



6. Some Playing Cards of Rajasthan

by R. V. Leyden

Rajasthan is one of the few places in India where the indigenous card games of India have kept alive. The old games are still being played and the little round hand-painted cardboard cards are still being made by the artisans of the cottage toy industry in Jaipur, Sawai Madhopur, Karauli and elsewhere. There must have been formerly many more centres of making playing cards, as it is to be expected that every court in every little state employed court or local artists to paint playing cards apart from their normal duties of painting portraits and devotional miniatures.

The antecedents of the card games in India are not known with certainty. They are first mentioned in the times of Emperor Bubar and Akbar. The Persian name for the game 'Ganjifa' indicates that it was imported by the Mughals from Persia. On the other hand, Akbar claims to have invented and introduced the normal Ganjifa game himself, simplifying an older and more complicated game with distinct Hindu features. It is therefore possible that an indigenous card game existed in India before the Muslim invasions and that this game in several variations developed out of the chess game. The curious thing about this assumed development is only that nowhere in Indian literature

are card games mentioned, while chess and dice games go back to the very early Indian traditions. It is however certain that the widespread use of the card game in India took place after 1500 and that it was found in succeeding centuries practically in every part of India in various forms. Rajasthan probably got its craze for the card game from Delhi and it is possible that the courts passed on the game itself and the styles of playing cards to the people.

The two main types of games are the 'Ganjifa' game proper with eight suits of 12 cards each, based on the various departments of Akbar's court, and the 'Dasavatara' game of 10 suits of 12 cards each, based on the ten incarnations of Vishnu. While one can easily recognize a few main styles in the general features and appearances of these games, the variations in execution are really endless, as every patron or even the individual artists were free to introduce decorative features of their own. One will find, for instance, that any kind of illustration or decoration is introduced into numerical cards. These carry normally only the symbols of their suit (for instance, swords, suns, arrows, cows, horses, etc.) in the corresponding number. In more elaborate cards various illustrations are added. In one





set, the whole Krishna legend has been illustrated on various cards. The imagination and the skill of the artist was lavished particularly on the execution of the honour cards which often have the grace and delicacy of miniatures.

Cards were made practically from every material ranging from gold and silver over ivory and rhinoceros skin to wood, paper and stiffened cloth. The influence of current styles in painting is naturally felt in every card game. Some are painted in the Mughal style of Rajasthan, others in more rustic and local styles, reflecting the various developments of painting in Rajasthan.

The elaborate sets of cards made for princes and members of the courts go under the name of 'Durbar' cards. One can trace how the features of the Durbar cards, by a process of simplification (because of their mass production) entered into the games made for the ordinary people. Even today one can recognize the rich pageant of feudal Rajput life in the simple round paper cards one buys in the toy shops of Jaipur. They are made in the size of eight anna or one Rupee coins, and some of them have, instead of the usual plain vermillion backs, a mottled brown and yellow which is obviously imitating the pattern of the costlier tortoise shell or rhinoceros skin used in some of the Durbar sets.



1 Cards from a Durbar set made of stiffened and lacquered cloth. This is pure folk art, reminiscent of the decorations painted on the walls of houses in Rajasthan. These cards belong to the 'Kali' (Vishnu's tenth and future incarnated) suit in which white horses are the numerical symbols or 'pips'. dia. 2-1/2". 19th cent. Amber.

2 & 3 Six cards of the 'Sword' suit (shamshar) of a Ganjifa game illustrated with hunting scenes and with scenes of Krishna's life painted in a vivid Rajasthani style which recalls the delicacy and grace of miniature painting. Probably early 18th cent. Paper board, dia. 2 1/2". Courtesy National Museum.

4 These cards of the 'Sun' suit of a Ganjifa game decorated with hunting scenes reflecting the love of this princely court at Rajasthan courts. Paper board, dia. 2 1/2". Courtesy National Museum.

5 & 6 Two cards of the 'Sun' suit of an elaborate 'durbar' set of Ganjifa cards painted in the Rajasthani Mughal style on tortoise shell or rhinoceros skin. Probably 18th cent. 2-1/4 X 2-1/4". The rich splendour of a feudal court finds expression in these lovely little tablets, done with exquisite taste and a feeling of preciousness.

7 Cards from a military game in which various cadres of the armed forces such as horsemen, foot soldiers, elephant-riders, chariots etc. are featured. The use of animals of the endless variations in card-games, many of which may have been invented or designed by individual patrons according to their own fancies. There are other games which feature different birds or animals as the suit 'Colours'. 18th cent. paper board, dia. 2X3 1/2". Courtesy National Museum.

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Von Leyden, R.

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