Historical Values of Traditional Ganjifa Paintings

INTRODUCTION

Many mysteries lie hidden in the pack of playing cards, which has been with us since the 14th century. Why three court cards and the remainder pips? What do the oldest surviving cards look like? An enormous diversity of playing cards styles, formats and designs has seen the light of day. The cardboard courts, brightly coloured, are more than just a game. They have been a focus for design, advertising or propaganda, reflecting past eras and ways of life... a little encyclopædia of social history!

Ganjifa cards are not merely playing cards, but a way of life for the artisan. Making the Ganjifa cards involves a tedious process, often involving all the members of the artists’ family, with individual responsibility depending upon age and ability. Apart from being a part of traditional games, these cards are fascinating objects in themselves – they incorporate aspects of court art, courtly culture and art, and Hindu religious symbolism. The cards are packed in painted boxes with sliding lids that are as beautifully made as the cards inside. Ganjifa is an intrinsic part of an artistic tradition and the card games unravel myth, legend, lore and a cosmological picture of the world.

How did the extraordinary designs of the court cards evolve, full of semi-circles and meaningless diagonal shapes? Are the pictures based upon any historical personalities? Has this question ever crossed your mind while playing cards amongst friends? Is the art of Ganjifa a living or dying tradition? If this question were to be answered by art connoisseurs, a majority of them would be left clueless. Unfortunately this is a reflection of the state of awareness with regard to Ganjifa, the traditional art of playing cards in India.
The game first became popular at court, in the form of lavish sets of precious stone-inlaid ivory or tortoise shell (darbar kalam). It later spread to the general public, whereupon cheaper sets (bazār kalam) would be made from materials such as wood, palm leaf, or pasteboard. Ganjifa cards are circular and traditionally hand-made by local artisans. The suits are composed of twelve subjects on coloured backgrounds, with pip cards that run from 1 to 10, and two court cards, of a minister or counsellor, and a king. The precise style and arrangement of the decoration on any set is dependent on its artist. The designs of the cards use motifs from the ten avatars of Vishnu.

Many theories have been put forward about the origin of playing cards and claims have been made by many a country as their birthplace. The exact origin of card games and playing cards is subject to a great deal of speculation and misinformation. There are many divided opinions, theories and contradictions in the historical research of card games and playing cards. However, playing cards most certainly not an invention of one person, but rather the result of a gradual development of different games being played in many different regions of the World, throughout the centuries. Can you guess a country by its playing cards? As Dr Von Leaden (Card collector) explains, the introduction of Ganjifa cards into India was probably an example of this, since it seems likely that these, the earliest playing cards known in India, were first introduced either by the Mughal or by earlier Muslim rulers. The effect is not restricted to the first introduction of playing cards, however. The most interesting card patterns are in India, Persia, China, Japan, Germany, Spain, England etc. The cards there are so different, they are easily recognized. It is believed that playing cards date back to the 15th century in England. The earliest evidence occurs in a parliament act where importing of foreign cards was prohibited because of a petition made by the local card makers. It was also known that families in England played cards on various holidays and festive occasions. During the reign of Henry VII, the accounts of the court refer to the card debts of the Queen. Once in India; Ganjifa acquired remarkable characteristic, their secular shape and their large number of suits. Japan initially missed out on the craze, and it was not another three centuries
Dasavatara Tas (Ritual Playing cards) in Vishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, Early 20th Century A.D.
before Portuguese sailors introduced playing cards in the late sixteenth century. However, Japanese card-matching games involving images and poetry were rapidly developed.

In the literature of playing cards, several European Countries and Egypt, India, China and Korea have been given the honor of having devised this ingenious instrument for the exercise of the mental prowess of deduction and combination. It is possible that Chinese Playing Cards using money as suit signs, spread westward, during the thirteenth century and were modified en route.

But, they belong to the broad category of trick-taking games. The earliest mention of playing cards is as early as 1294, when a court case was brought to the attention of Emperor Kublai Khan (1215-1294) concerning some Chinese gamblers who were caught with cards and wood-blocks for printing them. By the fourteenth century, cards had appeared in Europe and probably in Persia, from where they were brought to India.

It is difficult to tell when card games made their first appearance in India. But there is evidence to show that Ganjifa playing cards were in use in India as far back as the seventh century A.D. or earlier. Playing cards were apparently not known in India before the beginning of the sixteenth century. They were introduced under the first Mogul Rulers who brought them from their ancestral homes of Central Asia. Once established, the cards spread to most regions of India either in their original form known as Mogul Ganjifa, or in its slightly later Hindu form known as Dashavatara Ganjifa.

There is some uncertainty about the origin of playing cards in India, I discovered, while games of all kinds were known and played in ancient India, and there might have been some early version of playing cards here too (a Bengal King is said to have got playing cards made in the eighth century), the view most widely held is that the playing cards we speak of here – Ganjifa – were an import from the Islamic world. The word itself comes almost certainly from Persia in which `gain’ means a treasure or store, and `Ganjifa’, -a pack of cards.

