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DEEPAK SHIMKHADA

**A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE GAME OF KARMA  
IN INDIA, NEPAL, AND TIBET<sup>1</sup>**

*Introduction*

This paper deals with a group of paintings from Nepal which have gone hitherto unnoticed. The paintings are popularly called *Nāgapāśa* and are used as game-boards; I shall try to interpret the iconography of *Nāgapāśa* together with its origin.

The game dealing with karma is not unique to the *Nāgapāśa* paintings alone. Similar games are known to have existed in India and Tibet as well. What is interesting, however, is the fact that in each country the game is called by a different name and played somewhat differently. Although the purpose of the game may be the same, each game is unmistakably distinct, having regional characteristics of its own.

Very little study on the game of karma has been carried out. Two major books that deal with the subject from India and Tibet have recently been published,<sup>2</sup> but they do not take into account the *Nāgapāśa* paintings from Nepal which I propose to discuss here in some detail. It is my contention that the Nepali *Nāgapāśa*, though they are unique in themselves, stem – like the Indian and Tibetan games – from the same ancestor, the origin of which appears to be Buddhist.

*Two Nepali paintings*

My first interest in the subject was sparked in 1977 when I stumbled upon a curious-looking painting in one dark corner of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.<sup>3</sup> Listed in the Museum's register under the broad classification of "religious work", the painting is said to have come from North India (fig. 1). Since it was acquired from a certain art dealer in North India and it contains the figures of Hindu gods, the attributions given by the Museum authority did not sound unreasonable. But upon a careful examination, I came to the conclusion that the painting was not from North India, but from Nepal and

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented in somewhat different form at the Annual Symposium of the Art Historians of Southern California held at California State University, Northridge, California, November 14, 1981. I wish to thank Nancy Atkinson of Claremont Graduate School, California, for diligently editing the manuscript with many valuable suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Harish Johari, *Leela: The Game of Self-Knowledge*, (Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc.) New York, 1975; Mark Tatz and Jody Kent, *Rebirth, The Tibetan Game of Liberation*, (Anchor Books) New York, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> This article is an outcome of my graduate study at the University of Chicago under Prof. Harrie Vanderstappen who encouraged me to prepare a catalog of the Nepali and Tibetan paintings in the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History. For his advice and encouragement during my difficult years I am grateful to him. I would also like to thank Dr. Ben Bronson, Curator of Asian Anthropology at the Museum for his generosity in the use of that facility.



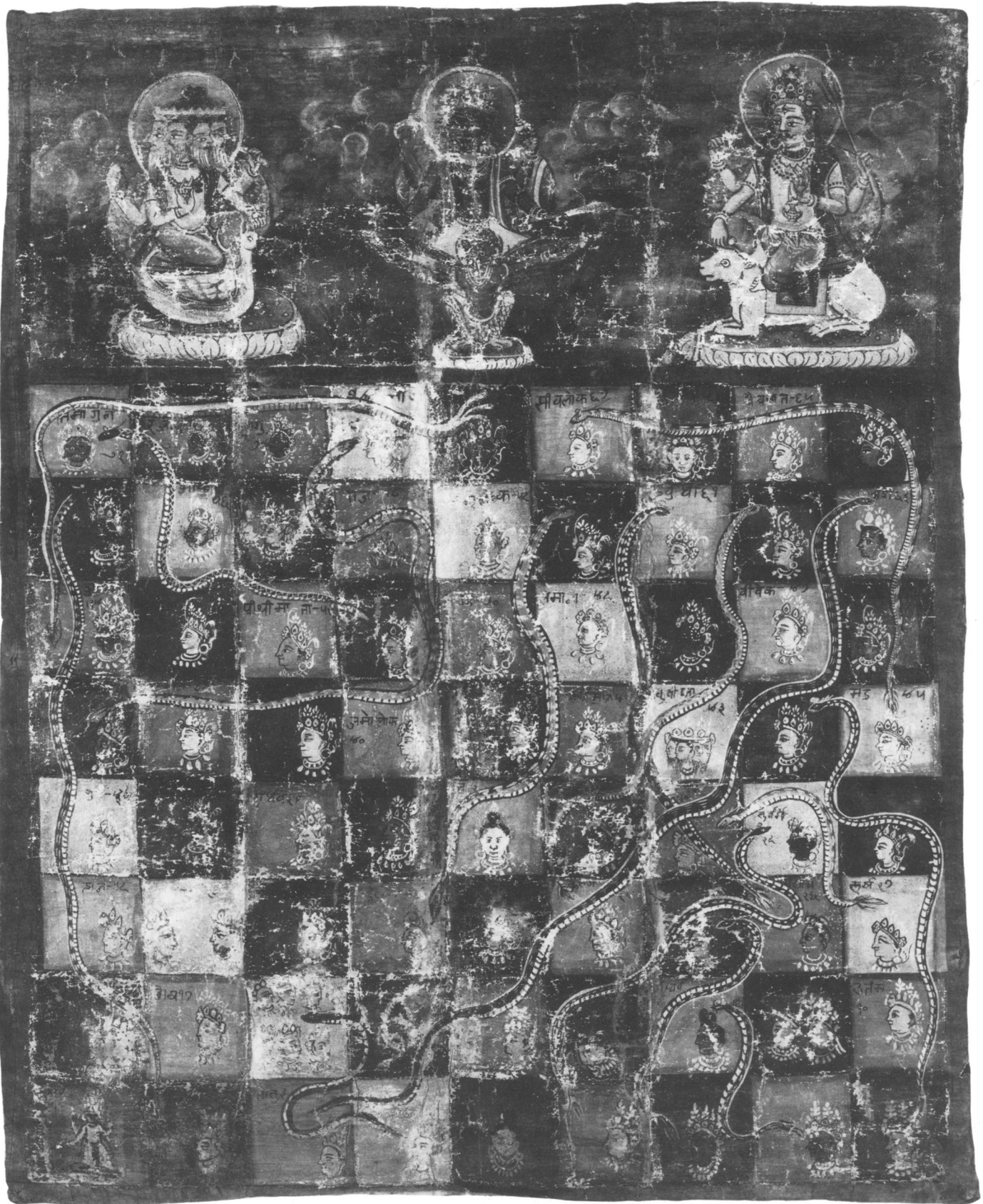


Fig. 1 *Nāgapāśā* (the so-called religious painting) in *Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago*.

