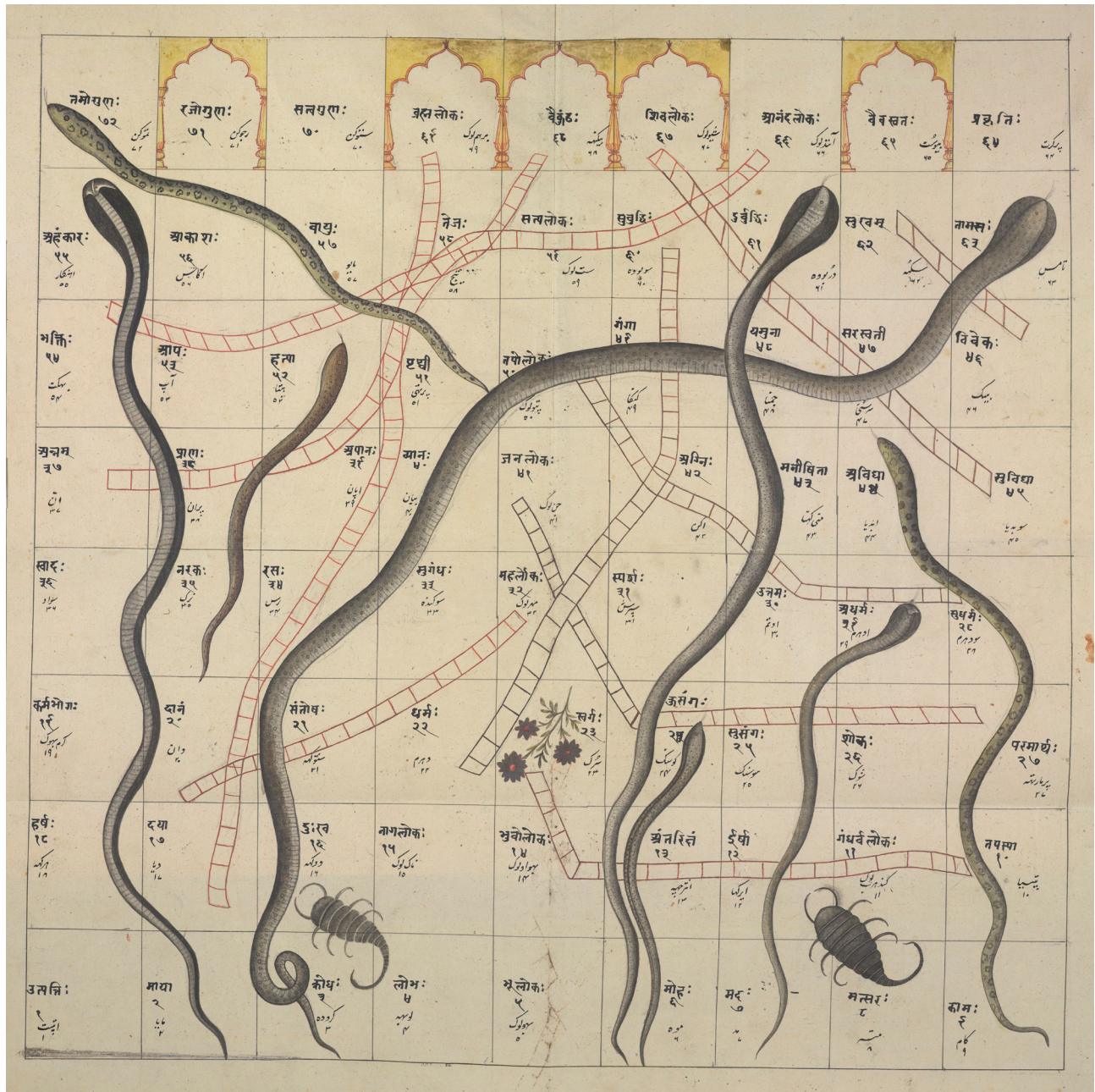


The Game of Knowledge

Playing at Spiritual Liberation in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Western India



JACOB SCHMIDT-MADSEN



Frontispiece. The earliest datable *gyān caupar* chart (Va72#7). Lucknow, 1780–82. Commissioned from a local artist by Richard Johnson (1753–1807). *Source*: British Library, London, Johnson Album 5.8. Public domain.

