

Lost Game: Dashabatar Taas of Bishnupur

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Picture 1: Dashabatar Taas of Bishnupur by Sital Fouzdar: one of the court-cards from each suit

The Dynasty and the Game

Bishnupur witnessed the rise of a glorious tradition of art, craft and culture since the 700 AD under the patronage of the Malla kings of Bankura. The tradition reached its zenith during the reign (1565–1620 A.D) of Malla king Veer Hambir, the 49th ascender to the throne. His long and stable reign can be called the golden era of arts and culture—classical in taste and nature. The tradition was carried forward by his successors King Raghunath Singha and his son Veer Singha. Art, literature and music reached their heights through research, experimentation, training and application. After his conversion to Vaishnavism, according to some authors, under the influence of Vaishnav guru Srinivas Acharya, Veer Hambir was inspired to create a distinct style of art and to nurture a different type of cultural atmosphere in Bishnupur.¹ The establishment of Vaishnavism might have had something to do with enjoying pastime in a different and non-violent way and this might have given birth to the game of 'Dashabatar taas'. Vaishnavism also hints that the game might have been imported

Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design, (ISSN 2231 – 4822), Vol. 1, No. 2, August, 2011

URL of the Issue: www.chitrolekha.com/v1n2.php

Available at www.chitrolekha.com/V1/n2/09_Dashabatar_Taas_of_Bishnupur.pdf

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from somewhere else, for Dashabatar Taas of Bishnupur was none other form than Dasavtara Ganjifa which used to be played during the time in parts of India like Rajasthan, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and the contemporary Bengal. But Dashabatar Taas of Bankura developed its own distinct form and rules for playing.



Picture 2: Four of Lord Vishnu's ten incarnations (Dashavatar) on the wall of the temples of Bishnupur

Origin

The Ganjifa playing practices in India were introduced and popularized by the Mughal emperors in the 16th century A.D. Though the origin of the word Ganjifa is obscure, following the conclusion of Rudolf Von Heyden "Ganjifa is supposed to have travelled from Persia to India with the Persian etymology 'ganj' that denotes treasure, treasury or minted money.ⁱⁱ As Kishor Gordhandas has noted, "There is always one "Money Suit" named after a coin of local currency. In our Moghul Ganjifa, the two Suits called SAFED and SURKH are said to have represented money: SAFED (White or Silver) represents CHANDRA and SURKH (Red or Gold) represents SURYA."ⁱⁱⁱ



Picture 3: Ram Suit with ten numerals by Sital Fouzdar

In Ain-i-Akbari by Abul Fazal we find a detailed account of an eight suited pack of Mughal ganjifa with 96 cards and also an “ancient’ pack of twelve suits. Albert Houtum-Schindler said in 1895 on the usual content of Mughal ganjifa: “From travelers to Persia in the 17th century we know that a set of gangifeh consisted of ninety or ninety-six cards in eight suits or colors.”^{iv}



Picture 4: Dashabatar and Naqsh Cards by Sital Fouzdar

Dashabatar Taas of Banura

Once established, the ganjifa cards spread all over the country in either an original form of Mughal ganjifa or in a slightly hinduized version, painted with Hindu gods and goddesses on it. In India two more suits were added to the mother ganjifa and named all of them after the names of “Dash Abatar” or ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The set has thus been known as Dashabatar or Dasavatara ganjifa. This pack generally consists of 120 cards instead of 96 of Mughal set, and in Bishnupur unlike the other states it is played by five players. The names of the suits of this Dasavatara ganjifa are respectively Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Baraha (boar), Nrisingha (a combination of man and lion together), Baman (Brahmin dwarf), Parasuram (the sixth incarnation with axe), Sri Ram (the hero of Ramayana), Balaram (brother of lord Sri Krishna), Buddha (the ninth incarnation with absolute peace) and Kalki (the ‘abatar’ yet to come).

Every suit of a Dasavatara pack consists of 12 cards each with a Raja as a king or an upper court card and a Mantri as a minister or a lower court card along with ten general numeral cards. The above mentioned suits can be identified with different symbols proficiently painted by the Ganjifa chitrakars (painters in forms of 'patachitra' (scroll painting). The suit of Matsya is symbolized with fish, Kurma with an image of turtle, Baraha with shell, Nrisingha with chakra (decorated discs), Baman with water pot, Parasuram with axe, Sri Ram with arrow or bow and arrow or monkey, Balaram with plough or club or cow, Buddha with lotus and Kalki with sword or horse or parasol.

