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Kancha, Gutti and Stapu: Cultural History and Regional Variations of Three Indian Childhood Games

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Kancha, Gutti and Stapu: Cultural History and Regional Variations of Three Indian Childhood Games

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Abstract

Marbles, five stones and hopscotch are among the most widely played childhood games in India, yet they are usually discussed in passing, as items in long lists of "traditional games", rather than as cultural practices with histories of their own. This paper examines three of them, known in much of north India as Kancha, Gutti and Stapu, with two aims: to trace what is known of their history, and to document the names, materials and rules under which they are played in different parts of the country. The study used a qualitative documentary and comparative design. Published research articles, conference papers, folklore studies and documented accounts of traditional games were searched, and every reference to the three games was coded for region, local name, material, rules, players and cultural meaning. The analysis brought together more than twenty regional names for the three games. Kancha is played with glass marbles, stones or, in some places, seeds; Gutti with pebbles, seeds or small cloth bags; and Stapu with a grid scratched or chalked on the ground and a flat stone or tile as a marker. Each game has close relatives outside India, from the knucklebones of the ancient Mediterranean to Batu Seremban in Malaysia and Engklek in Indonesia, but each has also taken on local names, rhymes, materials and rules. The documented sources also show a gendered pattern, with marbles more often associated with boys and five stones and hopscotch with girls. The paper argues that the three games form part of India's living knowledge tradition and should be documented systematically before the generation that learnt them by hand passes on. It ends with a call for field-based, state-wise documentation and for their structured use in school physical education under the National Education Policy 2020.

Keywords: Kancha, Gutti, Stapu, marbles, five stones, hopscotch, traditional games, intangible cultural heritage, Indian Knowledge Systems

1 Introduction

Ask a group of Indian adults what they played as children and the same three games come up again and again: a handful of glass marbles flicked across the dust, five small stones tossed and caught on the back of the hand, and a chain of boxes drawn on the ground with a piece of brick and hopped through on one foot. In Hindi-speaking north India these are usually called Kancha, Gutti and Stapu. Travel a few hundred kilometres in any direction and the names change, the rhymes change and some of the rules change, but the games are recognisably the same.

The three games share several features that make them worth studying together. They need almost no equipment and cost almost nothing. They were learnt from older children rather than from adults, and they were played in courtyards, lanes and school grounds without referees or written rules. They are also very old, and each has close relatives in other parts of the world. At the same time they differ in important ways: Kancha is a game of aim and strategy

played crouched on the ground, Gutti is a seated game of hand-eye coordination and timing, and Stapu is a game of balance and movement played standing. These games are now played far less than they once were. Studies from India and other parts of Asia describe the same causes: the spread of screen-based leisure, shrinking open spaces in towns and cities, academic pressure, and the dominance of a few organised sports (Mehta & Kumar, 2025; Mohamed & Tajuddin, 2019). Lancy and Grove (2011) observed that marbles and other child-organised games are "rapidly becoming extinct" in many societies. When such games disappear, they take with them a body of local knowledge: their names, rhymes, counting systems and rules. Indian policy has begun to respond. UNESCO (2003) recognises traditional games as part of the intangible cultural heritage of communities, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 asks schools to use indigenous sports in sports-integrated learning (Para 4.8) and to include games within the knowledge of India taught in schools (Para 4.27). Yet the research that would support such teaching is thin. Most Indian writing on traditional games either lists many games briefly or measures their effect on fitness or cognition. Few studies stop to describe a single game carefully: where it comes from, what it is called in different languages, what it is played with, and how its rules change from one region to another.

1.1 Objectives

1. To trace the documented history of Kancha (marbles), Gutti (five stones) and Stapu (hopscotch), in India and in comparable games elsewhere.

2. To compile the regional names, materials and rule variations of the three games recorded in published sources.

3. To identify the cultural features the three games share, including patterns of gender and transmission.

4. To discuss their relevance for Indian Knowledge Systems and for school physical education under NEP 2020.

2 Review of Related Literature

The literature relevant to this study falls into four groups:

Play theory and children's games. Huizinga (1949) argued that play is older than culture and that culture itself develops in the form of play. Sutton-Smith (1997) later showed that play is described through several competing "rhetorics", such as play as progress, as identity and as power, which helps explain why a single game can carry developmental, social and cultural meanings at once. Children's games with small objects have a special place in this tradition. Piaget (1932) built much of his account of moral development on watching children play marbles, and Lancy and Grove (2011) used the same game to argue that rule-governed play without adult umpires trains children's social intelligence. Lancy and Grove also noted that Iona and Peter Opie, the British folklorists, recorded three basic versions of marbles but a "staggering" variety of local rules.