Nepal, late 18th century. Gouache on cloth, approx. 24 × 34 inches. Photo: Courtesy, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago





Fig. 2 *Nāgapāśa*, now in *Nepal National Museum, Kathmandu, Nepal*.  
Nepal, early 19th century. Gouache on cloth, approx. 36 × 48 inches. Photo: author





Fig. 3 Detail of figure 2

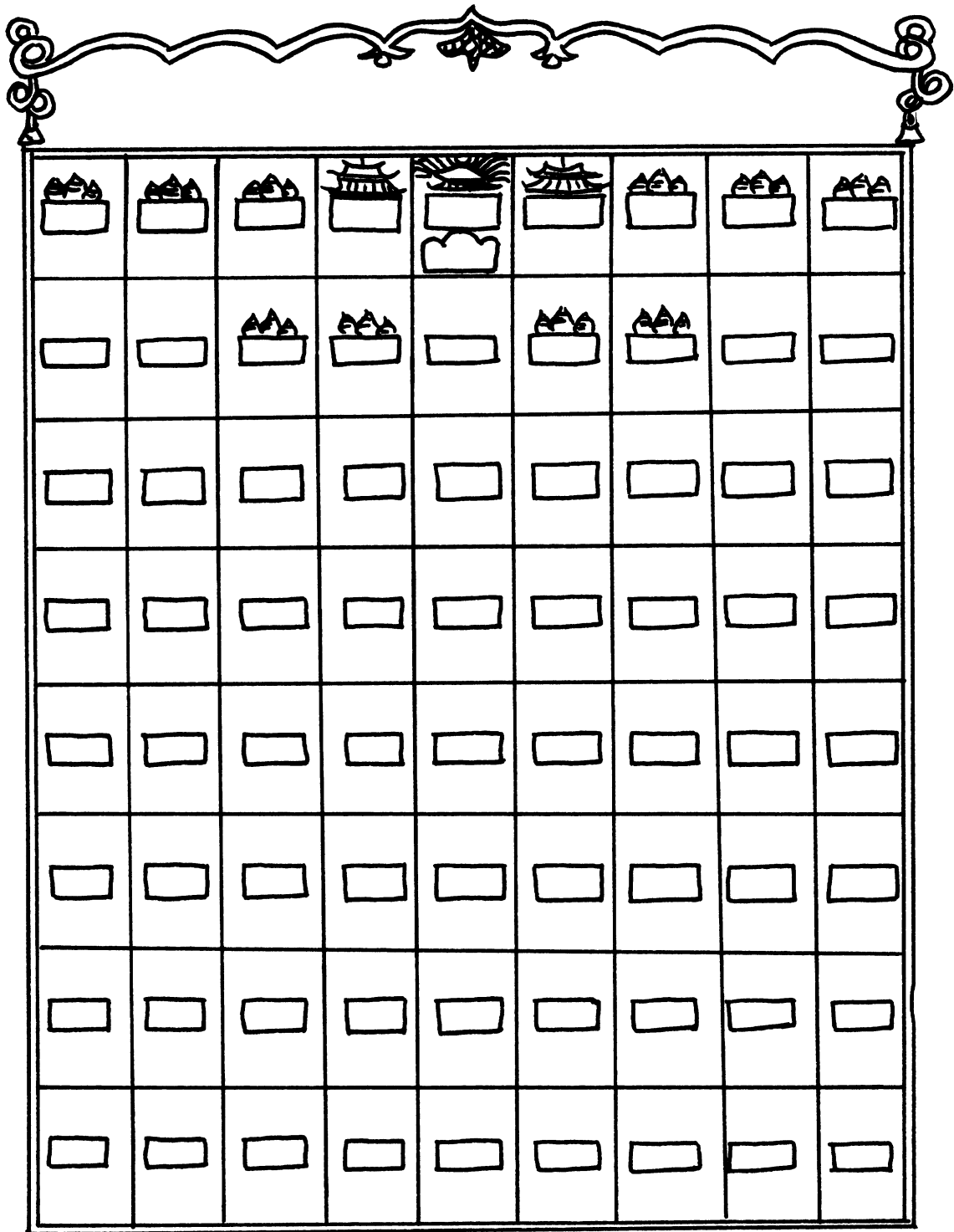


Fig. 4 Rebirth: The Game of Liberation (the original game of Sa-skya Pandita), Tibet.  
Line-drawing after Tatz