Naqsh Taas of Bankura



Picture 5: Naqsh Taases

Besides, Dashabatar there is also another type of card in Bishnupur known as "Naqsh Taas". Painting of Bishnupur Naqsh Taas is the most popular among all kinds of Naqsh ganjifas prevalent all over India. As the word 'Naqsh' ('Naksha' in Bengali) denotes pattern, design, shapes etc. the Naqsh cards are accordingly ornamented with beautiful Patachitras, patterns and graphic stylizations. The Naqsh taas pack consists of 48 cards with 4 equal suits of 12 cards each. These cards are generally produced in two different sets—one is large and another is a miniature deck with 2" of diameter. These small cards are also created with much attention, precision and a thorough dedication in detailing. The most significant part of this kind of card is the container pack which is also a decorative specimen with colours, paintings and accessories. Remarkably the artists of Bishnupur are most famous for this kind of artistic wonders.

Naqsh Taases are generally played for gambling purposes and it was a favourite pastime for holydays, Janmastami and an auspicious time between Dussera and Diwali or Kali Puja.



Picture 6: Patachitro by Sital Fouzdar

Gaming Rules

The rules of the play of Dasavatara ganjifa is essentially the same with the Mughal one, but in case of Dasavatara ganjifa the eight suits of Mughal ganjifa are only extended to ten suits to make it more complex and interesting. In Mughal custom the game generally gets started by the holder of the Raja (King) of 'Surkh' in daytime. But in night the game will be started with the Raja of 'Safed' suit. Similarly in Dasavatara ganjifa the lead starts with the king of 'Ram' suit in the day time and King of 'Balaram' during the night. In system of Dashabatar taas of Bishnupur the game starts with the king of 'Ram' during the day, Nrisingha at twilight, Kurma during a rainy day and Matsya during a rainy night. All these features highlight how significant and enjoyable the game of the Dashabatar Taas was when it used to be relished with vigour by the royal courtiers.

The Making of Dashabatar Taas of Bishnupur

It is interesting to note that the Ganjifa artists might have been influenced by two traditions here: one, the Dashabatar figures frequently used on the panels of various temples of Bishnupur, and another was the tradition of Patachitra. But still, this cannot explain the mysteries associated with various aspects of Dashabatar Taas. The process of making Ganjifa card is very laborious and it involves almost all the members of a family to bring forth a single set of ganjifa. The Bishnupur Dashabatar Taas are made from old cloth pieces pasting one piece on another by tamarind glue. After pasting layers after layers the stiffened piece of cloth is stretched, dried and cut into circular pieces following coating with a base colour. Then the senior artist touches his brush to draw delicate outlines, details of figure cards and critical touch-ups which require a master's hand. The junior artists generally draw the numeral cards. Thus the entire family would devote itself to producing a single set of Dashabatar Taas.

The Decline

Though the game had enjoyed a glorious time (even till the King Kaliprasanno Thakur as per Sital Fouzdar's report), with the introduction of European printed cards in 19th century fascination with the Dashabatar Taas gradually declined. People rather became more interested in the new European card games as more fashionable. They were also attracted to the stylized figures of French King, Queen and Jack. Just as people started adopting new fashions as part of developing new style during the colonial period, the new game might have had something to do with embracing a new fashion as a symbol of modernity. It is important to note here that many indigenous games were given up in favour of adopting the western ones. Moreover the cost of hand painted Dashabatar Taas was less affordable to the poor and middle class players. The Dashabatar set thus got gradually replaced by the attractive European cards and Ganjifa card artisans became reduced to one or two families creating the cards not for players but for tourists and art-lovers. Many of their families sank into a great poverty, many of the master craftsmen are no more alive today and some of them are suffering from an acute poor vision without any hope. With the decreasing demand and the lack of interest and awareness among the tourists and general public about the Dashabatar Taas the artisans now are no more interested in taking up Dashabatar Ganjifa as a secure way to earning their livelihood. Only the Fouzdar family of Bishnupur is still engaged in creating the traditional Dashabatar ganjifa and Naqsh taas. But unfortunately they are on the brink of leaving this glorious tradition because of lack of patronage and security for livelihood and minimum respect and recognition for their art. Soon Dashabatar Ganjifa will become extinct and the pieces will find their places in various museums as a cultural fossil unless urgent measures are taken to save this delicate and precious traditional craft.

