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## SNAKES AND LADDERS IN INDIA: SOME FURTHER DISCOVERIES

Although now known mainly in its modern, Westernised form as a children's game, Snakes and Ladders is a traditional Indian board game of considerable antiquity and profundity. Its theme is the spiritual quest for liberation from the vicissitudes of karma or the hindrances of the passions. As I have discussed in an earlier article,<sup>1</sup> surviving boards for the game appear to date only from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Their playing areas and surrounds are usually inscribed and painted, often with much artistic skill, on cloth or paper; inlaid wood and embroidered textile versions are also known. Three main sectarian types are found: Jain and Hindu, each with their own variants, and, more rarely, a Sufi Muslim version. Common to all forms of the game is a rectangular field of play with ascending rows of inscribed squares, along which each player's piece follows a boustrophedon (ploughed furrow, or zigzag) path, advancing according to the throw of dice or cowries, while being subject to sudden demotions and promotions via the snakes and ladders which lie in wait at irregular intervals. Thus, pilgrim-like, each player progresses fitfully from states of vice, illusion, karmic impediment, or inferior birth at the base of the playing area to ever higher states of virtue, spiritual advancement, the heavenly realms, and (in the ultimate, winning square) liberation (*mokṣa*) or union with the supreme deity. Known by different regional names, the game was formerly played throughout much of North India as *gyān caupar* ("chaupar of knowledge or gnosis") or *gyān bāzī* ("game of knowledge"), in Nepal as *nāgapāsā* ("snake-dice"), and in Maharashtra as *mokṣapaṭa* ("cloth or board of liberation").

My previous article presented a brief account of some twenty surviving North Indian or Nepalese boards of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A provisional classification of the Hindu, Jain, and Muslim versions of the game was outlined, based on the size and format of the playing area, the numbering and nomenclature of the squares, and the configurations of snake and ladder patterns. The most common types are the 72-square Hindu (predominantly Vaiṣṇava) board and the 84-square Jain board, followed by their expanded variants, which in Pahari (Punjab Hill) versions of the Hindu game can run to about 360 or more squares. An example of the 100-square Sufi Muslim game was also described. Finally, I briefly discussed the obscure origins of the game and the development from Indian *gyān caupar* in the 1890s of the moralistic English children's game of Snakes and Ladders and its modern simplified derivatives.

1 A. Topsfield, "The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders," *Artibus Asiae* 46, 3 (1985): 203–214 (hereinafter: IGSL). Little has been written since then: e.g. D. Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 91–94; I. Finkel, "The Ups and Downs of Life: The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders," in *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*, ed. C. Mackenzie and I. Finkel (New York: The Asia Society, 2004), 59–63; also a short survey account by the present writer, "Instant Karma: The Meaning of Snakes and Ladders," in *The Art of Play: Board and Card Games of India*, ed. A. Topsfield (Bombay: Marg Publications, forthcoming), in which the boards shown here in figs. 1, 3, and 7 are illustrated in colour.

In the last two decades many more *gyān caupar* boards have come to light, some displaying further variant features of board size and playing scheme. Nevertheless, the earlier classification of main board types can still be said to hold. Some of these additional examples are discussed in the present article, while for comparison a cognate karmic game from nineteenth-century Mysore and a unique elaboration of Nepalese *nāgapāsā* based on a complex mandala design are also described. Finally, the evidence for the history of *gyān caupar* is again reviewed, with a concluding conjecture that the Jains were the most likely inventors and early promoters of the classic Snakes and Ladders game concept.

### Two Literary References

It is first worth mentioning two late-nineteenth-century references to *gyān caupar* that have come to light, from a Brahmin author at Aurangabad and a British magistrate at Saharanpur. These are the first descriptions of the game in Sanskrit and English known at present.<sup>2</sup> The earlier of the two appears in the *Krīḍākauśalya* of 1871 by Harikrishna, son of Venkataraman.<sup>3</sup> In his discussion of the popular games of Maharashtra, this author devotes a short passage to *jñānapaṭṭa*, the “board of knowledge”:

Formerly the great yogi Jñāneśvara in Maharashtra, for the sake of bringing relief to those oppressed by the pain of Saṁsāra, created a very pleasant game called *jñānapaṭṭa*. The game has eighty-five squares (*prakṣṭha*), and nine snakes and four ladders. It is played with seven [cowrie] shells: the number of shells that fall face upwards is what counts. The players should complete [the tour of] the board according to its numbering, starting at birth and ending at liberation (*mokṣa*). Going upwards comes about by means of the ladder; going down comes about from the body of the snake. Going up is achieved from good actions; [going down from] the face of the snake is caused by bad actions. *Vaikunṭha* [the heaven of Viṣṇu] is reached by completing the game; otherwise the player must go on climbing.

- 2 *Gyān caupar* had evidently not come to Thomas Hyde’s attention, though he did publish an example of the Chinese Official Promotion Game (a race game based on the civil service) in his pioneering work *De Ludis Orientalibus Libri Duo* (Oxford: Sheldonian, 1694); A. Lo, “Official Aspirations: Chinese Promotion Games,” in Mackenzie and Finkel, *Asian Games*, 64, fig. 5:1.
- 3 The *Krīḍākauśalya* forms the twentieth chapter of Part Six (*Mīśraskandha*) of Harikrishna’s encyclopaedic work *Bṛihajjyotiṣarnava*, composed in Śaka 1793/1871 CE (Bombay: Jagadishvara Printing Press, 1885; rpt., 1900). S. Y. Wakankar, “Sanskrit Works on the Game of *Ganjipha*,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay* 54–55 (1979–80): 207, observes that “this is the only book in Sanskrit which describes different games, such as *ganjipha*, chess, Snakes and Ladders, dice, and many others that are current in Maharashtra and Gujarat.” See also S. R. Iyer, ed. and trans., *Indian Chess as Embodied in the Kridakausalyam of Pt. Harikrishna Sharma Jyotishacharaya* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1982), introduction. I am indebted to Prof. Wakankar for drawing my attention to Harikrishna’s passage describing the *jñānapaṭṭa* game (*Krīḍākauśalya*, 1900 ed.: 112, vv. 241–245) and to Dr. Jonathan Katz for a translation (here slightly adapted). In an immediately following passage (ibid., 113–114), Harikrishna describes another karmic game called *karmavipākapaṭṭa*. This game, of which no extant example is known, is said to be played on a board with 500 squares, including three *loka* squares (*Viṣṇu-*, *Śiva-*, and *Goloka*) and one *mokṣasthāna*. I am grateful to Dr. Maria Schetelich for her comments on this passage, which is also mentioned in A. Bock-Raming, “The Literary Sources of Indian Chess and Related Games,” in *New Approaches to Board Games Research: Asian Origins and Future Perspectives*, ed. A. de Voogt (Leiden: International Institute for Asian Affairs, 1995), 116f. (Bock-Raming is mistaken in ascribing only one snake and ladder to this board, as no such specific number is mentioned).

The author is evidently describing a variant of the 84-square Vaiṣṇava board, possibly of 9×9 squares with three heaven squares above the playing area and an initial (birth?) square appended below. He follows local Maharashtra tradition<sup>4</sup> in attributing the invention of the game – more usually known as *jñānapāṭa* (“cloth-picture of knowledge”) or *mokṣapāṭa* – to the celebrated Nath poet-saint Jñānadeva or Jñāneśvara (fl. ca. 1290).

The first English account of Snakes and Ladders (referred to as *gyān causar*) was contributed by G. R. Dampier, Assistant Magistrate at Saharanpur, to the journal *North Indian Notes and Queries* in 1895.<sup>5</sup> It provides a detailed description of a Vaiṣṇava 72-square board and would have been of use to Pargiter, had he known it when writing his account of the Royal Asiatic Society’s 124-square board twenty years later.<sup>6</sup> Dampier remarks:

*Gyan chausar*, or the “Chess Of Knowledge”, is a game much played by Hindus, especially those of the Brahman caste . . . it forms at once a pleasurable amusement, and an instructive lesson on the best means of attaining to heaven. The game is adapted for Hindus of all persuasions, as all three Heavens are marked on the board: Brahmlok, or the world of Brahma, for the worshippers of Brahma; Vaikunth, or the Paradise of Vishnu, for the Vaishnavas, or followers of Vishnu; Kailasa, or the Paradise of Siva, for the Saivas, or adherents of Siva. . . .

This suggestion of three alternative winning squares was presumably obtained from a local informant, but may be open to doubt as it overlooks the persistent centrality (and occasional elevation above the others) of the *Viṣṇuloka/Vaikunṭha* finishing square among the three divine *loka* squares at the top of this and many other Hindu boards. This hierarchical preference suggests that the majority of players were Vaiṣṇava rather than Śaiva; as the cult of Brahmā was moribund by the nineteenth century, few players if any would have been Brahmā devotees.

Dampier lists the names of the 72 squares or “houses” (Hindi: *ghar*) and explains the use of “steps or ladders” and “serpents” for accelerated promotion and demotion. He describes a scoring method using nine cowrie shells, with cowries also being used as game pieces:

- 4 As does A. B. Deodhar in his later Marathi book, *Illustrated Marathi Games*, published at Bombay in 1905; his diagram of a 108-square *mokṣapāṭa* shows the winning square as *saccīdananda* (being-consciousness-bliss, 108), even higher than the abodes of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva (105–107), as noted in Topsfield, IGSL, 212, n. 35.
- 5 G. R. Dampier, “A Primitive Game,” *North Indian Notes and Queries: A Monthly Periodical* (May 1895): 25–27. This journal was published at the Pioneer Press, Allahabad, for several years in the early 1890s under the editorship of the ethnologist William Crooke, at that time Magistrate and Collector at Saharanpur and Provincial Director of Ethnographical Inquiries. Gerald Dampier, who had entered the Indian Civil Service in 1892, was Crooke’s junior colleague at Saharanpur; *The India List: Civil and Military* (London: W. H. Allen, 1895), 26, 89. Saharanpur lies in the northern plains, not far from Dehra Dun in the Hills; in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) it is where Kim’s friend the Lama finds his “River of the Arrow.” I am again grateful to Jonathan Katz for bringing Dampier’s article to my notice, in the incomplete run of *North Indian Notes and Queries* held by the Indian Institute Library at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 6 F. E. Pargiter, “An Indian Game: Heaven or Hell,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1916): 539–542; also Topsfield, IGSL, 210–211, no. 20, fig. 8; R. Head, *Catalogue of Paintings, Drawings, Engravings, and Busts in the Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1991), 141–142; Finkel, “Ups and Downs,” 58, fig. 4:1.

The game is played by two or more persons. Each player is represented by a cowrie (shell) on the board and nine cowries are used as dice. The game is commenced by the first player placing his cowrie on sq. No. 1 (*Janam ghar*, or the square of Birth). He then throws the nine cowries. According to the number of cowries that fall upside down (*chit parti bain*), i.e., with the mouth of the shell upward, so is the number of squares, which the player can move. Thus, if out of the nine cowries five fall *chit*, the player will move his shell on to sq. No. 6 (*Moh*, or Spiritual Ignorance), the second player then throws, and so the game proceeds. . . . [Near the end of the game] should any of the players throw more than the requisite number for securing his paradise [the realms of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, nos. 67–69], he will have to pass by Heaven without entering into it, and if his throw takes him beyond sq. No. 72, he must start all over again from sq. No. 1.

The square-names and the snake and ladder configurations in Dampier's accompanying diagram are, with variations, much in keeping with the standard 72-square board type, exemplified by the India Office Library Lucknow board of ca. 1780 among others.<sup>7</sup> There are ten snakes and eight ladders, the most extensive in each case being the customary snakes descending from *ahaṅkāra* (egoism, 55) to *māyā* (illusion, 2) and from *tāmas* (darkness or inertia, 63) to *krodha* (anger, 3), and the ladder ascending from *dayā* (mercy, 17) to the heaven of Brahmā (*Brahmaloka*, 69).<sup>8</sup> Dampier finally states correctly that the game "has, I am told, been lately introduced into England and, with ordinary dice for cowries and a somewhat revised set of rules, been patented there as a children's game".<sup>9</sup>

### 72-Square Hindu Boards

The North Indian 72-square Vaiṣṇava board shows a strong consistency in its main features throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,<sup>10</sup> from Rajasthan and other parts of Western India to Uttar Pradesh and Nepal in the east.<sup>11</sup> This holds true of the further nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century boards that have come to light, including:

1. American private collection (on loan to the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University).<sup>12</sup> Probably from Rajasthan and of nineteenth-century date, this Hindu board on paper unusually

7 See Topsfield, IGSL, figs. 1–3, and further discussion below.

8 In his concluding discussion of the spiritual import of some of the snake and ladder connections, Dampier contradicts his own diagram in placing the base of this heaven-bound ladder in square 18 (*harṣa*, delight) instead of 17 (*dayā*, mercy). The error leads him to misinterpret this ladder as supporting a doctrine of "Hedonism . . . very contrary to our ordinary Western teaching, in which the broad way of pleasure is usually supposed to conduct to a very different place."

9 Topsfield, IGSL, 213–214, for a brief discussion; and Finkel, "Ups and Downs," 62–63.

10 Topsfield, IGSL, 204–206.

11 A further 72-square board from Nepal of ca. 1900 is in the British Museum (acc. no. 2001.5.29.01). It shows a number of errors or inconsistencies in its square numbering and nomenclature: e.g. a white (benign) snake ascends to *Vaikuṅṭha* from *pāp* (evil, 53). Another North Indian Vaiṣṇava 72-square board, also of ca. 1900, is in the Library of the Wellcome Institute, London (Wellcome Indic Sanskrit MS 276).

12 B. Rossi, *From the Ocean of Painting: India's Popular Paintings, 1589 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 210–211.

shows a slight preponderance of ladders (eleven) over snakes (ten; perhaps indicating a moderate optimism about the human condition). As usual, a ladder from the supreme virtue of *bhakti* (devotion, 54) takes the player to the presiding end-square *Vaikunṭha* (unnumbered), while *dayā* (mercy, 17) leads up to *Brahmaloka* (abode of Brahmā, 69), and *jñāna* (gnosis, 37) to *Śivaloka* (abode of Śiva, 68). The more dangerous of the snakes mainly follow conventional patterns, e.g. from *abāṅkāra* (egoism, 55) to *māyā* (illusion, 2), from *tāmas* (darkness, 63) to *krodha* (anger, 3), and from *avidyāloka* (realm of ignorance, 44) to *kāma* (sexual desire, 9).

2. Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford (fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> This early- to mid-nineteenth-century paper board, probably from the Punjab or northern Rajasthan, was donated to the Pitt Rivers by the Oxford Indologist Friedrich Max Müller in May 1895 (coincidentally, the same month in which Dampier's article appeared in India). An old museum label, presumably based on information provided by the donor, describes it as a "Philosophical game board used in India. The players advance from one numbered square to another, by means of ladders from virtues to their rewards, and by means of snakes from vices to their punishments."<sup>14</sup> This standard Vaiṣṇava board, with the winning *Vaikunṭha* square (68) at the centre of the top row, is presided over by a four-armed Gaṇeśa in a domed pavilion, painted in a folkish style. While at least one other bilingual Hindi-Persian board is known that uses dual scripts for identical square-names,<sup>15</sup> this board features a unique translation of the Hindu square-names in Sanskrit/Hindi into their approximate Islamic analogues in Persian/Arabic. These Muslim conceptual equivalents vary in fidelity to their Hindu models, in some cases reverting to the terminology of the 100-square Sufi board (discussed below), with which the translator was evidently familiar. While this board was clearly made principally for Hindu use, it would also have been usable for play – perhaps even at the same time – by any Muslim free-thinking enough to be unconcerned by a certain amount of Hindu imagery. It may therefore have been produced in some courtly or urbane social milieu in which Hindus and Muslims associated freely, such as a Hindu court with a complement of Muslim courtiers and officials and their ladies. The ten snakes and ten ladders follow the normal configurations. *Bhakti* (devotion, 54), equated with *'ibādat* (prayer, worship), leads by a ladder to *Vaikunṭhaloka*, rendered as "seventh heaven" (*fulk-i haftom*). Below this square, the ascending column of heavenly realms from *bhūvaloka* (the present world, 14) to *satyaloka* (world of truth, 59) is similarly interpreted as the "first" to "sixth" heavens. *Svarga*, or "second heaven" (23), is reached by a ladder from *tapasyā* or *ri'āzat* (austerities, 10), and *mahāloka*, or "third heaven", by a ladder from *dayā* or *rahm* (mercy, 17). Elsewhere, from *jñāna* (gnosis, 37) or *dānistan* (to know), a ladder extends to *ānandaloka* (abode of bliss, 66) or *'ālam-i surūr* (realm of secrets), and another from *suvidyā* or *husn al-'ilm* (right knowledge, 45) to *Śivaloka* (abode of Śiva, 67) or *makān-i fanā kunande* ("realm of attainers of *fanā* or mystical annihila-

13 Acc. no. 1895.29.1.

14 Another old label on the rear of the frame contains a longer version, ending: "Mr Gandhi, a Jaina, showed me [Max Müller?] a similar board used by the Jainas to the present day." Any original note by Müller from which this may have been transcribed does not survive.

15 I.e. the India Office Library board; Topsfield, IGSL, fig. 1.

tion”). Among the earlier snakes encountered in the game are *kusaṅg* or *ṣuḥbat-i bad* (bad company, 24), leading down to *mada* or *mastī* (drunkenness, 7), and from *adharma* (absence of dharma, 29) or *nai īmanī* (faithlessness) down to *moha* (illusion, 6) or *farīftagī* (beguilement).

3. Museum of Indology, Jaipur (fig. 2).<sup>16</sup> This small nineteenth-century Rajasthani paper board is of crude design and execution and is now quite damaged, but it is noteworthy in having benign red snakes instead of ladders, as in the Nepalese tradition, e.g. leading from *bhakti* (54) to *Vaikuṅṭha* (68) and from *dharmā* (right path or doctrine, 23) to *suvidyā* (right knowledge, 60). There are four red (ladder) snakes and nine malign black ones. Not only the descending black snake from *tāmas* (63) but two others also appear to converge on square 9 (mutilated, but probably *kāma*, sexual desire).
4. Private collection, Germany (fig. 3). In this attractively painted nineteenth-century board from Nepal,<sup>17</sup> the single or multiple figures in each square depicting deities or personifications of the square-names show a characteristic Nepalese synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. In some squares in which the heads of black, malign snakes originate, wrathful Tantric deities are shown: *ahaṅkāra* (egoism, 55) is five-headed and sixteen-armed, much as in an example in the National Museum, Kathmandu.<sup>18</sup> There are nine black snakes and seven red or white (benign) snakes. The single white, polycephalous snake, presumably Śeṣa (snake-king and supporter of Viṣṇu), provides as usual a winning connection from *bhakti* (54) to *Viṣṇuloka* (68).
5. Etnografisch Museum, Antwerp (fig. 4).<sup>19</sup> This is another nineteenth-century Nepalese board, but of more conventional type, the squares being numbered and inscribed only and lacking images.<sup>20</sup> Three presiding deities are painted above, with Viṣṇu in the centre, flanked presumably by Brahmā (now missing) on the left and Śiva (partly missing) on the right. There are six benign (red or, in the case of Śeṣa, white) snakes and eight malign black ones.

16 I am grateful to Ilay Cooper for photographing this and other *gyān caupar* boards for me at the Jaipur Museum of Indology (Sri Ram Charan Vidya Pith and Sangrahalaya Trust) and to its director, Acharya R. C. Sharma, for granting study access. Three other 72-square Hindu boards in the same collection are of twentieth century date: two have coarse depictions of the main deities in the section above the playing area; the third is more diagrammatic in design but of interest for the plethora of snakes and ladders featured (with a majority of eighteen ladders over sixteen snakes). A further fragmentary board in the collection, containing the first 54 squares of what was most likely a 72-square Hindu game, has peripheral attendant figures executed in a nineteenth-century Rajasthani folk style.

17 I am indebted to Dr. Joachim Bautze for providing images. For other, previously documented Nepalese boards, see Topsfield, IGSL, 205–206 and references.

18 D. Shimkhada, “A Preliminary Study of the Game of Karma in India, Nepal, and Tibet,” *Artibus Asiae* 44, 4 (1983): figs. 2–3. The prominent upper section, with three seated deities (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva) and two attendant figures, is not found in the example in Germany.

19 Acc. no. AE 73.15. I am grateful to Jan van Alphen for bringing it to my attention.

20 Cf. Shimkhada, “Preliminary Study,” fig. 5, also in the National Museum, Kathmandu.

### 84-Square Hindu Boards

The 72-square Vaiṣṇava board was sometimes expanded to 84 by the addition of an upper row of nine squares, with three further divine *loka* squares above it.<sup>21</sup> Two boards of this type have entered collections in Oxford.

6. Indian Institute Library, Bodleian Library, Oxford.<sup>22</sup> This nineteenth-century paper board from Rajasthan has 84 numbered squares ( $9 \times 9 + 3$ ) contained in a broader  $9 \times 11$  grid, with the outer left and right columns left vacant. Each square is in the form of a miniature triple-domed pavilion. Above the playing area painted figures of three deities (now abraded) preside in larger pavilions. Viṣṇu in *Vaikunṭha* (84) appears at the centre, flanked by Brahmā (82) and Śiva, who is attended by Nandi and a devotee (83; wrongly inscribed *i[n]dralo[ka]*). In this board there are twelve black (or dark grey) snakes<sup>23</sup> and seven red (or pinkish) benign snakes, as well as nine ladders. The ladders are sketchily executed in some cases and may have been an afterthought; a red snake ascends from *bbakti* (54) to *Vaikunṭha*, as does, parallel to it, a fainter (and corrected) ladder outline. Other red snakes include those leading from *dharmā* (21) to *satya* (truth, 68), and from *satsaṅgat* (association with good men, 45) to *Vaikunṭha* (84) or near it. Somewhat ambiguously, a ladder also runs from the *satsaṅgat* square to *viveka* (reason, 61). The most favourable ladder is from *dayā* (mercy, 17) to *ānanda* (bliss, 79). As usual, one of the worst black snakes leads from *abāṅkāra* (55) to *māyā* (2).
7. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> Painted in a coarse folkish style on cotton cloth in a mainly pink and blue palette, this interesting though much damaged board is also probably Rajasthani and of late-nineteenth-century date. Unusually, it reflects a Śaiva affiliation, as Śiva appears in the central pavilion above embracing Pārvatī and with the Ganges flowing from his hair.<sup>25</sup> He is flanked to the left by Brahmā and to the right by Rāma with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa; Hanuman also appears as their chowry-bearer. There are nine snakes and five ladders, none of them extending to the upper row of the board, suggesting that this row of supernal realms was indeed an afterthought to the standard 72-square board. All the snakes but one have half-swallowed a woman, whose upper half protrudes from their jaws: she presumably represents the soul ensnared by *māyā*. There are many unusual or corrupt square-names, e.g. the snake of ?*akārnorūp* (sc. *abāṅkāra*?, 55) leads down to

21 One such board in Bangalore, discussed in Topsfield, IGSL, 206, is inaccurately described there as an 81-square ( $9 \times 9$ ) board, since the three divine *loka* squares above are also numbered (82–84).

22 Donated from the estate of Robert Fraser (1937–1986), a leading dealer in modern art in 1960s London. The board has extensive minor repairs to damaged areas.

23 In one, only a tail survives (squares 56–57); faint outlines of two more short snakes appear in the lower right sector of the board.

24 Acc. no. EA 1987.29, gift of John Gillow. The rebacked cotton playing surface has been severely damaged, causing the loss of several of the squares.

25 A traditional Nepalese 84-square Śaiva board (with the winning square, *mokṣakailāsa*, above) can be found, in a modern transcription, among the papers of the late Bernhard Kölver at the University of Leipzig's Institute of Indian and Central Asian Studies. I am grateful to Dr. Maria Schetelich for bringing it to my attention.



square 2, here called *kāla* (time; instead of *māyā*) and inhabited by a blue monkey-demon in pink drawers. A three-headed snake from *pāp* (evil; instead of *tāmas*, 63), without a woman in its jaws, descends to *Mahāpātāla* (sc. Mahatala?) *loka* (6), the name of a hell region, while the snake of illusion (*māyā sarpaṇī*, 43) leads to *Pātālaloka* (5), another of the hells.

#### 84-Square Jain Boards

The theory of karma, whose manifold defilements impede the soul (*jīva*) in its spiritual journey, became elaborated to a high degree among the Jains. There seems accordingly to have been a continuous tradition in Western India for several centuries of employing *gyān caupar* boards both for instruction in the workings of karmic cause and effect and as an edifying pastime for the Jain laity at religious festivals such as Paryuṣana. Gujarati and Rajasthani examples of the 84-square Jain board survive in considerable numbers. Normally they comprise a 9×9 grid, with an additional (birth) square below and a projecting square at each side, and they include nine snakes and from four to six ladders, placed in consistent configurations. Jain boards appear in two main types: the *lokapuruṣa*, or Cosmic Man, with his head, arms, and feet appended to the playing area, or, more commonly, the architectural type, with a tiered, often multi-domed heavenly palace (*vimāna*) superstructure, which represents the highest realms of being.<sup>26</sup> Occasionally a combination of these types is found.<sup>27</sup> Examples of these boards are collected in:

8. Museum of Indology, Jaipur (fig. 6). From Rajasthan, possibly Mewar, this now abraded cloth board is dated VS 1792/1735 CE below and inscribed with a maker's name, Vijay Krisa ... (?). It is the earliest dated example of *gyān caupar* known at present.<sup>28</sup> It has nine snakes, shown with thick bodies and cobra hoods, and five ladders. The two longest snakes, as in some other boards, represent varieties of egoism, *rājas-abhāṅkāra* (75) and *tāmas-abhāṅkāra* (67), descending to squares 2 and 16 respectively. Many of the square inscriptions are crudely written and because of extensive abrasion have become even harder to read. The board is adorned with perching peacocks in the upper corners.

26 E.g. Topsfield, IGSL, figs. 4–6.

27 E.g. *ibid.*, no. 17 (later sold at Christie's New York, 19 September 2001, lot 205), with the arms and feet but not the head of the *puruṣa*.

28 Apparently earlier still would be an elaborately inscribed Jain *gyān caupar* board on cloth, sold at Christie's New York, 20 September 2000, lot 245. It is dated by the cataloguer to the sixteenth century, but the style of the extensive painted decoration is ostensibly of the late fifteenth. I have only been able to study this work in photographs, but evident anachronisms in its text passages and script and certain anomalies in its composition raise doubts concerning its authenticity. I am grateful to several colleagues for their comments on this, including Lalit Kumar, who has pointed out the similarity between this board's composition and playing scheme to that of the stylistically quite different *gyān caupar* board in the Victoria and Albert Museum (which may also now require a reappraisal); see Topsfield, IGSL, 208, fig. 6; also R. M. Cimino et al., *Life at Court in Rajasthan* (Florence: Giusti, 1985), no. 78, and P. Pal et al., *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1994), no. 121. Some faking of Jain and Hindu *gyān caupar* boards may well have been encouraged by the Western collecting taste for so-called Tantric art since the 1960s; as with many other areas of Indian art, a degree of caution is now required.

9. Julia McDivitt Emerson collection, USA.<sup>29</sup> Reportedly painted on paper, this board is probably of early- to mid-nineteenth-century date and perhaps from some maritime region of Western India, since the snakes take the form of long, makara-headed, finny fish.<sup>30</sup> There are nine snakes and five ladders. The supernal realms above appear as a tower superstructure with striped-domed *chatrīs* set with flags. A deep blue ground surrounds the playing area.
10. Museum of Indology, Jaipur. This paper board is crudely drawn and densely inscribed in black ink, without colour or embellishment. It is notable for a date VS 1904/1847 CE in its upper left marginal inscription and for having as many as ten snakes and eight ladders.
11. Marcel Nies collection, Antwerp.<sup>31</sup> Painted on cloth and probably from mid-nineteenth-century Rajasthan, this board is attractively decorated with a crane-filled sky above the *chatrī*-domed superstructure, a stylised strip of garden below, and lateral niches containing cypresses in vases, a seated prince, and a lady.
12. Private collection, London.<sup>32</sup> This nineteenth-century Western Indian board on paper was reportedly collected at Bhuj in Kutch. The playing area is outlined in pale vermilion ruling, with a compressed architectural superstructure containing six heaven squares. There are twelve black snakes and, instead of ladders, seven benign orange snakes. One of the shortest of these leads from 19 (*puṇya*, merit) to 22 (*dharmā*). An inscription below gives the maker's name as Jaya Kalyan.<sup>33</sup>
13. Museum of Indology, Jaipur. Made in 1903 at Udaipur in Rajasthan,<sup>34</sup> this relatively simple but elegantly drawn and inscribed board is heightened with yellow, red, and other colours. The triple-domed superstructure and the row of arcaded niches below it display the typical multi-cusped arches of contemporary palace and haveli architecture at Udaipur.

29 Exhibited at the Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, in 2001; www.cloudband.com.

30 As in an example in the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad: K. Talwar and K. Krishna, *Indian Pigment Paintings on Cloth* (Ahmedabad: Calico Museum, 1979), no. 117; Topsfield, IGSL, 208, no. 11.

