

The Unknown Treasures of India

By Jon Crumiller

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Some of the most extraordinary chess sets ever made have only been seen by a few people — until now. One of the world's top collector's takes readers inside the extraordinary world of the royal chess sets of India.

Antique chess sets from India are widely acclaimed for their stunning beauty and expert craftsmanship. An earlier column looked at the spectacular [John Company sets](#) and there are other types of chess sets 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 there is a different class of antique Indian chess sets has been almost completely hidden from public view. These sets have 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.

Several of these sets in this month's column have never before been seen in public.

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.



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Note the carved inscription on the plinth of the King (center of the photo).



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The inscription, in Devanagari script, gives the name of the Maharaja and the year of his birth.

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. The following photos are of the copper case and textile pouch.



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Another royal chess set, from the former [Kingdom of Bundi](#), is also made of jade with silver ornaments.



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This set is an excellent example of the traditional Indian chess theme of “Hindu versus Muslim.” The Hindu king’s inscription is in Devanagari script, whereas the Muslim king’s inscription is in Urdu, a right-to-left script that is a derivative of the Arabic alphabet.



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The Hindu King's inscription says "Maharao Shri Jaimalji, SV 1920." (To date, I have been unable to translate the Urdu script on the Muslim King.) [Vikram Samvat](#) (abbreviated on the inscription as SV, for Samvat) is a Hindu calendar system that is 56.7 years ahead of our own Gregorian calendar system, so Samvat 1920 translates to 1864 A.D.

The next set on display is approaching the 200th anniversary of its creation.

[Lt. Col. 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.



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The 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. 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, as shown below:



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The top tier contains some of the major pieces, as well as a miniature portrait.



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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.”)

श्रीठाकुरभादाबसोपनातसिपजी
उनडावनकपतानहोद
सादावनेसतरतरेणे
११११११११



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This set can be dated, utilizing two methods that were discussed in previous columns: [1] dated artwork that correlates to the type of chess set in question, and [2] written documents that are related to the set or its manufacturer. It is possible to determine a fairly accurate date for Lt. Col. Tod's chess set by using both methods in tandem.

A painting of Lt. Col. Tod riding on his elephant, attributed to his servant Ghasi, is dated circa 1820. Extracting his image from the painting and comparing it side-by-side to the image on the miniature portrait on the chess set box, there is an uncanny resemblance.