A Few Last Measures

The famous collector of Ganjifa cards Kishor Gordhandas (to whom the author owes much) almost pleads with the readers for its survival:

“It is important that the artists get some pushing and encouragement from the Art world, and from the local Government. Indian people must have awareness and knowledge about the Indian Ganjifa, and be ready to purchase a few items, either for collecting, or for the games that are played with Ganjifa cards so that the Ganjifa Art can survive.”^v

Following his suggestions, to revive this craft the some possible measures may be helpful:

- a. The governments and/or NGOs and societies should immediately arrange for monetary help for the ganjifa artists.
- b. Frequent exhibitions and workshops will encourage the students of fine art and crafts to work and experiment with this craft and invent new ideas to popularize this age-old creation.
- c. Creating general awareness among tourists in Bankura and people outside is necessary so that they know the history and learn to adore them as precious pieces of traditional handicraft.
- d. Initiatives should be taken to spread knowledge about this through essays, articles and books on it and by including a chapter on it in the syllabi of fine arts courses.
- e. In our time of digital technology the gaming industry is always looking for traditional games to be taken on the virtual world. Gaming software can be made for playing Ganjifa cards in order to spread the awareness about it throughout the world.

An Interview with Sital Fouzdar



Sital Fouzdar claims to be the 87th generation of artisans who had started making Dashabatar Taas of Bishnupur 1200 years ago under the patronage of the Malla kings of Bishnupur. He is a born artist making Dashabatar Taas and Naqsh Taas, Patachitros and clay idols. He has been awarded with Kamala Devi Award. He has exhibited his works in places like Kolkata, Bangalore, Mumbai and Andaman. He can be contacted at 09732083428.

Chitrolekha: You have been creating Dashabatar Taas for many years as your forefathers had done for generations. What do you know about its history?

Chitrolekha: As far as I have learnt from my father and uncle and grandfather, our Taas is 1200 years old and we are the 87th generation working on this.

Chitrolekha: Can you tell us how and when it started?

SF: I don't know exactly. But our forefathers used to create Dashabatar Taas for the Malla Kings.

Chitrolekha: We see you have the title 'Fouzdar'. That means you were soldiers or you had soldiers working under you?

SF: Yes, I have heard so. We worked for the kings.

Chitrolekha: But then how did they move on to creating artistic Taas?

SF: Our forefathers were also artisans and they worked for the temples and built the idols. Even now we create and repair the idol of Mrinmoyee temple and paint three Patas for it.

Chitrolekha: When you entered into making this, there were other professions open to you. But why did you choose this profession which brings very little money?

SF: When I was in reading in class IV or V, I went with my uncle Bhaskar Fouzdar to Bangalore at a handicrafts fair. I was exposed to numerous items of handicrafts from all over India. But sadly people paid little attention to our Dashabatar Taas. At that time I decided to learn the art. Later on I noticed that the Taas would not survive if nobody plays it. So I decided to learn the rules. My father and uncle and others did not know how to play with the Taas. So I requested the companions of our late king Kaliprasanno Thakur to teach me the rules since they played with the king. I hosted the game at my house. But I found they just went on playing and I could learn nothing.

Chitrolekha: So how did you know the rules?

SF: Then one day a German lady came to me. She told me that in a museum in Germany they had a collection of the Dashabatar Taas of Bishnupur and they also possess the gaming rules.

Chitrolekha: Excellent!

SF: But she said that she would teach me the rules on the condition that I would give gaming instructions to only those customers who would buy a set of 120 cards.

Chitrolekha: Why?

SF: May be because we reduced the numbers to ten only as no one was interested in playing and did not know the rules. They were collecting the cards just as craft items.

Chitrolekha: How do you give instructions for playing the cards?

SF: I supply a leaflet with sets of 120 cards. It contains the instructions for the game.

Chitrolekha: Where are the cards sold? I mean outside does it have markets Bankura?

SF: Only in Kolkata. You can find my art works at Artisana.

Chitrolekha: But do you know your work is available also in the USA with Kalarte Gallery? We wanted to use a Patochitro by you and they were delighted to give us permission for free use?

SF: No. I don't know. But they must be great people. I am so happy to know this.

Chitrolekha: Your works are also available with Art n Soul India and they were also delighted to give us permission for free use of the images.

SF: Ok. Very good.

Chitrolekha: But in India there are some organizations which have got collections of your cards and they charge some amount for using images. Do you get any portion as royalty or help?