PRIMUS BOOKS
An imprint of Ratna Sagar P. Ltd.
Virat Bhavan
Mukherjee Nagar Commercial Complex
Delhi 110 009

Offices at CHENNAI LUCKNOW AGRA AHMEDABAD BENGALURU BHOPAL COIMBATORE
DEHRADUN GUWAHATI HYDERABAD JAIPUR JALANDHAR KANPUR KOCHI KOLKATA
MUMBAI PATNA RANCHI VARANASI

© *Jacob Schmidt-Madsen, 2026*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Primus Books, or as expressly permitted by law, by licence, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to Primus Books at the address above.

First published 2026

ISBN: 978-93-0961-619-8 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-93-0961-537-5 (POD)

Published by Primus Books

Laser typeset by Jojy Philip
jojyphilip@gmail.com

Printed and bound in India by
Thomson Press India Ltd.

This book is meant for educational and learning purposes.

The author(s) of the book has/have taken all reasonable care to ensure that the contents of the book do not violate any existing copyright or other intellectual property rights of any person in any manner whatsoever. In the event the author(s) has/have been unable to track any source and if any copyright has been inadvertently infringed, please notify the publisher in writing for corrective action.

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>Note on Transliteration</i>	xv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
<i>Preface</i>	xix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xxv

PART 1

STUDY

1. What's in a Game?	1
2. The Beginnings of <i>Gyān Cauṇaṛ</i>	17
3. Source Material	59
4. Critical Reading and Analysis	105
5. Simulation and Narrative	173
6. Related Cultural Forms and Practices	203
Conclusion	225
<i>Bibliography</i>	231

PART 2

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Game Charts	253
A1: Provenance	256
A2: Description	292
Appendix B: Typology	364
B1: Vaiṣṇava Charts	365

Contents

B2: Jaina Charts	371
B3: Şūfī Charts	373
B4: Advaita Vedānta Charts	375
B5: Unidentified Charts	376
Appendix C: Transcriptions	377
C1: 72-Square Vaiṣṇava Charts	378
C2: 84-Square Jaina Charts	414
Appendix D: Critical Readings	567
D1: 72-Square Vaiṣṇava Charts (Type a)	570
D2: 84-Square Jaina Charts (Type a1)	590
Appendix E: Game Verses	639
E1: Verses on Vaiṣṇava Charts	639
E2: Verses on Jaina Charts	645
Appendix F: Game Texts	657
F1: <i>Krīḍākauśalya</i> 241–55	657
F2: <i>Jñān Bājī Ramvānī Rīt</i>	663
<i>Index</i>	675

INTRODUCTION

Among the pastimes most commonly found on the shelves and floors of children's rooms are fairy tale books and traditional board games. As it happens, the two often share the same trajectory: they originated in obscurity, were primarily intended for adults, and had to undergo censure before they could be safely delivered into the hands of children. While fairy tales were picked clean of sex and violence, traditional board games were simplified and stripped of any meaning beyond that of winning and losing. The present thesis leaves the fairy tales to the folklorists, and takes up the subject of traditional board games; or, to be more precise, the subject of a single traditional board game. Snakes & Ladders is easily one of the most successful children's games of all times, and since it was first marketed toward the end of the nineteenth century, it has been played continuously by excited children and patient adults all over the world. How a purely luck-driven game could attain such popularity without involving any element of gambling remains a cause of wonder to game designers and scholars alike. While I do not aim to strike at the root of that wonder, I do hope to be able to demonstrate why people might have been

attracted to the original version of the game as it was played especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western India. Back then it was not always the innocent and abstract pastime that it has become today. It was a game of knowledge deeply rooted in religious thinking and capable of revealing the innermost secrets of self and universe. The evidence presented in the following pages and chapters even suggests that the earliest form of the game was not a game at all, but rather a tantric diagram of the subtle body with various cosmic principles mapped on to it. Ironically, just as the Indian game would eventually be transformed into a European game, the mechanics that turned the original tantric diagram into *gyān caupār* may themselves ultimately have derived from Europe.

The beginnings of Snakes & Ladders in the West can be traced back to the late nineteenth century.² In October 1892, the London-based company F. H. Ayres, then one of Britain's leading manufacturers of sports and games equipment, took out a design registration

² The claim featured on the Wikipedia page of games manufacturer Jaques of London that they began publishing the game in 1888 cannot be verified (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaques_of_London).