31 J. van Alphen, ed., *Steps to Liberation: 2,500 Years of Jain Art and Religion* (Antwerp: Etnografisch Museum, 2000), no. 51.

32 In the same private collection are three more late-nineteenth-century 84-square Jain boards from Western India; one with a brightly painted temple superstructure with trees, peacocks, sun, and moon is evidently Rajasthani. Also in this collection is an interesting small-format sketch on paper of an 84-square Jain board, without any square inscriptions, which may have been a page from a Western Indian artist's book of designs. A Jain board in a somewhat folkish style, also probably late nineteenth century, is in the Polumbaum collection, New York. Several other nineteenth-century Jain boards are reported in the Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum, Ahmedabad, by Lalit Kumar (personal communication), including an example on cloth dated VS 1868/1811 CE. Another Jain board on paper, reportedly from Gujarat and dated VS 1885/1828 CE (not 1808, as stated) is listed but not illustrated in A. Neven, *Religion et culture de l'Inde: Le Jainisme, art et iconographie* (Brussels: Association Art Indien, 1976), no. 61.

33 The colophon of this "jñāna kī bāzī" board ends: . . . *janī( ? ) jaya kalyāṇ likhatam*.

34 Inscribed in a panel below: *likhitā udepur madhye samat* . . . 1960 . . .

14. Private collection, London (fig. 7), and Madho Singh Museum, Kotah. Apparently the earliest printed version of the Jain game and known only in these two examples at present, this *lokapuruṣa*-type board of 1902 is printed on paper in black, red, yellow, and pale green; the Kotah Museum example is also hand coloured in a pale pink wash. The head of the Cosmic Man appears amid dense decorative vegetation with parrots and peacocks. Lateral vignettes of trees with men beside them may illustrate the Jain doctrine of the six *leśyās*, or karmic defilements, which taint the human soul. There are nine snakes and six ladders. The lower margin bears a printer's name of Bhim Sinha Manak at Bombay and the date VS 1959/1902 CE.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Larger Format Jain Boards*

Jain boards larger than the conventional 84-square type are very rare. One example with an expanded playing area and some unusual snake and ladder configurations is:

15. Jaipur Museum of Indology (106 squares). Probably nineteenth century and from Rajasthan, this board is roughly drawn in red ink on buff paper and comprises a 10×10 grid with 5+1 squares above. Although 106 squares are used in play, the ten squares of the far right column remain unnumbered, making a numbered total of only 95 (which does not include the uppermost, winning square). There are sixteen black snakes and a confusing multiplicity of thin red (presumably benign) snakes as well as red ladders.

#### *100-Square Muslim (Sufi) Board*

Previously known only in an early-nineteenth-century example on paper in the Royal Asiatic Society's collection (hereinafter: RAS),<sup>36</sup> the Sufi version of *gyān caupar* can now also be studied in two further examples: one, also on paper, is very closely related to RAS; the other, in inlaid wood, is probably a little later in date (see nos. 16–17 below). While this still remains the rarest type of *gyān caupar* board, it is to be hoped that more examples on paper may yet come to light in India or Pakistan, in spite of their natural ephemerality. It is likely that this version of the game was first devised in a North Indian Sufi milieu during the Mughal period, initially perhaps as a didactic exercise, in emulation of the Hindu or Jain game. By the late eighteenth century it evidently enjoyed a significant level of popularity. No extant boards are known later than the mid-nineteenth century. Subsequently its use, whether as a race game played with dice or simply as a mystical teaching aid, spread from North India to Sufi circles in Turkey. Late-nineteenth-century Turkish lithographed paper boards are reported<sup>37</sup> for a version known as *shatranj-i 'urafā'* ("Chess of the Gnostics"), attributed by local tradition to the great Andalusian philosopher-mystic Ibn al-'Arabī (1165–1240). These boards in fact seem to derive from the Indian game, though with variations such as the replacement of ladders by arrows. They may well have been used principally for spiritual instruction, as seems to have been the case in Syria, where a treatise on the esoteric meaning of the square-names, entitled *Sharḥ shatranj al-'arīfīn* ("Commen-

35 ... *cbhapāv śa. bhīm sinha mānak mumbāi samvat 1959*.

36 Topsfield, IGSL, no. 19, fig. 7; Head, *Catalogue*, 163; Finkel, "Ups and Downs," fig. 4:2.

37 By Irvin C. Schick (personal communication), who is preparing a publication.

tary on the Chess of the Gnostics”), was published in 1938 by Muhammad al-Hāshimī, a Shaikh of the Shadhili-Darqawi order (1881–1961).<sup>38</sup>

16. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (fig. 8).<sup>39</sup> This paper board, which first came to light only recently, is identical to RAS in its board format and Persian square-names, and in the configurations of its thirteen snakes and seventeen ladders. Its domed, mosque-like superstructure, enclosing the winning square of the Throne of God, is also of virtually the same type. This and other similarities of style and script suggest that it is a work of the same atelier as RAS (at Delhi or Ajmer?), though perhaps of slightly later date (ca. 1810–1815): while RAS is on English paper with a watermark of 1805, this example is on Whatman paper of 1810. In contrast to the plainer RAS, the snakes are attractively painted in watercolour, and the ladders and mosque façade are heightened with a pink wash. As in RAS, the Persian square-names have parallel English translations: these vary from RAS in many cases and seem to have originated independently. A Persian inscription below the board describes the method of play, and a corresponding English paraphrase appears above:

*Directions for playing this Game, which is termed Hazard*

Take six cowries in your hand, shake and throw them on the Table, should five fall on their faces, and one on its back, it counts ten, upon which you move your Man to the Square next Annihilation, and until such time as you throw ten your man cannot leave that Square. After having left the first square you move on according to the number of Cowries that fall upon their backs, should they fall all on their backs, or faces, it counts six, you thus proceed until you arrive in the ninth or Empyrean Heaven, which ends the Game – On the Road you will meet with much danger, such as Serpents of Avarice, of pride, Heart poisoners, and Devils, who are ready to devour and cast you down, there are also Ladders on the Road to Heaven; should you get to the foot of one, you proceed to the Top, consequently you will have many Ups and Downs eer [*sic*] you arrive in Arshillah [*sic*].

38 J.-L. Michon, trans., *Le Shaykh Muḥammad al-Hāshimī et son commentaire de L'Échiquier des Gnostiques... , un diagramme des étapes et des dangers de l'itinéraire initiatique attribué au Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyī al-dīn Ibn al-'Arabī* (Milan: Archè, 1998), with an account of the Shaikh's life. Born at Tlemcen in Algeria, he spent most of his life at Damascus. From 1911 to 1914 he resided at Adana in Turkey and perhaps first saw lithographed Snakes and Ladders boards there. However, he retained connections with his native land, particularly with his spiritual brother Shaikh Muhammad al-'Alawī of Mostaganem (d. 1934), and it is possible that his book *Sharḥ shaṭranj al-'arīfīn* (1938; rpt., ca. 1964 and 1988) may have been disseminated in North African as well as Middle Eastern Sufi circles. The 10×10 board on which the Shaikh's commentary is based (Michon, *Le Shaykh Muḥammad al-Hāshimī*, 70) is similar to the Indian game, e.g. with the two most hazardous upper-corner snakes, here descending from 91 (*al-ghurūr*, delusion) and 100 (*shaitān*), though also with variations: ladders are represented as arrows, and the snakes (which somewhat resemble fork-tongued centipedes in the diagram) are interpreted by the Shaikh as “chains” with “grapnels” at their heads. Despite the board's chess-based name, the Shaikh evidently regarded it simply as a diagram of the spiritual path and ignored or was unaware of its more worldly use as a race game played with dice.

39 Acquired at Bonhams, London, 12 October 2006, lot 312. It had previously come to light as part of a group of early-nineteenth-century Company style paintings at a local auction sale in Somerset.

“Hazard”, as the name of the game, is a fanciful rendering of the usual term *gyān caupār*, which appears in the Persian text below. (Hazard was, more properly, an old English dice game especially popular with gamblers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.)

17. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (fig. 9).<sup>40</sup> Attractively inlaid in mother-of-pearl in a heavy dark wood, possibly shisham or ebony, this board is probably from the Delhi-Agra region or Lahore and datable to the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It was collected in the 1850s by General R. C. Lawrence (1818–1896), who spent much of his career in the Punjab. The 10×10 playing area is bordered by foliate scrollwork, and the winning square (Throne of God) is framed in a small cartouche representing a late Mughal mosque (RAS has a more expansive mosque design). The squares are unnumbered as in RAS, and the majority of the one hundred Persian square-names are also the same: about a quarter differ in varying degrees or have been transposed. Where RAS has *'aql* (reason, 3) Cambridge has *rizā* (contentment); where RAS has *gham* (grief, 17) Cambridge has *daryā-ye ghazāb* (sea of wrath); where RAS has *ātīsh* (fire, 58) Cambridge has *damāgh* (pride, drunkenness).

The patterns of snake and ladder connections are largely similar, though Cambridge has only eleven snakes and sixteen ladders to RAS's thirteen and seventeen. As in RAS, the snakes are clustered in the lower half of the board, apart from the two disastrous upper-corner snakes, which plunge from *shaiṭān* (Satan, 100) to *shahwat* (lust, 10) and from *ghurūr* (pride, 91) to *daryā-ye ghazāb* (17). The ladders correspondingly increase in the upper rows; two of the more advantageous ones here are absent in RAS: from *khauf* (fear, 26) to *īmān* (faith, 70) and from *shujā'at* (fortitude, 55) to *shahādat* (bearing witness, 90). As in RAS, the 84th square *fanā fī Allāh* (extinction of the soul in God) leads directly to the Throne of God and the end of the game.

#### *Larger Format Hindu Boards*

While Jain boards adhere almost uniformly to a standard 84-square type, larger format Hindu boards, varying widely in scale, composition, and nomenclature, occur more frequently. One of the most artistically impressive examples is the Royal Asiatic Society's 124-square board, probably from Maharashtra.<sup>41</sup> In Rajasthan and Gujarat, boards of around 166 (or 2×84) squares are known, among other types. At least twice as large again are the immense boards of the Large Pahari type from the Punjab Hills, discussed below.

18. Private collection, London (116 squares). Possibly late nineteenth century and from Western India, this very worn board is outlined in red on cloth and is sparsely inscribed in Gujarati script. The design has been reworked, as there are traces of corrected square rulings. The square names have also been renewed and are not always clear but indicate that the board is of Vaiṣṇava inspiration. The playing area is 11×9 with three squares below and a superstructure (with multiple domes) of

40 Acc. no. 1951.995.

41 See n. 6 above.

5 + 5 + 3 + 1 squares, making 116 squares in all. A striking feature is the arrangement in twin vertical ranks of short snakes and ladders in regular crisscross formations.<sup>42</sup>

19. Present location unknown (165 squares).<sup>43</sup> Probably from Rajasthan, this Vaiṣṇava cloth board is copiously inscribed and has two upper panels of folkish floral ornamentation. An inscriptional date of VS 2008/1951 CE, cited by Neven, is also queried by him and is not verifiable from his illustration; probably the board is earlier than this, perhaps by half a century. The square numbering runs to 162 (omitting no. 90), and six of the ultimate squares remain unnumbered (the winning square, *Rāma Vaikuṅṭha*, is also repeated above). The 13×13 main playing area has floral ornaments in six top-row squares (which may have been out of play), and three further heaven squares project above it. The game is of considerable complexity, with thirty-one snakes and more than forty ladders.
20. Private collection, London (167 squares) (fig. 10). This large Rajasthani cloth board from Udaipur is probably of the late nineteenth century, although the style of the painted deities above follows the Udaipur court idiom of half a century earlier. A Mewar royal inventory number (25/111) appears on the reverse,<sup>44</sup> and a court clerk has inscribed a valuation of 8 rupees on the dome of the central pavilion above. The playing area is 13×13; in a fourteenth row below, the squares are unnumbered and the square-names simply repeat those in the row above. The winning square, *Vaikuṅṭha*, is numbered 161 and the final numbered square is 167. In the central pavilion above, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī are enthroned and attended by Garuḍa and four maidservants; Brahmā and Śiva appear in flanking pavilions, and three further *chattrīs* on each side contain minor deities. There are fifteen snakes and thirteen ladder squares, as well as three short ladders leading up to the heavens of Viṣṇu, Brahmā, and Śiva. There are two winning ladder squares: both *haribhakti* (devotion to Viṣṇu, 120) and *ātmagyānī* (self-realisation, 85) lead to *Vaikuṅṭha*. Adjacent to this, a ladder leads from *paropagārī* (beneficence, 112) to *Brahmaloka* (162), and an exceptionally circuitous, zigzag ladder leads from *pitābhakti* (filial devotion, 99) to *Indraloka* (160, perhaps wrongly inscribed for *Śivaloka*, since a short ladder runs to Śiva's painted abode). Why one of the lower ladder entrances should commence at *kāma* (sexual desire, 14) is unclear. Among the more disastrous snakes, *tamoguṇa* (the quality of *tāmas*, 167) leads back to *prithvī* (the earth, 90) and, still worse, *svāmidroha* (injuring a master or swami, 154) demotes the player to *saptaloka* (the seven worlds, 4). The snake of *abāṅkāra* (141) leads back to *utpati* (birth, 1) and not to the adjoining *māyā* square (2). Several of the snake squares deal with offenses of killing (*hatyā*), e.g. *brahmahatyā* (murder of a Brahmin, 96) leads to *nāgaloka* (the serpent world, 20).

42 A similar feature appears in the 108-square Maharashtran *mokṣapaṭa* board illustrated by Deodhar in his *Illustrated Marathi Games*, as noted in Topsfield, IGSL, 212, n. 35.

43 Neven, *Religion et culture de l'Inde*, no. 62.

44 This inventory was carried out in the late nineteenth century and 25 was the serial heading number given to large paintings on cloth; A. Topsfield, "The Royal Paintings Inventory at Udaipur," in *Indian Art and Connoisseurship: Essays in Honour of Douglas Barrett*, ed. J. Guy (Ahmedabad: Mapin Ltd., 1995), 188–199.

### Large Pahari Boards

The Large Pahari form of *gyān caupār* is by far the most expansive type of all, running in different versions to around 361 (19×19) or 380 (19×20) squares in all. The playing area is typically divided into symmetrical, separately numbered left and right panels, both 19×9 or 20×9, with their entry squares (1) at the lower left and lower right corners. A column of 19 or 20 unnumbered, ascending *loka* (heaven or hell) squares also runs up the central axis of the board<sup>45</sup> with two long snakes descending on either side, somewhat analogous to the position of the spinal column and the *nāḍī* conduits of *kundalini* energy in yogic physiology. These two snakes demote the player in each case from square 154 (*tr̥ṣṇā* or *āśā*, craving or hope) to 9 (*sarvaloka*, the whole world). Other snakes and ladders tend to be relatively short. In some cases they transfer the player from one side of the board to the other. *Vaikunṭha* is the central, winning heavenly region above, although ladders may also be shown reaching the adjacent heavens of Brahmā and Śiva.

