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The Maharajah's Dream Digitised: Archiving Boardgames in India

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Abstract

Boardgames have been a much-neglected aspect of India's intangible heritage, despite their fundamental role in shaping societies and cultures and have largely remained invisible within traditional academic discourses and museum archives. In the absence of physical archives and given the ephemeral nature and the multiple mediality of boardgames as artefacts, a digital archive seems to be the way forward in documenting Indian boardgames and their role as cultural artefacts. This article introduces the 'Digitizing Ancient Indian Boardgames (DAIB)' project, which seeks to move beyond the limitations (and often absence) of curated physical collections to curate a wide array of 'ludic artifacts' ranging from ancient cave etchings to oral traditions that are still in vogue. Through the lens of postcolonial DH and the praxis of jugaad, this DH project examines the challenges of archiving "ephemeral" culture in a resource-constrained environment. It remains cognisant of the fragmentariness of data and the difficulty of creating a cohesive history of play while, nevertheless, offering a scalable model for preserving intangible heritage across the Global South.

The 'Digitizing Ancient Indian Boardgames' Project: A Case Study

In the Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery in the former Jaganmohana Palace, 'there is an extraordinary group of wall paintings [...] showing a huge variety of boardgames and puzzles [that have] survived largely unnoticed until the present day' (Rangachar 2006, 147). This veritable mural-archive created by the Maharaja of Mysore, Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar III (1794–1868), has long been neglected and its potential still remains unrecognised. The lack of physical archives of boardgames in South Asia is striking. Museums have a very dispersed collection of boardgames that are curated as part of something else rather than as games per se. The Mysore Maharaja's dream archive of boardgames does not have a later counterpart in post-Independence India. The sad truth is that boardgames have largely been ignored by the academia and archival institutions all over India for many decades, if not centuries. This is surprising, as many of the most common boardgames have originated in India, and Indian culture is deeply imbued with instances of boardgame play such as the dice-game in the Mahabharata. Indeed Johan Huizinga (1949), the renowned historian of games, refers to this dice-game as a quintessential example of his theory of culture being *sub specie ludi* (in the guise of a game). Nevertheless, it is true that much of boardgame culture is either dispersed and difficult to track or is lost to posterity because the traditions of both making and play are no longer accessible.

Defining boardgames is difficult given the wide range of possible descriptions, and an approximate definition may be 'the surface of play which although commonly known as the "board", is not necessarily made of wood or other

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material, and is, in fact, in many parts of the world more often marked out on a level piece of ground whenever a game is about to be played' (Murray 1978, 1). Also, while 'ancient boardgames' is a category that is difficult to describe in exact chronological terms, the games considered here date back centuries (if not millennia), and many are now at risk of extinction. Currently, there are no archives to systematically record this rich and ancient cultural heritage that pervades Indian culture across chronological, geospatial, demographic and socio-cultural spaces. Of course, even when one addresses the long-term neglect, archiving boardgames is no easy task given the very transmedial conception of what 'boardgames' are.

Given the flexibility of the definition of boardgames, what is required is a digital archive, which enables intertextual connections, allows for regular updates and enhanced accessibility that contributes to the preservation of the games and the (re)dissemination of the ancient game cultures to a wider audience. Given the lack of physical archives and the absence of museum spaces dedicated to play, a digital archive proves to be a viable platform for archiving the rich boardgame culture(s) of India, and by extension, South Asia. Unlike physical archives, digital archives are premised on the digital surrogate or the digitally encoded representations of the physical artefact, which also enables wider access, networked data and extensive searchability. The digital archive, as conceived here, consists of networked data where unexpected connections between the games and their contexts emerge. It is simultaneously a palimpsest of games from various layers of time, tracing their roots and their evolution into contemporary games and other cultural forms. Given the erasure of play practices and contexts from public memory due to the archival neglect so far, an archive of boardgames is imminently needed. The 'Digitising Ancient Indian Boardgames' Project (the DAIB Project hereinafter), supported by the Jay Prakash Narayan Centre of Excellence at IIT Indore, aims to achieve such an archival goal. This essay is an attempt to outline the development of the project and discuss its challenges.

