



Journal of History, Art and Archaeology

Vol. 4, No. 1, 2024, pp. 33-40
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URL: www.arfjournals.com
<https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2024.v04i01.04>

AKṢAKRĪDĀ: GAME OF DICE AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN INDIAN ART

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Abstract: Since ancient times, several indoor games have been widely played in India and in other parts of the world. These indoor games are primarily for entertainment; however, in the Great Epic Mahābhārata a game of dice, primarily a mode of entertainment was used for political gains. When playing these games, players usually gamble based on Indian knowledge. However, outside India, it may vary depending on the player's interests. The level and seriousness of the game of dice in the case of the Mahābhārata ultimately resulted in war. In the Pauranic tradition, this dice game also played an important role between the Great God Śiva and his spouse Pārvatī. In Sanskrit texts, the word līlā is often mentioned, suggesting various types of divine plays. These include playful activities by divine beings, intended to promote hidden messages as in the case of Krishna and the activities that he performs at different stages of life. If it is about feelings or love, then it is Rāsa līlā; the narrative of activities during childhood would be called Bāl līlā, etc. Indian history and literature has featured a variety of games involving numbers and played while something was at stake. These are called Causara, Caupaḍa, Dyūtyakrīdā, Caturaṅga, Śataranja etc. The common factor is the use of numbers or dice, which is why they are called Akṣakrīdā in the present study. Only a few used dice while in some games it was not necessary. This study focuses on the representation of the Akṣakrīdā in visual arts based on archaeological and literary evidence. Additionally, there are overlaps and disparities between projected text and art. The latent nature of the game and changes in its association over time has also been discussed.

Received : 17 March 2024

Revised : 20 April 2024

Accepted : 26 April 2024

Published : 30 June 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pal, S. (2024). Akṣakrīdā: Game of Dice and its Portrayal in Indian Art. *Journal of History, Art and Archaeology*, 4: 1, pp. 33-40. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2024.v04i01.04>

Introduction

Akṣakrīdā is a game of dice. In literary references, it is clear that dice games have been in practice

since the Harappan period, although different titles and boards have been used over time. *Caturaṅga*

and *Śataranġa* were also utilised during the Mughal period, both of which correspond to the description of chess. Later, poetry and literature employed both *Śataranġa* and *Caupaḍa*, but the same board can be observed in the graphic portrayals. The usage of dice is common. *Akṣakrīḍā* is also known as *Dyūtyakrīḍā* and *Caupaḍa*,

Vātsyāyana lists *Dyūtyakrīḍā* (*Dyūtyaviśeṣa*) as one of the sixty-four types of art in *Kāmasūtra* (Dwivedi: 2010: 53-60). Later, in the commentaries after Yaśodhara Paṇḍita *Dyūtya* is presented as *Akṣakrīḍā*. The dice game is widespread in India under several names, and it is a hybrid of contemporary Chess and Ludo played by two people. The earliest specimen of dice in the Indian subcontinent was retrieved from the Indus Valley sites, datable to c. 2000 BCE, and they are presently housed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. It is a terracotta dice about 2 centimetres cubes with a few dots imprinted upon it from one to six (Topsfield: 2006: 315-316). Yet another terracotta dice (Account No 269) recovered from Mohenjo-Daro, dated c.2500-1900 BCE is in the collection of Chatrapati Sahuji Maharaja Vastu Sangrahalaya. Mumbai.

The explanation of *Caupaḍa*, is presented in *Kaśīkhaṇḍa* of *Skandapurāṇa* (Shastri & Bhatt: 1951:362). According to Nārada's understanding of the game, twelve months are twelve houses, thirty days dark and light fortnights of fifteen days each are the chess men (pawn), two transitions of the sun are the two dice, and the two stakes are victory and failure (*śrṣṭi* and *pralaya*). Goddess's success is *śrṣṭi*, while *Dhūrjaṭi*'s¹ success is *pralaya*. The duration of the game is the upkeep of the universe, and this enormous cosmic egg is the play of the king and goddess, neither of whom she beats. According to the narrator, the gaming board would have resembled Fig.4.1. The black and white squares depict dark and bright fortnights, respectively. This combination of black and white squares was originally a *Caturaṅga* or *Śataranġa* element that was eventually assimilated into the *Caupaḍa* board.