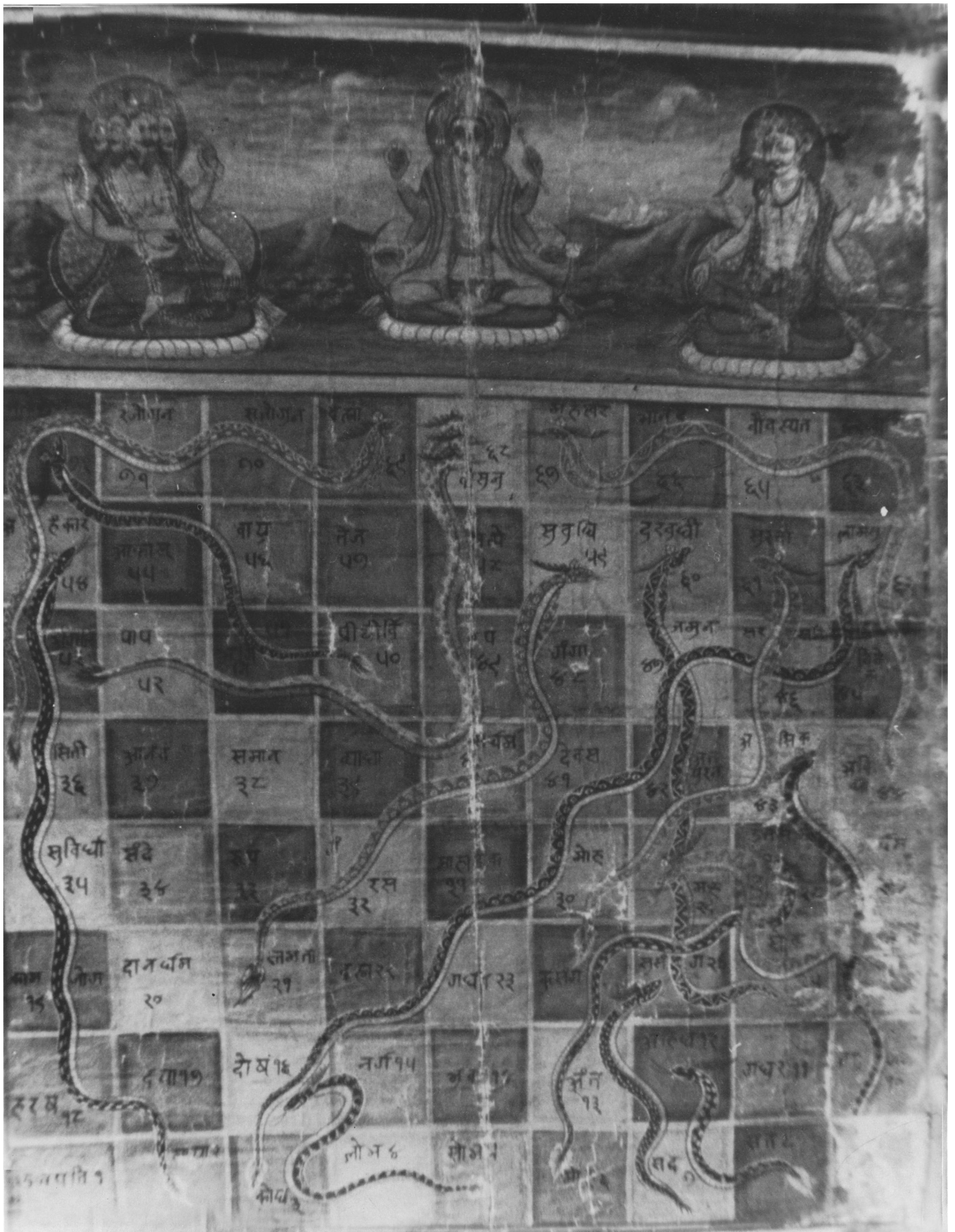


Fig. 5 *Nāgapaśa* in Nepal National Museum, Kathmandu.  
Nepal, late 18th century. Gouache on cloth, approx. 24 × 30 inches. Photo: author