Archiving Boardgames: A Summary of Earlier Research

Archiving and curating the history of boardgames and play traditions have been attempted by scholars and boardgame enthusiasts over many years all across the world. Although relatively few, there are museums of play across the world that house collections of boardgames and card games, such as the Playing Cards Museum in France; the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, USA; the German Playing Card Museum at Altenburg; the National Playing Card Museum at Turnhout in Belgium; the Swiss Museum of Games at La Tour-de-Peilz in Switzerland; among others. These museums house curated collections of not only of the games themselves but also objects related to them and to the tradition of play. In some museums in India, there are a few boardgames and card games of Indian traditions, but there is no dedicated gallery or curated collection devoted to these games. They are kept in decorative art galleries in the Indian Museum, Kolkata or the National Museum of India, New Delhi. Hence, most of the games of our own traditions remain unknown to people and to future generations. The Gautam Sen Memorial Boardgames Museum in Kolkata is perhaps the only museum in India dedicated to a collection of boardgames and card games from all around the world, both ancient and modern.

Indian digital humanities (DH) has been prominent globally because of the longstanding and extensive work done by the School of Cultural Texts and Records (SCTR) at Jadavpur University through their Bichitra variorum archive of the poet Rabindranath Tagore's works, and other digital archives such as the 1947 Partition Archive, the Indian Cine.ma Archive and the Savifa Archive of Bengali periodicals, which, although not stating as much, is a pioneering DH project by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC). There have, however, been no archives dedicated to games, either physical or digital—for archival knowledge on games, one needs to look abroad, as already mentioned.

More recent developments in documenting games from across the world have been made by the Digital Ludeme Project housed in Maastricht University through the Ludii database (https://ludii.games/index.php), where a team of game scholars digitised existing games and developed a digital database for game developers, scholars and game enthusiasts to design, play and explore games all around the world by geotagging the games along with AI search algorithms. In India, the team Project Kheliya have documented ancient games from archaeological sites and held conferences and workshops to discuss the history of boardgames and their play traditions. Despite the intention to build such an archive, the lack of funding has been a major hurdle in India, and this project, as well as the efforts of others in India, have existed independently for decades.

Documentation of boardgames and the study of their origins and play traditions has seen an interesting revival in the recent years. H.J.R Murray, one of the earliest pioneers, did foundational service to the field with his tomes *The History of Chess* (Murray 1913) and the *History of Boardgames Other than Chess* (Murray 1978). Murray not only documents and writes about the boardgames, but also categorises them into games of alignment and configuration, war games, hunt games, race games, and many more. He also elaborates on the

distribution of these games and collects a wide array of information on games of various cultures all over the world. R. C. Bell (1979), in his comprehensive study, documented over 80 boardgames from all around the world in his book called *The Boardgame Book* (1979). Along with the documentation of the boardgames, there also lies another interesting characteristic in the book: Bell made an attempt to carefully design its pages to reproduce the boards in order to make them a part of a playing experience instead of just a book for reading about boardgames. The notable work of these early scholars was followed by Irving Finkel's (2007) pioneering edited volume *Ancient Board Games in Perspective: Papers from the 1990 British Museum Colloquium*.

Indian scholarship on boardgames first began with a compiled collection of essays in *The Sedentary Games of India,* edited by Nirbed Ray and Amitabha Ghosh (Ray and Ghosh 1999). This volume is a collection of essays by anthropologists and archaeologists from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century documenting South Asian boardgames, with diagrams explaining various boardgames, their similarities and dissimilarities, and identifying their local context. There are other notable works on card games such as Rudolf Von Leyden's *Ganjifa: Playing Cards of India* (Leyden 1982). Among scholars who have worked on the subject, Andrew Topsfield (2006) produced a compiled study on boardgames and card games in India in his work *The Art of Play: Board and Card Games in India* . Later works include Elke Rogersdotter's (2015) study on ancient games from Mohenjodaro and the Vijayanagara Empire, Jacob Schmidt-Madsen's (2021) work on the games Chaupar and Gyan Chaupar, Micaela Soar's research on Backgammon (2006), and Souvik Mukherjee's study (2020) of Gyan Chaupar and its colonial transformation.

