

# THE EARLIEST KNOWN LIST OF GAMES: SOME COMMENTS

BY

PAUL G. BREWSTER

A certain passage (Sect. 14, p. 9) in the Pali *Brahma-jāla Sutta*, or *Dialogues of the Buddha*, which, according to Rhys-Davids, is one of the most ancient of Buddhist documents, dating back to the fifth century B. C., contains what purport to be the actual words of Gotama himself<sup>1</sup>. In this passage the Buddha contrasts the thoughts and the activities of the unconverted man with those of the disciple, and, in so doing, gives the following interesting and valuable list of games and amusements to which he objects:

1. games on boards with 8 or 10 rows of squares;
2. the same game played by imagining such boards in the air (Pāli, *ākāsam*);
3. keeping going over diagrams drawn on the ground, so that one steps only where one ought to go;
4. either removing the pieces or men from a heap with one's nail, or putting them in a heap, in each case without shaking it, the one who shakes the heap losing the game;
5. throwing dice (Pāli, *khalikā*);
6. hitting a short stick with a long one;
7. dipping the hand with the fingers stretched out in lac, or red dye, or flour water, and striking the wet hand on the ground, or on a wall, calling out "What shall it be?" and showing the form required—elephants, horses, etc.:
8. games with balls (Pāli, *akkham*);
9. blowing through toy pipes made of leaves;
10. ploughing with toy ploughs;

---

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Rhys-Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I (1923). This translation forms one volume in the series *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*.

11. turning somersaults;
12. playing with toy windmills made of palm leaves;
13. playing with toy measures made of palm leaves;
14. playing with toy carts;
15. playing with toy bows;
16. guessing at letters traced in the air, or on a playfellow's back;
17. guessing the playfellow's thoughts;
18. mimicking of deformities.

Most, if not all, of these pastimes are still current. Although it is not always possible from the meagre descriptions given to identify them positively, the present paper aims at the identifying of those about which there can be little or no doubt and at the hazarding of some conjecture as to the identity of the rest.

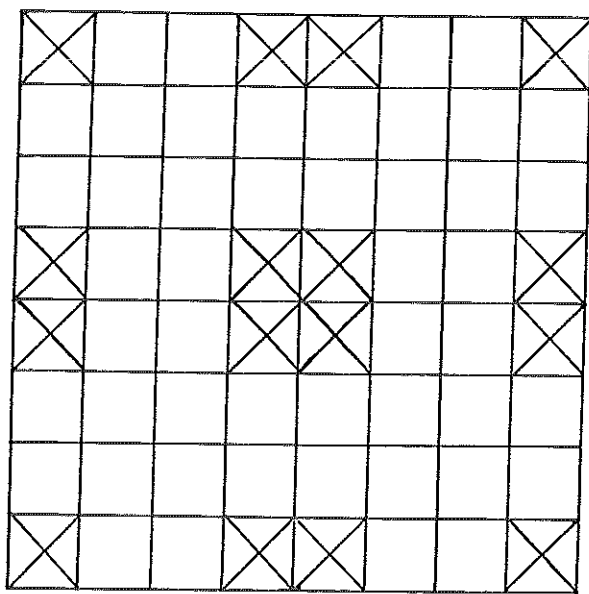
1. It is obvious that the reference here is to *Ashtapada* ("eight-square") and *Dasapada* ("ten-square"), two of the most ancient of Indian board-games. In the oldest games the board had an even number of squares, while in all existing games of the type the board has an odd number. *Ashtapada* and *Dasapada* could be played by either two or four players, each of whom entered his men on the crosscut squares in front of him. Movement was counterclockwise around the border and then clockwise around the inner squares, moves being made according to the throws of four cowries. Men in crosscut squares were immune from capture<sup>1</sup>. A similar game, but on a 6 × 6 board, is depicted on the coping of the Stupa of Bharhut<sup>2</sup>. The game of *Ashtapada* is mentioned also in the *Harivaṃsa*, where a contest between

<sup>1</sup> It was upon a board of this type that, according to tradition, the Persian vizier Vazurmīhr developed and demonstrated the new game of chess, which he had been challenged by its inventor, the Indian sage Tachtaritus, to explain. By so doing and by winning twelve games from Tachtaritus, the Persian won the wager that had been made and the Indians were forced to pay tribute. Vazurmīhr then created on the same kind of board the game of *nard*, which he in turn challenged the Indian players to explain. Unable to do so, they had to pay a second tribute to the Persian king, Chosrau Anōsharvan. — Although the crosscut squares no longer serve any purpose, they are still retained on Indian chess boards.

