

A palatial room at the *Patwon ki Haveli* heritage building in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, with a vintage board for the game of *Chausar*

The Game is

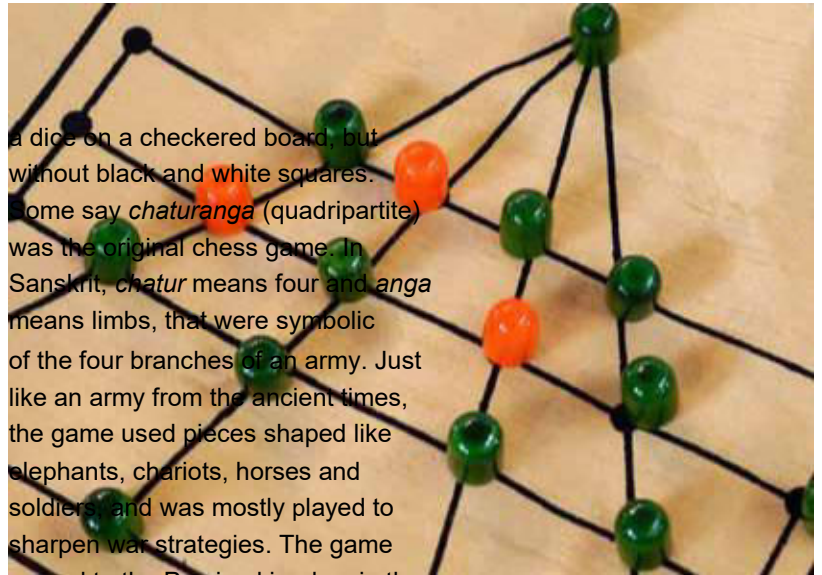
From board games that sharpen the brain's strategic prowess, to those which build memory, Indian traditional games are not just for enjoyment. **Abhishek Dubey** looks at some of these games which are making a comeback in contemporary avatars, captivating the attention of even the modern day gamers

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Ancient Indian epics are rife with descriptions of entertaining games that kept people of that time entertained through fictional yet strategic challenges. Be it indoor or outdoor games, there are several examples of hours spent by the elite and the masses alike indulging in sporty challenges. Take for example the game of *chausar*, often called the ancestor of the immensely popular board game we

now call Ludo. Played by four players on a cross-shaped board, the game involves the strategic movement of markers - four of which are allotted to every player. This is the game that finds a mention even in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. The modern avatar, Ludo, is now one of the most popularly enjoyed game on online platforms with thousands of games being hosted online. Historians say similar dice games were popular across India during ancient times. Remnants of oblong dices have been excavated at several Harrapan-era sites. The dice is mentioned in the *Rig Veda* and *Atharva Veda* too.

Another popular game, chess, is believed to have been invented in India. Experts say it was originally known as *ashtapada* (64 squares) and

a dice on a checkered board, but without black and white squares. Some say *chaturanga* (quadripartite) was the original chess game. In Sanskrit, *chatur* means four and *anga* means limbs, that were symbolic of the four branches of an army. Just like an army from the ancient times, the game used pieces shaped like elephants, chariots, horses and soldiers and was mostly played to sharpen war strategies. The game spread to the Persian kingdom in the 600 CE as *Shatranj*. Another similar game was *chauka bara*, which was played with cowries shells and coins to strategise for wars and also to help children learn counting of



Not all indigenous games are designed to just entertain. A few local games are in fact, aimed towards sharpening memory and observation skills



Left to right: The ancient strategy game of aadu *puli attam*, with markers representing lions and lambs; Young boys enjoying the traditional game of Gilli-danda in Turtuk village, Nubra Valley, Ladakh

Traditional games still enjoyed across India

Traditional Games of North India

Punjabi Kabaddi (Punjab)

Chaturanga (Uttar Pradesh) – a form of chess

Lagori (Punjab) – also called seven stones, it involved placing seven stones on top of each other in decreasing size

Gatka (Punjab) – a form of martial arts

Camel race (Rajasthan)



Traditional Games of Western India

Slingshot (Maharashtra) – the classic slingshot or *gulel*

Kho kho (Maharashtra) – a traditional game of tag

Pagathiya (Gujarat) – the classic game of hopscotch



eastern India

Tenga ball (Assam) – a game played with a pomelo, a fruit locally called *robaabtenga*

