

SEVEN GAMES OF INDIA IN THE 6TH CENTURY B.C. AS DEPICTED IN THE MAHĀTANHĀSAÑKHAJASUTTA OF THE MAJJHIMANIKĀYA

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Introduction

The popular scene of India in 6th century BC is generally described as one of rigorous philosophical tension – where people from all walks of life discuss serious philosophical issues concerning human life, its aims and final emancipation. However, a deeper investigation into the Pāli literature presents a fairly pleasant picture where people of the time appear lively, not mechanized, but, very much closer to the way things happen at the present time. Philosophers were discussing metaphysical issues seeking the ultimate reality of existence; specialists in different professions, arts and techniques were doing their jobs; and children, just like today, were in a world of their own playing innocent games. In my research, I have found that some of the games we see today have their antecedence in Pāli literature and are transferred to us in a gradual process of development in over two and a half millennia. This study will be of use to understand the history of some games of South Asian villages. It will also help us to have a glimpse of the ordinary life of the Buddha's time when philosophical thinking reached its peak and the Buddha declared that he had discovered the perfect solution to human suffering. Further, the research in a broader perspective hints that an evaluation of the sixth century Indian society is possible through analyzing

these games and materials used to play them.

Methodology

The subject of games was never the central point of any of Buddha's discussions. Games are used mostly to illustrate a fact, for example the gradual and natural growth of a child, and are ultimately related to philosophical explanations concerning the behaviour of the mind and matter of beings. The list of seven games, I present here, are recorded in the *Mahātanhāsankhajasutta* of the Majjhimanikāya. The list also appears in various other places of the Tipiṭaka along with names of other games. This subject has not been treated independently by past scholars. The translators of the passages, in respective translations, and lexicographers have discussed these games to some extent in different places. Here, I hope to collect these explanations comparing them with the traditional definitions available in Pāli commentaries, e.g. those of Venerable Buddhaghosa of the 5th century A.D., and elaborating, wherever possible, by discussing the instruments used and methods of playing the games. The English renderings are mostly those found in the translations of the passage, but, in my discussion, I give some slightly variant forms of some of the popular renderings. I have attempted to give an etymological

explanation of each of these games and wherever necessary, I have referred to the previous studies for the authoritative etymological explanations.

The Seven Games

1. *vaṅkaka* [*vaṅka+ka*] – This term is translated as ‘toy-plough’ following the explanation *khuddakanāṅgala* given by Venerable Buddhaghosa (5th century A.D.) in his commentaries. Most probably the *vaṅkaka* was made of wood or sticks and village children of that time imitated the way the plough was used by the elders. However, the method of playing the game is not very clear from the evidence available.

2. *ghaṭṭikā* [*ghaṭṭa+ka*] – This term is translated as ‘tip-cat’. An explanatory definition is given in the commentary as, *ghaṭṭikā* is ‘a game played using two sticks: one long and the other short. It is played by hitting the shorter stick with the longer one.’ *Ghaṭṭikā* is still known to South Asian countries, like Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka etc. In Bangladesh it is known as *ḍāṅguli khelā*. The longer stick in a *ḍāṅguli khelā*, should be about 1½ ft and the shorter stick about 6 inches. There are certain rules for preparing the sticks and playing the game with them.

3. *ciṅgulaka* [*ciṅgula+ka*] – this is a toy windmill made of palm leaves etc. made to move by winds coming from the opposite direction. An etymological explanation is suggested by Rev. Richard Morris, viz., that the word is derived from a verbal root ‘*ciṅg*’. In Bangladesh

presently these toy-windmills are made of coconut leaves and hard papers.

4. *mokkhacika* [*mokkha+cika*] – Ven. Buddhaghosa defines *mokkhacika* using a synonymous expression: *samparivattakakīḷā* which directly means ‘somersault’ and therefore indicates such acrobatic performances where the body becomes so flexible that one is able to bend down either towards the front or behind to touch the ground and being in that position roll like a wheel. The use of a stick in playing *mokkhacika*, in the traditional definition, is not very clear. Perhaps it indicates that one may even keep or throw a stick and roll keeping the stick in a middle position. *Mokkhacika* reminds us of various acrobatic feats in the Olympic Games.

5. *pattāḥhaka* [*patta+āḥhaka*] – a toy made of leaves to measure sand etc. used by children in their games. *Āḥhaka* is an important term to understand the instruments used for measurements during the Buddha’s time.

6. *rathaka* [*ratha+ka*] – this is a toy car. This was made probably imitating the horse-carriages and carts of that time. How it is made and played is not very clear. Perhaps it was made of clay and sticks and a group of children would push each one’s car from a common starting point to see whose car reaches the end point first. *Rathaka* gives an idea of the primitive stage of various car races, horse-races etc.

7. *dhanuka* [*dhanu+ka*] – Venerable Buddhaghosa simply introduces this as a ‘small-bow’

[*khuddakadhamu*]. As to how or using what materials these bows were made is not very clear. However, the procedure of playing the game could probably be by shooting arrows, to see whose arrow of the group of young children reaches a longer distance.

Conclusion

My research introduces the early forms of the seven games some of which still exist in the same form and some of which are further developed. It is an opportunity to emphasize the fact that when we talk about the time of the Buddha we should not completely forget the normal lives of people. In fact, the games discussed here contribute greatly to compare the

present society with that of the past. The reference to games in the Buddha's discourses is yet another example to document the Buddha's excellent methods of teaching, illustrating serious philosophical issues through examples from everyday life.

References

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