Discussion

Skanda Purāṇa tells the story of Śiva and Pārvatī, when they played the game of dice in another narration. Once Nārada went to *Gandhamādana*² to visit the great couple, and in a playful mood, he told Śiva that he went there in a playful mood; Both Śiva and Parvati asked him what to play; Nārada suggested the game of dice. After an ample discussion on the nature of this game, Pārvatī agreed to play the game with Śiva, keeping Nārada a witness. The great couple started the game, and Śiva won, on this Nārada-teased Pārvatī, and Pārvatī challenged Śiva for another round.

Śiva lost almost all of his possessions, and Pārvatī stated that she had defeated Śiva. On hearing this, the *Gaṇas* with Nārada became aggressive, and soon the temper of the couple rose, and they were in the midst of a fight. Nārada made matters worse by saying that Pārvatī was lying and that that Śiva had willingly lost. Bhṛṅgī tried to restrain Pārvatī, but in anger, she snatched everything from Śiva as he had lost everything, even the loincloth. Śiva asked her to give him his loincloth, but she refused by adding that in *Dārukavana*, he wandered naked, and the ladies were fond of him. Finally, in anger, Śiva left the mountain and went into meditation and Pārvatī returned to her abode (Shastri & Bhatt: 1950:287-300).

Another account of *Padma Purāṇa*, (Deshpande: 1988: 2377-2378) states, that after worshipping Lakṣmī in the form of a cow, Pārvatī started to play the game of dice and she continued to win, and Śiva even lost even his undergarment end, as also lost Nandī, Snake, and Moon. It is described as a game of fortune with an entirely different perspective.

In the Buddhist text the *Jātaka* tale of Vidhurpaṇḍita also mentions about the game of dice between Punnakayakṣa and king Dhanañjaya where Punnaka wins over Dhanañjaya and takes Vidhurpaṇḍita with him (Cowell: 1907: 134-135). However, in Buddhist texts, these games are prohibited, and these were condemned in early Brahmanism too. At Ajanta this narration can be

seen in the form of painting while another stone relief is preserved at Indian Museum Kolkata. The relief is inscribed with the letters *ci-tu-pa-da-si-la*. The actual narration is unidentified however a board game with thirty six squares can be easily seen between the two parties.³

As per the description, the board for the game of dice given in *Skanda Purāṇa* appears to resemble the present board of Ludo. Even the description of *Caupaḍa*, given in *Ain-e-Akbari* (Blochmann: 1993:315-316), matches the board which corresponds with the description of Pauranic texts; however, instead of six squares, it mentions eight squares, making a of total ninety six.

Caturaṅga and *Paccīsī*, on the other hand, are played on a similar board known as *Aṣṭapadī*, which has eight squares on one side and a total of sixty four like contemporary chess. Similarly, it can be played with ten and twelve squares by renaming the board. Dice is also used, which changes the character of the game. Chess's original Indian name was *Aṣṭapada*, which means "eight-legged spider" in Sanskrit (Brown: 1964). It was played using white or black dice on an 8x8 chequered board. The 10x10 *Daśapada* and 9x9 *Saturankam* were two additional Indian boards. Its name is very similar to that of *Caturaṅgiṇīsenā*, which has been referenced in several studies, including the *Mahābhārata*. *Caturaṅgiṇīsenā* refers to the four traditional divisions of an army that consists of chariots, elephant corp, cavalry, and infantry.

Chess is focused on strategic fighting and plotting to vanquish another, whereas *Caupaḍa*, is centred on luck and fortune, but *Caturaṅga* combines the best of both. Dice is for chance, while movement is for strategy. A number on the dice is given to a certain piece, and how that piece travels indicates the player's strategy. For example, the number one is allocated to the king and pawn, and if one appears, it is time to move the king or pawn. However, the player decides how to move and whether to use a king or a pawn. It is one of the four players who gain a stronger

position in war and politics based on chance and talent.

Coming to the visual reference of the game sculptures at Elephanta, and Ellora depict the scene of Śiva and Pārvatī playing a game of dice on a large canvas, and the same theme is projected in a very compact format in mediaeval time. At Ellora, this can be seen in Rāmeśvra (cave 21) and Dhūmarlenā (cave 29). Both caves are credited to Early Kalachurīs. This theme is also depicted in the Daśāvatāra cave at Ellora, cave 2 of Elephanta, and Jogeshvari cave, on friezes with the other sculptural themes.

