

Ganjifa Art

Aesthetic Representation of Elephant in the Playing Cards of Mysore and Moghul Ganjifa

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Many games such as chess, polo, snakes and ladders, karate, and playing cards originated in India and became familiar across the world. The mention of *Chaturang* can be found in our epic the Mahabharata, a game that was played between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Many scholars like H.J.R Murray opine to the fact that in some form or the other, the game continued till it evolved into chess. Several games now familiar across the world owe their origins in India, particularly, the games of chess, ludo (including snake and ladders), and playing cards.

Ancient India was the place of origin of the game of playing cards and has since spawned a plethora of card based games which are played the world over. The playing cards were one of the favourite pastimes of Indians in ancient times and were patronized especially by the royalty and nobility.

The game of cards was known as Krida-patram in ancient India; during the middle ages, it was known as Ganjifa. These cards were made of cloth and depicted motifs from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc. Abul Fazal, a scholar in the court of Mughal emperor Akbar, recorded in his book *Ain-e-Akbari*, a game of cards that originated in India. The Ramayana pack appears to be the oldest, consisting of 144 cards, arranged in 12 suits with two court and ten numeral cards each. Here the superior of the two cards is Rama himself; the second court card represents various figures and scenes of Ramayana.¹

This indoor game became a royal passion during the Mughal rule, patronised by the Badshahs, the game came to be known as Ganjifa-meaning money or treasure. During the 17th and 18th centuries, card playing became an accepted and popular pastime in the Indian courts. The classic Mughal ganjifa with 96 cards and the standard eight suits spread all over India. In the Deccan, the ten-suited Dashavatara ganjifa gained prominence in the seventeenth century. The main purpose of the game was to teach, learn and tell stories from our ancient scriptures and holy books. One of the greatest benefits was that besides a memory test, the game provided a good retention of traditional knowledge.

Ganjifa

Ganjifa, Ganjapa or Ganjapha is a card game or type of playing cards that are most associated in India, Persia, Turkey and several Arab countries. The earliest references to ganjifah as

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playing cards can be dated to the late 14th and early 15th centuries, but some scholars have also traced them back to the 13th century. The Persian version of ganjifa was known as ganjifeh and became known throughout Arabia as kanjifah (a word that appeared in an inscription on one of the circa 1400 mameluke cards), and was expanded by the addition of a third court card.²

The Origin and Development of Ganjifa

The game of ganjifa and the eight-suited pack of cards used in play originated in Persia, but it is in India that the game really flourished and the card developed in a variety of forms. The word kanjafah, which maybe of Persian origin, first appears at the beginning of 15th century and seems then to refer to a game with the pack of cards of four suits, each with 13 cards, now known as Mamluk playing cards. The earliest reference to an eight-suited pack is in a poem called Rubaiyat-i-Ganjifa by the Persian poet Ahli Shirazi, dated to around 1514-15. The word ganjifa makes its first appearance in India in 1527 in the diary of Emperor Babur, but no further description is given. However, in *Ain-i-Akbari* by Abu'l Fazl (c. 1565) there is a detailed account of not only an eight-suited pack but of an “ancient” twelve-suited pack. It is often said that ganjifa was introduced to India by the Mughals in the 16th century, but it is equally possible that it arrived earlier, when Turkman princes immigrated to the Deccan in the late 15th century.³

Ganjifa practically died out in its homeland when the orthodox Shah Abbas II of Persia (1642-67) banned the game. In India, however, the game and its cards spread over most of the country. Although initially played by the Muslims, it was taken up enthusiastically by the Hindu population and the cards were adapted to suit their taste.

The different variants in ganjifa are the Moghul ganjifa , Dashavatara ganjifa , Ramayana ganjifa , Rashi ganjifa , Ashtadikpala ganjifa, Naqsh ganjifa , Mysore Chad ganjifa , Akbar’s ganjifa, Mamluk Kanjifa , French suited ganjifa etc.

Process

The cards are hand-painted on a variety of materials, ranging from ivory, mother of pearl and tortoise shell to paper-mache, paper and stiffened cloth. They are usually round and anything from 2 to 12cm in diameter. An upright rectangular format was also used, generally for higher quality packs.⁴ Paints were traditionally made, often by the artists and their families, from natural materials, but now commercially produced paints are mainly used. The backs are usually plain, but a few packs are elaborately decorated on the reverse. Boxes are often supplies for the cards, usually with similar design

¹ Agarwal M. K, *From Bharata to India: Chrysee the Golden*, voll, I universe inc, Bloomington, 2012, p 355.

² Leibs Andrew, *Sports and Games of the Renaissance*, Greenwood Press, Westport, London, 2004, p 130.