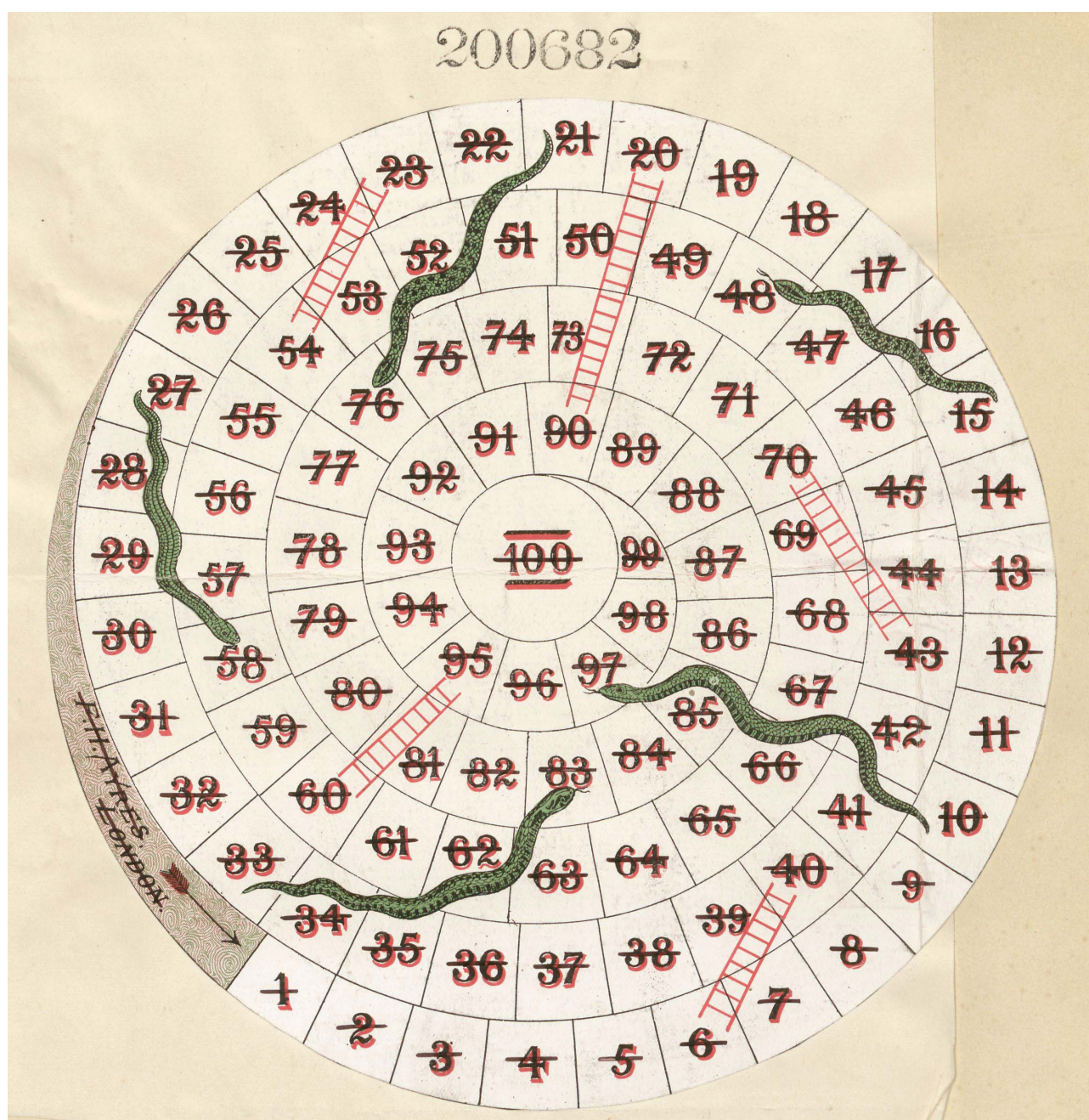


Fig. 0.1 Untitled game with snakes and ladders. British design registration.
F. H. Ayres, London, October 1892.

Source: National Archives, London, BT 50/182, design registration no. 200682.

for a spiral-track race game featuring snakes and ladders as a key mechanic (Fig. 0.1). The design was made to be printed on paper which would then be mounted on a circular wooden base. Only a few copies of the finished product are known to exist, and

none of them are titled or accompanied by the original set of rules.³ However, it does

³ I am aware of three copies held in private collections in the UK. A further copy can be found in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (acc. no. B.892–1993).