The first mention of the game is made in the Baburnama –the memory of Babar. The founder of the Mughal dynasty, emperor Babar, who ruled from 1526 to 1530. In June, 1527, Babar sent Playing Cards (Ganjifa) to his friend in Sindh, reports in his
annals,’ ‘This evening…..Mir Ali Korchi was dispatched to Tatta (in Sindh) to Shah Hussain. He is fond of the game with cards and had requested some which I have duly sent him.’’ The word used for cards in this text is Ganjifa or the Persian Ganjafeh. This was probably the eight-suited pack of 96 Cards. By the 16th Century, several different types of Ganjifa games had already been developed in India. The next, more detailed reference, neatly tabulated description of twelve-suited and eight-suited packs with all the details of cards and suit signs are provided by Abul Fazal Allami, the Vazeer and biographer of the great Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605), in his book Ain-I-Akbari. He devotes a short chapter to the games-ches and Ganjifa-played by Akbar. King Akbar made some alternations in the cards and he is said to have invented a new game of 96 cards with eight suits of 12 cards each, which is now known as Mughal Ganjifa. The eight suits of Mughal Ganjifa packs are surprisingly constant from the beginning of the 16th Century to the present day. The names of the eight suits of 96 Mughal Ganjifa widely known today are; Taj, Safed, Samsher, Ghulam, Chang, Surkh, Barat and Qimash.

The Hinduisation of Ganjifa themes must have contributed greatly to the spread and popularity of the games. DASHAVATARA Ganjifa with the Avataras as incarnates of Shri VISHNU was the most popular Card game in Rajasthan, Bengal, Nepal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

The main centres of Ganjifa manufacture are Bishnupur in Bengal, Sawai Madhopur and Karauli in Rajasthan, Sheopur in Madhya Pradesh, Fatehpur District in Uttar Pradesh, Sawantwadi in Maharashtra, Balkonda, Nirmal, Bimgal, Kurnol, Nossam, Cuddapah and Kondapalle in Andhra Pradesh, Mysore in Karnataka, Puri, Sonepur, Parlakhemundi, Barapalli, Chiki and Jayapur in Orissa, and Bhaktapur, Bhadbaon and Patan in Nepal.

Bishnupur, the temple city of Bengal, was the capital city of Malla kings. This Malla Dynasty was started by Raghunath Malla in seventh century. In early 18th century it was conquered by the Bardhaman Raj Kirtichand and was sold out to another Bardhaman Raj Tejchand in 19th century. In Bishnupur a tradition of ‘Pat’ painting had been evolved which is original in its style, completely different from other schools of Bengal or Orissa pat. Here again two
kinds of Ganjifa playing card had been evolved, one is known as ‘Dasavatara tas’ a game of 120 cards and another is known as ‘Naxo tas’, a 48 cards game.

The making of Dasavatara Ganjifa is confined to a single family of Bishnupur. It is made up of lacquered cloth, painted by natural colours. Bishnupur pat is unique for its simplicity in comparison with Orissa pat. This is revealed specially in ‘Ramraja pat’.

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Playing Card Boxes
It is really heart breaking to think that this magnificent art form is losing its glory in acts where the art is used by foreigners as coasters!! It really is appalling and we can do our bit I feel in reviving this art form by simply showing interest towards it.

I too found out about this art form sometime back when I was looking around in a flea market and spotted these cards. And I later found out that they were “ganjifa playing cards”! I was horrified to think that people were throwing these masterpieces away… Because a part from the visual aspect, they really are a treat to the mind. Whenever I see a piece if ganjifa art I always feel like it is a puzzle. Where there are different symbols pertaining to different things…very interesting.

How can ganjifa be given a new lease of life, beyond workshops and craft bazaars? By taking it out of drawing room cabinets into playing dens, where families could gather over a hand or two. The IGNCA staff tosses up the idea of a ganjifa club, where enthusiasts could meet to sharpen their card skills. Once possessed by the game, they might invest in a hand-painted pack.

Because, no matter its royal antecedents, ganjifa today is a craft in a crisis. Its only hope of survival is if one can find a trump in its frying pack, not merely as an art, but as an everyday Indian game. How long will that winning hand take?
Eventually one hopes that the players would popularize these cards all across India. One way is to develop this as a tool of education thereby elevating its artistic value and nurturing a legacy in heritage.

Fortunately, the art of lacquer painting of did not die. It has been revived without much deterioration. The new generation of chitaries is today engaged in creating all those traditional craft objects, including ganjifa which had once brought fame and glory to the chitaries in the field of arts and crafts of India. In the seventies of the last century, a collection of ganjifa playing cards were even sent to the many national and International exhibitions where it was highly praised. Therefore it is heartening to see that such a great traditional craft of India has come to life once again with full glow.