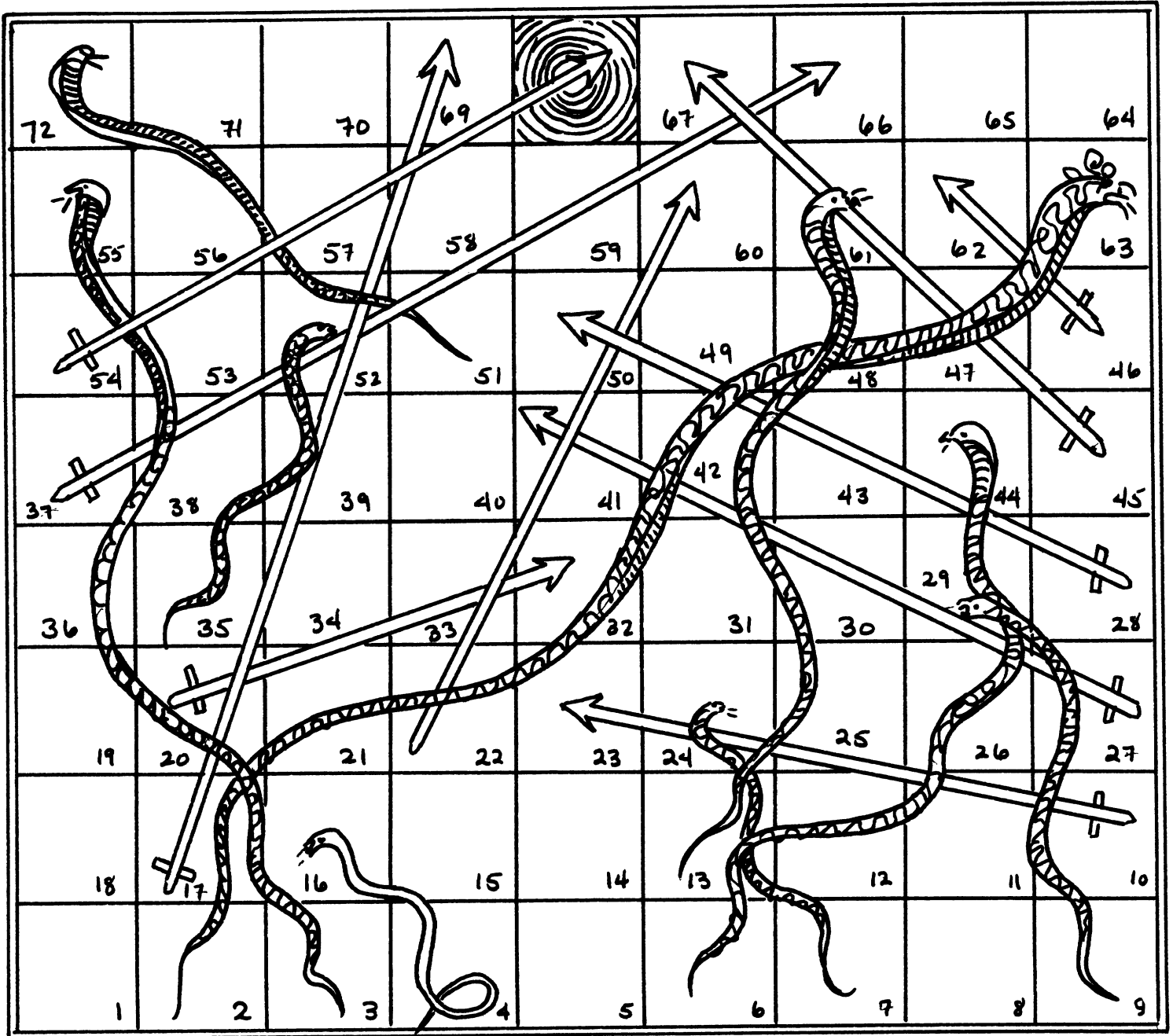


Fig. 6 *Jñāna Chauṣār*, the Indian Game of Self-Knowledge.  
Line-drawing after Johari