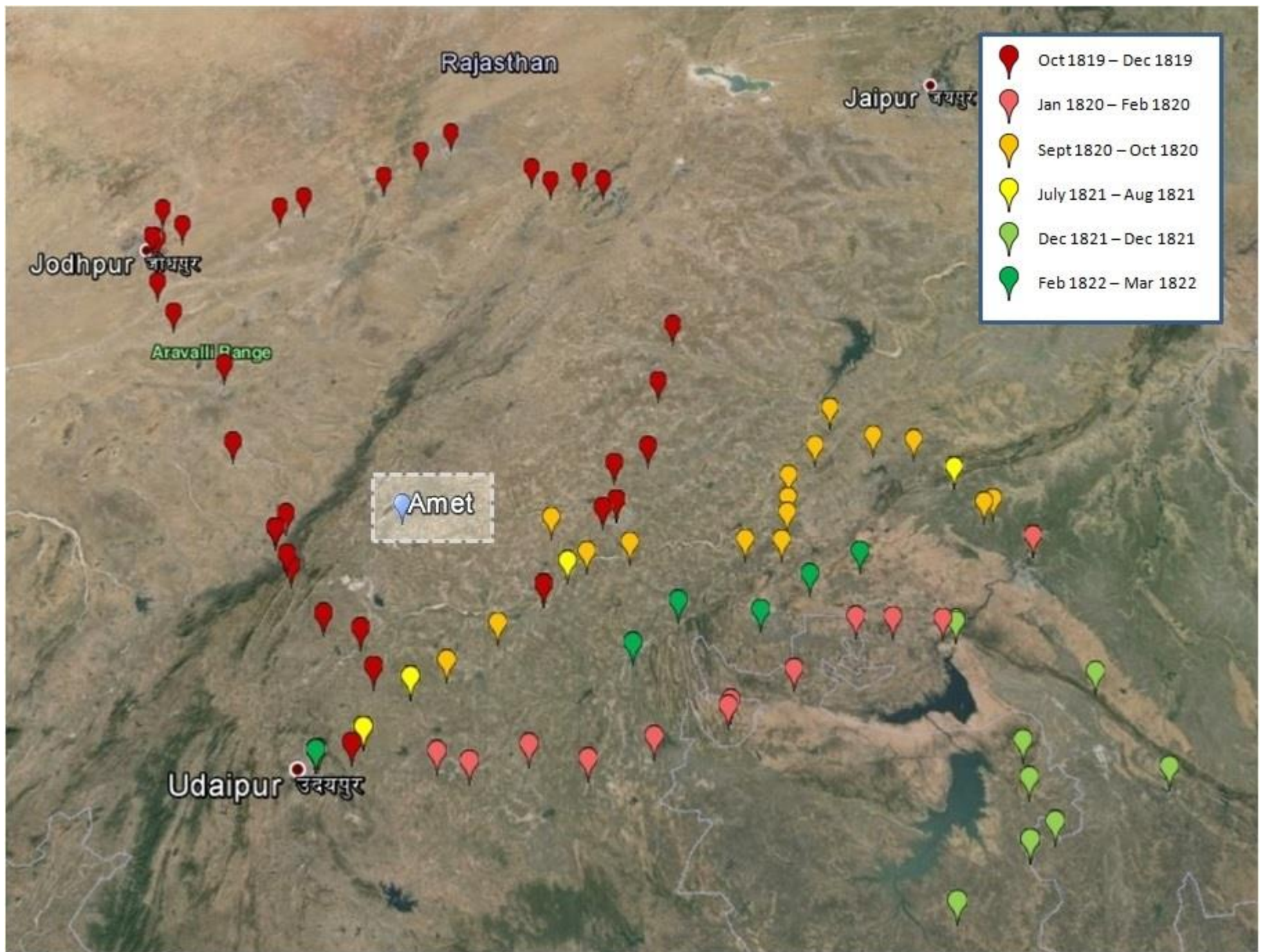


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Clearly this is the same person (as also indicated by the mini-portrait's text), and his age appears to be similar in the two images as well. If anything, the portrait on the left gives the impression of his being a bit younger.

Contemporary documents can also be used as corroborating evidence.

As documented in his own journals and later published in his two-volume work, Lt. Col. Tod conducted six lengthy trips throughout Rajasthan in the years 1819 through 1822. An assumption might be that the set was given to Lt. Col. Tod during one of these trips. But after having mapped his day-to-day travels during those trips, using geocoding techniques, it is clear (from both the text of his journals and the progression of places that he visited) that Tod did not visit Amet during those years.



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These trips are the only ones taken by Tod during the 1819-1822 time period. Towards the end of these travels, Tod suffered from ill health, resulting in his departure from India in 1823.

Based on the evidence of dated artwork and the documentation of his travels, it is most likely that Tod was presented with the set in Amet in 1817 or 1818.

The next set dates from Samvat 1932 (1882 A.D. in our calendar system), with pieces made of bone and silver, and representing the princely state of Sirohi versus the princely state of Alwar. In traditional Indian sets such as this one, the queen piece is a male figure who assists the King in some capacity – e.g. a “wesir” (vizier/minister/advisor) or “senpatai” (commander/general).



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Inscriptions in Devangari script on the two kings and two senapatis help identify the set's motif:

Red king: Shri Man Maharaja Shri Abey Singhji, Sirohi Darbar SV1932

Red senapati: Senapati Samad Karam Hussain, Sirohi Darbar

Green king: Maharaja Shri Man Shri Himatsinghji, Alwar

Green senapati: Senapati Ranjit Singh, Alwar

The pieces in this set follow a motif that is currently known as the Muslim pattern. (A future column will discuss the arguments for and against this designation.) Another attribute of this set, as well as every other colored set shown in this column, is the indigenous Indian color theme of red-versus-green. This color theme has existed in India for centuries, having originated as the colors for two of the armies in the four-handed game of chaturanga, a precursor to the game of chess. In Thomas Hyde's strange chess book *De Ludis Orientalibus* (1694; the entire book is written in Latin and Hebrew!), he describes Indian chess pieces in his possession. I've color-coded the key words "red" and "green" that describe their colors:



Hi sunt Scachi plani ex Ebore solido tornati, qui vernice cum intersperso auro opere variegato obducti sunt. Altera Militum Acies **rubet**, altera **viret**, coloribus lucidissimis & splendidissimis, in usum Principum ac Magnatum.

