

## चक्र, चक्कर — *wheels & cycles*

The Sanskrit word चक्र yields numerous physical, abstract and metaphorical meanings based on its primary sense of 'wheel, cycle, disk'. It occurs as a tatsama in Sanskritic languages generally, and has many vernacular derivatives such as Hindi चक्कर, चक्की, and चाक — as we shall see below.

The Proto Indo-European root *\*kwel-* (with its associated verbal root *\*kwele*) is the source of चक्र and of a surprisingly wide range of English cognates as diverse in form and meaning as *wheel, cycle, cultivate, culture, and colony*. Another cognate is the Sanskrit verb चरति, from which Hindi derives the verb चरना *to wander or to graze*.

In classical Indian sources the चक्र has several complementary significations. As a *disk* it is a weapon, and the so-called सुदर्शन चक्र is part of Vishnu's insignia alongside his शंख *conch*, गदा *mace* and पद्म *lotus*. The चक्र also represents the cycle of time and the cyclical nature of creation in Indian philosophy. The 24-spoked अशोक चक्र, named for its appearance on Ashokan columns and edicts, denotes dynamism; it appears at the center of the national flag of the Republic of India, where it replaced the Gandhian spinning wheel (चरखा) that had adorned earlier versions of the flag. This loanword चरखा (چرخا *čarkhā*) is from Persian چرخ *čarkh*, 'wheel', an Indo-Iranian cognate of चक्र; though a powerful symbol in its own right during the स्वदेशी campaign within the struggle for Independence, the चरखा *spinning-wheel* lacks the classical Sanskritic resonance of the चक्र that replaced as a national icon.



India's ancient चक्र icon has a formal status similar to that of the cross in the Christian West: when Indian military awards were re-named after Independence, medals such as the George Cross and the Military Cross were replaced by the परमवीर चक्र, महावीर चक्र and वीर चक्र (for gallantry in wartime), and the अशोक चक्र, कीर्ति चक्र and शौर्य चक्र (in peace). Not for the first time, a classical-looking Sanskritic formulation was pressed from an English mould; and by replacing both the चरखा and the 'cross' in contemporary iconography, our valiant चक्र has played an important role in the defining of the nation.



The term चक्र also plays a role in the esoteric physiology of the tantric principle, which envisages the physical human body as having a 'subtle' (सूक्ष्म) counterpart in which the life-force (प्राण) courses through channels called नाडी. These channels intersect at nodes called चक्र, often said to be seven in number. A system of ritual practice allows the adept (साधक) to 'open' the topmost चक्र and ultimately to achieve मोक्ष, emancipation from the world. Although the system is highly technical, its symbolic terminology is common knowledge, and the concept of the seven चक्र is

particularly well known. Ironically enough, therefore, the meaning ‘weapon of war’ mentioned earlier is complemented in tantric yoga (and latterly in New Age metaphysics) by its opposite, the attainment of ultimate peace. Thanks to the popularity of yoga in the West, the term ‘chakra’ now appears in English dictionaries — though the first of four glosses given for ‘chakra’ in the OED is the wonderfully unhelpful ‘A circular weapon used by the Sikhs’.

From the internet:

जानिए सुदर्शन चक्र के अज्ञात और अनकही कहानी को !  
Discover the unknown and untold story of the sudarshan chakra!

सात चक्र और सात तरह के लोग...  
The seven chakras and seven types of people.

शरीर के चक्रों का गणित और विज्ञान  
The mathematics and science of the chakras of the body.

ध्यान से खुल जाते हैं आत्मा के सारे चक्र  
All the chakras of the soul open through meditation.



In addition to these very specific senses, our word चक्र appears in a wide range of contexts with the meaning ‘cycle’ etc. Examples include फ़सल चक्रण *crop rotation*, वार्षिक चक्र *annual cycle*, and माहवारी चक्र or मासिक चक्र *menstrual cycle*, also called मासिक धर्म (Sanskrit मास and Persian ماه, both meaning *month*, are, incidentally, cognates of the words *menses*, *menstrual*, and *moon*). A more recent term is पुनःचक्रण, a calque from English ‘recycling’ that is too new to be found, as yet, in most dictionaries, but is beginning to be used in journalism and technical writing.

As mentioned above, tatsama चक्र yields numerous tadbhava words in vernacular languages. The CDIAL entry shows the ancient sense of ‘potter’s wheel’ to be very common, as exemplified by Hindi चाक and चक्की; but the range of forms and meanings also includes several other items characterized by ‘roundness’ — Nepali चाको ‘anything round’ and चाक् ‘buttocks’; Assamese *sāki* ‘a round bunch of flowers’.