<sup>2</sup> A. Cunningham, *Stupa of Bharhut* (1879), pl. xlv. See also Jeannine Auboyer, *La vie publique et privée dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris, 1955), fasc. VI (*Les jeux et les jouets*), pl. 14, in which the date is given as probably the middle of the second century B. C. In the game depicted the players are using seven inscribed dice.

Rukmin and Balarama ends in a quarrel in which the board is used as a weapon<sup>1</sup>.

2. This way of playing would, of course, require intense concentration and a very retentive memory, faculties which the Buddha feels should be employed in more worthwhile pursuits.



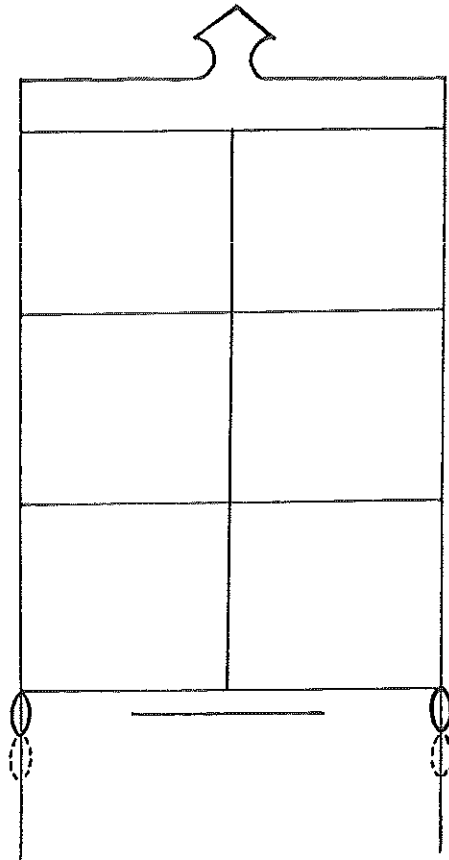
Ashtapada board

3. This is the game played in the Central Provinces under the name of *chikri billā* ("round brickbats") and called in Bengali *sāka-bhāta-khelā* ("the game of boiled rice and vegetables")<sup>2</sup>. In Tamil it is known as *pāṇḍi* or *trokkuḍu billā*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Lüders, "Das Würfelspiel im alten Indien", *Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (Philologisch-Historische Klasse), Neue Folge, Band IX, Nro. 2 (Berlin, 1907), p. 63. For other references to this game, see H. J. R. Murray, *History of Chess* (Oxford, 1913), p. 35. — Accounts of quarrels between players of board-games, frequently resulting in slayings, are numerous. Stories of killings over games of chess are of particularly frequent occurrence in the mediaeval romances.

<sup>2</sup> Charu Chandra Das Gupta, "A Type of Game Prevalent in the Central Provinces", *New Indian Antiquary*, VI (1943—44), 61; "The Boiled Rice and Vegetable Game", *Man in India*, XXII, 1 (January—March, 1942), 273—276.

<sup>3</sup> V. Raghavan, "The Game 'Chikri Billa'", *New Indian Antiquary*, VI (1943—44), 142.



*Chikri billā* diagram

In the accompanying diagram of *chikri billā* the compartments are by convention given the names of numbers. The first is *pahālī*, the second *dusrī*, the third *tisrī*, the fourth *chauthī*, the fifth *pachmī*, the sixth *chhatmī*, and the seventh *satmī*. The top of the diagram (8) is known as *pahāḍ* (mountain).

The game is played by two groups of children, usually between six and twelve years of age. Standing on the base line, a player of one of the groups tosses a rounded brickbat into the first compartment. He then hops in after it, kicks it out in the direction of the base line. In like manner he passes through all the other compartments in rotation, being careful not to step on a line or to kick the brickbat in such a way that it rests on one.

