kāla* as a *paramātman*, all pervading, one and only. This whole creation is nothing but the manifestation of *Kāla*. Various indigenous philosophical offshoots described time as a whole eternal entity which appears to us as segregated form. In the *Śloka-Vārttika* of Kumārila-Bhaṭṭa (*śloka* 303) time was described as a one endless process that segregated into past, presents and future. Now, we will enter into a deeper perspective of the *Atharva-Vedic Kāla-Sūkta*.

***Kāla-Sūkta* of the Atharvaveda**

In the first verse of the *Kāla-Sūkta*⁶ we have seen a remarkable philosophical observation which describes *Kāla* goes like a steed with seven reins that have thousand eyes, ageless, rich in seed. Seers and scholars mount him; the time is the wheel of the whole gamut of being. Here seven reins denote seven colours of the solar unity i.e., VIBGYOR. The number seven or thousand are not just a numeric order rather it prescribed mystic meaning. The concept of time also has been extended in the next *Sūkta* (19/54/1) where we will see water, brahma, tapa, direction and everything emerged from the time- '*kālād āpaḥ samabhavan kālād brahma tapo diśaḥ*'. Here Sāyaṇa explains *Kāla* as *Paramātman* i.e., which signifies eternal existence. It is said '*sarvajagatkāraṇabhūtaḥ*' means the primordial cause of all causes. He also penned '*kālaḥ kalayitā sarvasyajagataḥ anavacchinnakālarūpaḥ parameśvaraḥ*' that *Kāla* is the supreme source entwined with primordial cause of this universe which is everlasting. He also said time is ageless (*ajara*) i.e., '*jarārahitaḥ sarvadā ekarūpaḥ*'. In the outer perspective time is divided in many parts i.e., '*bhūtabhaviṣyadvartamānakālavartīni*' but in deeper sense it has no deviant. This phenomenal existence is its wheel that is to say '*cakrābhūvanāniviśvā*'. In the third verse of the *Kāla-Sūkta* a full jar has been placed upon *Kāla* that means every manifestation in this universe is emerged within time '*pūrṇaḥkumbho dhikālaāhitaḥ*'. Sāyaṇa explained it as '*sarvatrayyāptaḥ kumbhavat kumbhaḥ ahorātramāsartusamvatsarādirūpaḥ avacchinno janyaḥ kālaḥ nihito vartate*'.⁷ There is a simile in the 4th verse where time is like being father and became son. He is the utmost one.⁸

Sāyaṇa explained '*kāla eva pitṛvena putratvena ca vyavahṛyate| yaḥ pūrvajanmani pitṛvena jātaḥ sa eva asmin janmani putratvena vyavahṛyate avacchedakālādhīnatvāt sarvasya| athavā ekasmin janmany eva pituḥ putratvam āmnāyate*'. It is said the whole existence even the sense of past, present and future are assimilated within time.⁹ Sāyaṇa penned here '*kale eva bhūtaḥ bhūtakāle ādhāre avacchinnaḥ bhavyaḥ bhaviṣyacca iṣitam iṣṭhaḥ iṣyamāṇam vartamānakālāvacchinnaḥ ca jagad viśeṣeṇa āśritaḥ vartate*'. In the 7th mantra, we have seen our mind is fixed in time not only that, breaths, names everything are in time; when time has arrived, everyone rejoices.¹⁰ So, various thoughts with philosophical observations had been reflected in the *Kāla-Sūkta* which Sāyaṇa explained at his best though some queries remain unsolved and need to be explained but before we will proceed let's have some outlooks how other indigenous orthodox deal with the concept of time.

Brief Concept of Space and Time according to Other Orthodox

According to the *Vaiśeṣika* treatise space deals with co-existence which the time is successor; more specifically space deals with visible objects while time is a constant process or irreversible (*niyata*). Things move by the virtue of time and holds together by the virtue of space. Whereas *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* is of the opinion space deals with coexistence while time is succession more specifically it is said space deals with visible objects which time deals with produced and destroyed. According to the *Vaiśeṣika* there is only one time which is omnipresence, eternal¹¹ or better to say an eternal substance basis with all experiences.¹² It holds which is not related to eternal one but also related to non-eternal that is also called *Kāla*. That is why it is the primordial cause of all causes.¹³ Śaṅkara Mīśra penned here that the relation of time is purely constant while Space is pragmatic or reversible.¹⁴ It strikes *Nyāya* accepts almost the same metaphysical concept of the *Vaiśeṣika* although some of has the other opinions also. Like in *Nyāyamañjarī* it is also said time is perceived by the experience of the object because when we tell something about object like if we say *idānīmghaṭavartate* i.e., here is a Jar; the present sense of time i.e., *Vartamānakāla* automatically enters into the perception of the object though time is never perceived by itself. Quite relevantly *Mādhyamika* holds there is no present time i.e., *vartamānakāla*. Present is nothing but the subtle fraction of time which is simply beyond our perception. Eventually present has no meaning without any past or future. According to Vātsyāyana time is not generate into the space rather it manifested by action (*kriyā*). AN Whitehead also prescribed in his book that there is alternative flows of time or time-systems which is also variable in different space time systems.¹⁵

