**Sadvidya** Journal of Sanskrit and Indian Knowledge Systems
DOI: 10.18311/sadvid/2024/49285

# Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* and the Concept of Time: A Linguistic and Cultural Analysis

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## Abstract

This article examined Panini's treatment of time (*kāla*) in the *Ashtadhyayi*, focusing on the absence of specific temporal divisions within its grammatical framework. Unlike other grammatical traditions that incorporated time through tense and aspect, Panini's approach was distinctive, as he refrains from defining time in precise units, instead relying on broader temporal concepts. The study analysed Panini's references to time, including daily cycles, lunar months, seasonal divisions, and solstitial markers, as well as his interactions with the philosophical perspectives of Patanjali and Kautilya. Through a detailed exploration of the *Ashtadhyayi* and its commentaries, the paper reveals how Panini's grammar reflects not only linguistic precision but also the cultural and philosophical ethos of ancient India. Ultimately, it offers new insights into how time was conceptualized in classical Sanskrit grammar and its role in shaping ancient Indian thought.

**Keywords:** Ancient Calendars, Astronomical Cycles, *Kāla*, Linguistic Philosophy, Sanskrit Grammar, Vedic Time

## 1. Introduction

Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* stands as a cornerstone in the study of Sanskrit grammar, renowned not only for its meticulous structure but also for its profound insights into the linguistic and cultural contexts of ancient India. Among its many contributions, Panini's treatment of time (*काल*) is particularly noteworthy, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of temporal divisions that transcends mere linguistic constructs. Unlike other grammatical traditions that intertwine the concept of time with tense and aspect, Panini's grammatical system came to be known among ancient scholars as one "without time" (*akālakam- अकालकम्*), reflecting his deliberate exclusion of precise temporal divisions from grammatical discussion. The *Kāsikā-vṛtti* affirms this characterization by stating three times at उपज्ञोपक्रमं तदाद्याचिख्यासायाम्(2.4.21), उपज्ञाते(4.3.115), and मात्रोपज्ञोपक्रमच्छाये नपुंसके(6.2.14) that Panini was the author of a grammatical treatise in which he intentionally omitted a detailed treatment of specific time divisions. This article explores Panini's treatment of time in the *Ashtadhyayi*, examining the various temporal categories he introduces, such as days, months, seasons, and solstitial divisions, alongside his interactions with contemporary and later thinkers like Patanjali and Kautilya. Through a detailed analysis of the sutras and their commentaries, this study aimed to elucidate how Panini's linguistic methodology reflects not just a grammar of language but also a cultural chronicle of ancient Indian civilization.

## 2. Literature Review

Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* presents a sophisticated system of temporal division, reflecting not just linguistic precision but also deep cultural, astronomical, and administrative connections in ancient India. While Panini deliberately excluded detailed time definitions from grammar, relying on contemporary usage (*काशिकावृत्ति*, उपज्ञोपक्रमं तदाद्याचिख्यासायाम् (2.4.21)), his text implicitly integrates concepts like *muhurta* (48-minute intervals), *nakshatras* (lunar mansions), and seasonal cycles (*ṛtu*), linking language with agricultural, ritual, and

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Article Received on: 08.07.2024 *Peer-reviewed* Accepted on: 06.12.2024

fiscal practices. Patanjali highlight how these divisions influenced governance, economic management, and cosmological understanding, with shifts from *nakshatra* to *rāśi* marking evolving astronomical priorities. This interplay between grammar, time, and society underscores Panini's role not just as a linguistic theorist but as a chronicler of ancient Indian temporal thought.

## 3. Statement of the Research Problem

The research problem of the article centers on understanding how Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* delineates the concept of time, not merely as a linguistic construct but as an integral component of ancient Indian cosmology, administration, and cultural practices. The study seeks to explore how Panini's exclusion of specific time-based discussions from grammar, alongside his references to temporal divisions like *muhurta*, *nakshatras*, and *ṛtu*, reflects broader societal and astronomical understandings. It also aims to investigate the influence of these temporal concepts on governance, fiscal practices, and the evolution of calendrical systems, thereby addressing the intersection of grammar, time, and historical scholarship.