Digital Archives and the DAIB Project: Theorising a Boardgame Archive

The digital archive, of course, has been the subject of much debate in DH circles, with traditional archivists such as Kate Theimer arguing that an archival object has more value in an analogue archive and that 'digital humanists, especially literary scholars, may have more direct exposure to manuscript collections or special collections, rather than true archives' (Theimer 2012). Theimer, of course, has the happy luxury of believing in a 'true' archive. Her thesis is based on archives being able to provide a provenance, a collective organisation, and to arrange the archival artefact in its original order. Kenneth Price counters such a notion by stating that: 'In the past, an archive has referred to a collection of material objects rather than digital surrogates. This type of archive may be described in finding aids but its materials are rarely edited and annotated as a whole. In a digital environment, archive has gradually come to mean a purposeful collection of surrogates' (Price 2009).

It may be worth recalling Jacques Derrida's thinking on surrogacy, wherein he speaks of 'a central presence which was never itself, which has always already been transported outside itself in its surrogate. The surrogate does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow pre-existed it' (Derrida 1980, 49). For Derrida, there is no absolute centre, and the substitutions within the centre–surrogate relationship are characterised by disruptions of meaning that he likens to play. It is fitting, therefore, that an archive of play may then also comprise digital surrogates. The Derridean position, of course, applies to all archives that may contain surrogates of the original object. While Derrida likens the drive towards archiving as being characterised both by memory and the erasure of memory—what he calls 'archive fever'—he also notes that 'the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivisation produces as much as it records the event.' (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995, 17).

The digital archive also shapes the way in which the content is perceived and accessed, but it does so just as all kinds of archives also (re)shape the content, contingent on their technical structure. The archival assumptions of traditional humanities and social sciences disciplines are problematised by the Derridean contention of the archive in play, and even DH archives such as Ludii often end up privileging elements such as the rulesets and the typologies over other less tangible and experiential aspects. Informal archives such as the Boardgame Arena, YouTube channels and blogs often address these; and while it is difficult for academic projects to access all these elements, the DAIB attempts to take into account the archival play that boardgames and their transmedial and ludic nature entail.

Digital Archives in the Global South

Many of these issues emerge strongly especially in connections with digital archives of the Global South, where there are problems of the lack of organised data, necessary funding and adequate infrastructure. Sukanta Chaudhuri, in describing the making of one of the earliest Digital Humanities projects in India, Bichitra, the digital variorum of the poet of Rabindranath Tagore, states that 'we were pursuing—and dare I say achieving—the ends of the engineer by means that often smacked of the bricoleur . We thought, improvised, sometimes almost wished our way through problems: we could not hope for elaborate support according to the best practice' (Chaudhuri 2016, 5). Chaudhuri makes a connection with Claude Levi-Strauss's bricoleur figure who 'is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike

the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand' (Levi-Strauss 1966, 11). Padmini Ray Murray and Chris Hand describe the Indian DH scenario as being characterised by jugaad, a practice of 'technological disobedience' that reconfigures materialities to overcome obstacles and find solutions, and arguably finds a resonance with bricolage as Victor Viña (2012) argues. Ray Murray and Hand differentiate jugaad from hacking and view that 'these approaches that privilege the local should be seen as extending the limits of digital humanities practice despite appearing, albeit superficially, to contradict the universalising impulse of the discipline' (Ray Murray and Hand 2015, 152–3). It is intriguing that Levi-Strauss sees the bricoleur as being playful—play, in the Derridean sense of subversion, is certainly a key element in conceptualising the archives of the Global South, where the facilities easily available as givens to the Global North researchers are unavailable. This is also true of the DAIB project and its archival ambitions and challenges.