The same theme may be found in the art of the Kalachurīs during their reign in Ḍāhalamaṇḍala, Central India. This format was virtually identical to the representations of *Umā-Maheśvaramūrti* and *Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti* (Pal: 2022:29-30). In *Rāvaṇānugraha*, just a small figure of Rāvaṇa, similar to *bhāravāhaka*, is represented while Śiva and Pārvatī participate in the dice game. The identification for *Caupaḍa*, is *Gaṇa* teasing Naṇḍī in the lower band of the sculpture.

Separate boards can be found in almost all these depictions. However, the artist may not have paid attention to the game board, and the theme is implied by the repercussions, that of Pārvatī clutching dice symbolising her victory and dominance over Śiva (Fig.4.2).

Although the essence of the game suggested in the Puranic texts is a divine and cosmic play since a divine couple is playing it, the incidents and storyline of the play are provided as if it were an ordinary play. Śiva and Pārvatī mock each other because of their different personalities. Pārvatī is adamant since she is the princess of Himalaya and was born in the human race with animal instincts, whereas Śiva is calm and *Yogīśvara*. As a humiliated spouse, he felt ashamed and fled from the scene. The screenplay is filled with love, passion, and sexuality, with supreme masters acting and subsidiaries as audience.

Brahmanical architecture and sculpture prevailed, particularly in northern India, until the early mediaeval period. More Islamic architecture

is visible at the arrival of Islam. During the reign of the Mughals, miniature paintings played the role of Brahmanic sculptures. These paintings are mostly concern religious themes and literature. *Rītikāla* literature is full of *rasa* and aesthetic delight; there are a lot of works composed during this period that became the major theme of visual art.

Bhāṇudatta's *Rasamañjarī* was one among them, and in his work he refers to *Prāudhā Nāyikā* (RM.1.97) (Onians 2009:86), a woman who can debate and stand firm against her husband.

Śiva and Pārvaṭī were gambling, and Śiva kept Pārvaṭī's jewellery, and when challenged, he called upon water, fire, and even snake (poison) to establish his innocence. All his attempts were denounced by Pārvaṭī, who stated that she could not believe them since water dwells on his head in the shape of Ganga, fire in his third eye, and poison in his body, all of which might be partial, so she denied their testimony and strongly demanded that her jewellery be returned.

Devīdāsa of Nurpur in the Basohli School depicts this theme extremely brilliantly and passionately. Śiva and Pārvaṭī are represented with *Caupaḍa* board upon tiger skin, with Pārvaṭī requesting her necklace and Śiva clutching Pārvaṭī's necklace. The picture is in the public domain and housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art⁴. The term *Dyūtya* appears in the book, and Devidas depicts *Caupaḍa* board in the artwork. This might be because *Caupaḍa* was alluded to during gaming in the Pauranic tradition (Fig.4.3).

The tale of *Rasamañjarī* and its representation by Devīdāsa as *Akṣakrīḍā* are evocative of a *Nāyikā*'s conduct. Like Bhāṇudatta, Devīdāsa employed poetic language in his visual art, but he enhanced it by using a chrome yellow backdrop and red clothes to symbolise romance and passion, which is unusual for Śiva. Vivid yellow represents monarchy, and a tree of various kinds on either side represents the distinct personality of Śiva and Pārvaṭī. The tree can be regarded as a parasol with richer hues shading Pārvaṭī, while it is green and more muted towards Śiva. Unlike earlier, there

is no feeling of cosmic play in the lyric or the visual. It is centred on aesthetic pleasure, which is dominated by the sense of love.

In his *Rasikapriyā*, Keśavadāsa utilised both the expressions *Caupaḍa* and *Śataranjan* in different settings. He refers to one exemplary in the eighth section (8.17), (Misra: 1958: 167) when Rādhā devises a chess-like trick to prevail upon Kṛṣṇa. Love is the king, beauty is the knight, and restraint is the elephant's turn. Her fretful eyes resemble a pony with endless speed, her creative mind is a chariot, and her virtues are infantry men. The stage is set for a battle, and the truth will come out at some point, and who will emerge triumphant? And that's how *Sakhī* informs Kṛṣṇa. Chess is skilfully incorporated with *Śṛṅgāra rasa* character and repercussions. As *Skanda Purāṇa* attached *Caupaḍa* to the cosmic drama, *Rasikapriyā* endeavours to fabricate *Caturaṅga* in the adoration play. This scene was painted by the popular Mewar School artist Sahibdin, and is currently housed in the Public Authority Exhibition Hall, Udaipur (Topsfield: 2009:28). Sahibdin split the material with three flat fields in his way. The top most depicts working with a window through which *Sakhī* is narrating to Krishna the entire circumstances. Rādhā and other *Sakhīs* participated in *Caturaṅga* in the centre and were attended by two workers, each holding a water pitcher and a flywhisk, suggesting the intensity and type of activity that existed apart from everything else. The epitome and representation of the game is projected on the base red plain. In the writing, Rādhā's state or mentality is portrayed through the round of *Caturaṅga*. The term *Caturaṅga* is utilised as a symbol, although the first importance or *tātparya* is the tale of Rādhā's adoration after meeting Krishna. In one more setting of *Rasikapriyā* chapter twelve (*RP.12.3*), (Misra: 1958: 220), *Sakhī* tells Rādhā, "You invest all your energy with Krishna assuming some pretence of playing *Śataranjan*. Assuming your mother finds out, she will take care of you at home. I'm simply expressing it for your advantage, yet you're lifting your temples and