The successful traversing of the whole diagram by one of the parties is known as a *phalli*. Score is kept by drawing for each *phalli* a spearhead figure on an extension of one of the side lines and outside the diagram. The number of *phallis* necessary to win the game is decided upon beforehand.

The game appears to symbolize the climbing or the crossing over of a mountain<sup>1</sup>.

*Śāka-bhāta-khelā* resembles *chikri billā* in that it also has eight compartments and that a player who steps on a line or who kicks the brickbat so that it rests on a line loses his turn. However, there are several differences. For example, the player must not jump into the fifth compartment but must jump from *yamana* to *hiruni*<sup>2</sup>, and he is permitted to put both feet to the ground in the compartment called *jiruni*.

4. This is the game known to English-speaking children as Jackstraws. A number of long, thin sticks of various colors are placed in a heap on a table or other firm surface, and each of the players in turn, using one of the sticks as a rake, draws out as many as he can without touching the rest. The player who draws out the greatest number or the greatest number of a given color is the winner. I do not know whether or not the game survives in modern India.

5. The playing of dice games in India can be traced back to a very remote period, and games of this type have been popular from earliest times down to the present day. The earliest dice games were *vibhīṭaka*, which takes its name from the *vibhīṭaka* (*Terminalia Bellerica*), the fruits of which were used as

<sup>1</sup> In the game of *śāka-bhāta-khelā* the goal is called Buri Ganga, which is the name of a river in Dacca district. The author suggests that the game symbolizes the progress of a pilgrim to the Buri Ganga, where some religious festival is being celebrated.

<sup>2</sup> Compartment 5, which is a rectangle with diagonals, is known as *brāhmaṇa* (Brahmin). These crossed diagonal lines are symbolic of the *upavīta* (East Bengal, *paitā*) or sacred thread of a Brahmin, who today, however, wears only one, passing from the right shoulder to the left side of the waist. The *brāhmaṇa* is, because of these symbolic lines, regarded as too sacred to be touched by the feet and hence this compartment is never entered but jumped over. — Among Western nations the goal in the game of Hopscotch, of which the Indian game is a form, is usually termed "Heaven" or "Paradise".

dice<sup>1</sup>, and *paçaka*, in which dice made of wood or ivory were employed.

The ancient Indians, like the Chinese, were passionately devoted to gambling, and there are many references in the literature to their fondness for games of chance. In one of the hymns of the *Rigveda* (X, 34) a player laments the fact that he is unable to resist the fascination of gambling even though it has meant his ruin and that of his family, and a similar complaint appears in the famous play *The Little Clay Cart* (Act II), attributed to king Çudraka<sup>2</sup>.

As has already been noted, dice were used also in the playing of *Ashtapada*, *Dasapada*, and other board-games.

The symbolism present in dice games, their relation to religion and magic, and their representation in sculpture and painting have been ably treated by Mlle Auboyer<sup>3</sup>.

6. The allusion here is probably to the game known in modern India as *Gilli-Danda*<sup>4</sup>. The latter is played with a stick about two feet long (the *danda*) and a smaller one sharpened at

<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of the method of playing is given in K. de Vreese, "The Game of Dice in Ancient India (the Vibhîtaka)", *Orientalia Neerlandica* (1948), 349 ff.