Indian documentation of traditional games. Several Indian studies have recorded traditional games region by region. Ghosh (2023) documented the rural games of West Bengal, including Kit-Kit and Goli. Bandyopadhyay and Mondal (2026) studied the traditional games of children in West Bengal and found Hopscotch, Five Stones and Marbles among the most popular. A qualitative study of oral recollections in Jodhpur recorded local versions of marbles and hopscotch that survive only in memory. Kam, Mathur, Kumar and Canny (2009) identified 28 traditional village games through interviews with rural children in north and south India. Nagpal, Bathina and Das (2019) redesigned Gilli Danda and Gatte ka Khel (five

stones) as products for modern children. More recently, Mehta and Kumar (2025) and Khan (2026) placed traditional Indian games within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems and argued for their return to schools.

Comparable games in other cultures. Five-stone games have been studied in Southeast Asia, where Mohamed and Tajuddin (2019) surveyed young people from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines about Batu Seremban and found that players perceived physical, intellectual, social and emotional benefits. Archaeologists have described the use of animal ankle bones (astragali) as gaming pieces from the Neolithic onwards (De Grossi Mazzorin & Minniti, 2013). Hopscotch has a large literature in Indonesia under the name Engklek, where it is used in early childhood education to develop gross motor skills (Adpriyadi, 2017; Baharta et al., 2026). In Pakistan, Haq, Maqbool and Munir (2020) found that rural girls performed better than urban girls in shtapu, along with skipping and sprinting.

Developmental studies. A further group of studies measures the effects of these games on children. Marbles has been linked with fine and gross motor development ('Ayni, n.d.; Lancy & Grove, 2011), five stones with hand dexterity and manipulation skills (Mohamed & Tajuddin, 2019), and hopscotch with balance, coordination and fitness (Baharta et al., 2026; Haq et al., 2020).

2.1 Research Gap

The review shows a clear imbalance. International studies tend to examine one game in depth, but in a non-Indian setting. Indian studies tend to list many games together, each in a few lines, and often rely on popular websites for names and origins. Developmental studies measure outcomes but say little about the game as a cultural practice. No study was found that takes Kancha, Gutti and Stapu together, compiles their regional names and variations across India, and places them in their wider historical and cross-cultural context. The present paper attempts this.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study followed a qualitative documentary and comparative design. Document analysis was chosen because the aim was to bring together what has already been recorded about the three games, which is scattered across many kinds of sources (Bowen, 2009). Each source was judged for authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott, 1990).

3.2 Sources

Sources were located through Google Scholar, ERIC, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar and the reference lists of the studies found, using the search terms "marbles", "Kancha", "Goli", "five stones", "Gutti", "Batu Seremban", "hopscotch", "Stapu", "Engklek", "traditional games India" and "knucklebones". Three kinds of sources were included:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers on the three games or on traditional games of Indian regions.

2. Scholarly books and archaeological studies on the history of play.

3. Documented accounts of traditional games published by educators or cultural organisations (grey literature), used only for regional names where peer-reviewed sources were silent.

Popular websites and blogs were excluded as sources of fact. Claims found only on such sites, for example about the origin of hopscotch, are mentioned only where they are widely repeated, and are then marked as unverified.

3.3 Analysis

Every passage about one of the three games was coded under six headings: region or language, local name, material used, rules and levels, who plays (age and gender), and cultural meaning. The codes were then compared across regions and across countries following the stages of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Similarities were treated as evidence of a shared family of games, and differences as evidence of local adaptation.

3.4 Delimitation

The study did not collect new field data. The regional names and rules reported here are therefore limited to those already written down, and the absence of a name for a state does not mean the game is not played there.

4 Kancha (Marbles)

4.1 History

Small round objects used for aiming and striking games are among the oldest toys known. Lancy and Grove (2011) note that children in ancient Rome played marbles more than two thousand years ago, that the game probably goes back further to a time when children used knucklebones in place of marbles, and that Pieter Bruegel's painting Children's Games (1560) clearly shows boys playing it. For South Asia, a 2025 study of Pakistani traditional games reports that small stone balls found at excavations near Mohenjo-daro, dated to around 2500 BCE, have been interpreted as marbles (International Premier Journal of Languages & Literature, 2025). This claim is repeated widely in Indian writing, but the original excavation reports should be consulted before it is treated as settled. What is clear is that the glass marbles familiar today are recent; for most of history, children played with stones, clay balls, nuts or seeds.