looking at me. There are numerous other exquisite women; however, you are drifting over the skies". Rādhā, a *nāyikā* of favourable luck, was sitting with her friends one day, immersed in a round of *Caupaḍa*. Kṛṣṇa showed up from behind them and said something. Rādhā had shown an interest in pulling a trick. No one perceived how their looks merged like a bolt. Once more, Sahibdin's portrayal of this refrain in which Keśavadāsa (RP.3.71)(Misra: 1958: 96) utilised the term *Caupaḍa* is at present in the Dahejia collection of Kṛṣṇa workmanship created by Harsha V Dahejia (Dahejia: 2013:170). After cautiously inspecting the literary and visual references, it is evident that *Akṣakrīḍā* is something other than an indoor pre-packaged game. Before the Pauranic custom, both Brahmanism and Buddhism sentenced this game attributable to its tendency and repercussions. As in the *Mahābhārata*, this might prompt catastrophe. That was the game for sovereignty and nobility, or for individuals a chance of danger, like their own effects, property, and human relations. The equivalent is valid in the *Vidhurapaṇḍita Jātaka*. That may be the reason it was censured in the first text. On *dyūtyakrīḍā*, it is one of the 64 kinds of art. Other than *Artha*, *Dharma*, and *Mokṣa*, these abilities are depicted to prevail in the *kāmapuruṣārtha* of life. Thus, it was significant for a *Gaṇikā* (courtesan) to comprehend the specialty of betting, which should be possible through any means and any board game. The profound significance may be that she ought to know the specialty of winning or that she ought to make someone else win without understanding that he has lost everything. To succeed in the *Kāma*, there is a kind of prerequisite attached to the game with a connection to its tendency. The blessedness of the game was portrayed and attached to the god in the Pauranic tradition, subsequently Śiva and Pārvatī were shown to be engaged with it. They are the two representations of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* respectively, and the game between them proposes the connection of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*, which is expected maintain harmony. On the opposite side, Śiva and Pārvatī as a

couple are the epitome of sexuality, particularly following Kālidāsa's thesis of *Kumārasambhava*. This game has areas of strength with *Śṛṅgāra* rasa, and thus it fits into the association of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the writing of *Rītikāla* writers. The round of dice was also chronicled by Akbar's biographer in his *Ain-e-Akbari*, exhibiting its alliance with the noble class; however, its relationship with *Śṛṅgāra* and *Rati* was laid out in *Rītikāla* writing, trailed by smaller than expected canvases. As stated earlier, the settings related to the adoration for Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and *Akṣakrīḍā* were portrayed metaphorically or symbolically. Hence the results and use of *Akṣakrīḍā* in affection are likewise portrayed. This game tracks down new outlets and is brought into the public domain because of a smaller than normal canvas. This game's illustrations lay out its relationship with society's culture. The picture of *Caupaḍa* in the folktale of Dholā-Māru recommends the couple's commonality. At the time, it was likewise addressed to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, as well as Śiva and Pārvatī. All are connected to sensations of affection and energy. This is found in the smaller than normal works of art of Marwar displayed at the Mehrangarh Museum (Fig.4.4).

