

Tracing Gaming Addiction in Vedic Literature

Piyali Biswas
Assistant Professor in Sanskrit
Acharya Sukumar Sen Mahavidyalaya,
Gotan, Purba Bardhaman,
West Bengal, India
victory.biswas@gmail.com

Structured Abstract:

Purpose:

Nowadays, the love for online video gaming has crossed its limitations and has become an addiction and is recognized as the gaming disorder by World Health Organization. The present article explores the excessive gaming addiction among the Vedic people with special reference to a hymn of the 10th book or *maṇḍala* of the *R̥gveda* (10.34), where a resemblance can be seen between the game addicted people of the *Vedic* era with the game addicts of the modern era. Moreover, this hymn does not have any direct religious context and thus is considered as a secular hymn by the scholars.

Design / Methodology / Approach:

This paper is prepared in English language and the verses are written in Sanskrit language with diacritics. In the beginning of this paper, a list of abbreviations and a list of diacritical markings of the Sanskrit *Devanāgarī* alphabets are given to avoid inconveniences. Titles of books, quoted books and words, cited verses, quotations have been given in italicized fonts. We have put a list for references of the subsequent discussion as the 'Endnotes'. The study is based on secondary and primary data both. Some information from Internet also has been taken and given in the references.

Findings:

The study reveals gaming addiction among the common people of Vedic era.

Originality/Value:

Few works on gaming tradition has been done but not in this angle. In this paper, a comparative study has been made on the tradition of gaming addiction between the common *Vedic* People and today's common people.

Limitations:

The issue mentioned here is very alarming and is being going on ever since but raising awareness among the people with such a research work is very hard.

Keywords:

Introduction, Gaming tradition in early literary references, Gaming addiction shown in the *R̥gveda* hymn 10.34, Conclusion.

Paper Type: Research Paper.

Abbreviations:

AB = Aitareya Brāhmaṇa
APA = American Psychiatry Association
AV = Atharvaveda
AVP = Atharvaveda Paippalāda Saṃhitā
AVP = Atharvaveda Śaunaka Saṃhitā
Br. Up. = Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad
Chān. Up. = Chāndogya Upaniṣad
Comm. = Commentary
Ed. = Edited
GB = Gopatha Brāhmaṇa
ICD = International Classification of Diseases
KS = Kāthaka Saṃhitā
MLBD = Motilal Banarsidas Private Limited
Mun. Up = Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
N = Nirukta
TB = Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa
Trans. = Translation
TS = Taittirīya Saṃhitā
TU = Taittirīya Upaniṣad
RV = R̥gveda
ŚB = Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
WHO = World Health Organisation

Sanskrit alphabets in roman transliteration:

अ = a आ = ā इ = i ई = ī उ = u ऊ = ū
ऋ = ṛ क = k र = r
ए = e ऐ = ai ओ = o औ = au
क = ka ख = kha ग = ga घ = gha ङ = ṅa
च = ca छ = cha ज = ja झ = jha ञ = ṅa
ट = ṭa ठ = ṭha ड = ḍa ढ = ḍha ण = ṇa
त = ta थ = tha द = da ध = dha न = na
प = pa फ = pha ब = ba भ = bha
म = ma य = ya र = ra ल = la व = va

श = śa ष = ṣa स = sa ह = ha

Introduction:

The term “Addiction” does not only refer to the dependence on substances such as chemical, drug, alcohol etc. but it also involves an inability to stop partaking in some activities. And these days, internet gaming addiction has become a new threat to our Indian society with the increasing use of internet. These types of games lead us to a sedentary lifestyle¹. The latest list of diseases published by the WHO (ICD-11) includes addiction to the online video gaming². The American Psychiatry Association (APA) has developed nine criteria for characterizing the Gaming Disorder³. Doctors now recognize persistent and compulsive gaming behavior as ‘a mental health disorder’. There are so many games like Dota2, PUBG etc., which are very addictive in nature and makes the gamer neglect personal hygiene, gain or lose significant weight, disrupt sleep patterns, play at workplace, lying etc. Even it may have some or all symptoms of drug addiction. Some states like Gujarat had to ban the online video game PUBG.

