



## Review article

## Gambling in India: Past, present and future

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## ABSTRACT

Gambling has been a popular pastime in ancient and colonial India, and continues to be in modern India. Problem gambling is an important public health issue because of its prevalence, increased risk to certain vulnerable groups and its numerous adverse consequences to the gambler, his/her family and the wider society. In this paper, we present an overview of gambling in ancient and modern India, and also suggest a public health approach aimed at reducing gambling-related harm and associated problems.

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## 1. Introduction

Gambling is prevalent across most cultures; and it is and has been a popular pastime in modern, colonial and ancient India.

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Gambling remains a leisure activity with no resultant harm for some, but for others it can become problematic. Problem gambling refers to gambling that disrupts or damages personal, family or recreational pursuits (Lesieur and Rosenthal, 1991). It is now acknowledged (Orford, 2001) that similar to substance addictions, gambling addiction too exists on a spectrum or continuum of escalating severity and can have multiple adverse consequences. Gambling disorder refers to a condition related to excessive gambling and defined by criteria set forth in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder 5* (2013). These are very similar to the diagnostic criteria for substance addictions such as need to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement, restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling, has made repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling, is often preoccupied with gambling, etc. From DSM 4 to DSM 5, diagnosis of pathological gambling has seen three important changes: the name has changed to gambling disorder, the threshold for diagnosis has decreased from 5 to 4 criteria, and one diagnostic criterion ('has committed illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft or embezzlement to finance gambling') has been removed (Petry et al., 2014).

### 1.1. Public health impact

Problem gambling is an important public health issue because of its prevalence, increased risk to certain vulnerable groups and its numerous adverse consequences to the gambler, his/her family and the wider society (Roaf, 2015). In the United Kingdom (UK) 0.7% adults are problem gamblers and 7.3% of adults are 'at risk' gamblers (people who "may potentially experience varying degrees of adverse consequences from gambling" but who do not meet the criteria for 'problem gambling') (Wardle et al., 2010). Higher rates of problem gambling are found in respondents who were aged 16–35; Asian and Black; single, separated or divorced; and unemployed.

Problem gambling is associated with a range of health and social harms and adversely affects the individual, the family and society. It can negatively impact the gambler's physical (Morasco et al., 2006) health and gamblers tend to have high rates of various psychosomatic symptoms (cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, gastrointestinal and other non-specific psychosomatic symptoms) and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, substance misuse and personality disorders (Petry et al., 2005). Problem gambling has a significant impact on the individual's financial situation, often resulting in large debts, poverty and even bankruptcy. It is also associated with criminal activities, ranging from theft and prostitution to violent crime, with obvious legal consequences. Problem gambling can also adversely affect the gambler's interpersonal relationships (Velleman et al., 2015) and can result in relationship problems, neglect of the family, domestic violence (Mullean et al., 2002) and child abuse. Finally, costs of gambling borne by society include the cost of the crimes committed by gamblers and the various health and social care costs (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, 2012).

### 1.2. Aims

The aims of this paper are to 1) summarize gambling in ancient and modern India, and 2) suggest a public health approach aimed at reducing gambling-related harm and associated problems.

We present an overview of the following: references to gambling in ancient Indian texts, gambling legislation in India, extent of legal and illegal gambling in present – day India, research on gambling addiction from India, and finally we propose a three-

level approach for the prevention of gambling-related problems in an Indian context.

## 2. Gambling in India: the past

Perhaps the earliest account of gambling anywhere in the world is in a hymn from the *Rig Veda*, an ancient Indian text written between 1700 and 1100 BCE, and there are few clearer descriptive accounts of gambling's phenomenology, psychopathology and adverse consequences (Bhide, 2007). Part of this hymn (from the tenth book of the *Rig Veda* (Singh, 1990) is given below, where a gambler addresses the dice which have destroyed his life and begs them to spare him:

### 2.1. The dyuta sukta: (ode to the dice)

#### The Gambler:

*These nuts that once tossed on tall trees in the wind  
but now smartly roll over the board, how I love them!  
As alluring as a draught of Soma on the mountain,  
the lively dice have captured my heart.  
My faithful wife never quarrelled with me  
or got angry; to me and my companions  
she was always kind, yet I've driven her away  
for the sake of the ill-fated throw of a die.*

#### Chorus:

*His wife's mother loathes him, his wife rejects him,  
he implores people's aid but nowhere finds pity.  
luckless gambler is no better  
than an aged hack to be sold on the market  
Other men make free  
with the wife of a man  
whose money and goods the eager dice have stolen.  
His father and mother and brothers all say,  
"He is nothing to us. Bind him, put him in jail!"*

#### The Gambler:

*make a resolve that I will not go gaming.  
So my friends depart and leave me behind.  
But as soon as the brown nuts are rattled and thrown,  
to meet them I run, like an amorous girl.*

#### Chorus:

*To the meeting place the gambler hastens.  
Shall I win? he asks himself, hoping and trembling,  
But the throws of the dice ruin his hopes,  
giving the highest scores to his opponent.  
Dice, believe me, are barbed: they prick and they trip,  
they hurt and torment and cause grievous harm.  
To the gambler they are like children's gifts, sweet as honey, but  
they turn on the winner in rage and destroy him.  
Abandoned, the wife of the gambler grieves.  
Grieved too, is his mother as he wanders to nowhere.  
Afraid and in debt, ever greedy for money,  
he steals in the night to the home of another.*

Gambling prevailed as a popular pastime in ancient and medieval India (Benegal, 2013) as evidenced from its depiction in the *Mahabharata*, an epic written in 1500 BCE, and various other Sanskrit and Tamil texts written in the BCE era. Kathasaritasagar, written in the 11th century CE, a collection of legends and folktales, make several references to gambling (Somadeva, 1997). Gambling's popularity persisted during the medieval period (8th to 18th century CE) despite much of India being ruled by Islamic dynasties; gambling is proscribed under Islamic law (Mukhia, 1969). During the British rule (from the 17th century until 1947), passion for gambling among the Indian public persisted.

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