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Traditional Games in Ancient Indian Texts: An IKS Perspective

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Cognitive Wisdom in Indian Traditional Games: Kancha, Hopscotch and Five Stones through the Lens of Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

Play has a long and well-documented history in India, yet the games recorded in its ancient literature have rarely been read as a body of knowledge in their own right. This paper brings together references to games and play in selected Vedic, epic, Puranic, Buddhist and classical Sanskrit texts and asks what these references reveal about the purposes play served in early Indian society. A qualitative documentary method was followed. Standard translations of the Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Shatapatha Brahmana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana, Brahmajala Sutta, Arthashastra, Kamasutra, Harshacharita and Manasollasa were examined, and the relevant passages were coded thematically. The texts show games in five broad roles: as exercises of skill and strategy, as preparation for physical and martial life, as vehicles for moral instruction, as instruments of royal ritual and governance, and as the everyday play of children. The dice game runs through the whole tradition, from the gambler's lament of the Rigveda to the regulated gaming halls of the Arthashastra, and is treated at once as a skill, a ritual act and a moral danger. The Buddhist list of games in the Brahmajala Sutta preserves the names of children's games that closely resemble those still played in Indian villages. The findings suggest that the textual tradition regarded play as a training of the whole person. This view supports the sports-integrated and Indian Knowledge Systems-based learning proposed in the National Education Policy 2020, and offers a cultural foundation for bringing indigenous games back into school physical education.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, traditional games, ancient Indian literature, dyuta, chaturanga, physical education, NEP 2020

1 Introduction

Anyone who has grown up in an Indian village remembers a childhood full of games that needed almost nothing to play: a few smooth stones, a stick and a peg, a square scratched into the dust. Few of us stop to ask how old these games are, or whether anyone wrote about them. In fact, India's literature has been writing about games for close to three thousand years. A gambler laments his ruin in the Rigveda; a kingdom is staked and lost at dice in the Mahabharata; a Buddhist discourse lists more than a dozen games that a disciplined monk should avoid; a twelfth-century king devotes a whole section of his encyclopaedia to royal sports. These references are scattered across texts of very different kinds, and they are usually read for their religious, literary or political meaning rather than for what they tell us about play itself.

The Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) initiative, launched by the Ministry of Education in 2020, has encouraged scholars and teachers to look again at such indigenous knowledge and to ask how it may inform education today. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 supports this direction. It asks schools to adopt sports-integrated learning that draws on indigenous sports (Para 4.8) and lists sports and games among the domains of the knowledge of India

to be included in the curriculum (Para 4.27). Yet most IKS work so far has concentrated on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, yoga and the performing arts. Games appear in this discussion mainly as cultural heritage or as a means of physical fitness, and rarely as a subject of textual study.

Modern play theory gives good reason to take play seriously. Huizinga (1949) argued that play is older than culture and lies at its root, while Vygotsky (1978) showed that in play a child acts "a head taller" than in ordinary life. Ancient Indian texts have their own understanding of play, in which skill, chance, duty and even the divine (lila) are closely bound together. Bringing these textual references together can help us understand how early Indian society saw play, and why that view still matters for children's education.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The present study is entitled **"Traditional Games in Ancient Indian Texts: An IKS Perspective".** It seeks to identify, classify and interpret references to games in selected ancient and classical Indian texts, and to consider their relevance for school physical education under NEP 2020.

2 Review of Related Literature

Scholarship on games in early Indian texts falls into three broad groups.

Philological and historical studies of the dice game. The dice game has received the most attention. Heinrich Lüders' early study of dice in ancient India, later summarised for English readers by Schaufelberger, reconstructed how the Vedic game was played with vibhitaka nuts and argued that the dice match of the Mahabharata follows the same ancient form. Kang (2021) re-examined the Aksha-sukta of the Rigveda and argued that aksha-dyuta, usually translated simply as "dice game", carried religious and social meanings that the English term hides. Fleming (2021), working from Dharmashastra and Nilakantha's commentary, showed that the dice episode of the Mahabharata is also a contest of legal reasoning, in which Yudhishthira loses the game but wins the argument. Regmi (2025) reread the same episode through the agency of Draupadi. Bhide approached these texts from psychiatry, reading the Rigvedic gambler and Yudhishthira as early literary portraits of compulsive gambling.