In Hindi the most common derivative of चक्र is चक्कर, whose range of meanings is shown here by OHED:

चक्कर cakkar [ad. cakra-], m. 1. = चक्र, 1.-8. 2. a curve, bend. 3. a round journey. 4. fig. perplexity, confusion; trouble, inconvenience. — ~ आना, to grow dizzy, to feel faint. ~ काटना, to revolve; to wander; to make a round trip. ~ खाना, to be made to revolve; to wind (as a road); to wander; to be dizzy, to faint. ~ देना, to confuse, or to deceive (one, को). ~ पड़ना, a perplexity to arise: to lose (one's) way. ~ मारना, to revolve; to make a round trip; to take a walk. ~ में आना, v.i. to be involved or entangled in difficulties; to be confused, or uncertain; to be misled. ~ में डालना, v.t. to involve in difficulties; to perplex; to mislead. ~ में पड़ना, v.i. = ~ में आना. ~ लगना, v.t. = ~ मारना, 2., 3.; to go a round, or a circuit; to make an orbit. - चक्करदार [P. -dār], adj. circular, round; circuitous, round-about; involved, complicated. चक्करदार सीढ़ी, f. a spiral staircase.

A sense of 'circularity' is clearly involved in many such usages. The specific sense *dizziness* is specially common; but an additional sense, largely missing from dictionaries but alluding to a whirlpool or vortex of feeling, describes a *fervent longing* to do something — a *giddy desire*, so to speak, typically relating to an action rashly perpetrated. These two meanings of dizziness and obsessive desire predominate when we search for चक्कर on the internet, as in these headlines:

चक्कर आना किसी बड़ी बीमारी की चेतावनी  
Dizzy spells warn of some major illness.

चक्कर दूर होता है योग से  
Dizziness is banished by yoga.

चक्कर आना : कारण और निवारण  
Dizziness: cause and prevention.

ज्यादा धन कमाने के चक्कर में क्या कर बैठता है यह इंसान  
What this man perpetrates in a frenzy to make more money.

चलती ट्रेन से उतरने के चक्कर में रिटायर्ड रेलकर्मि आया ट्रेन की चपेट में  
Retired railway employee is injured while attempting to alight from moving train.

भारत के न्यूज चैनल पैसा कमाने और दलगत निष्ठा दिखाने के चक्कर में सही-गलत का पैमाना भूल चुके हैं  
India's new channels have long forgotten the difference between true and untrue in their eagerness to make money and to show party allegiance.

खूबसूरत दिखने के चक्कर में ये सितारे बिगाड़ बैठे अपना चेहरा  
In a bid to look beautiful these stars ruined their own faces.

करोड़पति बनने के चक्कर में युवती ने गंवाए डेढ़ लाख  
Girl blew ₹150,000 in her longing to become a 'millionaire'

विदेश जाने के चक्कर में पत्नी की करवा दी NRI से शादी  
Obsessed with going abroad, [he] married his wife to an NRI (Non-Resident Indian).

Elsewhere, a more literal sense of *circling*, or of *doing the rounds*, is involved:

फ्लाइट जयपुर पर चक्कर लगा लौट गई  
Flight returned to Jaipur after circling.

अब नहीं लगाने पड़ेंगे थानों के चक्कर  
It will no longer be necessary to traipse round the police stations.  
[an announcement after the launch of a new phone-in enquiry service]

पृथ्वी सूर्य का चक्कर लगाती है...ये नहीं जानते अमेरिकी  
Americans don't know that the earth revolves around the sun.

And a चक्कर can also be a convoluted problem, a tricky matter, a bewildering puzzle, a riddle (again with a sense of circularity):

यह जो नाम का चक्कर है...  
This puzzle over names... (in the context of choosing names for babies)

There is also a related verb, चकराना –

चकराना cakrānā [cf. H. *cakkar*, *cakr*], v.i. & v.t. 1. v.i. to revolve; to spin, to whirl. 2. to go around, to wander about. 3. to be perplexed; to be confused or bewildered; to be agitated, disturbed. 4. v.t. to cause to revolve; to spin, to whirl; to make (one's head) giddy. 5. to make perplexed; to confuse; to bewilder; to agitate, to disturb. — सिर ~, the head to be in a whirl; to be confused, &c.

---

Finally, we end up — via a roundabout route! — at Hindi's perfect tautological reflection of the English *roundabout* (also known, less poetically, as a 'traffic circle'): the गोलचक्कर ! The English word derives from adverbs, in the sense of a circuitous route that goes 'round and about', but the Hindi version has no such historical justification. If readers ever come across a चक्कर that is not गोल, I'll be glad to hear from them.