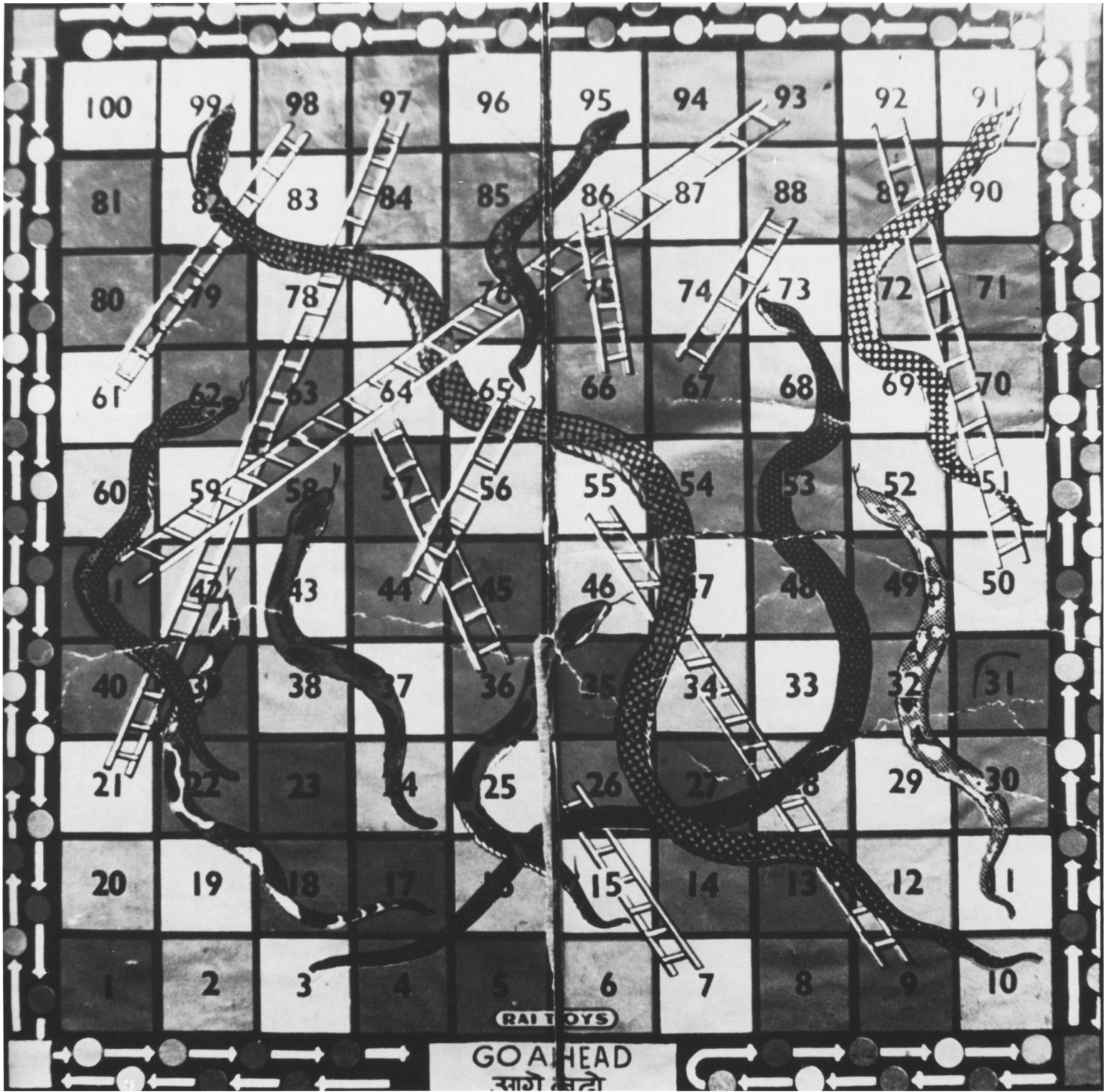


Fig. 7 Snakes and Ladders. India, contemporary. Photo: author



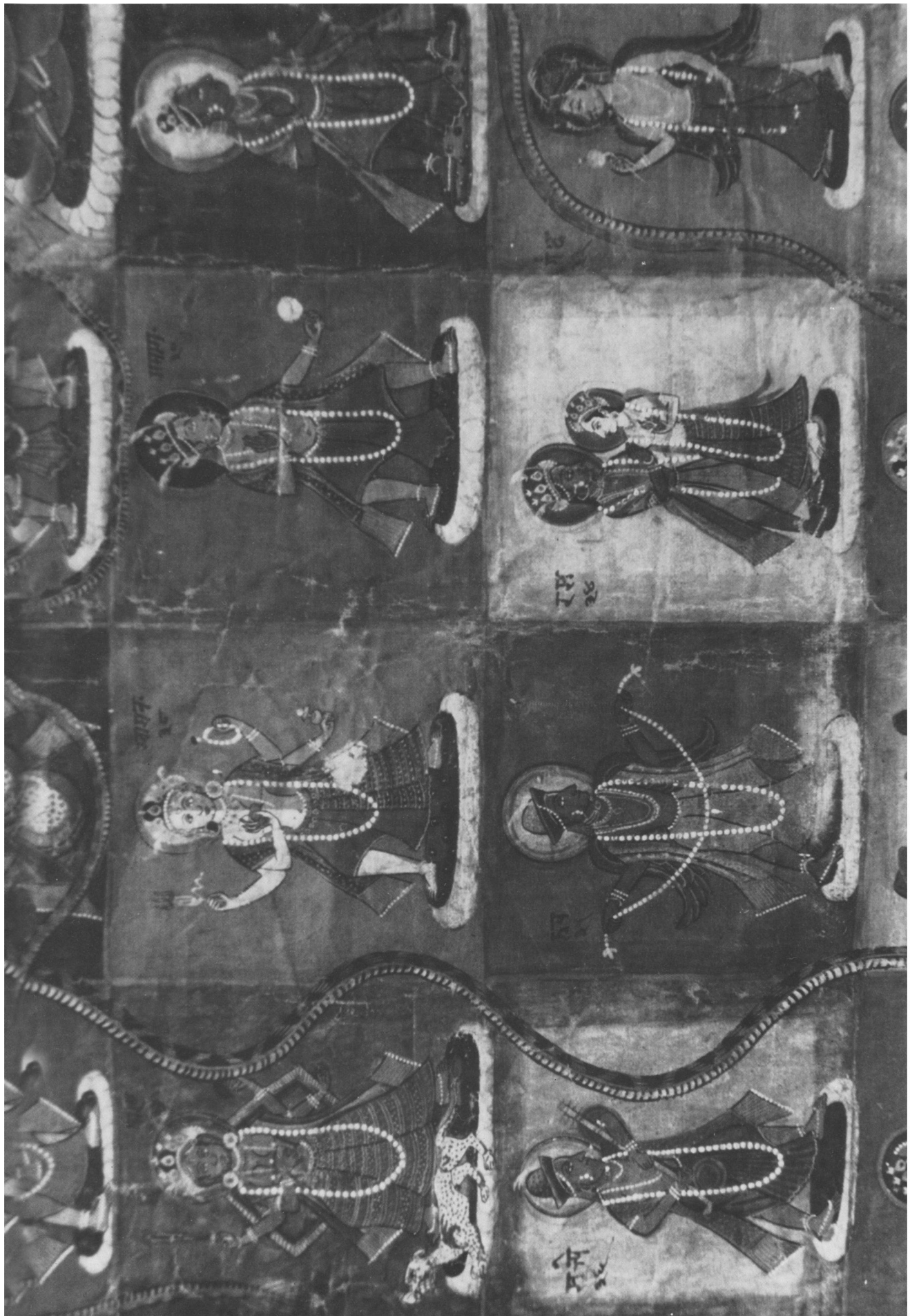


Fig. 8 Detail of figure 2



that its subject-matter was more specific in meaning than simply “religious”. However, I was not certain as to the exact meaning of the painting until I made a trip to Nepal the following year.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, there at the National Museum, Kathmandu (hereafter referred to as the Nepal Museum), I discovered another painting with similar iconography which was entitled *Nāgapāśa* (fig. 2).

Both the paintings (figs. 1, 2) contain figures of black and red *nāgas* (snakes), and the name *Nāgapāśa* is clearly derived from the word *nāga*. *Nāgapāśa* literally means “falling in the trap of snake” thereby referring to death. Although a *nāga* in religious texts has been portrayed as subservient to many of the Hindu gods and comes before us as a benevolent creature, the term *Nāgapāśa* seems to have been employed here very loosely to mean both the terrestrial snake as well as the mythical *nāga* of heavenly nature. The black and red snakes assume opposite roles – the former symbolizing malevolence and the latter benevolence. The name *Nāgapāśa*, though it may be misleading, should not therefore confuse us about the real intention of the painting. Many terrestrial snakes, for example, come with deadly venoms; the black “*nāga*” of the paintings is a symbol of death and is therefore none other than the fearful cobra.