As explained above, *Rītikāla* scholars involved *Caupaḍa* as a device to portray *Śṛṅgārarasa* while describing the outline of original copies with stanzas. Artists portrayed the subject taking visual freedom; however in the portrayal of fables and elegant scenes it evolved as an apparatus to portray the closeness between a couple. Maharaja Takhat Singh is portrayed in the Marwar School of painting enjoying *Akṣakrīḍā* with his female companion. This addresses the joy of relaxation somehow or another, that additionally falls under the general class of affection. Takhat Singh's depiction is utilised as Dholā in the portrayal of Dholā-Māru. To convey the couple's closeness, the artist utilised *Caupaḍa* as a strategy to address their isolation. Also, Takhat Singh is depicted in the garden, playing *Akṣakrīḍā*, while showing elegant delight. They are not betting; they are simply partaking in the experience of playing

unlike the game of dice in the *Mahābhārata* and *Skanda Purāna*. Through the game, they are truly engrossed in the magnificence of nature and time. The floor in the composition is white, the background is quiet and exquisite with trees and water, and in the foreground are wellsprings with blossoms, which might address the couple's internal considerations (Fig. 4.5).

Conclusion

An evident shift in the portrayal *Akṣakrīḍā* can be seen from early time to the modern in the literature as well and visuals depiction. The game was visualised with its aristocratic association and transformed in the cosmic play of divinity. This transformation could be the outcome of social as well as political factors. Much transformation took place during the Mauryan period when they congregated all the republics under one umbrella, followed by a major transformation during the time of the Gupas. In *Kāmasūtra* this act is accredited with the stature of fine arts and not a game while it was condemned in early Brahmanism and Buddhist tradition. Later when Indian art faced a revivalism under the custodianship of great Mughals, this theme was projected in art. However more than visuals it finds its reference in literature that transformed into miniature paintings in the form of illustrated manuscripts. During this time the nature of this game changed to that of a pleasure activity. It was a medium to relish the amorous and romantic feeling. At the same time in the literary instances of this game were woven the epitome of love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa that established its sanctity although it was totally amorous. Similarly *Akṣakrīḍā*, was incorporated into the court paintings and visual folklores metaphorically

From ancient times to the present, there has been a clear change in how *Akṣakrīḍā* has portrayed in literature and visuals. The game's representation of aristocratic connotations initially changed into the cosmic drama of divinity. This change could have resulted from a variety of factors, including social and political.

The Mauryan era saw significant changes as they united all the republics under one government, and the Gupta era saw even more substantial deviations. In *Kāmasūtra*, this practice is regarded as a work of great art rather than a game, but it was frowned upon in early Buddhism and Brahmanism. This theme was later reflected in art when Indian art faced a revivalism under the Great Mughals. More so than images, though, it is found in literature that has been translated into images through illustrated manuscripts. At this point, the game's focus shifted to being a recreational activity. It served as a vehicle for savouring the passionate and amorous mood. Simultaneously, this game was depicted in literature alongside the epitome of love - Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa which established its sanctity; however, it was entirely amorous. Similarly *Akṣakrīḍā*, was absorbed into the visual folklore, allegorically.

Illustrations

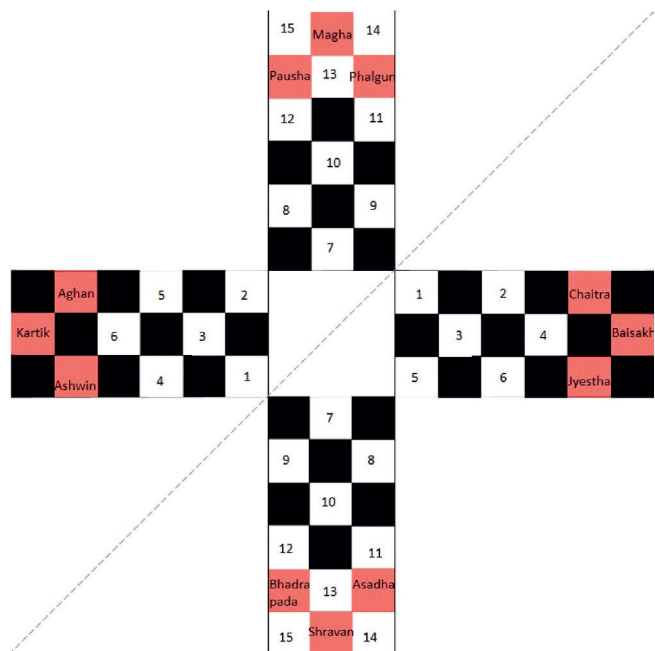


Fig 4.1: Representation of *Caupaḍa* board as per *Skanda Purāna*



Fig. 4.2: Śiva-Pārvatī playing Game of Dice., presently at Rani Durgawati Museum, Jabalpur. ©Saurabh Pal.