Kāla as a Śakti of Brāhmaṇa: Bhartṛhari

Bhartṛhari was such a great scholar who had introduced to us a new dimension of time or *Kāla*. Quite interesting that a whole third chapter called *Kālasamuddeśa* of the *Vākyapadīya* has been dedicated to the concept of *Kāla*. According to him, evolution of the cosmic world or this whole phenomenon happened with the help of the *Kāla-Śakti*¹⁶. In the first *śloka* of the *Kālasamuddeśa*, Bhartṛhari holds time is different form of activity which is eternal, single, all pervading and the measure of all activities.¹⁷ Time is the instrumental cause which seems to us identical with activities and this *Kāla-śakti* is considered as one of the supreme powers irrespective all other powers of absoluteness. To establish time as a soul of the universe he postulated time is static though all transformations, growths and decays of all animate and inanimate forms appear separately.¹⁸ In another *śloka* he said ‘there are different doctrine regarding *Kāla*’, some of are the opinion that it is power (*śakti*), some holds that it is soul (*atman*) and other calls it deity (*devatā*).¹⁹ The vital importance of Bhartṛhari that time controls this whole universe with two powers one is suspension i.e. *pratibandha* and other is permission i.e. *abhyanuññā*. At the beginning of the universe, time acts as instigation or *prayoga* and thus the creation manifested and restricted depend on the impulsion of time. As result time is divided into various parts of activities such as growth and destruction, suspension of self being, disappearance, destruction so that time became the soul of the universe i.e. *Viśvātmā*. So, time or *Kāla* and the co-existence of Brahman are irreversible.

Time or Kāla co-exists with Eternity or Brahman

In the *Kāla-Sūkta*, Sāyaṇa explained in several mantras where the sense of *Kāla* or time, *Paramātmān* or Brahman or eternity and Prajāpati or supreme god are commingled with each other. In the 8th mantra of *Kāla-Sūkta* it described Brahman or eternal source is within time so that it is the lord of everything even he was the father of Prajāpati.²⁰ Sāyaṇa said ‘*ekaḥ kālaśabdo yaugikaḥ kalayitari kale jyeṣṭhaṃ brahma hiraṇyākhyam*’. In the next verse we have seen time having become Brahma, supports *Parameshthin* i.e., the supreme legacy²¹ Here Sāyaṇa explained it as ‘*kālaeva brahma deśakālāvachinnaṃ saccitsukhayitṛrasam avādhyam paramārthatattvaṃ bhūtvā parame sthāne satyaloke tiṣṭhantaṃ caturmukhabrahmāṇam*’. It is an interesting phenomenon that Sāyaṇa opined time was embodied with *sat-cit-sukha* or Brahman even it also personified with four-headed supremacy i.e., Prajāpati. In various portion of the *Kāla-Sūkta* it describes time is the progenitor of all beings, creature, virtue, directions etc. Time is the beginning.²² It is said time surrounding all the existence even beyond par excellence it is exit.²³ Sāyaṇa hold ‘*paramaḥ sarvvottamaḥ kālo devaḥ ṛyate sarvvam sthāvarajaṅgamātmakam jagat vyāpya varttate*’. So, the innermost concept of time or *Kāla*

is signified with the essence of eternal existence or Brahman. Here, time is not only mere rather it is a form of eternal; a form of absoluteness or *Mahā-kāla*.

Conclusion

To conclude we may estimate that the *Atharvavedic* hymns to time or *Kāla-Sūkta* has transcended the limit of its own and spread with pervasive flourish. It impresses all truth-seeking minds since time immemorial down the present era in the light that time encompassing the foundation of all being and all knowledge. In the 10th mantra of the *Kāla-Sūkta*; Seer holds *Kāla* is the progenitor of all *Prajā* (people) even *Prajāpati* (creator). *Kāśyapa* was the first man, who seems to be born from himself (*svayambhū*), (but) was created by the *Kāla*. So, nothing is created automatically.

Modern science also proves this whole existence begins from a source and beyond this visible universe there might be several multi-verses. British mathematician, philosopher in science and Nobel laureate in Physics (2020) Roger Penrose did not properly agree with the concept of the Big-Bang theory as it was the beginning of our universe; rather he estimates there might be another universe before the existence of the Big-Bang thought it is not well proved till now. So, this whole phenomenon is everlasting where the existence of space and time mingled with each other. Modern science is well developed as well as well-equipped but they cannot be able to prove what the epitome of this universe is? When it begun? What is the dimension of time? What is it the proper relation between time and space? There are so many questions that provoked us to search and interesting phenomena is that even three to five thousand years ago these same quests also stimulated to the seers of the Vedas. So, since time immemorial questions remain same but we have to expand our knowledge which leads us to the edge. We do not even know what the source is and what is the edge? It might be a cyclic-process which is ever-ending. So, there are lots of probabilities but our life which is a little span of time is so limited. Here our ancient Vedic seers act like a torch-bearer and it is our responsibility how far we will surpass our own limitations.

