

Paramapada Sopanam: Reviving Ancient Indian Board Games for Modern Pedagogy: Pedagogical methods in Sanatana Dharma

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ABSTRACT

The study delves into the historical trend of the popular traditional Indian board game Paramapada Sopanam, popularly known as Snakes and Ladders, against modern education and life. Traditionally, Paramapada Sopanam served as an educational tool. It's a simple yet profound format—virtues as ladders, vices as snakes—that imparts lessons on moral decisions, consequences, and personal growth. The interactive, hands-on elements of the game provide special benefits for overall development in an age where digital technology and virtual instruction are the norms. Playing the game in groups builds social relationships, patience, and moral thinking, while also enhancing mental abilities such as numeracy, planning, and strategic skills. By giving abstract concepts like karma and dharma a real and applicable form, Paramapada Sopanam serves as a mediator between cultural heritage and value-based education in the modern age. It contends that incorporating such forms of games in the traditional sense will ensure cultural continuity, assist in filling gaps in experiential and moral education, and enable pupils to be well-rounded individuals. The applicability and advantages of reactivating Paramapada Sopanam as a pragmatic and useful tool for the imparting of values and life skills in the fast-changing world of today are underscored in the conclusion of the study.

Keywords: *Paramapada Sopanam, Snakes and Ladders, virtues, cultural heritage, value-based education.*

Introduction

This paper not only traces the historical and cultural significance of Paramapada Sopanam but also proposes a practical syllabus module for integrating its lessons into contemporary classrooms. Indian board games, such as Chaupar, Pachisi, Aadu Puli, Vamana Guntalu and Vaikunthapali (also known as Moksha Patam or Paramapada Sopanam), have long served as both entertainment and a means of imparting moral and spiritual lessons. These games reflect the cyclical nature of life, offering students valuable opportunities for cognitive, emotional, and ethical development

They bring out the cyclical structure of life with tenacity and humility along with emphasis on the end goal of Moksha or spiritual liberation. Through organised play, these games provide a framework for comprehending fate, free will, and the balance between action and consequence. They are being reintroduced as effective teaching tools that promote ethical, emotional, and cognitive development in modern pedagogy. Through Paramapada Sopanam, students cultivate mindfulness, gain life lessons, and grow personally.

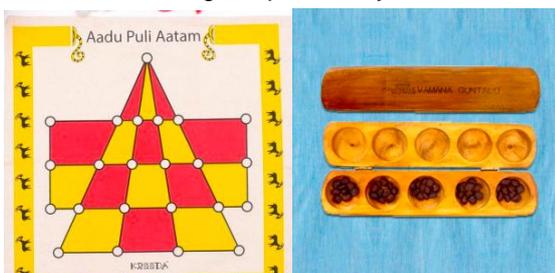
Paramapada Sopanam, Pachis, Aadu Puli, Vamana Guntalu

Philosophical Background of Moksha

In Indian philosophy, Moksha—considered the Paramapurushartha, or highest aim of human life—symbolises self-realisation, ethical refinement, and inner freedom. It invariably represents some kind of inner freedom, the ethical development of the individual, and realisation of self. It stands for both the uncovering of the true self and freedom from the birth-and-death cycle. Moksha has been interpreted in innumerable ways by bringing in texts and thinkers, from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita to various commentaries, such as those by Ramanuja, Nammalwar, and so on.

Bhakti Movements Democratized Moksha

The quest for Moksha was constrained by conventional obstacles like caste, gender, and access to sacred texts. These obstacles were broken down by the saints and Bhakti movements, who made the idea of Moksha available to everyone. They placed a strong emphasis on inclusivity and spiritual equality via devotion and intimate spiritual connections. This democratisation



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made it possible for moksha to be experienced and understood outside of elite or ceremonial boundaries, paving the way for everyone, regardless of social standing, to achieve liberation.



Pedagogical Aims and Relevance to Students

For students engaging with Indian thought, understanding Moksha is not just an academic exercise but a transformative journey connecting philosophical inquiry with personal reflection. The pedagogical aim is to present Moksha as a subject of study that is conceptual, experiential, and inclusive. Students are encouraged to critically engage with Moksha as a personal and ethical goal, moving it from theoretical abstraction to a lived value system that influences their growth and worldview.

The Origins of Paramapada Sopanam

The game's origins are still up for debate; some scholars believe that Dnyaneshwar, a Marathi saint from the thirteenth century, invented it, while others point to a passage from the tenth-century text *Rishabh Panchasika* as an even earlier reference. The oldest surviving example of the game dates to the Mewar period in the seventeenth century. Gyan Chaupar was especially popular during the Jain Paryushan festival, when devotees fasted and played the game as a form of spiritual engagement. In South India, the game is called Vaikunthapalli and is traditionally played during Vaikunta Ekadasi, the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight, which holds special significance for Vaishnavas as a day symbolizing the opening of the gates to Vaikuntha, the supreme abode of Vishnu. The number eleven in this context represents the Ekadasi (eleventh) day, which is believed to bestow liberation from the cycle of birth and death for devotees who observe the associated rituals.