H.J.R. Murray refers to this passage in his well-known book, A History of Chess (1913): “The chessmen which Hyde possessed were coloured red and green, and these are still the usual colours at the present day[.]”

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 chess 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.



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Standard motifs are present in this set as well. The pieces are red-versus-green, and a plaque on either side of the textile board states the theme of Hindu-versus-Muslim.



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Another traditional theme is present here as well. Note that the Royal Rajasthan set has the same progression of animal pieces as the Lt. Col. 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. A future article will examine these other types of Indian sets, such as “Sikh”/“Sahib” sets and “Rajasthan” pattern sets, both of which have the camel-horse-elephant sequence.

A sharp-eyed observer might wonder if the opposing red pieces are set up incorrectly, due to the reversed placement of the King and Queen, but that is not the case. Hindi chess rules were somewhat different from the European rules. H.J.R. Murray describes these rule differences, a sampling of which are given here, to show some of the fundamental differences with “modern” 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.

The pieces in this royal set are very large (king size 18.4 cm, or 7¼ inches) and made of bone. Each piece is adorned with silver decorations as well as rings of pearls.



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All-told, there are 552 pearls affixed to the set – more pearls than one might expect to find in a local jewelry store!

Another traditional Indian set in my collection was made with an artistic technique that uses thick layering of lacquer as the basis for its decorations.



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These non-figural pieces also have the familiar red-vs-green motif. Each piece is stamped with decorations, then dusted with gold or imitation gold, followed by application of the thick layers of lacquer, to produce a dazzling effect. The stamped decorations provide 3D texture. An inscription in Devanagari script around the center of the red king says: “Maharaja Bharat Singhji, Chhatarpur 1920.” Chhatarpur is a city and (on a broader scale) a district in the state of Madhya Pradesh, directly southeast of Rajasthan. As noted before, Samvat 1920 = 1864 A.D.

The *Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition* (1903) describes the lacquering process in some detail, and comments on its importance within Indian culture: “This art is practised all over India, especially in the ornamentation of wooden toys, bed-posts, pán-leaf boxes, etc. It is perhaps one of the most ancient and widely known methods of wood ornamentation in India. Certain towns are famous for the rich blending of colours, the depth of tone, and the fine polish produced by the local kharádis.”

The oldest traditional Indian set in my collection is also the largest. Made of bone with wooden core, and adorned with silver caps and panels, the set is so bulky that its textile board needed to be spread out on the floor in order to play a game.



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Once again, the set is red vs green, and the inscriptions on the kings and senapatis make it clear that the theme is Hindu-vs-Muslim. The Hindu inscriptions are

Red king: Thakur Sahib Jarowar Singh from Gyangarh [near Devgarh, Mewar)

Red senapati: Senapati [general] Ranjit Singh, Samvat 1840

The Thakur was the regional governor under the Maharana of Udaipur. Samvat 1840 corresponds to 1784 A.D.