The DAIB project is also about preserving heritage, and as such, archaeology features importantly in it. As Neha Gupta et al. comment 'conventional archaeology is extractive and typically distances local communities from their heritage. Archaeological practice has colonial roots such that a non-European (i.e. Indigenous, Black and other racialised archaeologist was thought to be "too [biased]" to work in their own community, and thus, European (i.e. White) scholars alone could provide "objective" knowledge about the past' (Gupta et al. 2024, 147) and they raise the need to deploy digital tools and methods in Indian archaeology so as to reach a wider group of people, to move away from the existing state-run agencies and their archival privilege. The DAIB Project also faces similar challenges in attempting to move the research on boardgames from its early colonial bias to a scenario that is more inclusive and representative of the cultures in which these games are played.

In South Asian contexts, DH projects take on a distinctive character of their own, as Padmini Ray Murray had announced at the Digital Diversity 2015 conference, 'Your DH is not my DH—and that is a good thing' (Risam 2016). Roopika Risam, outlining the need for a postcolonial DH states that 'Postcolonial digital humanities is an approach to uncovering and intervening in the disruptions within the digital cultural record produced by colonialism and neocolonialism' (Risam 2018, 3). The South Asian context is better understood if 'the existing discourse on [which] DH still draws upon, to a large extent, the given history of the term which renders it inaccessible for countries in the Global South, especially from a postcolonial context, and with a sufficiently intersectional perspective' (Ibid.) is reconfigured and digital archives are understood in a wider context. As Ellen Ndeshi Namhila's research comments on 'the apparent neglect of person-related records of indigenous Namibians, it examines the extent to which the former colonial governments' systems created, ingested, maintained, preserved and made accessible a specific category of person-related records [and] it is a case study of racially discriminating creation, management, disposal and retention, destruction or transfer, appraisal, archival processing and indexing practices of person related records in colonial archives' (Namhila 2017, 1). Maya Dodd and Nirmala Menon speak to this problem of colonial archiving by noting that in India '[e]lisions and absences from archives of the state and of the powerful are now being narrated by private actors, often with digital tools' (Dodd and Menon 2024, 3). They also make the brave and astute observation that 'our understanding of what it means to "do DH" in India made clear the fact that academic ceilings cannot define the imaginations that abound in the field. The journey of DH in India is one made possible by a diversity of actors with different stakes for their communities, made possible by sheer audacity' (Ibid.).

The DAIB Project: The Methodology of the Archive-Building Process

It is perhaps this 'audacity', arising out of the need to innovate and be bricoleurs, that informs the methodology of digital archives in South Asia, particularly one that is about boardgames and is built from scattered resources and unconventionally accessed archival data. Such an archive requires public engagement that can be extremely significant towards building on the existing datasets. As such, the DAIB project was from its inception designed as an archive that would be open-access (under Creative Commons licensing) and that would welcome inputs from all interested parties, from the academia and elsewhere. The sources of information on boardgames are very widely scattered and most of them date back either to the medieval period, such as King Someshwara's Manasollasa ([c. twelfth century CE] 1939 ed.) or Abul Fazl's *Akbar Nama* (Abul Fazl [1600–1605?] 2022 ed.), or to the colonial period, as the rather surprising surge of interest in boardgames in the early decades of the twentieth century (some of which are now anthologised in *Sedentary Games of Bengal*) reveals. There have been later attempts by scholars from abroad and more recently from India. Nevertheless, no digital archive is available today, and as already explained in the previous section, it is of paramount importance if the information that is available from such extremely

dispersed sources is to be made available in a single location.

