A group of people bound by the same institutions, practices, norms, traditions, rules and/or administration form a society. The people in the group are responsible for forming these to make the group function smoothly. The families build up a community; communities often make codes of conduct. These influence and mould the behaviour of the members of a community and these cyclical and interlinked processes and so on and so forth form the society (Pati 2010). The day-to-day activities of its people which generally follow a pattern in the families of a community get associated with their social lives knowingly or unknowingly, be it their work, their studies, their entertainment, etc. These activities, thoughts and expressions of the members are reflected in their social behaviour. Recreation is an important part in the life of a human being and hence of a society. Games and sports provide that important rejuvenation to man which relaxes his mind from the stress of that day and prepares him for another day of drudgery. A particular group of people which inhabit a particular region have a common set of games showing a common pattern. This develops over the ages through acculturation and innovations. These games, in turn, also depict the society from different angles. The devices that are played, the designs that are made on them, the way they are played, the people who play them provide a lot of information about the society they are a part of.

It used to be a game of the elite class. The royalties, the nobilities and people related to them could only play them or rather even afford them. At that time they were based on the arrangement of the Persian royal court with the suits representing eight different departments of the court. Mughals had the same arrangement of cards and suits in their set. The king used to be the highest, then the minister and the numeral cards used to indicate the employees
of that particular department. This secular court-themed game was a favourite of the Mughal monarchs as we find references to them in the literature of Babur’s, Humayun’s, as well as, Akbar’s times.

Akbar was also very fond of different kinds of arts and skills. He encouraged and patronised talented people and also created new things himself. The then existing Ganjifā set was modified by him to fit the lifestyle of his court (Blochmann 1873). Gradually, from the Mughal court it passed down to the allied courts of the local rulers. The Hindu elite liked it as much and it became a favourite amongst them too. They started giving it their own flavour by Hinduising the depictions. For the elite the cards used to be manufactured with expensive and rare materials, e.g., ivory, tortoise shell, brass or with gold and silver inlay. The game used to be exchanged as gifts among the rulers and was one of the best pastimes they had.

It is difficult to limit a cultural element to one part of the society. The game slowly percolated to the common people through the courtiers and other royal employees. The common people modified it further to suit their taste and their affordability. The medium of production changed to cheaper and easily available materials like cloth, paper, paper pulp and the themes changed to appeal to the mass beliefs. India, being a religious country, and the religion of the majority being Hinduism, the paintings on the cards represented the religion of the masses which is something that binds the public together irrespective of their caste or class. First, the local painting traditions in different regions took up the charge of manufacturing these cards. That added to the localisation of the cards and the game and blended it in with their societies further. This is why, though the source of the cards is the same, we find variations throughout the country in every state and even in different regions of the same state.

Ganjifā, thus, became a part of the lives and many things related to the lives of the people who played it, made it or got associated with it in any way. How these details affected Ganjifā and how the cards reflected these details is the subject matter of this chapter.
ODISHA

Inside the state of Odisha, one of the very few states where the game is still being played, there are different regions where the cards are manufactured and played. All of them have their own brand of manufacturing style, painting style and depictions. Though the themes of the paintings are by and large alike and the base of the painting is the same, the treatment varies. And so does the social status of the players, the artists and the patrons.

PURI:

The seat of the Jagannātha cult, Puri, shows almost the complete impact of its religious leanings and social scenario on the cards. The packs that are played here are always based on some Vaishnav theme, especially the Daśāvatāra. The group that has still kept the game alive in the town of Puri, play with a Daśāvatāra set with sixteen suits that has suits of different deities in addition to the ten incarnations.

The players in Puri belong to a particular caste and class of people. They are called the Sebāyats. They are the employees associated with the great temple of Lord Jagannātha, in the service of the lord. They comprise of the priests, temple cooks who cook the Prasāda (food offered to the deities as blessings of the deity), caretakers of the temple and other superior workers of the temple (Panda 2006). This is a community that arose with the establishment of the temple itself, to serve the lord in various ways. These men are quite well off financially and are some of the reputed and influential personalities inside the temple and in the neighbourhood. They are not reluctant to spend money on these expensive cards. They are Brahmin by caste. This is the only community that is allowed to touch and play the cards and the game. After a hard day’s work the players gather at a small shrine of goddess Kālī situated in the alley right in front of the great temple. From around 8.30 in the evening till midnight, they continuously play this game. Whoever comes first spreads out the mat and a towel over that to prepare the platform for playing. Four players are usually needed to play but there are invariably more people than that in the place. They
enjoy watching it but all are also given a chance to play in turns. They indulge in small talk about current affairs, local happenings, matters of life while enjoying the game at the same time with its complexities and arguments that ensue. However, all the players here are in their seventies or eighties and their number is decreasing by the day.

