

At last, a contribution from India!

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Everybody knows that there are different puzzles to solve before definitely clarifying the context of chess origin: India or China, four or two players, with or without dice, war or race game, and so on. It seems to me that ultimate answers on these points have to come both from Chinese and, especially, from Indian scholars. Having no specific knowledge of indology, it is for me hard to accept the evidence that most useful contributions on old Indian languages and literatures have instead been provided – and still are! – by German scholars.

Therefore, extremely interesting is for me a recent publication by an Indian doctor: C.P.Bhatta, *Origin and Genesis of Chess*, Seevetal: Meissenburg, 1994, 42 p. About it, let me summarise the final part of a recent Italian review of the last contributions to chess history by several indologists, as published in *Torre e Cavallo*, 11 Nr. 6 (1995) 17-19.

Dr. Bhatta appears to be the very personage, whom we were awaiting – indeed, he covers entirely both required roles: on the one hand, his belonging to the Königstein group is a guarantee for his involvement in chess history; on the other hand, he is a lecturer of Sanscrit by profession, who obtained several awards for his academic work. His present contribution, nevertheless, does not appear to me fully satisfactory. I must admit, however, that this judgement may be due more to a too great expectation on *my* part than to actual defects in the text, which practically summarises all ancient Indian references to boardgames.

In the introduction, Egbert Meissenburg reviews the present research on the subject, in a concise and comprehensive way. However, it is the part coming from India that we are anxious to examine. Unfortunately, this text is not easy to read.

The division of the text in sections and the corresponding titles certainly appears unsatisfactory. Here and there, long digressions are abruptly inserted, such as that on the various ways used in placing Indian armies on the battle field or that on the conventional use of knight jumps in building puzzle-poems. Another reason may be due to the great deal of short notes, as common in academic papers, with recurrent references

to Indian and European sources (in particular, the quotations of European experts are more than could have expected from Indian scholarship).

Various early boardgames are mentioned in a way that is not enough to characterise them. This is unavoidable, due to the small evidence available, as it also occurs for the old European civilisations; however, some inaccuracies are added, as when draughts is quoted in the place of nard or tables.

Most of all, vain is our research of an ordering of the matter based on subject, geography, or chronology. Some thread of the argument may actually be present but we should be indologists too for being able to pinpoint in space and time most of the quoted references. At least a page of appendix, containing a chronologically ordered list of references, would be useful to the ordinary reader.

In addition to these questions of more or less formal character, there is an essential comment on this treatment. After earlier boardgames, Dr Bhatta separately considers two “chess” games, *buddhibala*, “our” chess game, two players without dice, and *chaturanga*, the previous version, seemingly the same game played with dice. Whereas, it is impossible to suggest a very early dating for *buddhibala*, *chaturanga* may have evolved from previous similar games, down to the debated “chessmen” excavated from settlements of the Indus civilisation. With respect to the old-fashioned Cox-Forbes theory, the only difference seems to be that the earlier form of the game, in any case played with dice, is here a game for two instead of four players.

The problem is that witness on *buddhibala* is not earlier than the 12th century – and this seems to be here the only (or at least the clearest) point in dating the evolution of chess outlined. Being so late, it should not be used to confirm, as Dr Bhatta does, suggestions by European historians that chess was born in this modern form.

On the other hand, I could not find here any dating for the beginning of the game that can be named *chaturanga* – and THIS is the actual date under discussion among chess historians. We have been told many times by chess historians that the Indian name of *chaturanga* entered many other countries, together with the game.

If I follow Dr Bhatta’s reconstruction, I feel tempted to conclude that we have to thank India for boardgame *chaturanga* and that India has to thank other countries for *buddhibala*, namely for chess. By contrast, the

fact is that the game which spread out of India assuming a name derived from *chaturanga* is everywhere known precisely as chess.