Even for digital sources, the problem is serious: for example, a comment (Samaiya 2022) on the Board Game Studies mailing list and forum provides crucial leads on the etched games in the Khajuraho temples, while a digitised set of Santhali texts contains details of a set of boardgames from a now obscure book on Santhali games and pastimes. As for the physical or non-digital (there are instances when there are no physical records available), it is quite a task to collate details of games and play practices from a wide range of textual sources in different languages as well as oral history accounts from the makers and the players of these games. The already extant work on etched games has been further supplemented by field research. Boardgame-makers, such as the Dashavatar Tash artist Banamali Mahapatra, researchers both from academia and outside, and those who remember playing some of these games, have been interviewed for the digital archive.

The games are found as multiple media, and often there is no uniformity in the source material given the ephemerality of the medium. Ranging from detailed records in books or other archives to YouTube videos or social media posts, this archive has to rely on a varied set of data sources and eclectic data that is also 'messy'. The data had to be 'cleaned up' and made uniform in spreadsheets before more could be done with it, and tools such as OpenRefine were used to standardise the dataset. Also, one of the early tasks when designing the website and the archive plan was to modify the standard Dublin Core metadata to make it as inclusive as possible for not just a variety of sources but of material and even play experiences. Dublin Core, given its North American origins, can at best serve as a preliminary basis of standardisation and as Wan et al. state in the context of metadata for Chinese museums, 'Considering the different management systems, it is difficult to utilise existing metadata schemas without modification. And museums are different in collection types, collection quantities, data quality and the skill levels of staff. So different requirements for metadata need to be considered. [...] In the project, we design the core metadata based on Dublin Core, and specific metadata extensions for drawings, porcelain, ancient buildings and inscriptions' (Wan et al. 2014). Similarly, this project has adapted the Dublin Core to include more fields in the descriptive and administrative metadata, given the various sources of boardgames and the records of play experience.

While Dublin Core has been selected as a universally accepted metadata standard, the specificities of archiving boardgames in South Asia required some important modifications as has been indicated. As Derrida states it, the technological archival intervention such as digitization itself also informs and reshapes the episteme of the 'archiving archive' itself, as such DAIB renegotiates Western digital standards such as Dublin Core with more local classifications that address oral history sources such as lore, hearsay, evidence of play experiences and the making of these games. The elements that do not fit standard Western protocols are included through text fields in the database that have emerged from the ongoing research in a grounded theory approach.

The archive has two sections so far. One is on the Ganjifa cards, a traditional card game existing in India from the Mughal period having many regional variants, which are now facing extinction both in their making and play traditions. Some of the remaining artists, players and scholars who worked on this card game were interviewed on-site and these were recorded using digital cameras on smartphones with geolocation enabled. The aim was to preserve and document the continuity of the tradition of these cards along with understanding their local context and history. The materiality, transition, art form, availability and play traditions were traced through audio and video interviews in conversation with the artists, players and researchers on Ganjifa.

The other section of the archive consists of boardgames including the hitherto-ignored etched games or graffiti games that are engraved in various Buddhist caves, Hindu temples and other secular spaces as well as on boardgames from earlier non-digital sources like the documentation of boardgames in *Sedentary Games of India* (1999), and those that have been revived in recent times by organisations such as Ramsons Kreeda Pratisthana. The records were then geotagged as appropriate and updated with the requisite metadata.

Fieldwork, consisting of photography, geotagging and recording information, was conducted onsite in caves and temples such as Pataleshwar in Pune, Ellora, and the Bull Temple (Nandi Temple) in Bengaluru. Gameboards were measured, described and geotagged as far as possible and their locations within the caves were marked so as to make them easy to discover for future research. In many locations, artisans, players and game researchers were interviewed and these interviews were then transcribed and subtitled. The database contains transcriptions of both audio and video interviews and snippets of the games played and the making of certain games. English subtitles have been also added to the videos for better accessibility and engagement making content more inclusive for a wider range of global audience. In other cases, information was collated from various sources, both print and digital, to create detailed entries on the boardgames. Finally, some of the games were made available as downloadable versions with their rulesets. These were created within the archival

structure of the free archiving software Omeka S.