³ Topsfield Andrew, edited, *The Art of Play, Board and Card Games of India*, Volume 58, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2006, p 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 102

to the cards. Ganjifa were made in many parts of the country, but are now only being painted in Bishnupur, Sawantwadi, Raghurajpur and several towns in Orissa.⁵

The court artists painted chosen themes, in miniature style on sandalwood and ivory, and etched them as well in enamelled silver and gold, in circular and rectangular shapes. These luxury packs produced in the darbari kalam or royal style, were for the exclusive use of the ruler and his noblemen. Bazaar quality cards were produced in the bazaar kalam for the common man in waste paper or card board and starched cloth. Squirrel hair brushes were used and paints were derived from vegetable and mineral sources. The cards were then lacquered for durability and card-sets were stored in rectangular, painted, wooden boxes.

Game

Ganjifa is a trick-taking game, like whist or bridge, but with strict rules governing what cards may be led. There are no trumps and no obligation to follow the suit, if a player cannot win the trick. In half of the suits ten is the highest numeral and one the lowest, and in the other half the ranking is reversed. There are usually three players, four when there are twelve or more suits in the pack, and all the cards are dealt out anti-clock wise. The mir or raja of an agreed suit is led, and along with this card the player puts a low value card, called the “throne”. With these cards he wins the first two tricks. There after there are complex rules about which cards must be led next. If any player has the highest card in a suit he is obliged to play it if that suit is led. If he fails to do so, it loses its value.⁶

Players have to remember what cards have been played, and particular skill is needed towards the end of a game to determine which of the middle-ranking cards may yet be used to win a trick when the higher ones have been played, and which can be discarded. The winner is the player who takes most of the tricks.

Mughal Ganjifa

Ahli Shirazi did not describe the cards in detail in his poem, nor give the rules of the game, but did record the names of the eight suits. These are ghulam (servant), taj (crown), shamsher (sword), ashrafi (gold coin), chang (harp), barat (document), tanka (silver coin), and qimash (merchandise). These represent the household of the court, treasury, armoury, gold mint, women’s quarters (zenana), administration, silver mint, and stores respectively. The names of the coin suits had changed by the time Abul Fazl wrote about ganjifa, attributing the invention of the eight-suited pack to Akbar himself. The gold coin is designated surkh (gold) and the silver coin, safed (silver). They are often identified with the sun and moon respectively, and faces may be depicted on the gold and silver discs. The suit signs remain unchanged to even this day. The pack consists of 96 cards (eight suits of twelve cards each); ten of each suit are number cards and two are court cards: the mir (king) and wazir (minister). The mir is generally seated on a throne, though the mir of ghulam usually rides an elephant and the mir of surkh

⁵ Ibid., p 103

⁶ Ibid., p 103

may be represented by the sun shining from behind one or more tigers. The wazir is usually on horseback, though the wazir of ghulam rides an ox, the wazir of chang a camel.

Some scenes occur frequently. A man smoking a huqqa often appears on the one and four people playing chaupar on the four. It is leisurely pursuits and entertainments that are depicted. Acrobats, wrestlers, swordsmen, musicians, dancers, performing animals, fights between elephants are most often depicted. There are drinking parties, sometimes taking place under the palm trees where toddy-tappers are at work, and people taking bhang, soldiers march, etc depicted on the cards. All of these subjects are in the common repertory of the painters of Indian miniatures, but here they are much on a smaller scale, sometimes on cards no bigger than 2-9 by 2-3 cm.⁷

The Chad cards of Mysore

Ganjifa the art of playing cards is also referred to as the '*Chad*'. Chad means leaves and therefore Ganjifa is the playing cards of Mysore providing encouragement to art and games during those days. It was also called as '*devara āta*' or the game of the gods as the leaves had the images of gods and goddesses.⁸ Though the origin of the word Ganjifa is obscure, following the conclusion of Rudolf Von Heyden "Ganjifa is supposed to have travelled from Persia to India with the Persian etymology 'ganj' that denotes treasure, treasury or minted money. This game was played by kings, satraps, landlords and the rich. Significance was not only given to the game; the cards were also given priority. Natural colors were used and intricate images were created on the cards.

The themes portrayed in the chad cards range from social to religious ones. The choice of the subjects has always reflected the socio-religious trend in the society. The suits are based on a variety of themes that included the signs of the Zodiac, the Dikpalas and the Navagrahas (the nine planets in Indian astrology)

Krishnaraja Wodeyar III (1794-1868) devised many different board and card games. He ruled Mysore from 1799 until he was deposed by the British in 1831. Kautuka Nidhi of one of the nine chapters of the encyclopaedic work of Sritattvanidhi (noble Treasury of Philosophy) written in Kannada language and compiled under the patronage of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III (1794-1868). Krishnaraja Wodeyar, more commonly referred to as Mumtaz Ali Wodeyar has been credited with having invented several card games, which the court artists produced in the form of beautifully designed playing cards that are known under the name of Mysore Chad Ganjifa.

In his work Sritattvanidhi, he describes thirteen card games, requiring anything from 36 to 360 cards. The packs had up to 18 suits, each presided over by a particular god or goddesses, and up to 18 cards in each suit, together with a number of additional cards, with a different role in the game, that did not belong to any particular suit. The 13 chads in the Mysore are the Chamundeshwari Chad, Jagan Mohan Chad, Navin Dasavatara Chad, Navagraha Chad, Panch Pandava Chad, Devi Dasavatari

⁷ Ibid., p 93

⁸ Shivshankar M L, Ganjifa, Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Mysore, 1996, P 1.