Variations in Grid Sizes and Regional Adaptations

Grid Size	Regional Association/Name	Description & Symbolism
10x10	Universal, Andhra Pradesh, others	Most common format; 100 squares; standard for traditional and modern boards; square 100 represents Moksha or Nirvana
11x11 or 12x12	Telugu-speaking regions	Known as Andhra Vaikunthapali or Paramapada Sopanam, larger boards (121 or 144 squares) symbolize a more expansive spiritual journey and deeper teachings

8x12	Regional/local adaptations	Less common; used where space or local custom dictates; reflects unique spiritual lessons or local cultural practices
132 squares	Tamil Nadu, Andhra, traditional	Cloth boards with 132 squares, especially in Parama Pada Sopanam; the journey continues past 100, signifying extended spiritual symbolism and the path to Nirvana

- i. 10x10 Grid: Universally recognized, especially in Andhra Pradesh, representing the standard journey to Moksha
- ii. 11 x 11 or 12x 12 Grid: Larger, regionally significant boards in Telugu areas, adding depth to the game's spiritual metaphor.
- iii. 8x 12 and other variants: Found in some regions, these reflect local adaptations and teachings
- iv. 132 Square board - Traditional versions, especially in South India, extend the journey, emphasizing additional spiritual milestones



Vaikunthapali (11X11) -- 10 X 10

Iconography and Symbolism

The visual design of Vaikunthapali (Snakes and Ladders) is deeply infused with spiritual and cultural symbolism, making each element serve both an educational and moral purpose.

Animals

Elephants: Often depicted to symbolise the eight directional guardians in Hindu belief, elephants represent spiritual protection and guidance on the path to Moksha.

Snakes: Represent various vices or spiritual pitfalls-such as ego, greed, jealousy, and other negative qualities-named after demons or mythological figures (e.g., Ravana for lust, Kumbhakarna for laziness) Landing on a snake square illustrates setbacks due to moral failings.

Ladders represent qualities like self-control, moral behaviour, tenacity, devotion, judgement, integrity, and empathy. Ascending a ladder represents advancement via the development of virtue.

Deities and Temples

Boards may feature deities such as Lord Vishnu, Lakshmi, and others, as well as temples, to represent divine intervention, blessings, and sanctuaries of devotion. These images reinforce the ultimate spiritual goal and remind players of the divine dimension of the journey

Saints and sacred Symbols

Illustrations of saints, gurus, and sacred symbols (such as the conch, chakra, or lotus) represent the wisdom and guidance that lead the soul toward liberation. These motifs highlight the importance of spiritual teachers and sacred knowledge in achieving Moksha

Moral and spiritual lessons

Each square is often numbered and paired with a specific virtue or vice. To mention a few, with respect to virtues, one might say that faith, reliability, knowledge, and asceticism are associated with ladders, while vices like pride, greed, and lust stand for the snakes.

The journey across the board allegorizes the soul's passage through various levels of existence, with ladders helping transcend worldly desires and snakes causing regressions due to moral lapses.

The iconography transforms the game into a visual and interactive lesson in ethics and spirituality. By engaging with these symbols, players-especially children-internalize the consequences of virtues and vices, the importance of guidance, and the overarching goal of liberation, making the game a powerful pedagogical tool

Design of Game and its Purpose

Vaikunthapali holds a special place in India, especially for Telugu people, and is sometimes referred to as Paramapada Soplanam, the "steps to the highest realm." The game board consists of 132 squares, each marked with numbers and various symbolic illustrations. At the bottom of the grid, snakes and elephants are depicted. According to Hindu belief, these represent the underworld (Patalam) and the eight elephants (Ashtadiggalas) carrying the earth, with the squares above representing the earth being supported by them.

The Game's Symbolism

Before starting the game, players place their tokens in the "Patalam" (the underworld) and make a wager. The game is often played with stakes such as six coins or dice. The players must decide on their tokens in advance, and the game can be played by multiple participants.

Ladders can be found in squares 16, 19, 30, 41, 52, 63, 74, 79, and 87 on the Vaikunthapali game board. A player can use the ladder to ascend to a higher square once their token lands on one of these squares. For example, the player can use the ladder to ascend to square 28 (Salokyam) after landing on square 16 (Sagunam). We call this upward motion "climbing the ladder." A player is said to gain virtue as they move up a ladder, enabling them to place bets once more. Players continue to climb

and move in accordance with their dice rolls as the game progresses.