Studies of particular games and texts. Murray's (1913) A History of Chess remains the standard account of chaturanga and accepts Banabhatta's Harshacharita as containing its earliest clear mention. Sadhale and Nene (2004) translated the sections of the Manasollasa that describe elephant sports in the royal arena, and Shrigondekar's edition of the same text identifies twenty kinds of royal entertainment (vinoda). Finkel (2007) and Bell (1979) placed Indian board games within a wider, comparative history of games.

Educational and IKS-oriented studies. A growing body of recent work in physical education links Indian games with culture and schooling. Gulia and Dhauta (2019) traced the origin and present status of several traditional games. Kumar (2025) proposed ten principles of Bharatiya Khel drawn from ancient literature, and Sreeji (2025) discussed indigenous sports as part of IKS in the context of professional sport. Other recent papers argue for reviving traditional games in contemporary schooling and under NEP 2020.

2.1 Research Gap

The studies in the first two groups are deep but narrow: each examines a single game or a single text, and their concern is literary, legal or historical rather than educational. The studies in the third group are educational but tend to mention ancient texts only in general

terms, often without citing specific passages or editions. No study was found that systematically examines references to games across different genres of ancient Indian literature and then interprets them for school physical education. The present paper attempts to fill this gap.

3 Objectives and Methodology

3.1 Objectives

1. To identify references to games and play in selected ancient and classical Indian texts.
2. To classify the games found according to their type and the purpose they served.
3. To interpret the findings in the light of Indian Knowledge Systems and NEP 2020, with particular reference to school physical education.

3.2 Research design

The study followed a qualitative documentary research design. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents so that meaning can be drawn from them and understanding developed. Each source was judged against the four criteria proposed by Scott (1990): authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning.

3.3 Selection of texts

Texts were chosen purposively to cover the main genres of early Indian literature: Vedic hymns and ritual texts, the epics and Puranas, Buddhist canonical literature, and Shastric and classical works. Three criteria were applied. The text had to be composed before about 1300 CE; a recognised scholarly translation had to be available; and the passage had to describe a game, sport or play activity, not merely use one as a figure of speech. Popular retellings without a traceable textual source were excluded. The texts and the translations consulted are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Texts Examined and Translations Consulted

Genre	**Text**	**Translation/Edition**
Vedic	Rigveda	Griffith (1896)
Vedic	Atharvaveda	Whitney (1905)
Vedic	Shatapatha Brahmana	Eggeling (1882–1900)
Epic	Mahabharata	Ganguli (1883–1896)
Puranic	Bhagavata Purana	Gita Press edition
Buddhist	Brahmajala Sutta (Digha Nikaya 1)	Rhys Davids (1899); Walshe (1995)
Shastric	Arthashastra	Kangle (1972)
Shastric	Kamasutra	Doniger and Kakar (2002)
Classical	Harshacharita	Cowell and Thomas (1897)
Classical	Manasollasa	Shrigondekar (1925–1961)

3.4 Analysis

The selected passages were read closely and coded following the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes described the game and its setting (for example, “dice”, “ball”, “children”, “royal court”, “warning”). These codes were then grouped into broader themes describing the function of play. Where possible, each passage was compared across two translations, and the interpretations of later commentators were kept separate from the text itself.