The clear division of social hierarchy in this town, rather in the district of Puri, can be seen very vividly from the way the game has been restricted to a particular caste. Only the Brahmins working in the temple are allowed to play this and not the lower orders, not even those who work with the former in their workplace. The lower castes keep a distance from the Ganjifā area. This feeling is reflected directly on the restrictions attached to this game.

Though this game is played in a temple, there are no rituals associated with it as such. It is not played during any religious festival nor is it a part of any custom of the great Jagannātha temple. But, by chanting the names of the gods, the players believe their sins are washed away. Besides this, there are no religious connections to this game.
The artists who paint these cards are of a community called the Citrakāras who do not hold a very high position in the hierarchy of castes. They bear two surnames Mohapatra and Maharana (usually). The village of Raghurajpur is almost entirely inhabited by them. There are a few other places too like Daṇḍasāhi in Puri town where they reside. They belong to the lowest stratum, Śudra. The Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa describes that Viśvakarmā, the creator god, had relation with a Śudra woman and begot nine craftsmen castes. Among them this was one. They further had connection with a Śudra prostitute and fell further in the caste ladder. Hence, even among the Śudra’s they are considered low (Das 1982). Interestingly, these are the people who make the cards that go to the highest caste to be played. The altering customs of the society to suit the purpose of the higher castes is evident from this instance.

Paṭa, the material these cards are made up of is actually cloth. These are originally bazaar kalam i.e. the cheaper sets meant for people who cannot afford to spend too much on recreation and gaming objects. But the paṭa material does not come very cheap. It is made up of several layers of cloth and takes a lot of effort from the artists. So the prices are relatively high. The Sebāyats are sound, economically, and thus do not think much before buying a set but those who are financially weaker play with paper cards. But, as usually only the Sebāyats are allowed to play, paper-made cards are really hard to find at Puri.

**SONEPUR:**

The second most active region is Sonepur. The only kind of set that they know is such a favourite that they never felt the need to experiment with any other themes. The strong Rāmāyaṇa inclination is too evident on the cards as on everything else related to the people here. Even the ringtone of a player was a bhajan (devotional song) dedicated to Lord Rāma. The epic battle between the gods and the demons has taken the form of a card game in this place.
Unlike Puri, this place allows and encourages all the castes to play this game. There is no perceptible discrimination or staunch dogma that is followed regarding castes with respect of the game. This is a much less populated, easy-going and laid back town where people are closely knit irrespective of their social or economical order. Every evening all the players gather below a mango tree, on a porch in front of a Dadhivāman (a form of Lord Viṣṇu) temple. There is no feeling of any inequity and the people generally have an easy life-style. So the gathering usually sits early in the evening. On holidays the players assemble earlier and the game lasts for hours. Along with the veterans from the older generation, young people also show interest in learning this game and intently observe the older men playing.

Fig. 6.2: The crowd beneath the tree enjoying the game

The artists are the same Citrakāras bearing the same surnames as those of Puri. They do not have special areas reserved for them because their population is considerably small. Their economic condition is not very sound as Sonepur is not a town which tourists keep flooding throughout the year. However, cards and paintings made here have their own distinctive style. The
erstwhile Maharaja of Sonepur, *Late Biramitra Singh Deo*, was a great player and a patron of the game. But the royal house is no more. The popularity has faded now.

Sonepur packs are made of the same paṭa material. The researcher has not come across any paper packs. The paṭa sets are cheaper than the ones in Puri. The difference in the popularity of the towns and hence the population and demand for locally made things must have resulted in the difference in price too. However, in Sonepur people are usually economically content. So to keep their social life active they buy these cards without much hesitation.

**CHIKITI:**

The former kingdom of Chikiti in the district of Ganjam is the only place where the candidate was able to get a chance to talk to the royalty about this game. After monarchy was abolished the royal family is not ruling any more but they are active politicians and they still live in their ancestral palace, though it is quite dilapidated. The old king, who is in his nineties, has forsaken the luxuries of royal life and lives in a two-room asbestos-roofed house beside a mud-road with just one servant to help him. But he reminisces the days when, in his youth, his ancestors as well as he used to play the game. With the decline of their authority and glory such luxuries lost their lustre too. From the kings, their employees had learnt this game and spread it among other commoners. Thus a wide range of people came to play this game. Though they have not continued playing with the rules, they are still using the Ganjapā cards.
Fig. 6.3: Present king of Chikiti, Sachchidananda Rajendra Deb

Only the lowest caste and class of people like manual labourers and farmers are playing these cards now. Moreover, they play *Naqṣ* with it and not the original Ganjapā game. This is the only place in Odisha where this game with stakes. Like in every culture, gambling is one of the main activities during important religious festivals; so is the case here. *Kumara Purnima* is a very significant festival for the Odia people and huge fairs are held on this day all over the state. During these fairs the worker class people play *Naqṣ* with the *Naqṣ* Ganjapā cards that are the local version of the standard Mughal set. Ninety-six cards are quite a number for their game but they have been playing it traditionally and have not moved on to the modern cards. This may have been also because they were being made locally till very recently and the players are acquainted with the cards.
The present players in Chikiti