## 4. Methodology

The methodology of the article is primarily qualitative and textual, involving a detailed philological and interpretive analysis of Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* and its commentaries, particularly Patanjali's *Bhashya* and the *Kashika*. The study examined relevant sutras to contextualize Panini's treatment of time. By analyzing specific terminologies like *muhurta*, *nakshatra*, and *ṛtu*, and their applications in linguistic, astronomical, and administrative contexts, the research reconstructs the conceptual framework of time in ancient India. Additionally, it integrates comparative insights from historical sources to trace the evolution of time-related practices and terminologies.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

The article provides an in-depth analysis of Panini's system of grammar, particularly focusing on his treatment of time (*kāla*), and its broader implications in linguistic, astronomical, and administrative contexts. This section delves into the nuanced discussions presented in the text, exploring the conceptual framework Panini established and its subsequent interpretations by scholars such as Patanjali and Kashikara. The analysis includes,

- Panini's Exclusion of Temporal Dimensions in Grammar
- General Time Divisions in Panini's Grammar
- Time in Administrative and Social Contexts
- Comparative Analysis with Vedic and Post-Vedic Sources.
- Implications for Linguistics and Historical Studies

In essence, the article's analysis and discussion underscore Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* as more than a grammatical treatise—it is a window into the intellectual landscape of ancient India, where language, time, and the cosmos were intricately interwoven.

## 6. Findings

The article's comprehensive analysis of Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* reveals several key findings regarding the treatment of time (*kāla*) within the framework of Sanskrit grammar and its broader cultural and scientific contexts.

### 6.1 Panini's Distinction Between Grammar and Time

A fundamental finding is Panini's deliberate separation of linguistic structure from the precise measurement of time. The *Ashtadhyayi* treats grammar as a system that operates independently of temporal constraints, focusing instead on the structural rules governing language. This is evident in sutras like कालोपसर्जने च तुल्यम् ( *(1.2.57)*, which emphasizes that the determination of time is based on conventional usage rather than grammatical prescription.

### 6.2 General Temporal Divisions Embedded in Grammar:

Despite this distinction, Panini acknowledges general time divisions such as day (*ahorātra*), lunar phases (*pakṣa*), months (*māsa*), and years (*varṣa*). These divisions are not arbitrary but reflect a sophisticated

understanding of natural cycles, suggesting that while specific temporal metrics were outside grammatical scope, broader temporal concepts were embedded in linguistic practice.

### 6.3 Integration of Astronomical and Seasonal Cycles:

The article highlights how Panini's grammar indirectly incorporates astronomical knowledge through references to celestial events like solstices (*ayana*), lunar months, and constellations (*nakṣatra*). Terms such as *muhūrta* (a 48-minute period) and *ṛtu* (season) indicate a nuanced awareness of seasonal changes and their impact on daily life, rituals, and language.

Panini mentioned names all the six seasons in the sutras directly such as,

- vasanta, (ग्रीष्मवसन्तादन्यतरस्याम्(4.3.46), वसन्ताच्च(4.3.20))
- grīṣma (ग्रीष्मावरसमाद्वुञ्(4.3.49))
- varṣā (वर्षाभ्यष्ठक्(4.3.18)); also called prāvṛṣa (प्रावृष एण्यः(4.3.17)),
- śarad (श्राद्धे शरदः(4.3.12))
- hemantaḥ (हेमन्ताच्च(4.3.21)) and
- śiśirā (हेमन्तशिशिरावहोरात्रे च्छन्दसि(2.4.28))

Each season (ṛtu) comprised two months as shown by the mention of the two parts of a season like pūrva and apara (Kashika - पूर्ववार्षिकम्। पूर्वहैमनम्। अपरवार्षिकम्। अपरहैमनम्। पूर्वं वर्षाणाम् ।अपरं वर्षाणाम्।(7.3.11))

The year is known by various names such as varṣā (वर्षाल्लुक् च(5.1.88)), samā (समायाः खः (5.1.85), समांसमां विजायते (5.2.12)) saṃvatsara (रात्र्यहस्संवत्सराच्च(5.1.87)), and hāyana (हायनान्तयुवादिभ्योऽण् (5.1.130), with the term 'hāyana' referring to both time and a type of harvested paddy. Panini also mentions different terms within the five-year cycle, including idvatsarīyaḥ, saṃvatsara, and parivatsara (वत्सरान्ताच्छश्छन्दसि(5.1.91), सम्परिपूर्वात् ख च(5.1.92)). The year was divided into two halves, each known as ṣaṇmāsa (षण्मासाण्ण्यच्च(5.1.83), with the first half-year called āvarasama, and the associated loan repayment during this period termed āvarasamakam ग्रीष्मावरसमाद्वुञ्(4.3.49).