4 Findings

4.1 Vedic literature: the dice and their double face

The oldest clear literary reference to a game in India is the Aksha-sukta (Rigveda 10.34), often called the Gambler’s Lament. It is one of the few hymns of the Rigveda with no ritual purpose. The speaker is a man who has lost his wealth, his wife’s affection, and his standing in society to dice made from vibhitaka nuts. He knows the dice will ruin him, yet he cannot resist their call when they fall on the board. The hymn ends with advice that reads almost like a teacher’s: give up the dice, plough your field, and be content with what you earn (Griffith, 1896). The Atharvaveda, by contrast, contains charms for success at dice, which shows that gaming was common enough for people to seek divine help in it (Whitney, 1905). The game also had a formal place in ritual. In the Rajasuya, the royal consecration described in the Shatapatha Brahmana, the king-to-be takes part in a ritual dice game that is arranged so that he wins (Eggeling, 1882–1900). Already in the Vedic period, then, the same game was a social pastime, a sacred act and a source of moral warning. Kang (2021) argues that this layered meaning is lost when aksha-dyuta is translated simply as “gambling”.

4.2 The Mahabharata: games of the court and the training ground

The Mahabharata contains the most famous game in Indian literature. In the Sabha Parva, Yudhishthira accepts Duryodhana’s invitation to play dice, with Shakuni throwing on the Kauravas’ behalf, and loses his wealth, his kingdom, his brothers, himself and finally Draupadi (Ganguli, 1883–1896). Fleming (2021) shows that the episode is also a contest of law and reasoning: each side uses fine points of Dharmashastra to trap the other. The game thus becomes a stage on which questions of duty, consent and justice are worked out.

Dice return elsewhere in the epic. In the story of Nala and Damayanti, King Nala loses his kingdom at dice to his brother Pushkara, and regains it only after he has learnt the secret of the dice from King Rituparna. During the Pandavas’ year in hiding, Yudhishthira lives at King Virata’s court in the guise of Kanka, a Brahmin skilled in dice. In both stories dice is treated as a skill that can be studied and mastered, not only as blind chance.

The epic also records the play of children. In the Adi Parva, the young Kaurava and Pandava princes are playing with a ball when it falls into a well. Drona retrieves it by shooting a chain of grass blades into one another, and this display of skill leads to his appointment as their teacher of arms. A children’s game here opens the door to formal martial education.

4.3 The Bhagavata Purana: play in the village

The tenth book of the Bhagavata Purana describes the childhood of Krishna and his companions in Vrindavana. The boys mimic birds and animals, play hide-and-seek and chasing games, and divide into teams for competitive play. In the episode of the demon Pralamba, the boys play a team game in which members of the losing side must carry the winners on their backs, a rule that is still found in many village games. In this text play is joyful, physical

and social, and it is also lila, the divine play through which the world itself is understood.

4.4 Buddhist literature: a catalogue of games

The Brahmajala Sutta, the first discourse of the Digha Nikaya, contains one of the fullest lists of games in any ancient text. It appears in a passage describing amusements that a disciplined ascetic avoids. Because the list was drawn up in order to reject these games, it preserves, almost by accident, a picture of what ordinary people played (Rhys Davids, 1899). Table 2 shows selected items from the list with present-day games that resemble them. These parallels are offered as suggestions and are not claimed as proven continuities.

Table 2: Selected Games from the Brahmajala Sutta and Possible Present-Day Parallels

Pali Term	**Description (after Rhys Davids, 1899)**	**Possible Present-Day Parallel**
Atthapada	Board game on a board of eight rows	Ashtapada board; forerunner of chaturanga
Dasapada	Board game on a board of ten rows	Larger board games
Akasa	The same board games played without a board, in the mind	Blindfold or mental play
Parihara-patha	Stepping through diagrams drawn on the ground	Stapu, Kith-kith (hopscotch)
Santika	Removing pieces from a heap without disturbing the rest	Pick-up and stone games
Khalika	Playing with dice	Dice and race games
Ghatika	Striking a short stick with a long one	Gilli-danda (tip-cat)
Mokkhacika	Turning somersaults	Tumbling play
Dhanuka	Playing with toy bows	Archery play
Akkharika	Guessing letters traced in the air or on a friend's back	Guessing games

The list is striking for two reasons. First, several of these games are still played by Indian children, which suggests a continuity of more than two thousand years. Second, akasa, playing a board game entirely in the mind, depends on holding the position of every piece in memory, a demand that modern psychology would describe as a working-memory task (Baddeley, 2000).