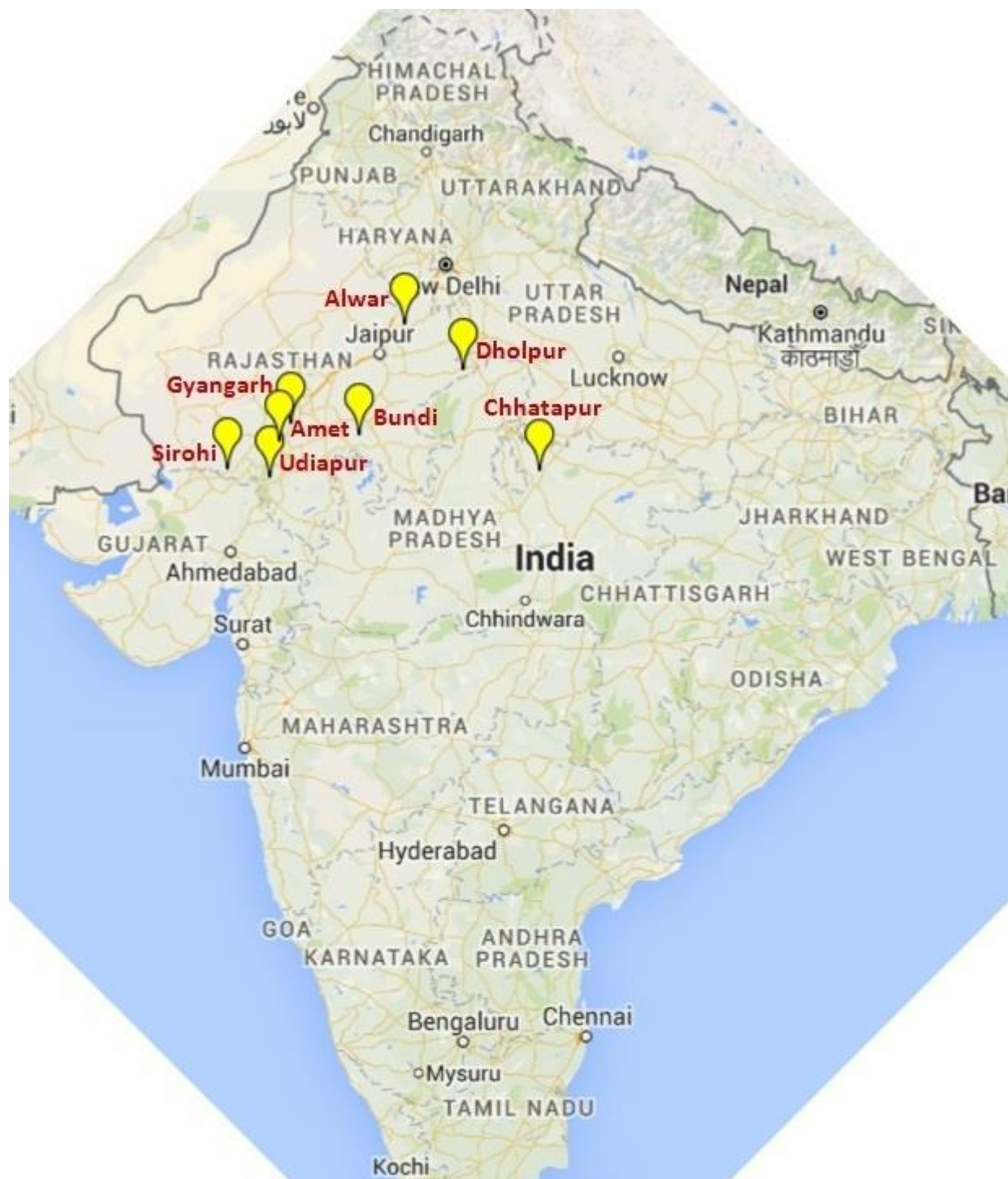
Unfortunately the Urdu script on the Green king and Green senapati is too worn to be deciphered.

The large size of some Indian sets such as this one led to disbelief, and even accusations of exaggeration, amongst chess historians of later generations. Duncan Forbes, in his book *The History of Chess* (1860), excoriates Richard Twiss's two-volume essay entitled *Chess* (1787/1789):

It is simply very absurd. He [Twiss] says that the King is 'twelve inches high and eight broad.' Now, admitting the height, which, however, I do protest, as a very great stretch, let us see how the breadth will stand the test of those stubborn little things known as the figures of arithmetic, a Hindu invention by the way. The King being eight inches broad, it follows, that in order to allow him room to move freely, every square on the board must have been at least nine inches by nine. This gives us a chess board of six feet by six, not counting the outward rim or border! 'Risum teneatis amici!' [Laughter, friends!]"

While not quite that large, the textile board of my bone-and-silver inscribed set measures 4 feet x 4 feet, thus providing evidence that might tilt the benefit of the doubt in Twiss's favor!

All of the 18th and 19th century sets featured in this article are from former kingdoms and "princely states" in the northeastern quadrant of India, in a vast area known at the time as Rajputana. For geographical context, here is a map of modern-day India, with pushpins designating the kingdoms in which these sets originated and/or represented.



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Photos of the traditional Indian chess sets in this column can be found at the following links: [Royal Dholpur chess set](#); [Lt. Col. James Tod chess set](#); [Sirohi-vs-Alwar chess set](#); [Royal Rajasthan chess set](#); [Indian Bone and Gold-Dusted chess set](#); [Indian Bone and Silver Inscribed chess set](#)

Photos of Mr. Crumiller's collection are posted at chessantique.com and <https://plus.google.com/collection/OnITRB>