As an archiving platform, Omeka S (as opposed to Omeka) was chosen for DAIB due to multiple reasons. After a pilot archive on Omeka's free plan, the team realised that the platform would have been too expensive to afford. As an archiving platform, Omeka S was chosen due to the technical affordances of the hosting site, Godaddy.com. The shift from Omeka to Omeka S proved slightly difficult as some of the features are named differently in the two versions and also depending on the constraints of the hosting platform, the newest version of Omeka S could not be installed leading to initial problems with the setup. Again, as researchers from the Global South have very little IT infrastructural support, the complete web-design had to be done by the principal investigator of the project, and instead of designing a bespoke database, the existing free software platform Omeka S, was tweaked to suit the necessary parameters. The various 'modules' of Omeka S were added to help perform crucial functions such as advanced search, import–export, tagging, geotagging and bibliography creation. The alpha version of the archive was presented at the Spring Seminar: Arts and Games Conference in Tampere University's Game Research Lab and the IIT Indore JPN Centre of Excellence in the Humanities Research Project Symposium. Feedback received in both the conferences proved useful in developing the database, particularly as questions emerged regarding creating such boardgame archives in the Global South.

A Digital Boardgames Archive in the Global South: Tackling Problems through Bricolage

A digital archive of boardgames is indeed such 'sheer audacity' in the spirit of Dodd and Menon's comment quoted earlier. For many years, no funding was received to start this archive, and it was only with the JPN Centre of Excellence's seed grant that this project was made possible. In addition to the extant problems of the colonial archives, the elisions and the neglect, there is another yet major hurdle that needs to be overcome in this context—boardgames are not taken seriously in Indian academic circles and are often looked upon as wasteful or frivolous activities in Indian society or as a comparatively recent Indian English coinage sums it up, 'timepass' (see Mukherjee 2025).

The colonial archive did not try to document boardgames in a systematic way, but there were records of such games mostly scattered in reports to the government or to archives and societies. One such example is the account left by the colonial historian and civil servant Henry Beveridge on Gyan Chaupar game-board (the Indian original for Snakes and Ladders) as shared by the Royal Asiatic Society, London: 'The volume, Indian Miscellania, contained "no less than three diagrams of the game, and is full of serpents and ladders". He explains how the ladders enable the lucky players to escape from the serpents. Beveridge had also consulted Blumhardt's Catalogue of Hindustani printed books at the British Museum and writes on his letter of finding also a Tamil version and a Hindustani one' (Beveridge 1915). Strangely Beveridge seems unaware of an earlier Gyan Chaupar board in the Society's collection that was donated by Henry Dundas Robertson in 1831. While Beveridge is clearly interested, other colonial officials are much less sympathetic and even dismiss it as a 'A Primitive Game' (Dampier 1895). This is still a relatively trackable scenario of colonial transculturation (see Ortiz 1995; Pratt 2007) with its concomitant violence, and as Mukherjee (2020) discusses, the pathway of the game from colony to metropole and back is now analysable, especially from a postcolonial consideration of the game.

Reading with the grain of the archive, as Ann Stoler (2010) has proposed, is still possible here. However, there are many instances where the archive is altogether missing, for example, in the strange disappearance of *mancala*-playing traditions (see Deshmukh 2022) in Maharashtra, whereas the game is etched in numerous locations in the region and was commonly played further South as *pallanguzhi* (Tamil Nadu) and *aligulimane* (Karnataka) and even much northward in the Jharkhand region where it is known as *til goti* and in Odisha where it is called *kasade*. Recent research is only just beginning to ask questions regarding how boardgames have travelled across South Asia and beyond, but so far the efforts remain parochial and do not aim to make broader connections.