SF: No. I am not aware of this. Many people come to us and we don't know what they do with the items.

Chitrolekha. Ok. What is the condition of this craft now?

SF: Like many of the crafts of Bankura it is also in a poor state. Very people buy it and many come just to see it. We create the cards with hard labour, but when customers bargain hard we understand that they don't know its tradition and we feel disappointed. Then tourists come mainly in winter and for the rest of the year we can sell few.

Chitrolekha: If so, it is very difficult to maintain a family. Do you depend on other things?

SF: Yes, we have to. We make Patachitro and clay idols of Hindu gods and goddesses.

Chitrolekha: If you don't mind...what is your average monthly income from these crafts?

SF: [With great hesitation] Very irregular. Sometimes we make ten thousand in a month, sometimes five thousand and sometimes only one thousand.

Chitrolekha: Ok. With this kind of future would you want your future generation to continue making Dashabatar Taas? Are they interested in this or looking forward to other jobs?

SF: Yes I encourage them to learn the art because I think we have to keep alive an artistic tradition of 1200 years. I hope even if they seek other professions they will not

give it up. There are other members of our clan who are making Patachitros and cards in spite of doing government service.

Chitrolekha: What has been the attitude of the governments to this craft? Have you got any financial support from them?

SF: Nothing...nothing. Nothing we have got. I want to set up a training centre here for attracting people from other professions to these crafts. I have applied but so far no response so far.

Chitrolekha: Do you have any expectation from the new state government?

SF: We don't have time for politics. The leaders may be interested. But we have to go to the officers and we don't get proper dealing. Only colours change, everything remains the same.

Acknowledgements

Chitrolekha is grateful to the following organizations and persons for allowing us to use their pictures:

- Picture 1, 3, 4 (by Artist Sital Fouzdar) and 7: Courtesy and Copyright – **Art n Soul India** (<http://artnsoulindia.com>)
- Pictures 2: Courtesy and Copyright – Shyamal Chatterjee (<http://przmm.blogspot.com>)
- Pictures 5: Courtesy and Copyright – **Anupam Gangopadhyay**
- Pictures 6: Courtesy and Copyright – **Kalarte Gallery**, (<http://kalarte.com>)

Notes

ⁱ Utpal Chakraborty, 'Karasilpo', *Bankura. Bankura* (Loksangskriti o Adivasi Sangskriti Kendro, Tothyo o Sangskriti Bibhag, Paschimbango Sarkar, Kolkata, 2002), p. 51.

ⁱⁱ In 1895, General Albert Houtum-Schindler described Ganjifa thus:

"The word ganjifeh is in Persian now only employed for European playing-cards (four suits, ace to ten; three picture cards each suit), which, however, are also called *rarak i âs - rarak i âsanâs* - or simply *âs*, from the game *âs* or *âsanâs*. From travellers to Persia in the seventeenth century we know that a set of ganjifeh consisted of ninety or ninety-six cards in eight suits or colors. At present a set consists of twenty cards in five colors or values. These values are:

1. *Shîr va Khurshîd* or *âs*: Lion and Sun, or Ace.
2. *Shâh* or *Pishâ*: King.
3. *Bîbî*: Lady (or Queen).

4. *Sarbâs*: Soldier (or Knave).

5. *Lakat* (meaning something of little value): generally a dancing-girl.

The backs of the cards are always black or of a dark color, but their faces have grounds of different colors, viz: The Lion and Sun, a black ground; the King, a white ground; the Lady, red; the soldier, gold; the Lakat, green. The pictures on the cards show much variety and are often obscene, particularly those on the card of the lowest value. The ordinary types as now made are: Ace, a Lion and Sun, as in the Persian arms; a King sitting on a throne; a European lady in a quaint costume; a Persian soldier shouldering his rifle; a Persian dancing-girl." Quoted in David Parlett's *A History of Card Games* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1991). Also available at

(<http://www.davidparlett.co.uk/histocs/poker.html#Xservice>.)

ⁱⁱⁱ A Short History Of Ganjifa Cards, Epic India. <http://www.epicindia.com/magazine/Visual-Arts/a-short-history-of-ganjifa-cards> (retrieved on 25.06.2011)

^{iv} Quoted in David Parlett's *A History of Card Games* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1991)

^v A Short History Of Ganjifa Cards (<http://www.epicindia.com/magazine/Culture/a-short-history-of-ganjifa-cards-part-two>)



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