

CHAPTER 4  
TREASURES OF INDIA

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ANTIQUÉ CHESS SETS FROM INDIA ARE WIDELY ACCLAIMED for their stunning beauty and expert craftsmanship. There are the John Company sets – manufactured by the East India Company – and many other types from places such as Berhampur and Vizagapatam that are similarly revered. What unites all of those sets is that they were made for export to the aristocracy of Europe.

But a different class of antique Indian chess sets has been almost completely hidden from public view. These sets never appeared in historical chess exhibitions, nor in chess auctions, nor in artwork known to the Western world. Yet their charm and beauty is of a special nature, and they are historically important. These are original Indian sets that were commissioned

by Indian royalty and members of the ruling clans of 18th and 19th century kingdoms within India.

THE MAHARAJA  
OF DHOLPUR SET  
mid-19th century

The city of Dholpur (or Dhaulpur) is located about 55 km south /southwest of Agra, the home of the Taj Majal. In the 19th century, Dholpur and its surrounding region was a kingdom, or “princely state,” ruled by the Jat clan under the British Raj. The chess set shown here was owned and used by the Maharaja Rana Bhagvat Singh (1823/4-1873), who ruled Dholpur from 1836 until his death in 1873.

The set is made of Indian jade with silver applications, and the plinth of the king bears the name of the Maharaja and the year of his birth in Devanagari script.

The textile board is old but probably not original to the set. However, it is an excellent example of the colorful fabric boards that were (and still are) used in parts of India. Fabric boards can be easily transported from place to place, which was definitely the modus operandi of this particular set. The set was stored inside a portable copper carrying-case and protected by a soft textile pouch that bears the name of the Maharaja’s wife.

One oddity of how the game was played under Hindi rules has to do with the initial set-up of the board: the kings and queens (or ministers) did not face each other, they faced their opposite number. That is, the red king faced the green queen and the red queen the green king. There were other differences with modern chess as well, which were described by H.J.R. Murray in his tome, “The History of Chess”:

In the Indian games each minister stands on the king’s left, and as a result each minister faces his opponent’s king [...] A pawn which arrives at the 8th row receives promotion to the rank of the master-piece of the file, i.e. a pawn reaching a8 (a1) or h8 (h1) becomes a rook, reaching b8 (b1) or g8 (g1) becomes a horse... [...] A king moves to any of the squares contiguous to the one he is occupying, and in addition he is permitted once in the game, whether he has already moved or not, to leap as a knight, but this privilege is lost if he be checked before he has availed himself of it.





LIEUTENANT-COLONEL JAMES TOD (1782-1835) WAS AN officer of the East India Company who oversaw vast swaths of territory in Rajasthan. He wrote extensively about his life and travels, and published his notes as a two-volume work entitled *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (vol. 1 in 1829, vol. 2 in 1832). Tod was well-liked and respected by the rulers of the kingdoms within Rajasthan, and his visits to their kingdoms were often rewarded with gifts and tokens of appreciation. During a visit to the city of Amet, Lt. Col. Tod was given a chess set, specially made for the occasion.

The chess set is made of bone and decorated with small glass beads, pearls, silver, and lacquer. The pieces are figural, with the standard Indian progression of camel-horse-elephant for bishop-knight-rook.

LT. COL. JAMES  
TOD SET  
early 19th century

Inscriptions in Devanagari script are present on both kings. The set was travel-ready and the pieces were stored in a two-tiered wooden carrying case with compartments to hold each piece separately.

The top tier contains some of the major pieces, as well as a miniature portrait. The portrait depicts two persons engaged in a friendly game of chess. An inscription in Devanagari script translates to “Thakur Sahib Shyam Singhji Sundavat and Captain Tod Sahib playing chess at Tikana Amet. Artist Chagni Ram made it and gifted it to Tod when he went to Amet.” “Thakur” was a feudal title meaning “chief” or “master”.



LT. COL. JAMES TOD SET



THE NEXT SET IS HISTORICALLY important, made to order by the King of Sirohi, Abhey Singh, in Samvat 1930 (1873 A.D.) to commemorate a historical event 100 years earlier. Soldiers of the Nawab of Tonk had robbed the treasures of Sirohi, which were on their way from Kota. In response, the army of Sirohi, supported by other Raiput states, attacked the Nawab of Tonk, who was forced to surrender and return the treasures.

The set was given as a dowry to the King's daughter when she married a prince of Udiapur. According to the inscriptions on one of the kings, as well as on the original textile board, the artist's name is Daud, and he was from Udapur/Mewar state.

The pieces in this royal set are very large (the king 18.4 cm, or 7¼ inches, tall) and made of bone. Each piece is adorned with silver decorations as well as rings of pearls. In all, there are 552 pearls affixed to the set – more pearls than one might expect to find in a local jewelry store!

### THE ROYAL SET OF RAJASTHAN

late 19th century

Standard motifs are present in this set. The pieces are red-versus-green, and a plaque on either side of the textile board states the theme of Hindu-versus-Muslim. The set also has the the same progression of animal pieces as the Lt. Col. James Tod chess set: bishop=camel, knight=horse, rook=elephant. The same pattern of camel-horse-elephant is prevalent in several types of Indian-made sets from the 19th and 18th centuries, and sometimes earlier.

But for hundreds of years prior to that period, the standard order was elephant-horse-chariot/boat as the elephant was the bishop, as prescribed in the four-person game of chaturanga and then for the medieval game of shatranj. At some point the order was switched and a camel was substituted for the chariot/boat.





श्री गणेशाय नमः  
श्री गणेशाय नमः  
श्री गणेशाय नमः