The Large Pahari game was exclusively popular at the Rajput courts of the Punjab Hills from the late eighteenth to nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Its origin is obscure. But it may have been at the court of Kangra, where art of all kinds flourished under the powerful Maharaja Sansar Chand (b. 1765, r. 1775–1823) in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, that this most ambitious form of the game was first devised. Sansar Chand is known to have been a keen chess-player, and he probably enjoyed other games as well. Later in his reign he was reduced to relative poverty, but the traveller William Moorcroft, visiting him in 1820, records the Maharaja's continuing taste for the arts as well as his lifelong addiction to chess and music.<sup>47</sup> The Large Pahari board now at Chamba (see no. 21 below) appears a little too late in style to have been made for Sansar Chand himself but is probably representative of a previous Kangra tradition, seen also in an earlier board in the Bharany collection.<sup>48</sup>

21. Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba (380 squares) (fig. 11).<sup>49</sup> Probably datable to ca. 1830 based on the late Kangra style of its depictions of the gods, this finely produced 20×19 board has 360 numbered squares (1–180) in its left and right panels. The ascending central column of twenty unnumbered hell or heaven squares (with the hell region of Pātāla at its base) is flanked as usual by two long

45 A comparable feature of a central axial column of squares representing ascending conditions of existence is found in an early blockprint version of the Tibetan Buddhist "Game of the Ascension of Stages": M. Tatz and J. Kent, *The Tibetan Game of Liberation: Rebirth* (London: Rider, 1978), 11, pl. B, though not in the more recent versions of that game. One wonders if some residual trans-Himalayan influence might have been at work in the formation of the Pahari board type.

46 Topsfield, IGSL, nos. 21–22, figs. 9–11, illustrating two examples in the collection of Chhote Bharany, New Delhi. These should properly be described as having in total 361 squares (19×19) and 378 squares (21×18).

47 "He passes more of his time at chess and music than consists either with his age or circumstances and were it not that these have been his addictions from early life I could find an apology for his conduct in his conviction that by his own means alone he cannot relieve himself of a feeling of thralldom that sits heavily on him and that he attempts to drown reflections and ill time by amusements." Moorcroft: manuscript letter to Kyd (India Office Collections, British Library), quoted in W. G. Archer, *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1973), I, 251.

48 Topsfield, IGSL, 211–212, figs. 9–10.

49 Previously noticed in *ibid.*, 211, n. 33a; this board should properly be described as having 380 squares, not 360 as stated. I am grateful to Dr. Eberhard Fischer for providing a photograph.

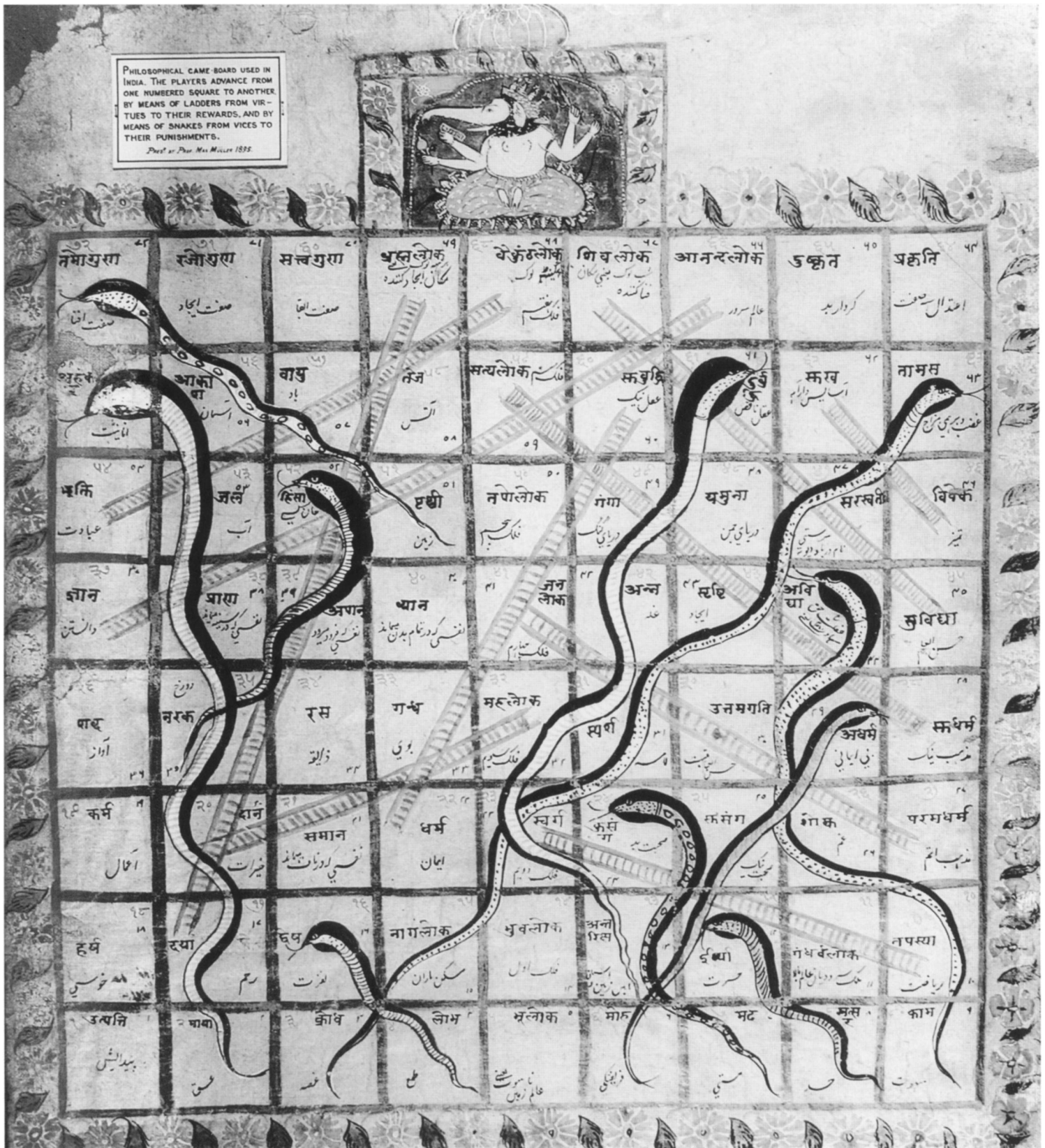


Fig. 1 72-square Vaiṣṇava gyaṇ caupār board on paper with both Hindu and Muslim square-names. Punjab or northern Rajasthan, nineteenth century. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.



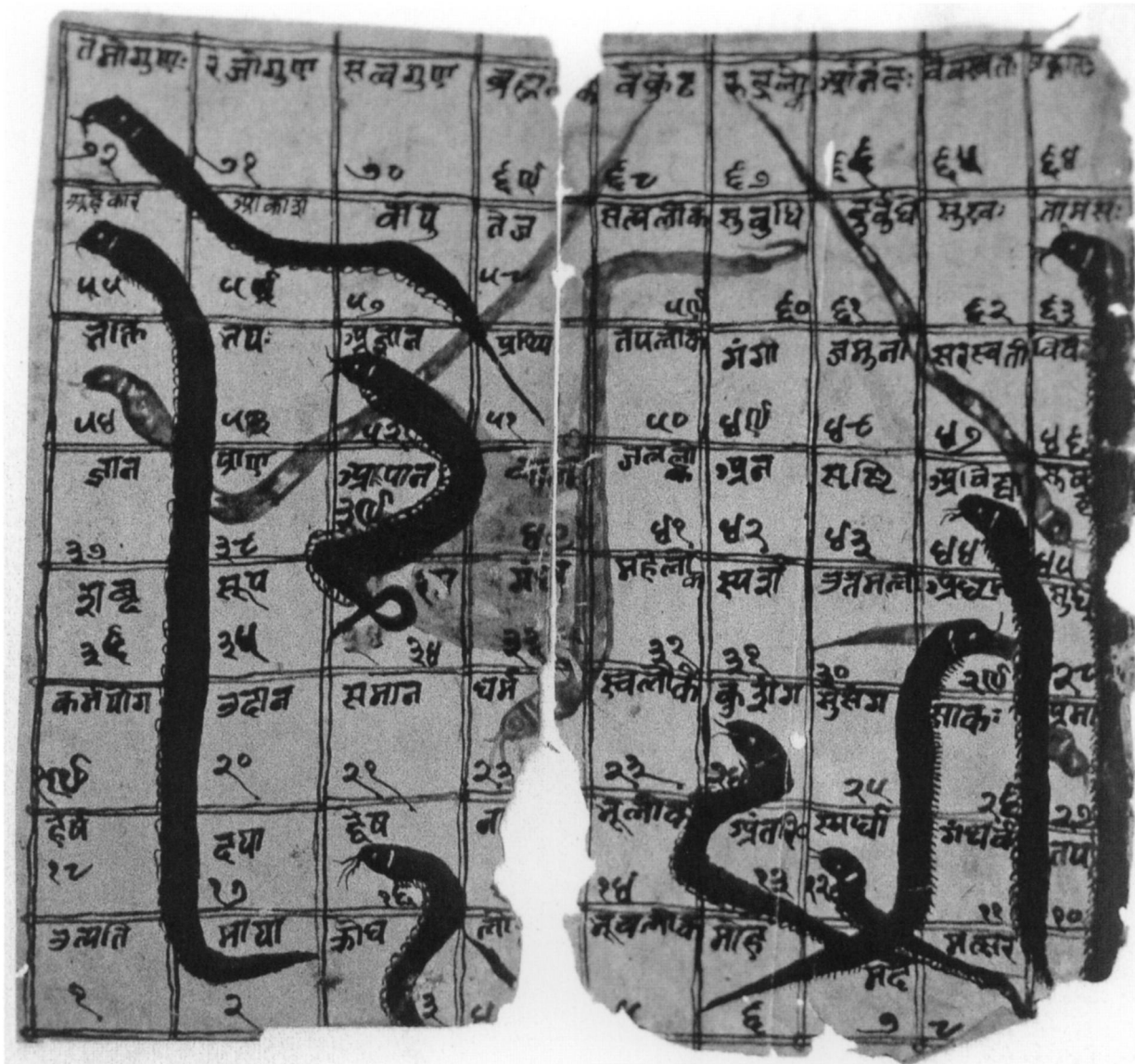


Fig. 2 72-square Vaisnava gyān caupā board on paper. Rajasthan, nineteenth century. Museum of Indology, Jaipur.



Fig. 3 72-square Vaiṣṇava gyaṁ caṇḍā board. Nepal, nineteenth century. Private collection, Germany.

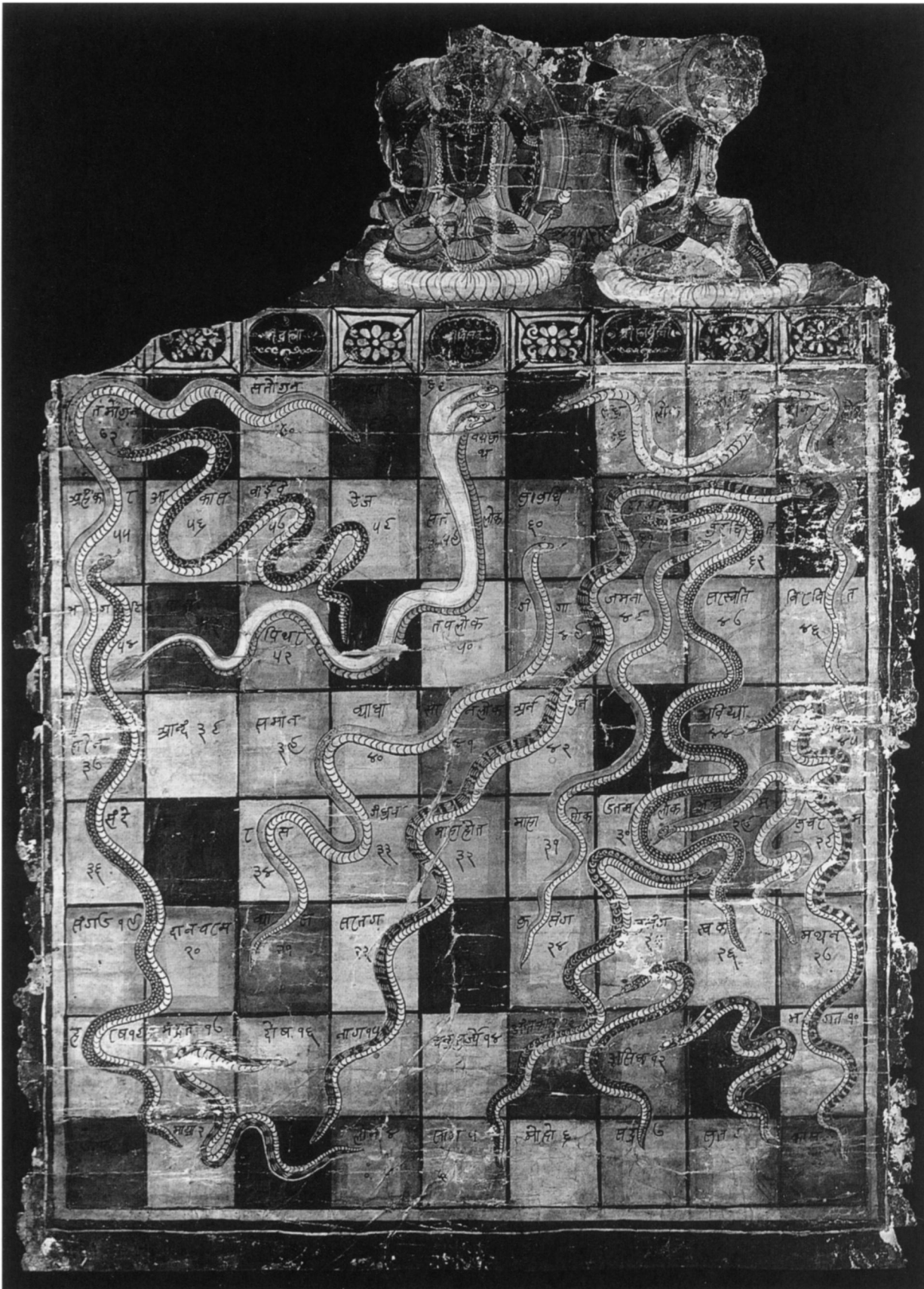


Fig. 4 72-square Vaiṣṇava gyan caupar board on paper. Nepal, nineteenth century. Etnografisch Museum, Antwerp.