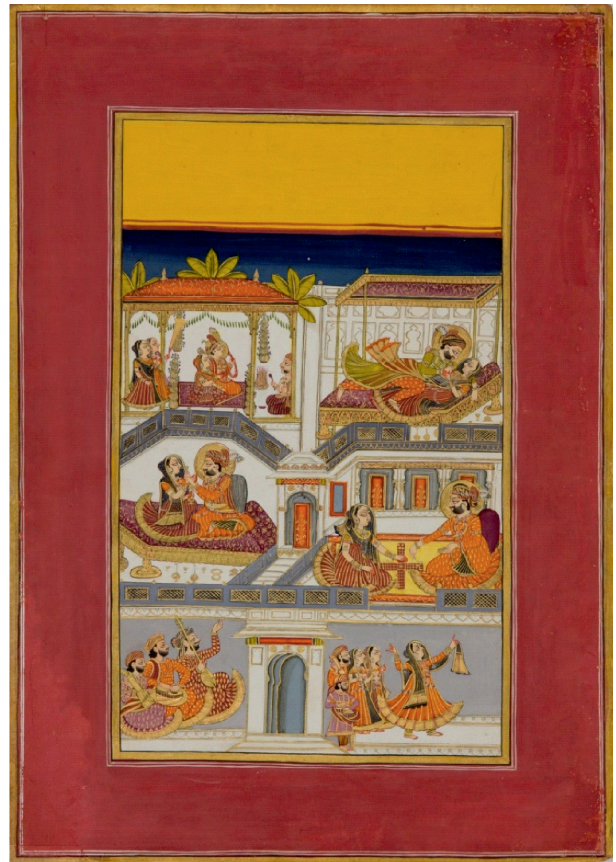


Fig.4.4 Folio from Dholā-Māru series. Photo courtesy: MMT



Fig.4.3 Bhāṇudatta's *Rasmañjarī* : Śiva and Pārvatī playing *Caupaḍa*. Courtesy: wiki commons.

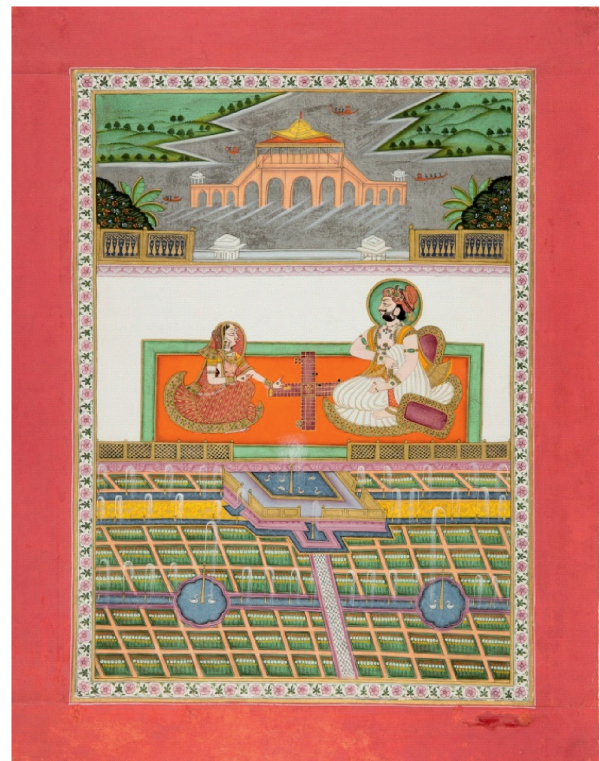


Fig.4.5 Maharaja Takhat Singh playing *Caupaḍa* with Maharani in palace garden.. Photo courtesy: MMT

Notes

1. Dhūrjaṭi is an epithet of Śiva, also used in *Mahābhārata*. Also mentioned in the 'Plate of Lalitaśūradeva' (853-854 CE).
2. As per the *Kumārasambhava* of Kālidāsa, *Gandhamādana* is a mountain in Himalayas at the same time it is also believed that the location of this mountain is in the South of Indian subcontinent near Rāmeśvaram.
3. Ac no 407,408. Ahuja, P Naman, 2022, By Strategic Design and With Some Luck: Researching Quotidian Histories, *Commemorating CSMVS Centenary 1922-2022*, 195-210
4. Ac No. 57.185.2. Bhāṇudatta's *Rasamañjarī*, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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