Snakes and their Downward Movement

Besides ladders, snakes are placed on some squares on the board. If the player's token lands on the snake at the bottom of the ladder, it climbs. If it lands on the snake's head, it gets bitten and descends down the snake's tail. We call this downward motion "being swallowed by the snake." The player is sent back to the underworld if, for example, they land on square 26 (Dvesham), which has a snake. The token then moves to the third square, where another snake is waiting.

A player may occasionally be sent all the way back to the first square if they land on square 106, which is home to a large snake. Avoiding the snakes and navigating the board to reach square 132, which represents the journey to the divine realm (Swargadham), is the ultimate objective. The player completes the journey and reaches the ultimate goal after completing the last squares.

The Final Spiritual Goal

The game also reflects a deeper spiritual journey: after passing through 132 squares, the player enters a state of divine vision. According to tradition, when reaching the final state, the player must confront the symbolic image of Lord Vishnu (Virat Swarupa), as represented by the images on the board. To represent the difficulties and detours encountered in the spiritual quest, the figures on the sides serve as gatekeepers, stopping the player from immediately entering the heavenly vision until they are circumvented.

Having explored the symbolic structure of the game, we now turn to its role in shaping cultural and educational practices

Educational and Cultural Value of Moksha Patam

Moral Lessons

Moksha Patam has originally been designed for teaching, featuring direct lessons in life, which children learn while playing this seemingly simple yet wholly unpredictable game. As described earlier, the dynamic movement on the game board mirrors life's unpredictability, reinforcing lessons in resilience and virtue.

Snakes denote the evils of greed, anger, and pride, while ladders denote the good virtues of wisdom, honesty, and compassion. For example, a player who picks "ego" can land in "illusion," evoking again one of the morals of pride could really be an impediment to judgement.

This intentional relationship between squares aids in internalising the importance of moral decisions and the results of acts.

Reflective Practice

Moksha Patam isn't just a game of chance but has players think through their choices and their consequences. The events brought about through the game stimulate

confirmation, awareness, and mindfulness in him and make the player think about how much virtues or vices affect his development off and on the field.

Community Engagement

Additionally, Moksha Patam was crucial in strengthening ties among the family and the community. Particularly at festivals or as a purposeful pastime, families and communities would get together to play, transforming the game into a communal learning and introspection experience. In order to strengthen their emotional bond with the game and its lessons, players occasionally utilised personal mementos, such as jewellery.

Artistic and Cultural Dimensions

The boards themselves were often crafted as works of art, adorned with symbolic imagery-gods, angels, and celestial beings at the top, and animals, plants, and humans lower down-mirroring the cosmic hierarchy of existence. This iconography transforms the game into a visual and interactive lesson in ethics and spirituality, helping players, especially children, internalize the overarching goal of liberation (moksha) and the importance of guidance along the spiritual path

A Spiritual Journey in Modern Pedagogy

Just as a traveller prepares for a much-anticipated journey-gathering information, seeking advice, and visualising the destination-students, too, prepare for life's challenges by learning and practicing virtues through the game of Paramapada Sopanam.

In this analogy, the *Prapanna* (one who has surrendered to the Divine) is like the traveller, but their journey is spiritual: each step is guided by anticipation of reaching Paramapada, the ultimate realm of bliss and liberation. The Prapanna's preparation involves studying spiritual teachings, reflecting on actions, and cultivating virtues-mirroring how students engage with lessons, reflect on their choices, and build character through the game.

Just as the traveller's excitement for the destination motivates careful planning and positive actions, the devotee's anticipation of Moksha inspires purposeful, ethical living. The process of moving through the game's steps-ascending ladders of virtue and avoiding pitfalls-becomes a practical exercise in aligning thoughts and actions with higher goals

For students, Paramapada Sopanam is not just a game but a model for life: it transforms the anticipation of a spiritual journey into daily practice, encouraging resilience, self-reflection, and ethical growth as they prepare for their own "journey" toward fulfilment and success.