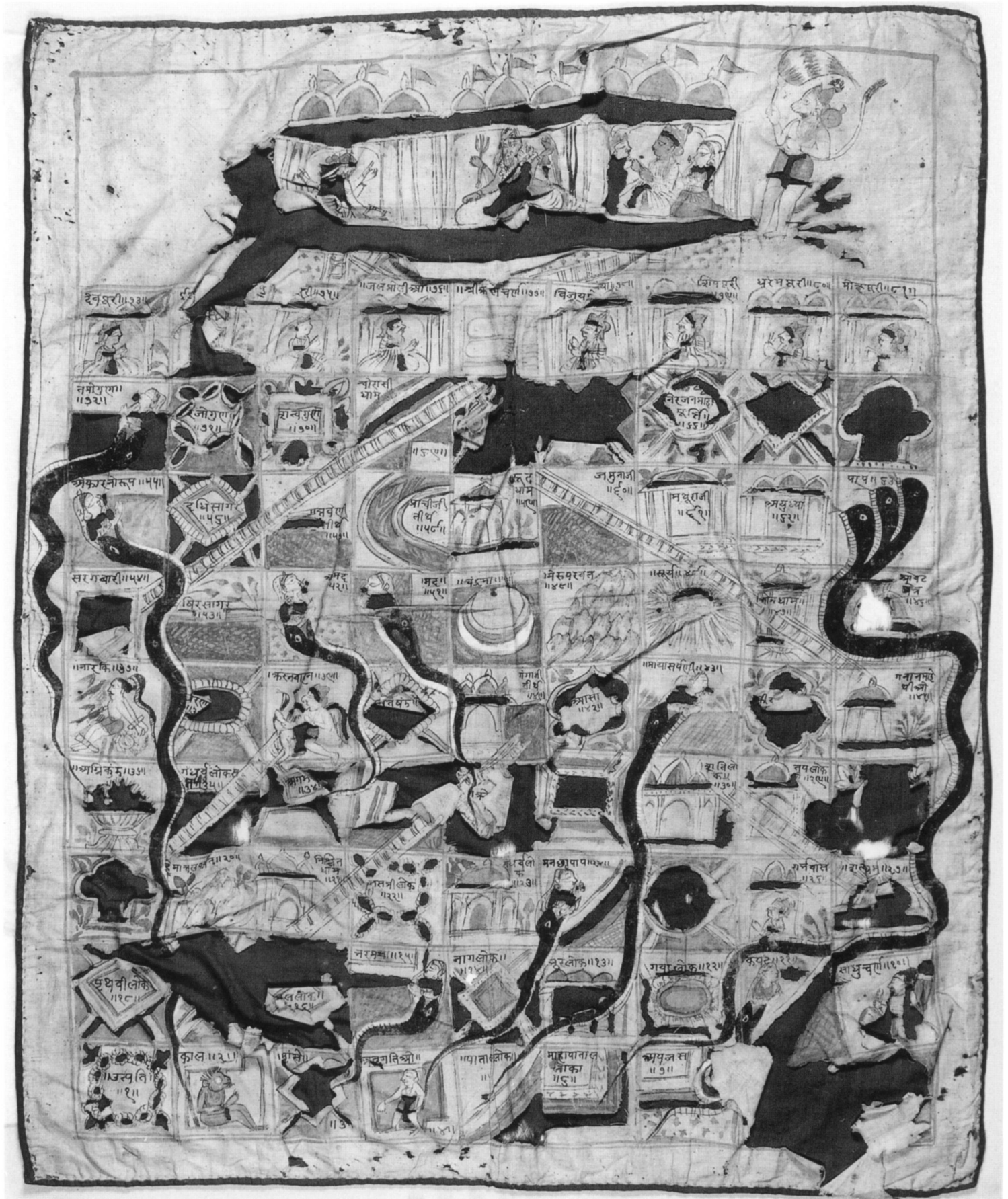


Fig. 5 84-square Śaiva gyān caupar board on cloth. Rajasthan, nineteenth century. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

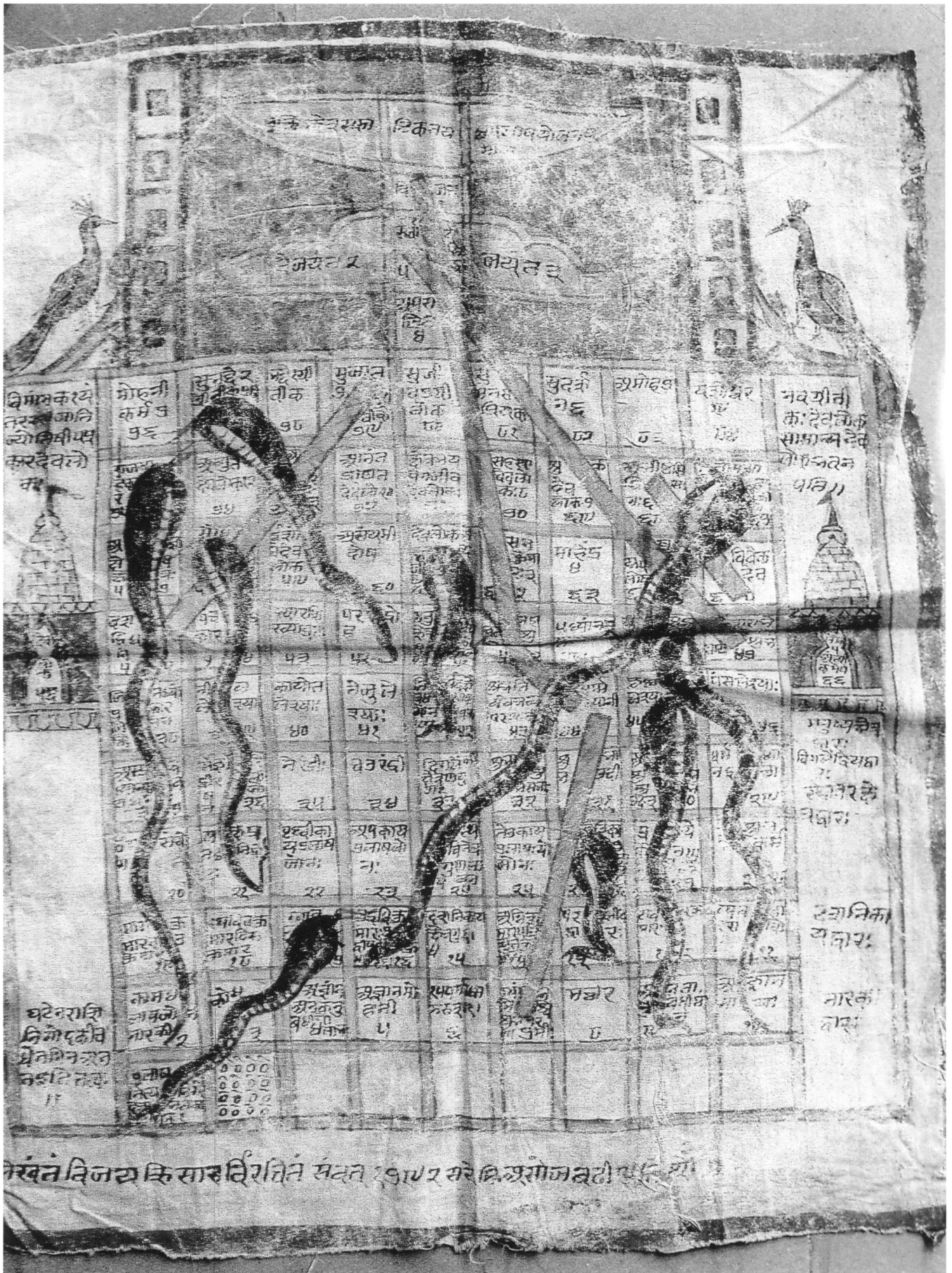


Fig. 6 84-square Jain *gyān caupar* board on cloth. Rajasthan, possibly Mewar, dated 1735. Museum of Indology, Jaipur.

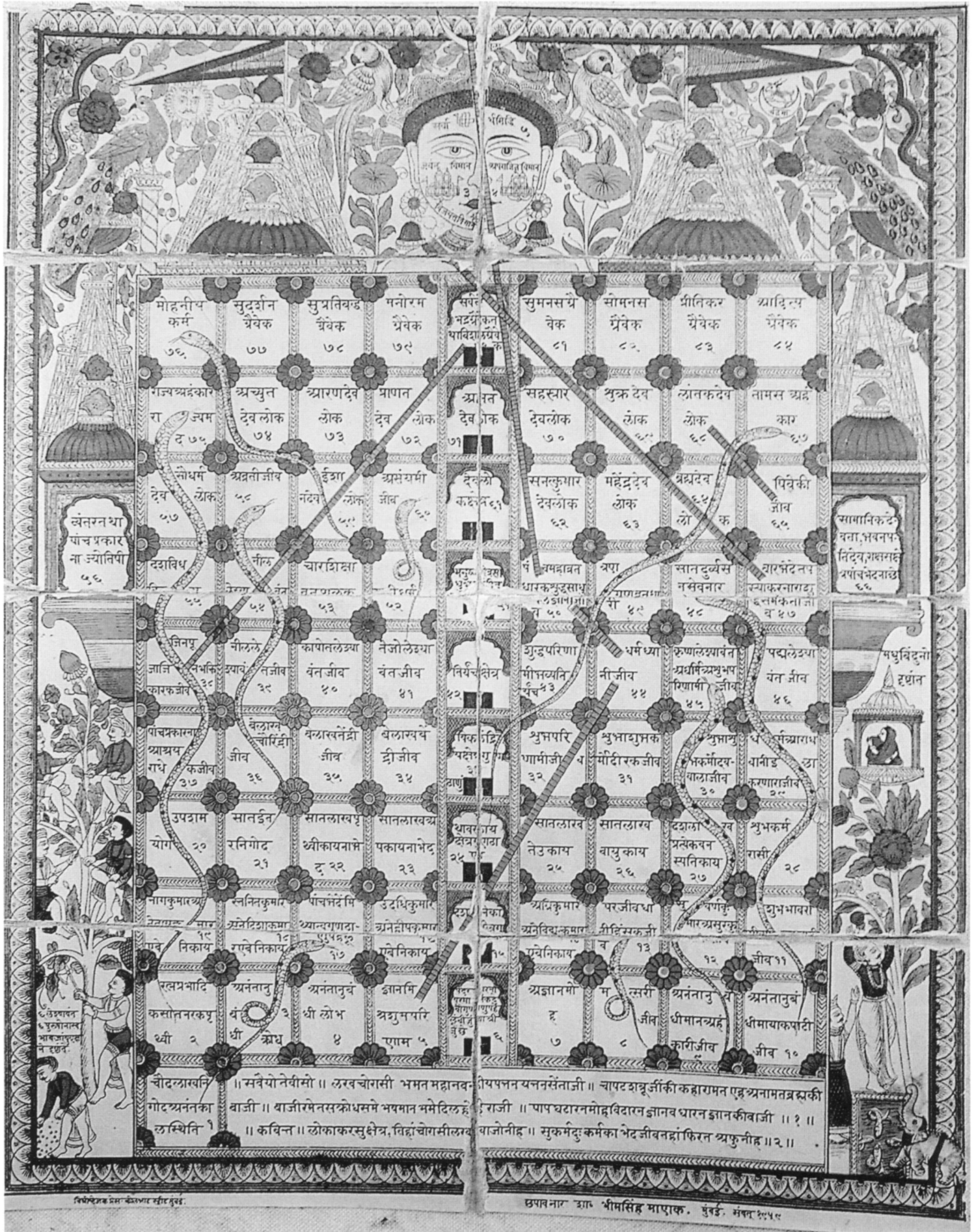


Fig. 7 84-square Jain gyān caupar board on paper, printed at Bombay in 1902. Private collection, London.



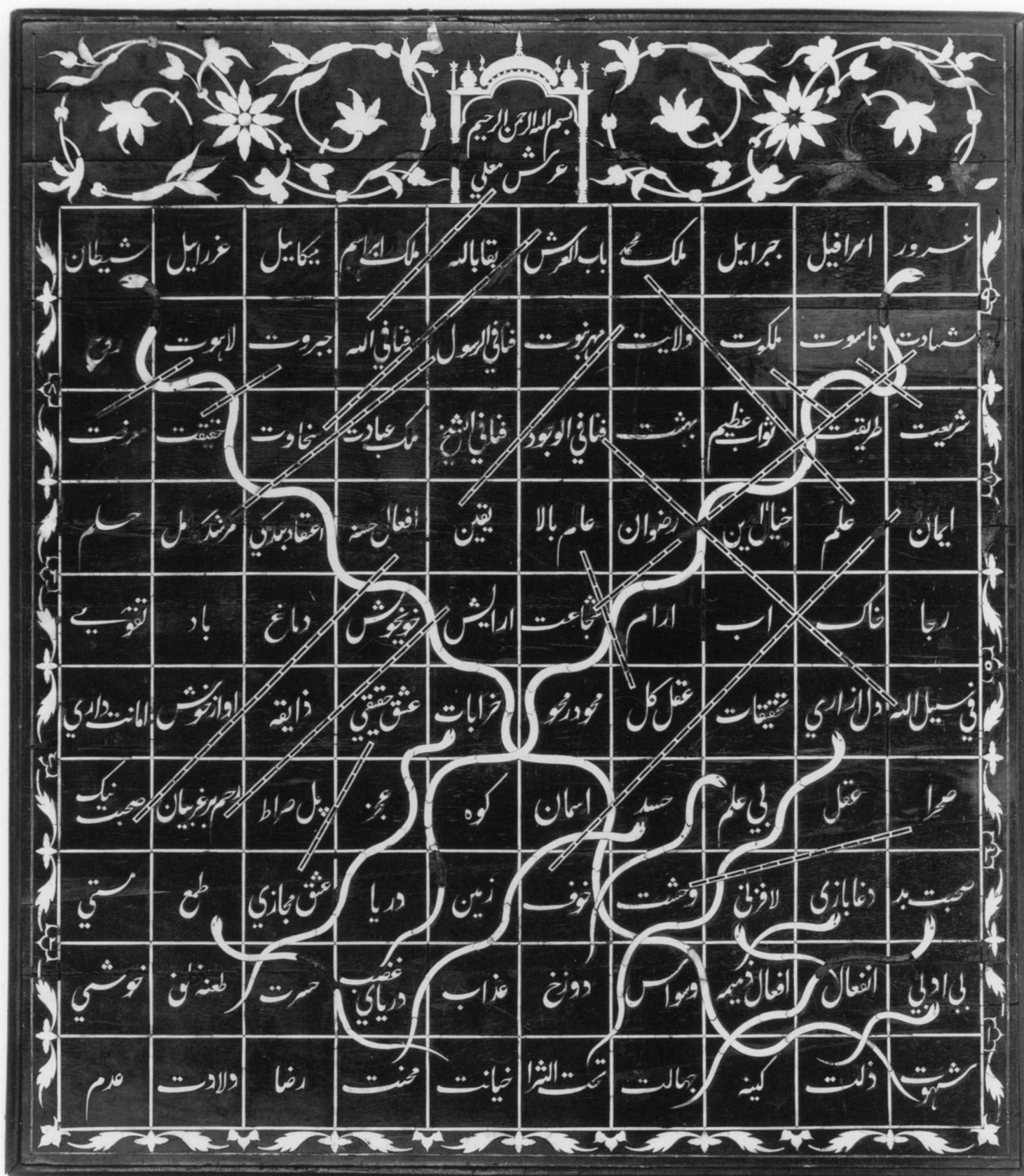


Fig. 9 100-square Sufi *gyān caupar* board in wood with mother-of-pearl inlay. Delhi-Agra region or the Punjab, ca. 1825–1850. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

