

**Chess and other board games as South Asian soft power:
A 4000-year old tradition**

Raamesh Gowri Raghavan

Associates, India Study Centre (INSTUCEN) Trust, 603, Sachinam, Raheja Complex, Malad (E),
Mumbai – 400097

Dnyaneshwari Kamath

Associates, India Study Centre (INSTUCEN) Trust, 603, Sachinam, Raheja Complex, Malad (E),
Mumbai – 400097

Kurush F. Dalal

Associates, India Study Centre (INSTUCEN) Trust, 603, Sachinam, Raheja Complex, Malad (E),
Mumbai – 400097

“It may or may not be true what they say about the devil having all the best tunes, but there can be no doubt that the people of Asia have all the best games. What's more, they seem to have had them longer than anyone else, and undoubtedly invented a great many of them.” – this statement by David Parlett captures in its elegance the soft power that games have held over civilizations since antiquity. Games are among the most powerful memes ever – they cross barriers of class and caste, geography and history, language and religion without friction. In this paper, we look at games and the narratives built around them as instruments of both ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’. As has been shown amply by sports such as cricket, games serve as bonds uniting a nation or culture, overcoming differences. They also serve as bridges between cultures, as international tournaments have illustrated. We will use the example of chess to illustrate the projection of soft power, intentional or otherwise. The earliest incident of diplomacy-by-chess by illustrated in the 6th c. Persian manuscript *Wizarisn-i-Chatrang*. It narrates, with some demonstrable historicity, of a chess game gifted to the Sassanian ruler Khusrau I by the Maukhari ruler Devasharvavarman (Dewisarm), the accompanying challenge, and the final counter-challenge, in which an improvised game of Backgammon was sent back. Chess has since been a byword for diplomatic maneuvers ever since, with words like ‘checkmate’, ‘stalemate’ and more entering the public lexicon. The game’s addictive power is also reflected in the number of religious prohibitions against it. But the soft power of games has also been expressed through trade networks, travelling with merchants overseas and deserts. In this paper we will trace a few geographical networks. We will conclude with an example of a South Asian game becoming the lightning rod of the Cold War – the (in)famous chess match between Bobby Fischer (USA) and Boris Spassky (USSR) in 1972 which would come to be described as the Match of the Century, played in Reykjavik, as far removed from its homeland Kannauj, as could be possible.

Keywords: *Soft power, games, board games, chess, Sharvavarman, Khusrau I, Indo-Roman Trade*