Now, is this tradition of ‘Gaming addiction’ new to India? The answer will be “No”, it’s been going on for a long time back. There is a hymn named *Akśasūktam* in the 10th book of *ṚgVeda*⁴. Where we see a monologue of a repentant gamer who laments the ruin brought on him because of addiction to the dice or *Akṣa*.

Gaming tradition in early literary references:

Not only in *ṚgVeda*, in the 4th and 7th books of *Atharvaveda* also there are hymns for success in Dice gaming⁵. In the 4th *Kāṇḍa* of the *Paippalāda* recension of the *Atharvaveda* the last verse says:

[We, who] want luck in dice against the opposing player, let the victory pour on us; let destroy him, who plays against us like a tree against the thunderbolt (AVP: 4.9.7).

Even, we all know that in the *Sabhāparva* of *Mahābhārata* (II.65.45), Yudhiṣṭhira had to stake his wife Draupadī before the Kauravas after losing everything in the Dice game⁶.

In *Nalopākhyāna* of *Mahābhārata*⁷ also Ṛtuparṇa, an expert in Dice game taught the game to Nala: “Know that I am acquainted with the dice’s secret and that I am an expert on numbers” (26):

“viddhyaksahrdayajñam mām saṅkhyāne ca viśāradam”

In the 7th Adhyāya of *Manusmṛhitā*, Manu has identified ten sins (*kāmaja vyāsana*) and dice gaming is among them⁸:

“mṛgayākṣah divāswapnah paribādah striyo madah

tauryatrikaṃ br̥thātyā ca kāmajo daśako gaṇah”

In later Sanskrit literary texts like the ten-act Sanskrit drama *Mṛcchakaṭika* by Śūdraka, we see a distressed state of a game addict Saṃvāhaka (*Mṛcchakaṭika*, 2nd act).

The early literary references in *Ṛgveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Mahābhārata* and other texts regarding the sedentary gaming tradition like dice gaming, show a major role in Indian culture.

Gaming addiction shown in the *Ṛgveda* hymn 10.34:

Gaming addiction was very popular among the Vedic people as well. The “Gamester’s lament” is one of the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* which do not have any direct religious context and is found in the late 10th book or *maṇḍala* (RV: X.34), where most of such hymns on miscellaneous topics are found.

H. Luders in his article⁹, *The Game of Dice in Ancient India*, wrote: “How could we imagine the dice game in the most ancient times that is difficult to say.”

M. Winternitz considered the poem to be “The most beautiful amongst the non-religious poems of the *Ṛgveda*”¹⁰. According to A. A. Macdonell “Considering that it is the oldest composition of the kind in existence, we cannot but regard this poem as the most remarkable literary product”¹¹.

The poem testifies to the popularity of gaming among all classes of Vedic people. The hymn contains fourteen verses or *mantras*. Ailuṣaḥ kavaṣaḥ is the seer of this hymn and the deities are - Akṣāḥ, Kitavaḥ and Kṛṣiḥ. The verses are in Tr̥ṣṭup and Jagatī meter. Now if we go through this hymn, we can see that the gamer says that the trembling air born products of

the great *vibhīdaka* tree delight him as they continue to roll upon the dice-board. Like a drink of Soma from the mountain Mujavant, the enlivening *vibhīdaka* dice has pleased him¹²:

na mā mimetha na jihīḷa eṣū śivā sakhībhya uta mahyamāsīt /

akṣasyāhamekaparasya hetoranuvratāmāpa jāyāmarodham // (RV:10.34.2)

The gamester's wife never quarrelled with him nor despised him; she was kind to him and to his friends. But for the sake of the partial dice the man have spurned his devoted spouse. His mother-in-law detests him, his wife rejects him. Even in his need he does not find any comforter.