The *Nāgapāśa* is a game, and these paintings were used as game-boards. However, the paintings have been preserved in the museums as works of art, and the purpose for which they were originally created has been overlooked. As a game, the *Nāgapāśa* is supposed to measure the karma of a player by the rolls of a die. In other words, it is the force of the player’s karma that controls his/her move in the game. The “cosmic consciousness”<sup>5</sup> – which is the abode of *Viṣṇu*, a Hindu god – is located both physically and metaphysically at the higher plane, and it is the aim of the player to attain that “cosmic consciousness” by avoiding the trap of the black “*nāga*” which is employed here as an obstacle to the path of the player’s consciousness.

In Nepal the *Nāgapāśa* is also known by the name of *Vaikunṭha Khel* (the game of *Vaikunṭha*) referring to *Viṣṇu*, since *Vaikunṭha* is the abode of *Viṣṇu*, where he sleeps in the Cosmic Ocean in his pure state of mind.

#### *Descriptions of the two paintings:*

Executed on a large piece of cotton-cloth, each painting contains seventy-two squares upon which are drawn fifteen figures of black and red “*nāgas*” in such a way to suggest a labyrinth or maze. While the painting from the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History (hereafter referred to as the Chicago Museum) is relatively simple, the painting from the Nepal Museum is more complex, including also representations of human beings in the squares. The squares are apparently supposed to represent the realms of gods or levels of consciousness, elements of nature, and qualities of human beings; and the human figures are the embodiment of that nature which each square represents.

<sup>4</sup> The painting in the National Museum, Kathmandu, was first brought to my attention by my adviser Prof. John C. Huntington of the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, to whom I am grateful.

<sup>5</sup> Term used by Johari for describing a similar game in India called *Jñāna Chaupār*.

Although the painting from the Nepal Museum is much larger and more elaborate than the Chicago work, in terms of the karmic notion and the total number of squares each painting contains, the two are almost identical in iconography. For example, each square in both paintings has an inscription describing the nature of what the square represents. The only difference that exists between the two works is that one has full figures of humans in the squares, the other does not. But once again, in terms of function and meaning, both works stand on the same ground. Because of this similarity, the Chicago painting may be called “*Nāgapāśa*” without any hesitation.

The entire composition in each painting is divided into eight horizontal rows, and each row represents a realm of human consciousness at one level. They are, from bottom to top, the realm of human existence, the realm of fantasy, the realm of karma, the realm of balance, the realm of human consciousness, the realm of knowledge, the realm of reality, and finally the realm of gods. The lower rows are the lowest levels of human existence, since they represent anger, greed, delusion, conceit, and sensual pleasure – qualities that prevent man from achieving higher consciousness. The upper rows obviously represent the higher planes. On the very top are painted the figures of the Hindu trinity – *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu*, and *Śiva* (fig. 3). The plane occupied by these gods is the highest level that a Hindu can attain, the equivalent of *Sukhāvātī*, the Buddhist paradise of bliss.

#### *The Tibetan game:*

A game similar to the Nepali *Nāgapāśa* was also known in Tibet, where it was called the Game of Liberation,<sup>6</sup> and was said to have been invented by the famous Tibetan scholar Sa-skya Pandita in the 13th century A.D. in order to amuse his ailing mother.<sup>7</sup> Since Sa-skya Pandita was a Buddhist monk, his game was colored by the Buddhist notion of nirvana. The Tibetan game, like the Nepali version, originally had seventy-two squares. In its present form, however, it has one hundred and four squares, suggesting that the game has gone through a process of evolution over the centuries. Though the number of squares is greater in the modern version, the underlying meaning has not changed.

If compared with the original game of Sa-skya Pandita, the Nepali game is similar not only in format but also in function and goal. What is different, however, is the spiritual path that each game takes to reach the goal: the Nepali version takes the Hindu path while the Tibetan takes the Buddhist. In Sa-skya Pandita’s version, which exists in the form of a wood-block print (fig. 4), it is nirvana, the total extinction of life, that is aimed at. The Nepali *Nāgapāśa*, being the Hindu version, promises the player the realm of one of the three Hindu gods. Despite the fundamental religious differences between the Buddhist and Hindu versions, the aim in both games is the same.

Since Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from India via Nepal, it is only reasonable to suggest that such a game, dealing with the religious path, might well have found its way to Tibet from Nepal because of its appealing concept of karma. Such a resemblance

<sup>6</sup> Tatz and Kent, *Rebirth*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.



between the two games may be explained through the active contacts Nepal and Tibet had with each other for centuries. That the Tibetan version was derived from the Nepali game will be discerned from the following historical evidence.

After Tibet was converted to Buddhism by the great Indian pandita Padmasambhava in the 10th century, Nepal and India saw an influx of Tibetan monks, seeking to learn the Buddha's Dharma.<sup>8</sup> During this quest many cultural exchanges took place between Nepal and Tibet. Even Sa-skya Pandita set out on a pilgrimage to Buddhist centers of Nepal and India. But he only reached as far as Keroong, a trading-post in Nepal, fifty miles north of Kathmandu.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that the Pandita may have seen a Nepali game-board of *Nāgapāśa* at Keroong. If that did not happen, it is likely that other Tibetan monks who visited Nepal before and after Sa-skya Pandita obtained a copy of *Nāgapāśa*. In either case, the concept of karma as found in the Nepali *Nāgapāśa* was clearly the motivating factor for the Tibetan model, for karma was not the sole property of Hinduism; it is a common denominator also in Buddhism. While a person may follow a religion of his/her choice, his/her karma does not change with the change of religion. People are born with their respective karma and are subject until death to its law. The present karma of a person is the fruit of his/her good or bad actions of his/her previous life. Since the notion of karma in both religious systems is essentially the same, the Hindu version of the Nepali game really did not matter for the Tibetans so long it contained this notion. When the idea was borrowed the Tibetans simply dressed the game in a Buddhist robe.