Recommendations

Learning About Moksha—The Journey to Inner Freedom

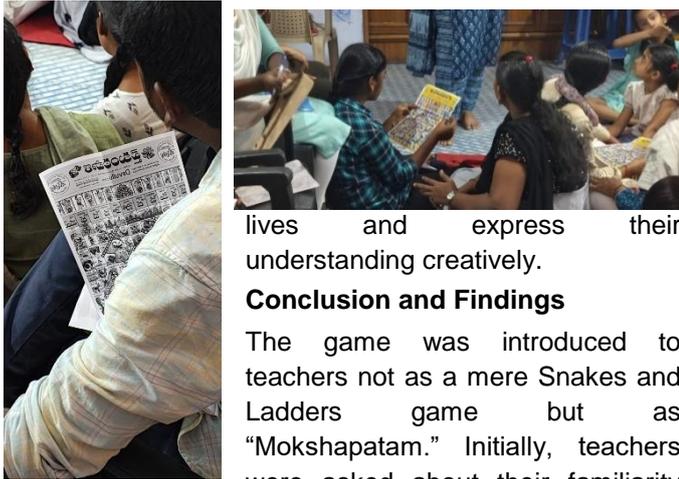
Week	Topic	Activities	Key Takeaways
1	What is Moksha?	Storytelling: The Four Goals of Life (Purusharthas) – Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha	Introduction to Moksha as freedom from stress, anger, and wrong thinking
2	Different Paths to Peace	Animated video + class discussion on Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga	Different people follow different ways to become better humans
3	Saints and Stories	Stories of Nammalwar, Ramanuja, and Lord Krishna's teaching to Arjuna	Saints helped people feel closer to God and inner peace, regardless of caste or status
4	What is true freedom?	Reflection worksheet: "When do I feel free and happy inside?" + group sharing	Moksha is not escaping the world-it's about finding peace inside
5	Project Week: My Moksha	Creative project: Drawing, poem, skit, or diary entry on "My idea of peace or inner freedom"	Expressing what they learned and felt in a personal way

Assessment/Evaluation

To measure student understanding and engagement with the concepts of Moksha, the following methods will be used:

- Quizzes and Short Reflections: Short written or oral quizzes at the end of Weeks 2 and 3 to check understanding of key terms (Moksha, Purusharthas, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga) and stories.
- Class Participation: Observing contributions during discussions, storytelling, and group sharing activities.
- Reflection Worksheets: Review of students' responses in Week 4 to assess their ability to connect the idea of inner freedom to their own experiences.
- Creative Projects: Evaluation of Week 5 projects (drawings, poems, skits, diary entries) for depth of thought, creativity, and personal connection to the concept of Moksha.
- Peer and Self-Assessment: Students can share feedback on each other's projects and reflect on their own learning journey.

This combination of formative and summative assessments ensures that students not only grasp the philosophical concepts but also relate them to their own



lives and express their understanding creatively.

Conclusion and Findings

The game was introduced to teachers not as a mere Snakes and Ladders game but as “Mokshapatam.” Initially, teachers were asked about their familiarity with the game and its essence. Most shared that they had played it since childhood and believed it represented the ups and downs of life, highlighting the need for perseverance despite obstacles. They agreed that progress in the game is slow but inevitable with continued effort. When we suggested that this board game conveys not only life’s fluctuations but the entire journey from birth to death, the teachers were sceptical and insisted that nothing of that sort existed in the game.

We then presented them with the game sheets and asked them to examine the board closely. The teachers were surprised and somewhat confused by the depth of symbolism present in the game.

We explained that the entire game, from square 1 to 132, represents the journey of life. The snakes symbolise ego, anger, lust, and other negative traits, while the ladders stand for belief, trust, growth, and other positive qualities. Negative actions cause setbacks, while positive deeds elevate the player to higher levels. Rolling the dice represents the choices and circumstances one faces in life. Some squares feature animals and trees, illustrating the need for humans to live in harmony with nature.

When asked about the ultimate goal of life, teachers responded with answers like heaven, Vaikuntham, or Kailasam. We encouraged them to look at the board to see if these were depicted as the final destination. They realised that all their answers appeared somewhere along the journey, but not at the ultimate end. The 132nd square is not the final goal; it represents the grandest realm within Samsara. True salvation lies beyond, symbolised by merging with Paramatma, depicted above the 132nd square at the top centre of the board.

Imagine children playing this game: instead of saying “a snake bit me,” they might say “my ego pulled me down” or “my anger set me back.” These concepts become ingrained in their minds and hearts. When faced with real-life challenges, this understanding can help them

recognise that negative qualities bring setbacks, while good deeds, knowledge, hard work, and faith lead to progress. This is the true essence of Mokshapatam.

In summary, this experience demonstrates that Paramapada Sopanam, when taught with its full philosophical context, is a powerful tool for moral and spiritual education. It enables both teachers and students to internalise the consequences of virtues and vices, making ancient wisdom relevant and impactful in modern pedagogy. The game bridges cultural heritage with value-based education, fostering ethical reflection, resilience, and personal growth.

Reviving Paramapada Sopanam in modern classrooms bridges ancient wisdom and contemporary pedagogy. By integrating this traditional game into value-based education, educators can foster not only intellectual growth but also ethical and emotional development, ensuring that students become well-rounded individuals rooted in cultural heritage.



*Images from the workshop training Teachers/Tutors

Further study

A quantitative experimental study could be conducted with students to measure the impact of Paramapada Sopanam on moral reasoning and value internalisation. By comparing pre- and post-intervention assessments between groups who engage with the game and those who follow traditional instruction, it would be possible to empirically evaluate how effectively this ancient board game fosters ethical understanding, reflective thinking, and personal growth in a modern educational setting.

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