dveṣṭi śvaśrūrapa jāyā ruṇaddhi na nāthito vindatemarḍītāram /

aśvasyeva jarato vasnyasya nāhaṃ vindāmikitavasya bhogham // (RV:10.34.3)

He cannot discover what the enjoyment of the gamester any more than he can perceive what the happiness of a worn-out hack horse. Others pay court to the wife of the man whose wealth, is coveted by the impetuous dice. His father, mother, brothers cry out, "We know nothing of him; take him away bound!"

anye jāyāṃ pari mṛśantyasya yasyāghṛdhad vedane vājyakṣaḥ /

pitā matā bhrātara enamāhurna jānīmo nayatābaddhametam // (RV:10.34.4)

When he resolves not to be tormented by them because he is abandoned by his friends who withdraw from him, yet as soon as the brown dice, when they are thrown, make a rattling sound he goes to their rendezvous like a woman to her paramour.

The gamester comes to the assembly hall glowing in body, asking himself "Shall I win?"

sabhāmeti kitavah pṛcchamāno jeṣyāmīti tanvāśūsujānaḥ / (RV: 10.34.6)

The dice inflames his desire by making over his winnings to his opponent. Hooking, piercing, deceitful, vexatious, delighting to torment, the dice dispense transient gifts and again ruin the winner; they appear to the gambler covered with honey. Their troop of fifty-three disports itself, itself disposing men's destinies like the God Savitr whose ordinances never fail. They bow not before the wrath of the fiercest. The king himself makes obeisance

to them. They roll downward, they bound upward. Having no hands, they overcome him who has. These celestial coals when thrown on the dice-board scorch the heart though are cold themselves.

The destitute wife of the gamester is distressed, and so too is the mother of a son who goes she knows not whither. In debt and seeking after money the gambler approaches with trepidation the houses of other people at night.

It vexes the gamester to see his own wife and then to observe the wives and happy homes of others. In the morning he yokes the brown horses — the dice; by the time when the fire goes out, he has sunk into a degraded wretch.

Lastly, he prays to the axis *akṣa* holding out his ten fingers to the east in reverence “I withhold wealth by playing dice, this is truth I say.”

Never play with dice; practice husbandry/cultivate; rejoice in the prosperity, esteeming it sufficient. Be satisfied with the cattle and the wife, the god advises.

akṣairmā dīvyah kṛṣimit kṛṣasva vitte ramaṣva bahumanyamānaḥ /

tatra ghāvaḥ kitava tatra jāyā tan me vicaṣṭe savitāyamaṛyaḥ // (RV:10.34.13)

In the last *mantra* he says “O dice! Be friendly to us and do not forcibly bewitch us with your magical power. Let your wrath and enmity now come to rest. Let others than we be subject to the fetters of the brown ones.”

mitraṃ kṛṇudhvaṃ khalu mṛḷatū no mā no ghoreṇa caratābhi dhṛṣṇu /

ni vo nu manyurviśatāmarātiranyo babhrūṇāṃ prasitau nvastu // (RV:10.34.14)

The piteousness of the sedentary gamester in this *Rgvedic* hymn 10.34 resembles to the distressed state of the game addicted of this decade.

Conclusion:

So, from the above discussion, we can say that this gaming addiction is not new in Indian society. It is an old scar of Indian civilization and unlike the other scars, which gradually starts to disappear; this scar is becoming more prominent day by day. Playing sedentary games like dice also shows great cultural influence with respect to the socio-economic and the political conditions of the respected period of India. Moreover, from this *Rgvedic* hymn,

we also come to know that this gaming tradition was not confined among the Kings and upper-classes people but was popular among the all classes of the society.