The difference between the Nepali and Tibetan versions is that Sa-skya Pandita's original model did not contain snakes, an element of obstacle found in the Nepali examples.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the snake is an additional feature of Nepali painting, and this feature may be seen as a reflection of local usage.<sup>11</sup> What becomes evident from this is that the Tibetan example does not appear to be a faithful copy of the Nepali model, even though it was based on the latter.

#### *The Indian game:*

It is said that in India, too, a similar game was in existence from an early date. The game is called *Jñāna Chaupār* which Harish Johari in his book, *Leelā*, describes as "the Game of Self-Knowledge".<sup>12</sup> The *Jñāna Chaupār*, like the Nepali *Nāgapāśa*, has seventy-two

<sup>8</sup> For a long list of Tibetans who visited India and Nepal from the 7th through the 15th centuries see *The Blue Annals* (*Bod-kui yul-der Chos-dan Chos-Smr-ba Ji-ltar byun ba'i rimpa Deb-ther Snon-po*, or in short *Deb-ther Snon-po*) by Gos-lo-tsaba gzon-nu-dpal, A.D. 1392–1481. Translated into English from Tibetan in two volumes by George N. Roerich. Published by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta (India), 1949–1953.

<sup>9</sup> Tatz, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Another painting of the same subject, now in the National Museum, Kathmandu, also has figures of snakes. In iconography and pictorial treatment it (fig. 5) is identical with the Chicago painting (fig. 1).

<sup>11</sup> Although the mountainous regions of Nepal do not abound in deadly snakes, the Valley does have numerous snake legends. In fact, one version of the origin of the Valley has been associated with the snake. Given the *nāga* legends of the Kathmandu Valley, it is likely that the representations of snakes in the *Nāgapāśa* paintings may well have been inspired by the local *nāga* lores.

<sup>12</sup> Johari, *op. cit.* Unnumbered plate at the end of the text which is reproduced here in fig. 5 in line-drawing. As will become evident from Grunfeld's discussion of the Snakes and Ladders that the *Jñāna Chaupār* was probably known also by the name *Moksha-Patamu*. See Frederic V. Grunfeld (ed.) *Games of the World*, New York, 1975, p. 131–33.

squares with drawings of snakes and arrows (fig. 6). But curiously, the game has long gone out of use in India, and no example in its original form is extant today. While the snake is a common feature also of the Nepali *Nāgapāśa*, the arrow seems to be exclusively Indian in its use in the game. According to Johari, the arrows are included in the game in order to boost the player to a higher plane by crossing the intermediate space with a leap.

A game similar to that of *Nāgapāśa* that exists today in India is called Snakes and Ladders,<sup>13</sup> popularized by the British in the 19th century (fig. 7). Snakes and Ladders, which is now sold in Indian bazaars, appears to have been based either on an original model of *Jñāna Chaupār*, now lost, or the *Nāgapāśa*. But because of the use of black and red snakes in the game, the Snakes and Ladders shows its dependence more to the Nepali *Nāgapāśa* than to *Jñāna Chaupār*. In spite of such similarity, the game is presented in a new format and with many modifications which are contrary to the meaning of the original model. Among the modifications, the ladders stand out as being a completely new element. In function, however, they are analogous to the arrows as referred to by Johari. Twenty-eight more squares are also added to the original seventy-two, making a total of one hundred. Although it originated from a religious prototype, the Snakes and Ladders in its present form is entirely secular.<sup>14</sup>

*The way the games are played:*

To play any of these games a die is needed, which a player throws on the board to determine his move. By the rolls of the die the player moves up and down the board. In all Indian, Nepali, and Tibetan games, though each has slight variations, the object is one – to move to the higher level. In principle, it is the force of karma that causes the die to fall on a particular space, allowing the player to assess his karmic move. Although karma is the essence of all these games regardless of their religious orientation, each game is played differently. In the Tibetan game, for instance, the square numbered twenty-four is the starting point, it being the “heavenly highway”.<sup>15</sup> In Buddhist cosmology there are said to be six highways, each one going in a different direction. These are actually the six karmic destinies or realms into which beings are reborn. As the player throws a die, he is at the mercy of his karma which now dictates his activities.

In *Jñāna Chaupār*, the Indian game of “Self-Knowledge”, the player begins with the square sixty-eight, it being the realm of *Viṣṇu*, the plane of “Cosmic Consciousness”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Prof. Naim of the University of Chicago, whom I wish to thank, first drew my attention to its similarity with the Nepali painting. A similar modern game is now commercially marketed in the United States under the name of Chutes and Ladders. In both format and number of squares this appears to be a counterpart of the Indian Snakes and Ladders. Chutes and Ladders has the same number of ladders as does the Indian game. Missing in the American version are the snakes, but they are replaced by the chutes. The reason for opting for chutes in lieu of snakes appears simple, since chutes, which are a British name for what are called “slides” in the U.S., are common in American parks. Understandably, the chutes are popular among kids in the United States, and the game is directed toward them. For a brief discussion of how to play the Snakes and Ladders and its meaning see Grunfeld, *Games of the World*.

<sup>14</sup> The black and red snakes in this game do not play the same role as they do in the Nepali *Nāgapāśa*. Regardless of their color, both the snakes are evil. Clearly, the colors were applied purely for aesthetic reason.

<sup>15</sup> Tatz, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Johari, *op. cit.*, p. 139.