Along-dolong (Assam) – the local version of London bridge

Luka-suri (Assam) – hide and seek

Mukna (Manipur) – folk wrestling

Thang-ta (Manipur) – folk martial art form

Yubi lakpi (Manipur) – a game similar to rugby but played with an oiled coconut

Cheibi (Manipur) – an ancient form of fencing

Naga Wrestling (Nagaland)

Achugwi Phan Sohlaimgung (Tripura) – wrestling

Dwkhwi Sotonmung (Tripura) – tug of war

Traditional Games of South India

Mallakhamba (Tamil Nadu) – it is a combination of gymnastics and yoga, where a participant displays acrobatic skills on a long pole (*mallakhamba*)

Sathurangam (Tamil Nadu) - chess

Chinni Dandu (Karnataka) – or *gilli danda*, it involves hitting a small stick with a larger one

Buguri (Karnataka) – the classic game of top

Vallamkali Snake Boat (Kerala)

around 1300 AD, these hand-painted cards are precursors to today's

local games of Tamil Nadu are, in fact, aimed towards strengthening memory and observation skills



numbers. While it was originally played on squares stitched on silk fabric, a simpler version of the game is played in Southern India with chalk lines drawn on the floor. A similar traditional board game that is played even today is *kattam vilayattu*. A variation of tic-tac-toe, the game used to be played with shells, coins or even stones!

Card games too were popular in India during the medieval era. An example is *ganjifa*, which was immensely popular in Mughal courts. Mentioned in historical records beginning

playing cards. The circular or square *ganjifa* cards, intricately painted in vibrant colours and motifs inspired by nature, mythology or life, were played in groups. While the game may have been lost to time, the art of *ganjifa* making is still alive in pockets of the country. These games were mostly developed to sharpen the brain or skills. A few

A large scale board used by Indian royals to play the game of *Chausar*. *Chausar*, a strategic board game is closely related to the ancient games of *chaupar*, *pachisi* and Ludo

Indian epics are rife with descriptions of entertaining games that kept our mythical heroes entertained through strategic challenges

Many of the traditional Indian games have even evolved in from and rules to sustain the vagaries of time and entertain the contemporary gamer

LOCAL FLAVOUR

India is also the birthplace of several outdoor games, that are known across the world by different names. What the rest of the world calls catch-and-throw,

the residents of Assam's Karbi Anglong district call *dhup-khel*. But the key element that sets the two apart is the object being thrown and caught – a fabric ball. It is one of the more popular games among local women. Lore says originally, women used to wrap cloth around a vegetable and use it as a ball! It has often been seen that traditional games used ingredients found locally.

An apt example is the game of *gilli-danda*, which is popular across rural India even today. Played with two pieces of sticks and a stone

- *pallankulli attam* and *aadu puli attam* (also known as *huli gatta* in Karnataka and *puli joodam* in Andhra Pradesh) being two of them. The first, which requires two columns of boards with seven shallow cups and objects to resemble coins (pebbles, seeds or shells), is played by two or four players, while the second, boasts a rather interesting set of rules involving coins representing goats and tigers!

Interestingly, many of these ancient indoor games are being reborn on online gaming platforms.

A set of painted ivory or *ganjifa* playing cards from the Deccan region (left) and from Rajasthan (right) from the 18th-19th century





Image: eastmojo.com

Top: A referee initiating a game of *insuknawr* in Mizoram. The game is related to modern day tug of war and involves one team pushing the other out of bounds with a bamboo stick;
Bottom: The board for the Tamil game of *pallankulli attam* with seven different cups and can be played with pebbles for markers



or a rounded object, it can be played between two or more players. History says this game was popular in the region around 2000 years ago.

The beauty of these sports is that, while such modern games as football and boxing exist, traditional ones are still intrinsic to everyday life across the country. Take for example Mizoram's *insuknawr*, a sport where participants try to push

each other out by holding a bamboo or a wooden staff. Such is the importance of this indigenous game that its

representation can be found on the emblem of the state sports council. In Northern India we see such traditional games as *kushti* (*pehelwani* or wrestling), which is also popularly and extensively practised in South India as *gushti*; *surr* (an outdoor game of tag played in the areas

steps to preserve these games. While board games are being reborn in digital formats, schools have been asked to train children in ancient outdoor games like *silambam*, *mallakhamb*, and *gatka*.



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around Ayodhya in northern India) and *sqay* (a form of martial art originating in Kashmir). There are examples of such traditional games from every region of the country. Today, as we look to the past to find solutions for our present, these traditional games and their relevance become very important. Government and private organisations are taking