Abbreviations- RV=Rgveda, AV=Atharvaveda, VS=Vaiśeṣika-sūtra

References

- ¹*kālavicchedarūpeṇa tadevaikamavasthitam | sa hy apūvāparo bhāvaḥ pararūpeṇa lakṣyate* || Vākyapadīya, kārikā 42 (Sādhanasamuddeśaḥ of Bhartṛhari).
- ²*kālaḥ prajāḥ asṛjat kālo agre prajāpatim | svayambhūḥ kāśyapaḥ kālāt tapaḥ kālād ajāyata* || *Kāla-sūkta*, Atharvaveda 19.53.10.
- ³*pañcāre cakre parivartamāne tasminn ā tashur bhuvanāni viśvā...RV 1.164.13.*
- ⁴*ko modate kimāścaryaṃ kaḥpanthāḥ kā ca vārtikā | vada me caturāḥ praśnān mṛtā jīvantu bāndhavāḥ* || śloka 95, *Māhābhārata*, Vanaparva.
- ⁵*asmin mahāmohamaye kaṭāhe sūryāgninārā tridivendhanena | māśartudavīrparighaṭtanena bhūtāni kāla pacatīti vārtā* || śloka 99, Ibid.
- ⁶*kālo aśvo vahati saptaraśmiḥ sahasrākṣo ajaro bhūiretāḥ | tama rohanti kavayo vipāścīstastasya cakra bhūvanāni viśvāḥ* || *Kāla-sūkta*, 19.53.1
- ⁷*pūrṇaḥ kumbho'dhi kāla āhitastam vai pasyāmo bahudhā nu santam* || Ibid, 19.53.2
- ⁸*pīta sannabhavat putra eṣāṃ tasmād vai nānyat paramasti tejaḥ* || Ibid, 19.53.4
- ⁹*kālo'mūḃ divamajanayāt kāla imāḥ pṛthivīruta | kāle ha bhūtam bhavyaṃ ceṣitam ha vi tiṣṭhate* || Ibid, 19.53.5.
- ¹⁰*kale manaḥ kale prānaḥ kale nāmasamāhitam | kālena sarvā nandanty āgatena prajā imāḥ* || Ibid, 19.53.7
- ¹¹*dravyatvanityatvevā yunāvyaḥkhyāte* || VS.2.7
- ¹²*aparasmīnnaparam yugapatciraṃ kṣipramitikālalīngān* || Ibid, .2.6
- ¹³*nītyeṣvabhāvād anītyeṣubhāvāt kāraṇekālākhyeti* || Ibid, 2. 9

¹⁴...*kiñcaniyatopādhyunnāyakaḥkālahānīyatopādhyunnāyikādik...*” Śaṅkara Misra, *Upaskāra*, p. 80-81, 2012.

¹⁵“Accordingly in different circumstance of motion, space and time mean different things, the moments of onetime system are different from the moments of another time-system, so that the permanent space of one time-system is distinct from the permanent space of another time-system.” AN Whitehead: 1922: p 8.

¹⁶*pratyavasthaṃ tu kālasya vyāpāro 'tra vyavasthitah |*
kāla eva hi viśvātmā vyāpāra iti kathyate || Vākyapadīya 3.2.12

¹⁷*vyāpāravayatirekeṇa kalam eke pracakṣete |*
nityam ekaṃ vibhadravyaṃ parimāṇaṃ kriyāvātām || Ibid, 3.9.1

¹⁸*mūrtināṃ tena bhinnānām ācayāpacayāḥ pṛthak |*
lakṣyante pariṇāmena sarvāsāṃ bhedayoginā || Ibid, 3.2.13

¹⁹*śaktyāmadevatāpakṣair bhinnaṃ kālasya darśanam |*
prathamam tad avidyāyām yad vidyāyām na vidyate || Ibid, 3.9.62.

²⁰*kale tapaḥ kale jyeṣṭhaṃkāle brahma samāhitam|*
kālo ha sarvasyeśvaro yaḥ pītāsīt prajāpateḥ || kāla-Sukta of the Atharva-Veda 19.53.8

²¹*kālo ha brahma bhūtvā bibharti parameṣṭhinam || Ibid, 19.53.9*

²²*kālah prajā asrjat kālo agre prajāpatim|| Ibid, 19.53.10*

²³*sarvvāṃllokān abhijītya brahmaṇā kālah sa tyate paramo nu devaḥ || Kāla-sūkta, 19.54.5*

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