Although he begins with this square, he can not stay there long because his aim would always be to return to the same number where he started from. As the player moves from one square to the other, he/she will confront snakes, sooner or later. The black snakes, which are the only kind in the *Jñāna Chaupār*, symbolize as in the Nepali *Nāgapāśa*, the force of evil, and they are, therefore, to be avoided. But the karma alone determines the course of the game, taking the player up and down, as though on a modern-roller coaster ride, in accordance with the player's karmic state. If the player by his karmic force lands, say, on the square where the head of a snake lies, then the player is said to be swallowed by the snake and is deposited at the end of its tail. This signals the player that he/she is at a low ebb of his/her karma. Conversely, if he/she lands on an arrow's handle, the arrow then shoots the player, transporting him instantly to the higher plane.

The Nepali *Nāgapāśa* also follows its own course, but the player begins with square one instead.<sup>17</sup> This space is assigned to creation, and naturally creation precedes all other activities. As life evolves from childhood to adulthood, and from adulthood to old age, so does the player; he must begin with number one, taking the natural course which is slow but evolutionary. The rest of the moves are, of course, controlled by the karma of the player. The black and red "*nāgas*" are there to counterbalance the player's move by shooting up or pulling down the die. Interestingly, the red "*nāga*", playing the benevolent role, is in function and value the same as the Indian arrow, for it lets the player climb higher. The black snake, on the other hand, pulls the player to a lower level, creating an obstacle of the same sort as the Indian snake. In essence, the black and red "*nāgas*" affect the course of the game the same way the snakes and arrows do in the Indian *Jñāna Chaupār*.

#### *Origin of the game:*

The Nepali *Nāgapāśa*, the Indian *Jñāna Chaupār*, and the Tibetan game of liberation of Sa-skyā Pandita all consist of seventy-two squares, and those seventy-two squares are numerologically balanced, since seventy-two is believed to be the golden number in Buddhism. The number seventy-two is, therefore, not a mere coincidence; it is in fact symbolic of a perfectly structured universe.<sup>18</sup> Since the number seventy-two is so intimately connected with Buddhist cosmology, it is fair to suggest that the original of all these games ultimately stemmed from Buddhism. The great stupa of Borobudur in Java, which contains seventy-two small bell-shaped stupas with images of Buddha enshrined in them on the top three circular terraces,<sup>19</sup> may be cited to support the Buddhist notion of cosmology. That the stupa of Borobudur was meant to be a representation of the universe in three dimensions is a fact well known not only from its mandala plan but also from the sophisticated application of numerology to the stupa iconography. In that sense, these game-boards are maps of the universe.

<sup>17</sup> In Nepal the game is also used to cast divination.

<sup>18</sup> Johari calls it "numerologically balanced, a 'perfect rectangle'." *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> For a diagram of the stupa showing seventy-two small bell-shaped stupas with images of Buddha enshrined in them on the top three circular levels see Benjamin Rowland's *Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, (The Pelican History of Art Series, Penguin Books) Baltimore/Maryland, 1959 (reprint), p. 246.

The seventy-two squares are derived by multiplying eight horizontal rows by nine vertical columns. While eight is the number of the “Manifest Universe, nine is the number of the Absolute”.<sup>20</sup> And together, they make up the cosmic stage on which the players act out their karmic roles.

To support this theory of a Buddhist origin for these games, yet another piece of evidence may be cited, though it may seem somewhat inconclusive. In the Pali canon, the Buddha is said to have made allusion to a game similar to those discussed above.<sup>21</sup> The exact details of the game are, however, unavailable. All we know is that it, too, had something to do with karma. If the game to which the Buddha referred was indeed similar to our three games mentioned above, then not only will the existence of the game date to the time of the Buddha but also it will suggest the Buddhist origin of it.

*Remarks about the Nepali painting and conclusion:*

Of the examples discussed, the painting from the Nepal Museum (fig. 2) is a highly developed work, culminating in the use of human figures in the composition. Furthermore, the work suggests the style of a mature and accomplished artist as he renders his understanding of the subject in a pleasing manner. It is likely that a work of this quality and scale would have been done only for a wealthy patron. The grand scale, rich color and sumptuous production all point to that.

Successful as he is, the artist captures the subtle shades of meaning demanded by the inscription in each square. For example, square thirty-four depicts a couple in an amorous embrace (fig. 8). The inscribed word in that square is *rasa* which can be loosely translated as “flavor”. *Rasa* is an abstract word, as are a number of other words such as *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas* that appear on the game-board. Clearly, the artist has understood the ambiguity of the word in its widest range of meaning and has judiciously selected the one that fitted best in the given context. To make a logical connection between the word “flavor” and the visual image of the amorous couple, a possible pathway might be that flavor leads to taste, from taste follows desire, and desire results in love. Hence, the representation of the amorous couple by *rasa* is justifiable.

In the absence of Indian *Jñāna Chaupār* and the original Tibetan game of Liberation, the Nepali *Nāgapāśa* is the only extant game of karma containing seventy-two squares with little change in its format and meaning. Therefore, its importance for understanding the Indian and Tibetan games is obvious.

<sup>20</sup> Also with respect to the numerology of the game, it is interesting to note that each horizontal row contains nine squares, the values of which, when added together give the number nine. For example, numbers one through nine in the first row total 45, and we get number nine when we add four and five ( $1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 = 45 = 4 + 5 = 9$ ). Similarly, the second row totals 126 ( $1 + 2 + 6 = 9$ ); the third row totals 207. For a brilliant discussion of the numerology in the *Jñāna Chaupār* see Johari, *Leela*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.