The artists here too are from the same community with the same surnames as in the other places i.e. Mohapatra and Maharana. Apanna Mohapatra was one of the greatest artists of the Chikiti Ganjapā industry. In the 1990s after an unsuccessful cataract operation he was unable to carry out his art any further. Now he has passed away and with him the industry has also closed down. Depending on the artist preparing it and the painting expertise, the prices also differ. The pack that is with the players right now is made of paṭa but is of very poor painting quality. It is a very old pack and many of its cards are also missing as proper care has not been taken. The players are daily wagers and it is doubtful if they had bought the set themselves.

KALAHANDI:

The population of the villages around this town where this game is played have a history of migration. They had come down from Ganjām district about two centuries ago and settled down here for good. The Brahmins had
migrated to this place with their families and had also brought families that they depended upon. Among the cultural elements the Ganjapā cards also came with them to their new abode. Strangely, the manufacturing of these cards did not shift. This is the only centre that does not prepare its own cards. Among all the workers the Brahmins brought with them, the Citraṅgās were either absent or had become dysfunctional in their ancestral profession after coming here. The players used to order packs of cards from Paralakhemundi which was situated in Ganjam district before it (the district) got divided. Even now the players procure the cards from there whenever required.

Usually the Brahmin farmers play it in the afternoons, especially during the summers. There are no direct or indirect religious associations with the cards, the game or the players. So it is not played inside any temple or its premises. Neither are the players associated with any kind of religious place. They deliberate and decide to gather at the home of one of the players and play this game very light-heartedly. There are neither stakes involved nor any severe competition.

![Fig. 6.5: The players of Kalahandi](image-url)
The pack they play with is not of a very high quality. It is the eight-suited Ratha-Hāthi set, a secular set, but they call it Aṣṭamalla. This might indicate either their ignorance about the set or the custom of the place or rather the place they hail from.

Presently, every year cultural programmes are organised and Ganjapā playing competitions are held there. The players are mostly of the older group but they are fit enough to play. Moreover, there are also younger ones and among them there are some who are even better than their older friends.

One common thing observed in all the centres of playing is the absence of the association of women with the game. There is a gender bias involved. The cards contain images of the consorts of the gods in sets like Aṣṭadikpālas and there are also sets based on the Saptamātrkās. The depiction of women in relatively newer themes of packs is all the female association that is found related to the cards. But there is no evidence to show that women ever played it and neither do they play it now. This is an aspect that has not changed since the Mughal time to the present. One unique case is the painter Bidyabati of Paralakhemundi. Among the Citrakāra community of all the places she is the only female artist. Though women assist the master artist (who is always a male) in other areas, they are never allowed to paint the main paintings. In the 90s of the last century she was quite popular but the Paralakhemundi branch of paṭacitra and Ganjapā has almost ceased to exist now.

**OUTSIDE ODISHA**

The scenario is not much different outside the state. In Sawantwadi, Bishnupur, Nirmal and Mysore the artists belong to the same Citrakāra community. They are named differently. In Sāwantwāḍi they are known as Citārīs and in Bishnupur they are called Paṭuās as they deal with the paṭa. Nirmal artists, due to their Islamic patronage from the Mughals and the Nizam, are called Naqqas. The Mysore ones are known as Citrakāras. However, there is no clear information if these places have kept the playing tradition active. So information about the caste and class of the players is difficult to comment on.
In the past, due to patronage by the elite class, Sawantwadi, Nirmal and Mysore used to produce *darbar kalam* in materials like ivory, leather and tortoise shell. But with receding popularity and hence, poorer sponsorship, all the centres make only *bazar kalam* with paper or cloth. There are no normal buyers who want to play it anymore, just curious collectors who are economically quite well off. But the unavailability of high priced and rare materials and also the diminishing demand have resulted in a fall in production. However, it does not mean that the economic condition of the people has worsened.

The game seems to be a very important part of the entertainment in Odisha. The entertainment was also mostly governed by the religious aspect as discussed above. The study of the game also helps to understand the economic and social viability associated with an object of entertainment.

Ganjifā, as a game to keep up the social life of its players, has lost its role. It is said that this game used to be like an addiction. The players used to remain glued to it for hours, and sometimes, even for days on end. The unending tricks kept them so engrossed that they used to forget about all their other work at home. The situation has become pitiable now. The Ganjifā playing crowd is thinning due to the changing lifestyle. The new generation is fast and impatient. So there is no one who would sit down to enjoy the excitement of the game and the small talk that accompanies it. As the social nature of man is declining, so is the game.