4.5 Shastric and classical texts: play as organised knowledge

Arthashastra. Kautilya treats gaming as a matter of state. He provides for a superintendent of gambling (dyutadhyaksha), requires that gaming take place in supervised halls, and directs that the state supply the dice and take a share of the stakes (Kangle, 1972). Here the game is neither condemned nor celebrated; it is regulated as a social institution.

Kamasutra. Vatsyayana's list of sixty-four arts (kalas) expected of a cultured person includes skill in particular kinds of dice play (dyuta-vishesha), as well as other games (Doniger & Kakar, 2002). Play is here part of a refined and educated life.

Harshacharita. Banabhatta's biography of King Harsha, composed in the seventh century, contains what is generally accepted as the earliest clear reference to chaturanga, played on the eight-by-eight ashtapada board (Cowell & Thomas, 1897; Murray, 1913). The four "limbs" of the game, namely infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots, are the four divisions of the

ancient Indian army. Chaturanga is therefore a clear case of a game designed to model military strategy.

Manasollasa. Composed by the Western Chalukya king Someshvara III around 1130 CE, the Manasollasa is an encyclopaedia of royal life. Its fourth part deals with twenty kinds of royal entertainment (vinoda), including sports with elephants and horses, wrestling, animal contests, fishing and hunting (Shrigondekar, 1925–1961). Sadhale and Nene (2004) note that its account of elephant sports in the arena appears to be the only one of its kind to survive. Writers on Mallakhamb also trace the earliest written description of exercises on a wooden pole to this text (Gulia & Dhauta, 2019).

Malla Purana. Later, the Malla Purana, a thirteenth-century text of the Jyeshtimalla wrestlers of Gujarat, describes sixteen kinds of wrestling exercises for building strength (NCERT, n.d.). Its existence shows that by this period physical training had become a specialised body of written knowledge.

5 Discussion: Functions of Play in the Textual Tradition

When the coded passages were grouped, five themes emerged. They are summarised in Table 3 and discussed below.

Table 3: Themes Emerging from the Textual References

Theme	Main Textual Evidence	Aspect of Development
Skill and strategy	Chaturanga, ashtapada, *akasa*, dice as a learned art	Cognitive: planning, memory, attention
Physical and martial preparation	Princes' ball play, wrestling, Mallakhamb, toy bows, royal sports	Physical: strength, coordination, agility
Moral instruction	Aksha-sukta, Sabha Parva, story of Nala	Character: self-control, consequences
Ritual and governance	Rajasuya dice, Arthashastra regulation, Manasollasa	Social: order, identity, culture
Children's everyday play	Bhagavata team games, Brahmajala list	Social-emotional: cooperation, joy, imagination

Skill and strategy. The texts repeatedly treat games as matters of knowledge. Nala must learn the secret of the dice before he can win back his kingdom, the Kamasutra counts expertise in dice among the arts of an educated person, and chaturanga reproduces the logic of a battlefield on a board. The Buddhist mention of akasa goes further, describing a game played wholly in the mind. These references show an early awareness that games train attention, memory and planning, the very functions that are studied today under the heading of executive function.

Physical and martial preparation. Many games in the texts are linked with the body and with war. The princes' ball game leads directly to their training under Drona; toy bows prepare boys for archery; the royal sports of the Manasollasa and the wrestling exercises of the Malla Purana show physical play becoming organised training. In this tradition, play and preparation for adult life were not separated.