Endnotes:

1. A sedentary lifestyle is a lifestyle involving little or no physical activity.
2. Cf. WHO, 2018, *International Classification of diseases*.
3. Cf. Petry N. M, Rehbein F, Gentile D. A, Lemmens J. S, Rumpf H. J, Möble T, (2014). *An international consensus for assessing internet gaming disorder using the new DSM-5 approach*. *Addiction*.109.
4. Cf. RV: X. 34.
5. Cf. AVP: 4.9, AVŚ: 7.109.
6. Śakuni commits Yudhiṣṭhira to stake Draupadī, and to this he agrees. It is said (II, 65, 45): *saubalas tu abhidhāyaivam jītakāṣī madotkataḥ / jītam ity eva tān akṣān punar evānvapadyata //*
7. Cf. MBh III, 72. For further information see Jarret, T. *Nalopākhyānam* or the tale of Nala. Cambridge University Press, January, 2014.
8. Cf. *Manusamhitā*, VII. 47.
9. See Lueders, H. *The Game of Dice in Ancient India* (1907) reprinted in *Philologica Indica*, 1940.
10. Cf. Winternitz, *HIL*, vol. I, P-112.
11. Cf. Macdonell, A. A, 1990, p. 127-8.
12. In the ancient India the dices or *akṣas* were made of the fruits of *Vibhīdaka* tree.

References:

1. Adhikari, T. N., (2016) *Atharva-Veda-Samhitā*. Vol- 1, Kolkata, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.
2. Adhikari, T. N., (2014). *Nirūkta*. Chapter- 7, Kolkata, Sanskrit Book Depot.
3. Anirvan, (1991). *Vedamīmamsā* (1st Part, 3rd Ed.). Kolkata, Sanskrit College.
4. Basham, A. L. (2008), *The Wonder That Was India: A survey of the history and culture of the Indian sub-continent before the coming of the Muslims*, Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan.

5. Bhattacharya, Bhabani Prasad & Adhikari, T. N. (2001, rpt. 2007). *Vedic Selections*, Part- II (Bengali). Kolkata, Sanskrit Book Depot.
6. Bhattacharya, Haridas Siddhantabagish. (1338 Baṅgābda). *Mahābhāratam (sabhāparva)*. Kolkata.
7. Bloomfield, M. (1979). *Atharvaveda Saṃhitā*, SBE, vol- 42, Delhi, MLBD.
8. Bloomfield, M. (1906, rpt. 1964). *The Vedic Concordance* vol- 10. Delhi, HOS, MLBD.
9. Bose, M. L. (1998). *Social and Cultural History of Ancient India (revised & Enlarged Edition)*, Concept Publishing Company.
10. Buhler, G. (1886). *Sacred Books of the East: The Laws of Manu*, vol 25. London, Oxford University Press Warehouse.
11. Gonda, J. (1975). *History of Indian Literature* (vol. I, Fasc. 1). Wiesbaden.
12. Griffith, R. T. H. (1971). *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*. Trans. rpt., 2 Vols Varanasi, Chowkhamba Skt. Series. Jha, Vashistha, N. (1992). *A Linguistic Analysis of The Ṛgveda-Paippalāda*. Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications.
13. Griswold, Hervey De Witt (1971), *The Religion of the Ṛigveda*, MLBD.
14. Jarret, T. (2014). *Nalopākhyānam or the tale of Nala*. England, Cambridge University Press.
15. Kaegi, Adolf (2004), *The Rigveda: The Oldest Literatures Of The Indian 1886*, Kessinger Publishing,
16. Macdonell, A. A. (1976). *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. Delhi, MLBD.
17. Macdonell, A. A. (1974). *Vedic Mythology*. Delhi, MLBD.
18. Monier-Williams, M. (2002). *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi, MLBD.
19. Ray, Nirbed & Ghosh, Amitabha. (1999) *Sedentary Games of India*. Kolkata, Asiatic Society.
20. Satavalekar, D. (No date). *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*. Pardi, Guajrat, 4th Ed.
21. Whitney, W. D. (1905, rpt. 1993). *Atharvaveda Saṃhitā*, Delhi, MLBD.
22. Winternitz, M. (1981. rpt., 1987). *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol-I. Delhi, MLBD.
23. Winternitz, M & Sharma, V. S. (1981), *A history of Indian literature: Introduction, Veda, Epics, Purānas and Tantras*, MLBD.