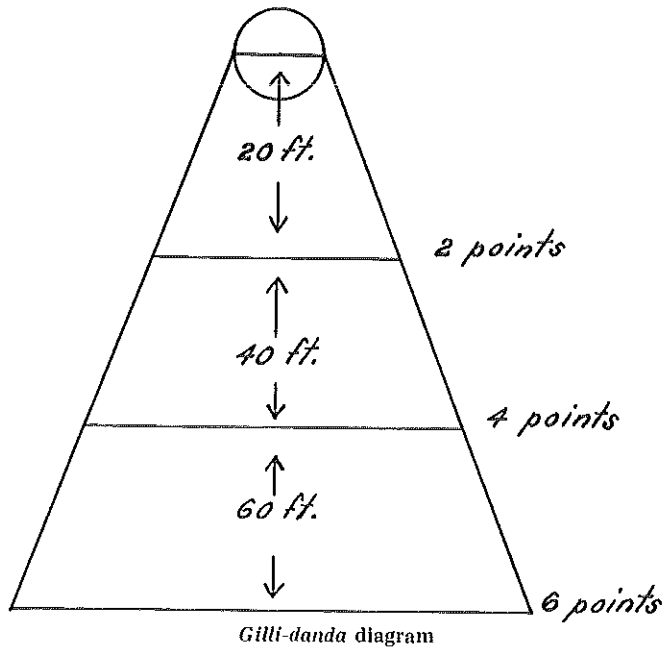
<sup>2</sup> In one of the stories of the *Kathasaritsagara*, two demons of the game of dice, Kall (One) and Dvapara (Two), take up their respective abodes in the bodies of the good king Nala and his brother Pushkara. The latter become dissolute and dishonest, and Nala loses his wealth. Finally the demons are routed by means of magic and the two brothers become once more their former virtuous selves. See N. M. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story: being C. H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara* (London, 1923), IV, 240 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 24—25; "De quelques jeux anciens en Asie Orientale", *France-Asie*, 85—86 (Juin-Juillet, 1953), 517—24; 87 (Août, 1953), 657—64.

<sup>4</sup> This game is known also as *Villi-dandu*, *Moi-danda*, *Pulat* or *Bombal* (Kota), *Eln* (Toda), etc. If the batter in the first of these hits the *gilli* so that it falls within jumping distance of the *gulli* and a player on the opposing team makes the jump, the former is out. This is a very popular game also among the Singhalese; see Leopold Ludovici, "The Sports and Games of the Singhalese", *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, V (1871—72), 28 (*Kally kelya*) and P. E. P. Deraniyagala, "Some Sinhala Combative, Field and Aquatic Sports and Games" (Colombo: National Museums of Ceylon, 1951), p. 32 (*Gudu*). For a somewhat more detailed description of *Gilli-danda* than that given here and for numerous parallels and analogues, see my "A Collection of Games from India, . . .", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Bd. LXXX, Heft 1 (1955), 90—92.

both ends (the *gilli*). Any number of players can take part, and the game can be played individually or by teams.

When two teams are competing, the manner of play is as follows:



(1) A circle three feet in diameter is drawn, in the center of which is dug a *gulli* or *badi* (hole).

(2) At a distance of twenty feet from the center of the circle is drawn a line parallel to the diameter. Two more parallel lines are then drawn, the second line twenty feet from the first and the third twenty feet beyond the second. The third line is thus sixty feet from the center of the circle. An equilateral triangle is now drawn with the third line as its base and its sides meeting the ends of the diameter of the circle.

(3) After the toss of a coin has determined which of the teams is to bat first, a player of the lucky team hits the *gilli* low and as far as he can. If it is caught while in the air, the player is out.

If it is not caught, he places his *danda* horizontal to the *gilli*, and the fielder tries to hit it from where the *gilli* landed. If he succeeds, the batter is out.

(4) Should the fielder fail to hit the *danda*, the batter's next step is to hit a *Ravan tolla* while standing in the circle. The term *Ravan tolla* means the placing of the *gilli* on the left fist, flinging it up, and knocking it as far as possible with the *danda*. If the batter fails to hit the *gilli* or if the struck *gilli* is caught in the air, he is out. If neither of these happens, he scores according to the line beyond which his *gilli* lands, as indicated on the diagram above.

(5) After the *Ravan tolla* comes the *Ram tolla*, which consists in placing the *gilli* in the palm, tossing it up, and hitting it as before. A successful *Ram tolla* is scored as explained in (4). The batter continues thus until he fails to hit the *gilli* or is caught out. Each player in turn scores as much as he can and then the individual scores are totaled to determine the winner<sup>2</sup>.

7. I am not aware that this form of amusement is still current in India, though it may be.

8. "The earliest toys of which models or records exist belong to the period of the Mohenjo-Daro, or Indus Valley Civilization, which archaeologists place between 3500 and 2750 B. C."<sup>1</sup> Among these models of toys are miniature balls made of *terra cotta*.