Table 1: Regional Names for Marbles Recorded in the Sources

Region/Language	Local Name	Material Noted	Source
Hindi-speaking North India	Kancha, Kanche, Banta	Glass marbles	Bandyopadhyay and Mondal (2026)
West Bengal	Goli, Kancha	Glass balls	Ghosh (2023); Bandyopadhyay and Mondal (2026)
Rajasthan (Jodhpur)	Kancha (improvised form)	Sitafal (custard apple) or neem seeds	Traditional Childhood Play in Jodhpur (2025)
Karnataka	Goti, Goli, Kanchay	Glass marbles	Traditional Games of India Compilation (2025)
Tamil Nadu	Goli Gundu	Glass marbles	Traditional Games of India Compilation (2025)

Other names reported across India include Goti and Guli (Bandyopadhyay & Mondal, 2026). The spread of the word goli (ball) from Bengal to Tamil Nadu, alongside the North Indian kancha (from kaanch, 'glass'), suggests that names have followed both the shape of the object and its material.

4.2 How the game is played

Across India, the most commonly described form uses a small hole (gucchi or pit) dug in the ground and a throwing line a few feet away. Players first throw towards the hole to decide the order of play. The player then tries to strike a marble chosen by the others, using a distinctive grip in which the striking marble is held between the fingers of one hand and flicked with the other, while the thumb of the supporting hand stays on the ground. Marbles that are hit are won. In the improvised Jodhpur version, the same rules apply to seeds, and players strike without lifting their fingers from the ground. Many groups play "for keeps", so that a skilful player gradually collects the marbles of others, while others play only for the turn.

4.3 Cultural meaning

The sources describe marbles mainly as a boys' game played in lanes and open ground (Ghosh, 2023; 'Ayni, n.d.). Because it can involve winning other players' marbles, popular accounts mention that some parents discouraged it [supporting source needed]. Piaget (1932), however, saw in the same game a complete "code of laws" made and enforced by children themselves, and Lancy and Grove (2011) argue that negotiating, bending and defending the rules of marbles is precisely what makes it valuable for social development.

5 Gutti (Five Stones)

5.1 History

Games in which small objects are tossed and caught are known across Asia, Europe and Africa. In the ancient Mediterranean they were played with astragali, the ankle bones of sheep and goats, which archaeologists find at sites from the Neolithic onwards and which were used for games, gambling and divination by children and adults alike (De Grossi Mazzorin & Minniti, 2013). Sets of bones used for a children's game resembling knucklebones have been excavated at the ancient Greek colony of Olbia (Eminak, 2019). In India the game has generally been played with what was at hand: river pebbles, broken pieces of tile, tamarind or other seeds, and in recent decades small cloth bags filled with sand or grain. It is often described as an ancient Indian game, but no direct historical link between the Indian game and the Mediterranean knucklebones has been demonstrated. The safer conclusion is that similar stone-tossing games developed or spread in many cultures.

5.2 Regional names

Outside India, the same family includes Batu Seremban in Malaysia and Singapore, Bola Bekel in Indonesia, Ei-Keb in Thailand and Jackstone in the Philippines (Mohamed & Tajuddin, 2019), as well as jacks and fivestones in the English-speaking world.

5.3 How the game is played

The Indian versions share a common structure. The five stones are scattered on the ground. One stone is tossed into the air, and before it falls the player picks up stones from the ground with the same hand and catches the falling stone. The game moves through levels: picking up one stone at a time, then two, then three and one, then all four together (Listing of Indian folk

Table 2: Regional Names for Five Stones Recorded in the Sources

Region/Language	Local Name	Material Noted	Source
Hindi-speaking North India	Gutti, Gatte, *Gatte ka Khel*	Stones	Nagpal et al. (2019)
South India (general)	Gutte	Five small stones	Listing of Indian Folk Games (2020)
Tamil Nadu	Kuzhangal, Anchankal, Thattangal	Stones	Listing of Indian Folk Games (2020); Venkatesh and Kumar (n.d.)
Maharashtra	Sagargote	Seeds of the sagargota plant	Kela (2024)
Other names (region not stated)	Gajage, Pacheta	Stones or seeds	Kela (2024)
Andhra Pradesh / Telangana	Kachakayalu	Five stones	Traditional Games of India Compilation (2025)
Goa	Panch Fathrannim	Round stones, 1.5–2 cm	Traditional Games of India Compilation (2025)

games, 2020). Later stages vary from region to region and may include placing stones down while one is in the air, catching all five on the back of the hand, or passing stones through an arch made by the other hand. Batu Seremban in Malaysia follows a similar sequence of seven levels, with points awarded at the end for stones caught on the back of the hand (Mohamed & Tajuddin, 2019). A registered trial in India describes a five-level version used with school children (ClinicalTrials.gov, n.d.).