Moral instruction. A distinctive feature of the Indian material is its repeated use of games to teach moral lessons. The Rigvedic gambler, Yudhishthira and Nala are all brought low by dice, and each story turns on a failure of self-control. The texts do not reject play as such; children's play in the Bhagavata is celebrated. What they warn against is play

that becomes compulsion. Bhide's reading of these passages as early accounts of addictive behaviour underlines how carefully this danger was observed.

Ritual and governance. The dice game of the Rajasuya, the state-run gaming halls of the Arthashastra and the royal spectacles of the Manasollasa show that games were woven into the structures of kingship and society. Play was a public matter, not only a private one.

Children's everyday play. Finally, the Bhagavata and the Brahmajala Sutta preserve the ordinary play of children: hide-and-seek, chasing, team games, hopscotch-like stepping games, pick-up games and stick games. These are the games least associated with kings and heroes, and yet they are the ones that have survived most widely in Indian villages.

Taken together, these themes suggest that the textual tradition did not see play as a single activity with a single aim. It saw play as training of the mind, the body and the character together. This integrated view is close to the holistic idea of education that the IKS framework seeks to recover.

6 Educational Implications under NEP 2020

NEP 2020 describes sports-integration as a cross-curricular approach that uses physical activities, including indigenous sports, to develop collaboration, self-initiative, self-direction, self-discipline, teamwork, responsibility and citizenship (Para 4.8). The five themes identified in this study correspond closely to these aims. Team games of the kind described in the Bhagavata build collaboration; the moral stories of the dice game invite discussion of self-discipline and responsibility; strategy games such as chaturanga and its descendants exercise planning and self-direction.

The findings suggest four practical directions for schools.

1. **Teach games as heritage, not only as activity.** Short readings or stories from the texts, such as the Rigvedic gambler, the princes' ball in the well, or the Buddhist list of games, can be used in physical education and IKS classes so that students see the games they play as part of a long tradition.

2. **Balance the five functions.** A school programme can include at least one game for each theme across the year: a strategy game (chess, chaupar, pallanguzhi), a physical game (gilli-danda, Mallakhamb drills), a team game (kho-kho, pitthu), and a memory or guessing game derived from the Brahmajala list.

3. **Use games for value education.** The textual treatment of dice offers a ready-made basis for discussing self-control, fair play and the difference between healthy play and compulsion, a theme that has new relevance in an age of screen-based gaming.

4. **Prepare teachers.** Physical education teachers need short training modules on the history and educational value of indigenous games so that they can present them with confidence.

These suggestions also point to empirical questions. If ancient texts already treated certain games as training for memory and attention, school-based experimental studies can test whether traditional games such as Gutti (five stones) or board games of the chaturanga family improve working memory and other cognitive functions in children today.

7 Conclusion

Games are not a marginal subject in ancient Indian literature. They appear in its oldest hymns, at the turning point of its greatest epic, in the discipline of its monks, in the ad-

ministration of its states and in the encyclopaedias of its kings. Across these very different texts, play is shown training the mind through strategy, the body through physical and martial exercise, and the character through moral example, while also binding society together through ritual and shared enjoyment. This is a holistic understanding of play, and it offers Indian schools a strong cultural foundation for the sports-integrated and IKS-based learning envisaged in NEP 2020. Indigenous games deserve a place in school physical education not only because they are healthy and inexpensive, but because they carry a body of knowledge that is thousands of years old.

7.1 Limitations

The study relied on English translations, which may not capture the full meaning of technical game terms in Sanskrit and Pali. The comparison of ancient games with present-day games is interpretive and cannot be proved from texts alone. Regional, folk and oral traditions, in which many games actually survive, lay outside the scope of a textual study. The selection of texts was purposive, and other works, such as Jain canonical literature and regional-language classics, may add further evidence.

7.2 Suggestions for future research

Future work may undertake a philological study of game vocabulary in collaboration with Sanskrit and Pali scholars; ethnographic documentation of games described in the texts that are still played in rural India; and experimental studies on the cognitive and physical effects of traditional games on school children.

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Conflict of Interest

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

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