1. **Administrative and Socio-Economic Applications of Time:** The study uncovered the role of time in administrative and economic contexts, particularly in texts like the *Arthashastra*. The use of time markers for fiscal cycles, legal agreements, and ceremonial observances reflects how temporal concepts transcended linguistic boundaries to influence governance and social organization.
2. **Comparative Insights with Vedic and Post-Vedic Texts:** Comparative analysis reveals that Panini's treatment of time aligns with Vedic traditions while also showcasing shifts seen in post-Vedic texts. The evolution from nakṣatra (नभ्राण्नपात्नवेदानासत्यानमुचिनकुलनखनपुंसकनक्षत्रनक्रनाकेषु प्रकृत्या (6.3.75)) based calendrical systems to the zodiacal framework in later texts indicates cultural and scientific advancements in ancient India.

The nakṣatra names directly mentioned in *Ashtadhyayi*

- Krittika - Referred to in the form kārttikī (विभाषा फाल्गुनीश्रवणाकार्त्तिकीचैत्रीभ्यः (4.2.23)), Panini refers to Kritika by another name, Baula (श्रविष्ठाफल्गुन्यनुराधास्वातितिष्यपुनर्वसुहस्तविशाखाषाढाबहुलाल्लुक्(4.3.34)
- Ardra (पूर्वाह्णापराह्णार्द्रामूलप्रदोषावस्कराद्वुन्(4.3.28))
- punarvasu (तिष्यपुनर्वस्वोर्नक्षत्रद्वन्द्वे बहुवचनस्य द्विवचनं नित्यम्(1.2.63))
- tiṣya श्रविष्ठाफल्गुन्यनुराधास्वातितिष्यपुनर्वसुहस्तविशाखाषाढाबहुलाल्लुक्(4.3.34), सूर्यतिष्यागस्त्यमत्स्यानां य उपधायाः(6.4.149)
- phalgunī (फल्गुनीप्रोष्ठपदानां च नक्षत्रे(1.2.60))
- hastaḥ(4.3.34)
- caitraḥ(4.2.23)
- svātiḥ(4.3.34)
- viśākhaḥ(4.3.34)
- anurādhaḥ(4.3.34)
- mūlaḥ (पूर्वाह्णापराह्णार्द्रामूलप्रदोषावस्कराद्वुन्(4.3.28))
- aṣāḍhaḥ(4.3.34)
- abhijit (वत्सशालाभिजिदश्वयुक्छतभिषजो वा (4.3.36))
- śravaṇā(4.2.23)
- śraviṣṭhā(4.3.34)
- śatabhiṣak(4.3.36)
- proṣṭhapadaḥ(1.2.60)
- revatī (रेवत्यादिभ्यष्ठक्(4.1.146))
- aśvayuk(4.3.36)

## 7. Conclusions

The article concludes that Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* serves as a remarkable intersection of language, time, and

culture. The findings suggest that Panini's grammatical system was not merely a linguistic manual but a reflection of the intellectual and scientific milieu of ancient India.

1. **Language as a Reflection of Temporal Consciousness:** Panini's work demonstrates how language can encapsulate temporal awareness, even when not explicitly focused on timekeeping. The integration of natural cycles into grammatical structures highlights the deep connection between linguistic expression and human experience of time.
2. **The Interdisciplinary Nature of Panini's Grammar:** The study underscored Panini's grammar as an interdisciplinary text, bridging linguistics, astronomy, philosophy, and administration. This holistic approach reflects the ancient Indian tradition of integrating diverse fields of knowledge within a unified framework.
3. **The Evolution of Temporal Concepts:** The article suggests that while Panini's grammar provides a snapshot of ancient temporal understanding, it also sets the stage for subsequent developments in Indian astronomy, philosophy, and governance. The evolution of timekeeping systems, from Vedic to post-Vedic eras, illustrates the dynamic nature of temporal concepts in Indian thought.
4. **Implications for Modern Scholarship:** The conclusions highlight the enduring relevance of Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* for contemporary studies in linguistics, history, and cultural science. Understanding how ancient civilizations conceptualized time through language offers valuable insights into the broader human endeavor to organize and interpret our relationship with time.

In summary, the findings of the observations and conclusions affirm that Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* is more than a grammatical treatise; it is a testament to the intellectual sophistication of ancient India, where language, time, and culture were intricately intertwined.

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