5.4 Cultural meaning

Unlike marbles, five stones is usually played sitting down, often indoors or on a verandah, and the sources describe it mainly as a game of girls and women (Kela, 2024). Kela notes that the game "was played in each and every house" fifty years ago. Its low space requirement and the use of household seeds made it part of domestic life. Its demands are fine motor control, timing and concentration rather than strength, which is why it has attracted interest from occupational therapists working with children with developmental difficulties (Listing of Indian folk games, 2020).

6 Stapu (Hopscotch)

6.1 History

Hopscotch is perhaps the most widely spread of the three games, and its origins are the most disputed. Many popular accounts claim that it began as a training exercise for Roman soldiers, who ran courts more than a hundred feet long in full armour. This story is repeated in Indian writing (Kela, 2024), but no primary Roman source has been cited for it, and it should be treated as folklore about the game rather than as its history. Firmer evidence comes later. An early English reference to a pavement game called "Scotch-hoppers" is usually dated to 1677 [verify primary source], and folklorists have recorded hopscotch courts of many shapes across Europe, Asia and Africa (Opie & Opie, 1997). In India, a photograph from 1911 shows children in a Kashmiri village playing the game under the local name Sazalong [verify original source]. Whatever its origin, the game has clearly been part of Indian childhood for well over

a century.

6.2 Regional names

Table 3: Regional Names for Hopscotch Recorded in the Sources

Region/Language	Local Name	Source
Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, North India	Stapu, Stapoo	Kela (2024); Amar Chitra Katha (2025)
Hindi-speaking regions	Kith-Kith, Langdi	Amar Chitra Katha (2025)
West Bengal	Ekka-Dukka, Ekhaat-Duhaat, Kit-Kit	Ghosh (2023); Amar Chitra Katha (2025)
Rajasthan (Jodhpur)	Ekka-dokka	Traditional Childhood Play in Jodhpur (2025)
Tamil Nadu	Paandi, Nondi	Amar Chitra Katha (2025); Venkatesh and Kumar (n.d.)
Karnataka	Kunte Bille	Bandyopadhyay and Mondal (2026)
Kashmir	Sazalong	Bandyopadhyay and Mondal (2026)
Region not stated	Tikkar, Chhipri	Kela (2024)
Indonesia	Engklek	Adpriyadi (2017); Baharta et al. (2026)

Two naming patterns stand out. Some names describe the action of hopping on one leg (langdi, “lame”; nondi, “limping”). Others count the boxes, as in the Bengali ekka-dukka (“one-two”) and ekhaat-duhaat (“one house, two houses”). The name Langdi is also used in Maharashtra for a separate chasing game played on one leg, which has its own national federation (Kela, 2024), so researchers should take care not to confuse the two.

6.3 How the game is played

A court of numbered boxes is drawn on the ground with chalk, brick or a stick. The player throws a flat stone, tile or piece of pottery (gitti) into the first box, hops on one leg through the remaining boxes, avoiding the box with the marker, and picks the marker up on the way back. Stepping on a line, losing balance or throwing the marker outside the right box ends the turn. In many versions, players who complete all the boxes earn a “house” in which they may rest on two feet while others must hop over it. Courts vary considerably: rectangular ladders of eight or ten boxes, courts with a semicircular “rest” at the top, and spiral or cross-shaped patterns. Amar Chitra Katha (2025) notes that each region has its own pattern and its own rhymes. In some versions the marker is kicked from box to box with the hopping foot rather than picked up.

6.4 Cultural meaning

Several sources describe Stapu mainly as a girls’ game (Kela, 2024), although boys also play it. Its courts were drawn in courtyards and outside homes and school gates, so it was easily watched over by adults and became part of the shared space of a neighbourhood. Because the court must be drawn fresh each time and can be redrawn in any shape, hopscotch has probably changed more from place to place than the other two games. Its counting names and numbered boxes also carry simple number knowledge, a point that Indonesian researchers

have explored as ethnomathematics

7 Discussion

7.1 Shared features of the three games

Table 4 sets the three games side by side.