Although some ball games, e. g. *kanduka-nritya*, were participated in by both boys and girls, most appear to have been played by girls alone. The method of playing seems to have been very simple, apparently consisting merely of tossing the ball from one to another or of striking it with the open hand. That the pastime as indulged in by girls was graceful rather than strenuous is suggested by the many allusions to it in early lyric poetry<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For this description of *Gilli-danda* I am indebted to the kindness of Miss Jaya S. Patel, of Bombay.

<sup>2</sup> Kamala S. Dongerkery, *A Journey through Toyland* (Bombay, 1954), pp. 12—13.

<sup>3</sup> One is reminded here of the passage in the *Odyssey* in which Nausicaa, daughter of king Alcinous, and her maids are described as playing a game of ball on the bank of a river, in which they have just washed their clothing.



In 1939, Joseph and Ria Hackin discovered in Begram (Afghanistan) an ivory plaque, tentatively dated as of the second century A. D., on which is depicted a game of ball (apparently *akham*) in which three girls are taking part<sup>1</sup>. One in the foreground holds a ball in both hands as though she had just caught it; behind her and to the left, another has the right hand raised, palm forward, as though preparing to hit a ball thrown to her. Some of the lines forming the figure of the third girl have been effaced, so that it is impossible to determine what she is doing. A second ball lies on the ground near the foot of the first player<sup>2</sup>.

9—15. Both Buddhist and Jain literary works contain references to toys and pastimes such as these: the *chingulaka* (a windmill made from leaves), the *ratham* (chariot) and the cart<sup>3</sup>, the *bangkakka* (plough), and many others, all of which are still a part of the play-life of the modern Indian child.

16—17. Whether these games are played in India today I do not know. Apparently the former was played in somewhat the same manner as the Porto Rican and Cuban *Huevo o Araña*, in which one player, standing behind another, touches him on the back with his hand, challenging him to guess how the fingers were held (i. e. ends of thumb and forefinger touching, forefinger and middle finger separated, etc.)<sup>4</sup>. It seems probable that in

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hackin, *Nouvelles recherches archéologiques à Begram* (Paris, 1954), fig. 25. See also Auboyer, "Les jeux et les jouets", *loc. cit.*, pl. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Games in which the players used several balls were known also in ancient Egypt. A Middle Kingdom wall painting reproduced in Adolf Erman, *Aegypten und Aegyptisches Leben im Altertum* (Tübingen, 1923), p. 279, shows one girl throwing up a ball and catching it, and three others, one with arms crossed, juggling three balls each. Below these, two girls, carried by two others, are throwing and catching. One of them holds a ball in her left hand and is in the act of tossing another with her right; another is catching a ball just thrown. The riders are not mounted upon the backs of their "horses" but are being carried on the hips of the latter, who are using an arm each to keep them from falling. For a description of this particular form of ball game, see Erich Mindt, "Mädchen-Reiterballspiele, Tänze und Sonstiges vom ägyptischen Sport", *Der Erdball*, I (1926—1927), 29—32.

<sup>3</sup> Immortalized in the famous drama *Mrichhakatika*, in which the cart made of clay and that made of gold form the main theme.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the Spanish *Pico, zorro y zaina*; Flemish *Hamer-scheer-mes-lepel-forket-of-kuip*; German *Stipti, Fausti, Grusti, Platti*; Swedish *Pip, ram, tali, justi*; French *Ciseaux, marteau, couteau*; etc.

the latter game the first player was required to answer certain questions put to him by the second, the guesser, somewhat in the manner of the modern "Twenty Questions". It is difficult to see how there could have been any accuracy in the guessing otherwise.

18. This type of amusement (?) seems to have a strong appeal for most children of a certain age level and is to be found among all societies. It is generally discountenanced not only by religious teachers such as the Buddha but also by the chiefs, headmen, or elders of purely pagan societies, who warn that the imitators will be afflicted with the same deformity as that disfiguring the person mimicked. Notwithstanding all these injunctions, it is probably safe to assume that the mimicking of deformed or otherwise afflicted individuals has not decreased noticeably either in India or elsewhere.