Fig. 8 (opposite page) 100-square Sufi *gyān caupar* board on paper. Delhi or Ajmer, ca. 1810–1815. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



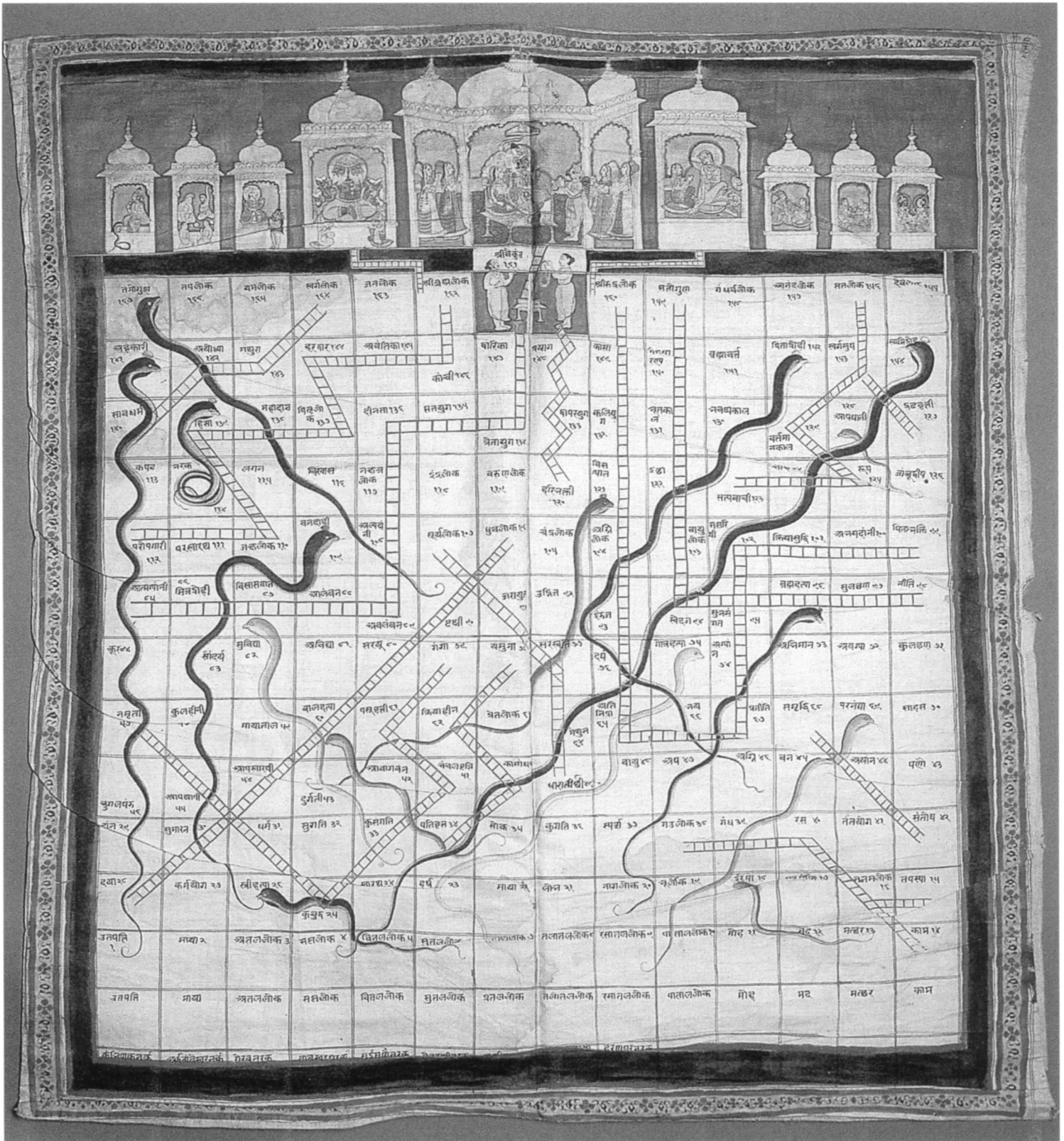


Fig. 10 167-square Vaiṣṇava *gyaṅ caupar* board on cloth. Udaipur, Rajasthan, late nineteenth century. Private collection, London.

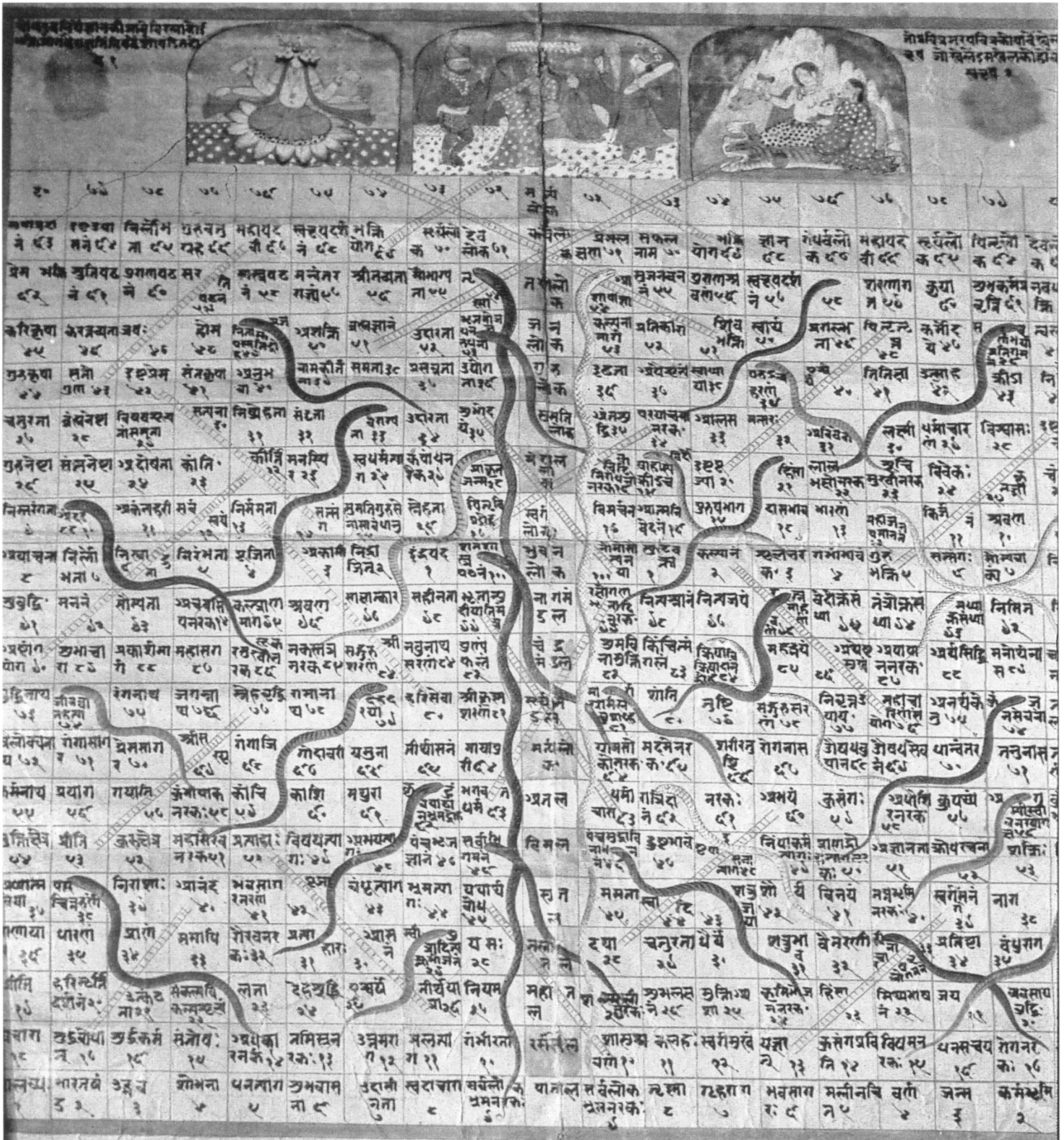


Fig. 11 380-square Vaiṣṇava gyaṇ caupar board (Large Pahari type). Late Kangra style, Punjab Hills, ca. 1830. Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.

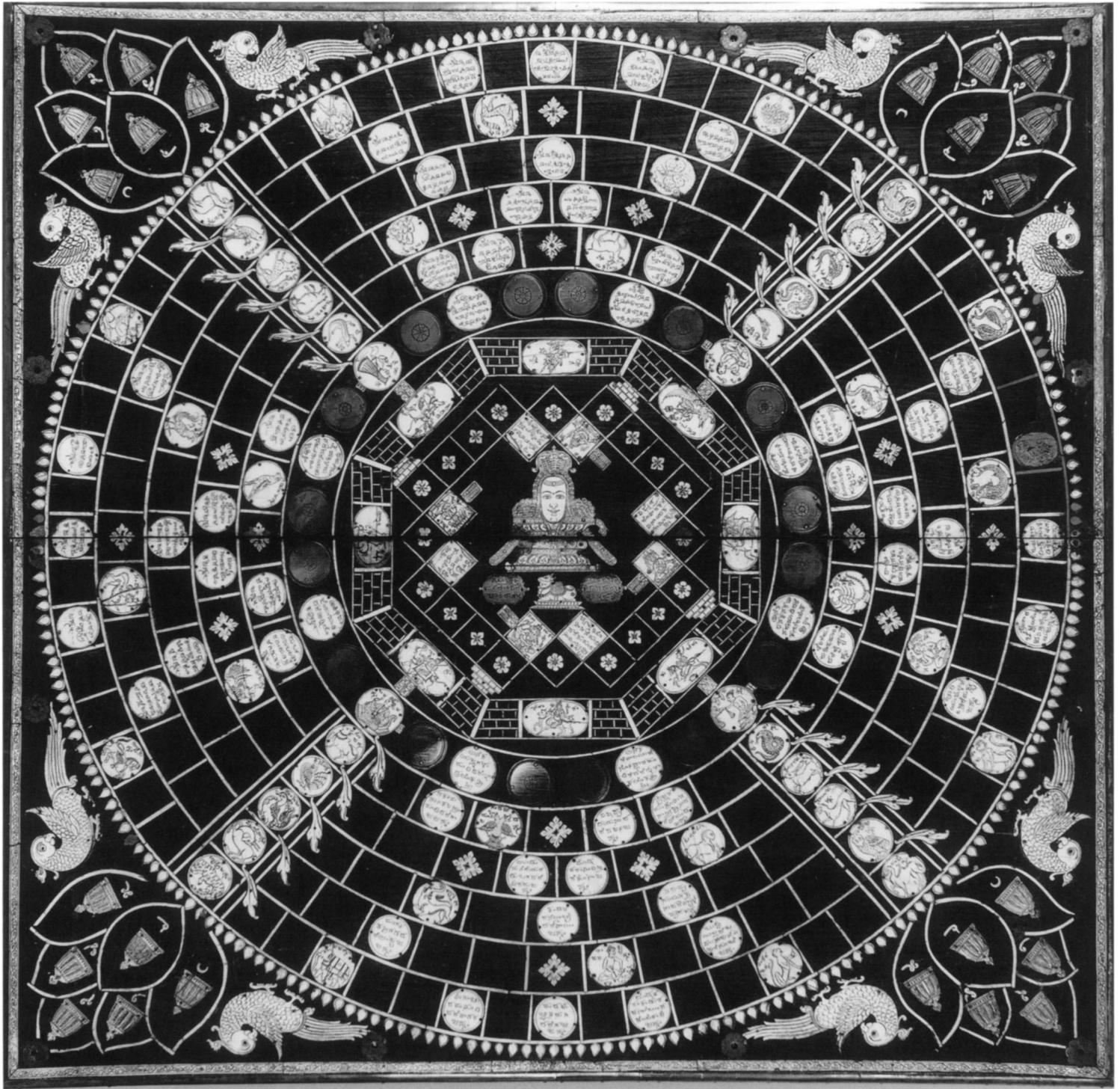


Fig. 12 Folding board for the karmic game of *Śivasayujya* in rosewood with ivory and brass inlays. Mysore, ca. 1840–1850. Present location unknown.