Table 4: Comparison of Kancha, Gutti and Stapu

Feature	**Kancha (Marbles)**	**Gutti (Five Stones)**	**Stapu (Hopscotch)**
Main skill	Aim, force control, strategy	Hand-eye coordination, timing, fine motor control	Balance, hopping, spatial judgement
Body position	Crouching on the ground	Sitting	Standing and moving
Material	Glass marbles; earlier stones, clay balls, seeds	Pebbles, seeds, cloth bags	Chalk or brick line; flat stone or tile marker
Usual setting	Lanes, open ground	Verandahs, courtyards, indoors	Courtyards, doorsteps, school grounds
Gender pattern in sources	Mainly boys	Mainly girls and women	Mainly girls
Structure	Turns, winning pieces	Graded levels	Graded boxes and "houses"
International relatives	Marbles worldwide	Knucklebones, jacks, Batu Seremban	Hopscotch, Engklek, shtapu

Three common features emerge. First, all three games are built from local, almost free materials, and each region has substituted what was available: neem seeds for marbles in Rajasthan, sagargota seeds for five stones in Maharashtra, and fragments of tile as hopscotch markers almost everywhere. This adaptability is one reason the games spread so widely. Second, all three are learnt by watching and imitating older children rather than through instruction, and their rules are held in memory rather than in writing. This is exactly the kind of transmission that the UNESCO (2003) Convention describes as intangible heritage. Third, all three have a graded structure, whether through levels, boxes or the gradual winning of pieces, that lets a younger child join at a simple level and progress. Piaget (1932) saw this same feature in marbles as the basis of children's moral learning.

7.2 Unity and diversity

The regional tables show both unity and diversity. The basic form of each game is remarkably stable across India and even across continents: a stone tossed and caught, a marble flicked at another, a court hopped through on one foot. What changes are the names, the materials, the number of levels, the shape of the court and the rhymes chanted while playing. In this sense the three games mirror India's wider cultural pattern, in which a shared practice takes on many local forms. The names themselves are a small archive of local language: Bengali counting words in ekka-dukka, the Tamil nondi for limping, and the kaanch (glass) in the Hindi kancha.

7.3 Gender and play

The sources consistently associate marbles with boys and five stones and hopscotch with girls (Ghosh, 2023; Kela, 2024). This division probably reflects older norms about where boys and girls could play: marbles was a game of the open lane, while five stones and hopscotch could be played close to the house. These patterns should not be read as fixed. Recent studies report boys and girls playing all three games, and school programmes can deliberately offer each game to all children.

7.4 Decline and revival

All the sources reviewed report that these games are played less than before. Mohamed and Tajuddin (2019) found that young people in Southeast Asia rarely played traditional games, and Mehta and Kumar (2025) describe the same trend in India. Revival efforts have so far taken two forms: redesigning the games as products, as Nagpal et al. (2019) did with five stones, and using them in schools, as many Indonesian studies have done with hopscotch. The first keeps the game alive as an object; the second keeps it alive as a practice. The second is closer to how these games were transmitted in the first place.

7.5 Relevance for IKS and NEP 2020

The three games fit well within the IKS framework because they carry knowledge that is practical, embodied and local. A child learning Gutti learns timing and graded difficulty; a child learning Stapu learns counting, balance and turn-taking; a child learning Kancha learns aim, estimation and negotiation of rules. NEP 2020 (Para 4.8) asks schools to use indigenous sports to develop collaboration, self-discipline and teamwork. These three games can do this at almost no cost and in very small spaces, which makes them especially suitable for government schools. Schools could also ask students to collect the local names, rhymes and rules of these games from their own families, turning a physical education lesson into a small documentation project.

7.6 Conclusion

Kancha, Gutti and Stapu are small games with long histories. Each belongs to a family of games found across the world, yet each has been reshaped in India by local languages, local materials and local habits of play. This study brought together more than twenty regional names for the three games and showed that, beneath this variety, their basic forms have stayed remarkably stable. The games also share a way of being passed on: from child to child, by watching and copying, without written rules. That mode of transmission is exactly what is now under threat. If these games are to survive as living practice rather than as items in a museum or a product catalogue, they need to be played, and schools are now the most reliable place where that can happen. The three games deserve a place in school physical education not only because they are cheap and healthy, but because they carry a body of knowledge that Indian children have built and handed on for generations.

7.7 Limitations

1. The study relied entirely on published and documented sources; no field data were collected.

2. Several regional names come from grey literature rather than peer-reviewed research, and should be confirmed through fieldwork.

3. Many states, especially in north-east and central India, are not represented in the

available sources.

4. Historical claims about the origins of the games rest on secondary sources and need checking against primary archaeological and textual evidence.

7.8 Suggestions for future research

1. A state-wise field survey of the names, rules, rhymes and players of the three games, using interviews with elders and children.

2. Audio and video documentation of regional rhymes and court patterns before they are lost.

3. Studies of how the games are taught and adapted when they enter school physical education programmes.

4. Comparative studies with neighbouring countries, especially Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, where the same games are played under related names.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

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