Chad, Ashtadikpala, Rama Chad, Manohar Chad, Sarvamangal Chad, Navaratna Chad, Krishnaraj Chad, Jyatadi Chad. The Chamundeshwari Chad, dedicated to the tutelary deity of the Wodeyars consists of 320 cards depicting a large assembly of the south Indian pantheon of gods and goddesses. The Kautuka Nidhi gives details of the chad games of Mysore. It gives the names of the card games, number of cards, details of iconography, color combinations and accompanying slokas.

The structure of all these chads is derived from the standard ganjifa with its suits consisting of court cards and numeral cards. In most of the Mysore chads, there are six court cards with their own names in the following order: Raja on throne or Elephant, Rajni in a palanquin, Amatya in a ratha, Senani on horseback, padathi or sevaka, the foot soldier and Dwaja, the flag.

Technique

The traditional ganjifa cards were handmade and hand-painted using vegetable and mineral colors, each single card being a work of art. As the demand grew, groups of artists in various centres produced cards according to local taste. Two styles generally prevailed, the durbar and the bazaar, the former made by the artists for the rulers and the nobility and the latter for the commoners. Artists involved in making cards for the rich and wealthy used expensive materials. They used to craft on lac wafers, tortoise shells, ivory. Engraved brass discs, mother of pearl and decorated with precious stones and metals. Common people made the cards using leather, paper, stylized palm leaves, fish scales and paper mache. Colors were made by hand and they were rich in natural mineral and vegetable dyes. The artists grinded and mixed these natural colors by hand and used fine brushes to paint the cards.

The process of making the ganjifa cards was laborious. Pieces of cloth or rags were glued, layered, stretched, dried and primed with an extract of tamarind seeds and coated with lime, burnished with stone several times till a smooth surface was obtained. Roundels were cut from sheets with the help of templates and scissors and the colors laid in several stages; finally the senior artist would draw with a fine brush the black outlines and the details of the figure cards. The cards were packed in painted boxes.

Representation of Elephants on the Chad and the Mughal ganjifa

Elephants have always played a significant role in Indian culture and history. They have traditionally been thought to hold the attributes of wisdom, honor, strength and stability. There are several myths relating to elephants in Indian literature. Elephants have been represented as the vahana of Indra, fertility of crops, the conception of womanhood, the sig of fecundation of mother goddess and her vahana, the guardian of quarters, the symbol of the sun and also the Buddha and Mahavira.

The representation of the elephants in the mughal ganjifa follows the mughal miniature style. The elephants are treated more naturalistically; few ganjifa cards show elephants in action. The king mounted on the elephant and fight between elephants is the common occurring themes in these cards. With plain backgrounds and arches the elephants indicate movement in a realistic manner. Few

cards depict the elephants with embellishments, delineated in a realistic manner. Mughal stylization is persistent in the representation of the elephants in these cards.

The chad cards of Mysore show reminiscences of the Mysore traditional style of painting. The artists use strong colors with flat backgrounds. The elephants are stylized and are shown in a realistic manner. The elephants are represented as vahanas for the gods and goddesses.

Ganjifa cards are not merely playing cards, but a way of life for the artisan. Making the ganjifa cards involves a tedious process, often involving all the members of the artists' family. Apart from being a part of traditional games, these cards are interesting pieces of art; they incorporate aspects of court art, courtly culture and art, and Hindu religious symbolism. Ganjifa is an intrinsic part of an artistic tradition and the card games unravel myth, legend, tradition and a cosmological picture of the world.

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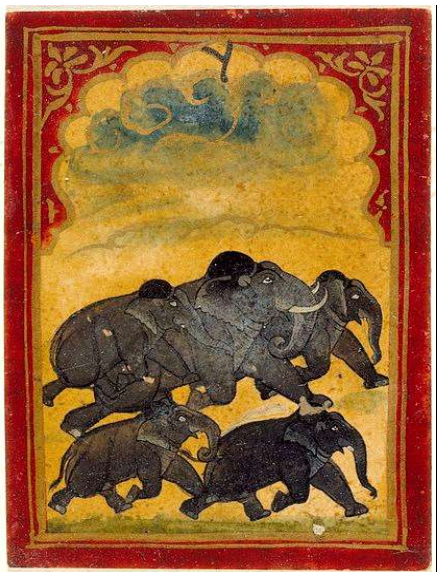


fig.1 Five Galloping Elephants,
Number Six of the Gajpati (Lord of Elephants)



fig.2 Mughal Ganjifa, Rajasthan



fig.3 Sawantwadi Mughul ganjifa



fig.4 Mughal Ganjifa, Rajasthan

Chad Cards of Mysore



fig. 5 Mysore Dasara



fig. 6 Ashtadikpala ganjifa



fig. 7 Ambari Shiva



fig. 8 Navanari Kunjara