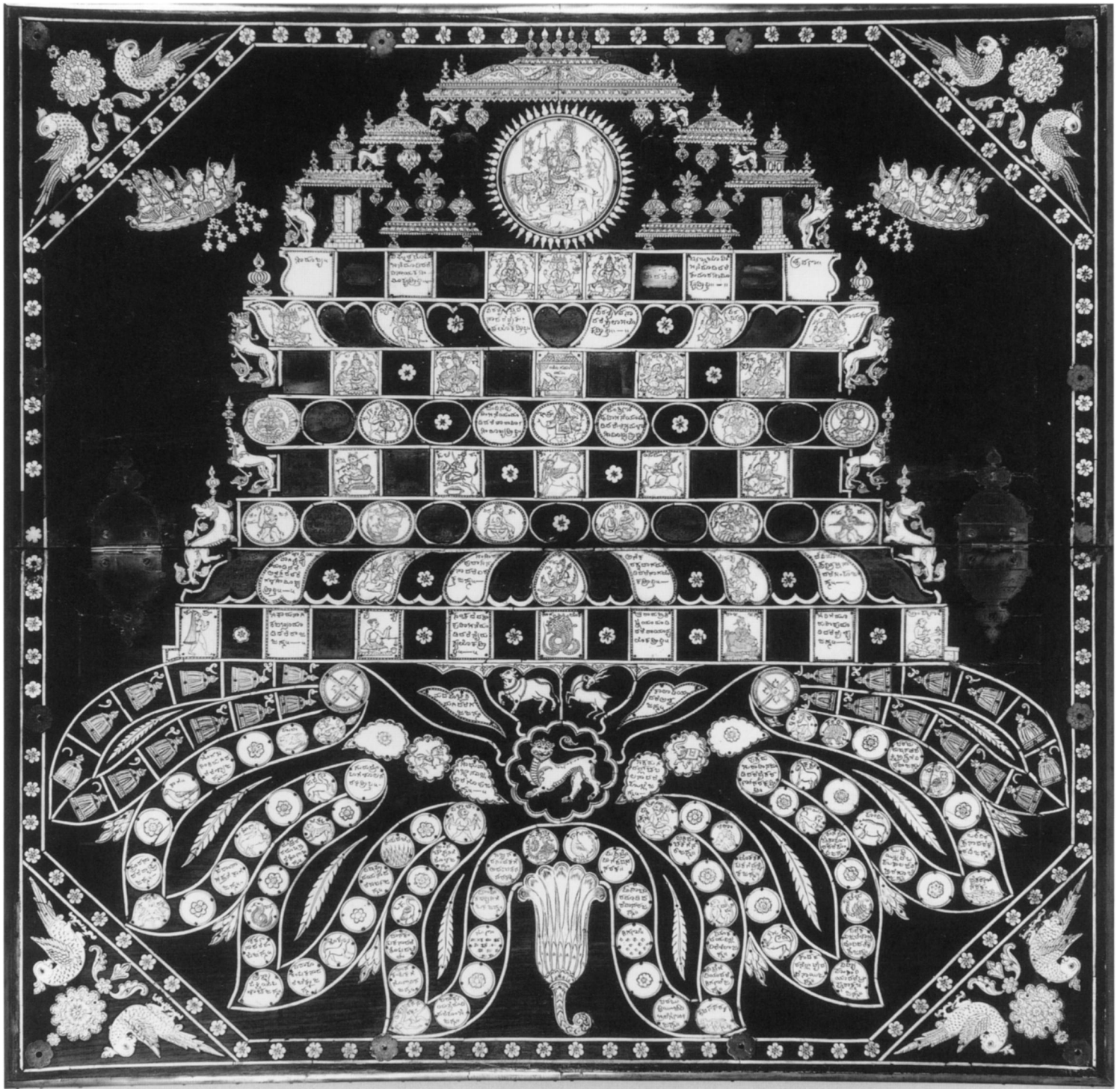


Fig. 13 Board for the karmic game of *Devīsayujya* in rosewood with ivory and brass inlays. Mysore, ca. 1840–1850 (the hinged reverse side of the *Śivasayujya* game, figure 12).

Fig. 14 Complex mandala form of *nāgaṭpāsā*, painted on cloth. Nepal, ca. 1700. Present location unknown.



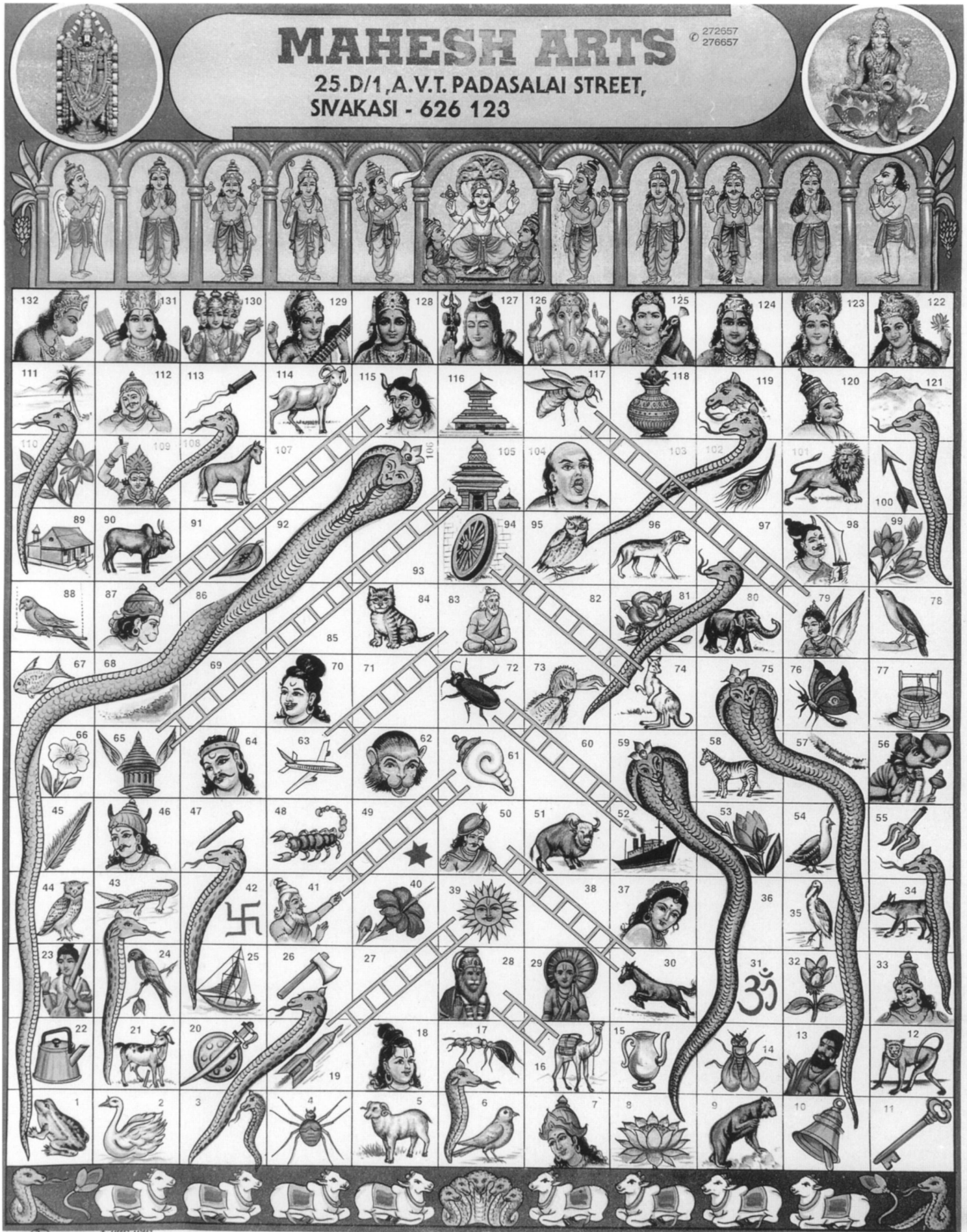


Fig. 15 *Paramapadasopanapata* board on paper, printed at Sivakasi, Tamilnadu, ca. 2000. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

descending snakes. In the central image above, Rāma presides with Sītā beneath a canopy, attended by Hanuman and Lakṣmaṇa; Brahmā appears to the left, and Śiva and Pārvatī on Kailāsa to the right. There are twenty-eight multi-coloured snakes and twenty ladders.

22. British Museum, London (380 squares).<sup>50</sup> In this mid- to late-nineteenth-century Pahari board, Viṣṇu presides above, flanked by Śiva and Brahmā; all are shown with their consorts, and Nandi also attends Śiva. The separately numbered left and right panels each comprise 19×9 squares (1–172), and as usual the central column of nineteen unnumbered squares is flanked by the two principal snakes. There are twenty ladders and thirty snakes. Among the ladders in the left panel, *tīrthayātrā* (pilgrimage journey, 23) leads to *cit sudhī* (wisdom, 50), and *aṣṭāṅgayoga* (yoga of the eight limbs, 90) promotes to *kīrti* (glory, 122). *Śivabhakti* appears twice: at square 151 leading to Brahmā, and at square 169 (in error for *Viṣṇubhakti*?) leading to the winning *Vaikunṭha* square. In the corresponding square (169) of the right panel, *bhaktiyoga* (yoga of devotion) is shown leading to *Vaikunṭha*.

#### *A Royal Karmic Game from Mysore*

No pre-twentieth-century boards for *gyān chaupar* or *mokṣapaṭa* appear to survive from further south than Maharashtra, and it is possible that the game remained unknown or relatively unpopular in southern India until modern times. It is quite surprising that it failed to flourish in nineteenth-century Karnataka, where the famous royal games enthusiast Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar of Mysore (1794–1868)<sup>51</sup> would certainly have known of it. Its omission both from the encyclopaedic games treatises compiled in his reign and the related mural depictions of board games in the former Jagmohan palace at Mysore may perhaps be attributed to some personal aversion on his part, either to snakes (was the Raja ophidiophobic?) and ladders per se, or to the more violent and *mouvementé* form of race game to which their use gives rise. Krishnaraja did, however, see fit to adapt the principle of a karmic race game to his own ludic and theological notions, as is seen most clearly in the remarkable double-sided game board (see no. 23 below). Similar or even identical karmic themes also appear in some contemporary Mysore elaborations of the classic chaupar or pachisi board.<sup>52</sup>

23. Present location unknown (figs. 12–13).<sup>53</sup> This double-sided, folding game board in rosewood inlaid with ivory and brass dates from the mid-nineteenth century and is a unique survival of its kind.

50 Acc no. 1999.8.9.01; acquired from a dealer in Florence. This board has a modern inscription in English on the reverse mentioning “Karan Singh I. Chamba State”; the Chamba ruler of this period was Charat Singh (r. 1808–1844).

51 I. Finkel, “A Raja’s Diversions: Board Games at Mysore,” in Mackenzie and Finkel, *The Art of Contest*, 127–133; V. Rangachar, “Deciphering Board Games Invented by the Raja of Mysore,” in *Step by Step: Proceedings of the Fourth Colloquium “Board Games in Academia,”* ed. J. Reschitzki and R. Haddad-Zubel (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 2002), 147–162; also V. Rangachar, “Games and Puzzles of Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar: ‘Broadcast Them to the World,’” and A. Topsfield, “Some Mysore Games in British Collections,” in Topsfield, *The Art of Play* (forthcoming).

52 E.g. Finkel, “A Raja’s Diversions,” 132, fig. 11:4.

53 Formerly in a private collection; Sotheby’s London, 23 November 1987, lot 395. For colour illustrations, see Topsfield, “Some Mysore Games in British Collections” (forthcoming).



Its two games share very similar karmic square-inscriptions and are essentially the same game in complementary forms. One is devoted to Śiva as supreme god, the other to his consort or Śakti, the Goddess in the form of Cāmuṇḍeśvarī, tutelary deity of the Mysore dynasty. Simplified versions of these games, called *Śivasayujya* and *Devīsayujya*, appear in the *Caturāṅgasārasarvasva*, a compendious games treatise by Maharaja Krishnaraja written in Sanskrit and Kannada in 1843, and a related image of the simplified *Śivasayujya* is among the mural paintings of board games in the former Jagmohan palace.<sup>54</sup> In this more elaborate version in inlaid wood (fig. 12), Śiva appears in *mukhalinga* form with Nandi at the centre, attended by Gaṇeśa and other deities, while the eight *dikpālas* guard the walls of his sanctum. The numerous ivory roundel plaques set in the six concentric circles leading inwards to Śiva's realm bear Kannada inscriptions specifying rewards and retributions for good or evil actions, as well as images of the animal and other incarnations of the hell and heaven states which are the karmic results. The four players each have six pieces, whose starting squares are marked in the corners of the board within lotuses flanked by *hamīsas*. The players' promotion from the outer circle to the successive inner circles of the game seems to be made via the trailing leaf motifs appended to twenty of the roundels, aligned in four radiating rows like the spokes of a wheel.

On the reverse, the *Devīsayujya* form of the game (fig. 13) shows Cāmuṇḍeśvarī mounted on her lion within an ivory roundel with sunburst rays, attended by celestial beings in aerial boats at either side. She presides over a temple-like structure, comprising eight storeys or rows of squares, with multiple *yāli* bracket figures. Further below, the early stages of the game take place within the eight lotus petals supporting the temple. The starting positions for four players, using six men each, are marked within the two outer petals. The playing track formed by these lotus petal roundels has been likened to an exploded form of the related karmic chaupar games from Mysore. The passage from this section of the game to the upper levels seems to be made via the central, twelve-lobed cartouche enclosing the goddess's lion (with an associated bull and buck above).

The edifying roundel inscriptions on this board (many of which also appear in the *Śivasayujya* game) include: "one who is cruel will be born as a tiger"; "one who is arrogant will be born as an elephant"; "one who indulges in pleasure will be born as a prostitute"; "one who becomes a wanderer will be born as a horse"; and so forth. Specific hells are named for those who denigrate the virtuous or who betray a friend, whereas "one who donates many jewels will reach *nāgaloka*" and "one who performs many sacrifices will reach *Indraloka*". False holy men will get their comeuppance: "one who is a sadhu, but without *jñāna*, will be born as a cow"; "one who merely pretends to meditate will be born as a crane". Higher up the board, the saving virtues of *bhakti* are felt: a Vaiṣṇava "will reach *Vaikunṭha*" and a Vīraśaiva "will reach *Kailāsa*". Thus the heavens of various deities are passed, before the player arrives finally at the supreme realm of Cāmuṇḍeśvarī.

54 I am grateful for this and other information to Dr. Vasantha Rangachar, who is preparing a translation of a major illustrated manuscript of the *Caturāṅgasārasarvasva* in a European private collection.

### *A Unique Version of Nepalese Nāgaṭāsā*

Also noteworthy is a remarkable Nepalese painting of ca. 1700, which came to light in California about two decades ago.<sup>55</sup>

24. Present location unknown (fig. 14). This board represents a unique elaboration of *nāgaṭāsā* within a complex, mandala-based structure. The absence of numbering or inscriptions makes it difficult to interpret its method of play, if indeed it was mainly intended as a game. However, the presence of both darker- and lighter-coloured snakes (presumably malign and benign) and the evident thematic progression from the lower tiers of squares to the higher, heavenly zone suggest that this was the case, although a didactic purpose, expounding esoteric Tantric yoga doctrines, was probably foremost in its maker's mind. The numerous, lighter and darker snakes form complex, writhing configurations, and the lower sections of the board are a veritable snake-pit. From the white panel at the base of the mandala's inner zone, two snake-heads each develop nine tails stretching into the twin arcs of squares ( $2 \times 42$ ) appended below the mandala (and in which play would probably commence). The squares within these two inferior arcs, the central block, and the rectangular divine zone above Mount Meru come to a total of 205 ( $84 + 94 + 27$ ). The seven outer circles of the mandala, though zoned in different colours, appear not to have come into play. Certain of the longer snakes appear to represent the *nāḍīs* or subtle channels of *kuṇḍalinī* energy, which flow within the human organism according to Tantric physiology. Thus both the major solar and lunar (*piṅgalā* and *idā*) *nāḍīs* are depicted here, to the right and left of Mount Meru (or the spinal column of the yogin), as ascending or descending snakes which connect the central squares within the mandala to the upper zone ( $3 \times 9$  squares), where five deities preside. These gods and goddesses are not now clearly identifiable: Viṣṇu is possibly in the centre, within a palace representing *Vaikuṅṭha*, with Śiva seated by him on the right. Many other Tantric deities appear below in the mandala's central zone and the two inferior outer arcs. In the upper corners of the painting celestial figures make offerings, while in the lower corners two *asura* warriors appear.