Added to the neglect in colonial archives and the limitations of post-Independence archiving of boardgames, there is a further insidious problem: their erasure from public memory. The project team was surprised to find out that there was hardly anyone who could play the once-popular *ganjapa* cards in Puri, Odisha. Only one person was found who knew how to play the game, and he mentions in his interview (archived in the DAIB database) that none of his fellow players were alive. Ganjifa researcher Arunima Pati (see Pati 2015) had been able to witness a game in Puri. In the post-Covid scenario, the players whom she knew were no longer alive.

The other challenge remains that much of the colonial archival material and the games themselves are to be found in museums of the Global North where researchers have far greater access than those in the Global South where the 'academic ceilings' of funding and paywalled access make it difficult to conduct research, as Dodd and Menon reiterate. Further, while researchers from the Global North use standardised European and North American names for these boardgames, the local variants

in India have very different names, and as such, often local respondents are unable to even identify the games because they have played them under different names. The variety and diversity of South–South connections have been largely ignored, especially regarding the naming of the games.

Nevertheless, the DAIB project has been able to initiate the building of a South–South record base and aims to establish broader connections through a 'distant reading' of boardgames via adding searchable metadata that allow for exploring patterns of play and cultural transmission in these games. By gathering together games from a multiplicity of sources—etched or incised games from antiquity, modern revivals of boardgames using Indian handicrafts, games as recorded in colonial archives and also interviews with people who have a lived memory of these games—the DAIB aims to facilitate a searchable network wherein hitherto unexplored links may emerge. For example, on considering the multiple types of *mancala*-type boards, it is now evident how their rules have changed based on their different locations and the kind of material affordances of the game boards, such as the number of holes and the size of the cowrie shells they are played with, among other things.

Where there is the likelihood of mapping the boardgames based on location information, one can see newer connections and weave together new narratives of cultural transmission and transculturation. Taking an oral history perspective, attempts can be made to preserve the almost forgotten play traditions and bring them back into public memory. Data-mining on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram has also yielded positive results, as has the re-examination of digitised colonial records, particularly from museums and archives outside India. The DAIB project is also, therefore, an example of bricolage, wherein data from numerous sources are collated and where often the gaps in the archive are equally important. As an archival intervention from the Global South, the project aims to train its view literally below the line of sight of colonial commentators, such as James Fergusson, who missed the numerous etched boardgames in the caves and temples of Ellora.

Towards a Conclusion: Expanding the Archive

As already indicated earlier, digital archives in the Global South often have to make do with too little too late. Indeed, the way in which they go about often shows a degree of audacity in the traditional sense of the archive. There is, therefore, scope for much expansion. The expansion of the archive will require more resources. For example, there are many locations where games were previously known to have been made and played in, which need to be revisited. Despite the ongoing research on sites of etched games, many locations, especially in the north and the east, remain unexplored. The play cultures and rules of games can be studied further across spatial and temporal planes with more datasets being made available to the DAIB project. The feature of downloadable boardgames that has been introduced in the database can be further developed if an online digital applet is created for them such as in the Ludii project. Finally, with a larger team and more resources, a much larger number of artists who make these games could be located and interviewed.

A digital archive has the advantage of reaching out to many more people—the information gathered by DAIB can be expanded substantially through crowdsourcing. It also makes it possible to keep play traditions in public memory, particularly for future generations. The possibilities are multiple, and the digital archive in its present form is just a beginning. There is an urgent need to develop it further and expand its remit, as much of the rich ludic culture of South Asia that dates back millennia is now threatened with extinction. A digital archive in the Global South, especially one devoted to boardgames, may indeed face many challenges, as any pioneering project such as ours does, but it is also one that can be built on and rescaled to preserve the now almost-ephemeral boardgame cultures of South Asia.

Data availability statement. All data used in this study are publicly available at: http://indiaboardgamesarchive.in/omekas/

Disclosure of Use of AI Tools. No generative AI tools were used at any stage in the preparation of this manuscript, including research, analysis, writing, or editing.

Ethical standards. This study used only publicly available, anonymised datasets. No direct interaction with human participants took place. The research was conducted in compliance with applicable data protection legislation.

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