### *Conclusion: On the History of the Game*

If these recent discoveries have not greatly modified our classification of *gyān caupar*, what further light do they throw on its origins and early development? A few suggestions can be made, which increasingly indicate the likelihood of a Jain invention of the game.

Although the earliest dated Jain board (no. 8 above, fig. 6) is only of the first half of the eighteenth century, its composition and playing scheme are of a fully developed maturity, which suggests a lengthy process of evolution over several centuries. What, then, would have been the starting point of such an evolution? One possibility, which can only be tentatively advanced at present, is that Jain *gyān caupar* might have originated in mandala-like grid diagrams used in doctrinal texts to clarify the interconnections of karmic causation: a relevant but as yet unpublished example is reported in a manuscript of the *Mahānīśītha Sūtra*, said to be of the eleventh to twelfth century, in a temple library at

55 I am grateful to Neil Kreitman for providing a photograph.

Śatrunjaya.<sup>56</sup> If this hypothesis is correct, we might further speculate that connecting lines drawn by Jain scribes between specific grid squares, to signify karmic cause and effect, could subsequently have developed into the distinctive snake and ladder forms of *gyān caupar*, as executed in independent, large-scale *paṭa* paintings on cloth. Such *paṭas* may have been used initially for the instruction of novices or the laity (somewhat like the Tibetan didactic Wheel of Life paintings), but later also as game boards.

The imagery of ladders would certainly have been familiar to a Jain audience. The doctrinal use of the terms *śedhi* or *śreṇī* (ladder or row) was well developed in texts such as the *Sarvārthasiddhi*, a commentary on Umasvati's *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, in relation to the fourteen *guṇasthānas*, or progressive stages of purification, of the *jīva*, soul.<sup>57</sup> According to the *Sarvārthasiddhi*, two ladders can be ascended by the *jīva* from the seventh *guṇasthāna* onwards: the *upaśama śreṇī* (ladder of subsidence or suppression of passions) and the *kṣapaka śreṇī* (ladder of destruction or elimination of passions). On the *upaśama* ladder, right-conduct-deluding karmas only subside, whereas on the *kṣapaka* ladder they are destroyed. Because of this, the highest *guṇasthāna* that can be attained on the *upaśama* ladder is the eleventh stage, from which the soul will inevitably soon fall back to somewhere between the second and sixth stages. The *kṣapaka* ladder, however, leads straight to the twelfth stage, and so to eventual liberation.

The use of ladder imagery in *gyān caupar* would seem to have developed directly from this kind of conceptual background. Moreover, the sometimes unexpected convolutions or zigzag turns made by ladders in Jain painted boards could perhaps reflect more than the vagaries of the artists' compositional methods, but bear some relation to the spatial concepts inherent in *śreṇī* theory, as expressed in the verse *anuśreṇī gatib*: "Transit takes place in rows [straight lines] in space"<sup>58</sup> (*Tattvārtha Sūtra* 2:27; *Sarvārthasiddhi* 2:26). *Anuśreṇī* are rows of successive (*anu*) space-points, commencing at the centre of the universe, along which souls move from one rebirth (*gati*) to another by traversing successive space-points in straight lines, whether horizontally or vertically (i.e. vertically to a different "world" or realm of Jain cosmology, horizontally to a different place in the same realm). This movement always occurs in a straight line, although the soul can make up to three 90-degree turns.<sup>59</sup>

Enough has been said to show that ladders – a symbol for the ascent of the soul in many cultures<sup>60</sup> – were central to the Jain conception of the spiritual path. Snake imagery, generally common in Hindu and Buddhist as well as Jain mythology, was naturally less prominent in doctrinal literature, though the cosmological terms for the progressive and regressive (upward and downward) half-cycles of time,

56 This karmic diagram, which, however, is said to lack the connecting lines I have mentioned as well as snakes and ladders, is reported by Dr. Rangachar, who was unfortunately not permitted to photograph it by the temple authorities. The subject of the *Mahānīṣītha Sūtra* is the good and bad conduct of monks and nuns, the repentance of their misdeeds, and related matters.

57 N. Tatia, trans., *That Which Is: Tattvārtha Sūtra of Umāsvāti* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 279–285, appendix 4: "The Doctrine of the Fourteen Stages of Spiritual Development"; also S. A. Jain, trans., *Reality: Śbri Pujyapada's Sarvārthasiddhi* (Calcutta: V. S. Sangha, 1960), 281 and footnotes; M. L. Mehta, *Outlines of Jaina Philosophy* (Bangalore: Jain Mission Society, 1954), 151–158; W. Schubring, *The Doctrine of the Jains* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), 322–323.

58 Jain, *Reality*, 69ff.

59 The foregoing account relies heavily on a succinct summary of the matter kindly provided by Dr. William Johnson.

60 E.g. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976), 103–104.

*avasarpinī* and *utsarpinī*, are serpentine in nature.<sup>61</sup> It would, however, have been a natural development in the painted karmic *paṭas* for the regressive (downward) paths between the higher and lower *gunasthāna* stages to have been graphically differentiated from the upward ladders by rendering them as snakes (also more suggestive of the powerful passions which hold the *jīva* in bondage).

When, probably at an early stage, these didactic *paṭas* were put to use as a recreational race game played with dice, they may indeed not have been the first Indian board game to be based on a spiritual theme. It seems reasonably likely that they were preceded and perhaps influenced by some form of Buddhist promotion game dating from the Pala-Sena period, which may have become lost in India following the Muslim invasions of ca. 1200 but was preserved in Tibet, along with much of the earlier Indian Buddhist religious and artistic tradition. The Tibetan game of the “Determination of the Ascension of Stages”, traditionally attributed to Sa-skya Pandita (1182–1251), has continued to be played into modern times.<sup>62</sup> It does not employ snakes or ladders and this may have been the case too with any Indian prototype for the game. If, therefore, the Jains did indeed initiate the use of these defining motifs, the invention of *gyān caupar*, or classic Snakes and Ladders, must be credited to them.

Dating *gyān caupar* in its earlier phases largely remains guesswork. But if the Jain game had possibly begun to develop by the thirteenth or fourteenth century, it is likely that Hindu versions would have followed quite soon thereafter,<sup>63</sup> as an evolution over several centuries, leading to the mature board types of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, can again be safely assumed. By the fourteenth to fifteenth century, Vaiṣṇava teachers and *bhaktas* may have begun to recognise the didactic as well as ludic potential of this game concept, so giving rise to the earliest forms of Hindu *gyān caupar*. In contrast to the conservative homogeneity of the Jain game, the Hindus developed a wide diversity of board formats, snake and ladder patterns, and square-nomenclatures. The latter in particular reveal complex layerings of philosophical or psychological doctrine from many sources, including Sankhya, Yoga, Tantra,<sup>64</sup> mandala theory, and, above all, the *bhakti* devotionism whose rise in northern India from the fourteenth century gave the Vaiṣṇava game its main impetus and its unifying theme.

As has been suggested, the Sufi game, represented at present by only three examples from the first half of the nineteenth century, most likely developed in emulation of the Hindu or Jain game, and perhaps no earlier than the eighteenth century. Both the last sectarian form of *gyān caupar* to evolve in

61 P. S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley and Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), 30–34: “At the present time our earth (Bhārata-kṣetra) is in a descending or regressive half-cycle, an *avasarpinī*.”

62 Topsfield, IGSL, 212–213; Tatz and Kent, *The Tibetan Game of Liberation*, 6–16; I. Finkel, “Notes on Two Tibetan Dice Games,” in de Voogt, *New Approaches to Board Games Research*, 34–45; Finkel, “Ups and Downs,” 61, fig. 4:3.

63 It is perhaps worth reiterating that more than one of the received traditions relating to the invention of the game refer to this general period or slightly earlier: Jñāneśvara, to whom Maharashtra *mokṣapaṭa* is attributed, lived at the end of the thirteenth century, a little later than Sa-skya Pandita (1182–1251), the reputed originator of the Tibetan Buddhist game, and his near-contemporary Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240), to whom Sufi *gyān caupar* has been ascribed, albeit only in a modern Middle Eastern source (see n. 38 above).

64 Compare, in this respect, the appearance of ten short snakes, arranged in symmetrical columns, at either side of a Tantric *puruṣamaṇḍala* diagram, reproduced in the polemical article by Baboo Bipin Behari Shome, “Physical Errors of Hinduism,” *Calcutta Review* 11 (1849), reprinted in *Selections from the Calcutta Review* (Calcutta: Thos. S. Smith, 1882), 398–399, pl. 2. The body of the *puruṣa* contains eighty-eight numbered squares or zones, running vertically from left to right (not boustrophedon), and some of the square-names are analogous to those found in *gyān caupar*.

India and the most short-lived, it uniquely achieved a wider dissemination and an afterlife through its later adoption in Turkey and the Middle East.

By the early twentieth century, all forms of *gyān caupar* in India had ceased to evolve and were losing popularity, except among the conservative Jain communities of Western India. The new ability to mass-produce cheap printed paper boards did, however, give rise to one or two later regional developments. A Bengali variant game, first popularised in simple woodcut versions around 1870, was *golokdham*, a 64-square Vaiṣṇava promotion game played without snakes or ladders.<sup>65</sup> In more recent times, a popular form of *gyān caupar* continues today in the printed pictorial boards sold in the bazaars of Tamilnadu. Known as *paramapadasopanapaṭa*, or “ladder to salvation”,<sup>66</sup> these cheap and colourful boards include, along with multiple depictions of presiding deities, a wide range of exotic or fanciful imagery. A recent example produced at Sivakasi near Madurai (fig. 15)<sup>67</sup> has Viṣṇu presiding in *Vaikunṭha*, while ladders below lead, for example, from a rocket (19) to the sun (39) or, more oddly, from a kangaroo (74) to a *cakra*, or wheel (94). The origins of this modern Tamil offshoot of the game seem to lie in Maharashtra *mokṣapaṭa*, which at some point probably reached the far south, following the extension of Maratha power to the Tanjore region in the eighteenth century.<sup>68</sup>

In modern India, Snakes and Ladders is still occasionally adapted or reinvented for the exposition of systems of spirituality, as for example in an eclectic version dating from the early 1980s which combines traditional elements deriving from the Large Pahari boards with more contemporary ecumenical and moral notions.<sup>69</sup> More often, Snakes and Ladders imagery is put to secular propagandist use,

- 65 Typically the blockprinted paper board comprised a 6×8 playing area with rows of 6 + 4 + 3 + 3 squares above. An article by Amitabha Ghosh on two early-twentieth-century, topographically themed *golokdham* boards from Calcutta is forthcoming. See also Topsfield, IGSL, 213, n. 37, for remarks communicated to me by the late Nirad Chaudhuri, who also suggested a date prior to 1870 for the invention of the game. Babu T. N. Mukharji seems to confirm a dating of ca. 1870 by a remark in his *List of Articles Collected for the Oxford Institute* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1884), II, no. 333: “Golokdham, a kind of game lately invented.” This latter board was one of the items collected in Bengal in the early 1880s for the museum of the newly founded Indian Institute at Oxford (later dissolved in 1962; this board is not traceable in the ex-Indian Institute collections now in the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers Museums).
- 66 E.g. V. Balambal, “Snakes-and-Ladder Game ‘Paramapadam’ in South India,” in *Working Papers, “Indian Views”: A Collection of Papers on Chess and Other Board Games*, ed. M. A. J. Eder and I. Finkel (Kelkheim: Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung e.V., 2001), figs. 1–3; also V. Balambal, *Folk Games of Tamilnadu* (Madras: C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, 2006), chap. 4.
- 67 Acc. no. EA 2005.75. This board was collected in recent years in the bazaar near the Minakshi temple at Madurai.
- 68 As suggested by Prof. Wakankar (personal communication), who remarks that in some versions of the *paramapadasopanapaṭa* board, “along with other pictures in the houses (birds, animals, etc.) are to be found the pictures of the members of the royal family of the Bhonsles, the rulers of the State of Tanjore and the descendants of Shivaji the Great.”
- 69 Designed in Hindi and English versions (“*Gyān caupar*” and “Game of Life”) by Chhote Bharany, accompanying the publication of his commentary on the game, *Gyān Caupar* (New Delhi: Abhivyanjana, 1984); English edition: *Game of Life* (Panchkula: Abhidha Prakashan, 2005). An earlier printed paper board entitled “Good and Evil: Tantric Snakes and Ladders” was published in the 1970s by Chimanlal’s Private Limited (Bombay). Two modern Sikh versions of Snakes and Ladders have been marketed recently on the internet.

as a visual aid in advertising<sup>70</sup> and political or public health campaigns.<sup>71</sup> Otherwise the game is now played, in the Indian subcontinent as elsewhere, mainly by children and in simplified Western form. It thus remains divested of the philosophical subtleties of *gyān caupar* and its essential element of *jñāna*, or transcendent knowledge: not least, the awareness that on attaining *mokṣa* all worldly dualities such as snakes and ladders (an echo here of Śaṅkara's image of the serpent and the rope?) will fall away as the mere illusory projections of *māyā*. Even so, this great ludic invention retains its hold on the world's imagination,<sup>72</sup> through the vivid dualism of its imagery and the existential drama of its play dynamic, as a paradigm of capricious fate or the ups and downs of human life.

70 A recent Indian printed paper Snakes and Ladders board expounding the virtues of Medimix Ayurvedic Bath Soap is in a London private collection. I am grateful to Dr. Irving Finkel for this and much other information and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

71 E.g. in 1993 an AIDS awareness festival in Delhi featured a giant Snakes and Ladders board inscribed with appropriate educational messages; and in 2002 another giant Snakes and Ladders game on the theme of "Panchayati Raj" was played by women delegates at a Panchayat representatives' congress at Patna.

72 At the time of writing, a Google search on the term "Snakes and Ladders" elicits about 900,000 items; on "Chutes and Ladders" (the snake-free American version of the modern game) over 500,000; and on (in descending order of popularity) "Serpientes y Escaleras," "Scale e Serpenti," "Serpents et Échelles," and "Schlangen und Leitern," a further total of 250,000.