

**S**UMMER'S here and parents are at their wit's end finding activities to occupy their little darlings. I am convinced God created schools to give all those poor harassed mothers some rest. It seems so cruel to snatch away their peace just when they had got used to it — and that too, in the heat of summer!

In days of yore, when families were large and a child more or less did not make much difference, the kids were largely ignored and left to their own devices. Today's planned kids have no companions, and parents are determined to structure every activity. Those who are lucky go off on holidays or are packed off to grandparents. For those who stay at home, television is the sole entertainment. High IQ activities and extra classes — tuitions — on every subject, are the fate of the offspring of ambitious and upwardly mobile parents. Poor kids! No wonder they turn to the television set as a release! Toyshops are having a ball, but the humble book seems to have taken a backseat.

Some time ago, Dr V Balambal, retired Professor of History, University of Madras, sent me her paper on the ancient board game 'pallankuli', once a favourite of women in ancient Tamil Nadu. I was so fascinated that I decided to publish a book by her on ancient board games and asked her to send me more material. She added two more papers on 'paramapadam' and 'chaturangam'. I found and displayed old variations of these games at the Museum of Folk Art in Kanchi, and Dr Balambal's book will also be out shortly. But summer holidays won't wait for printers, so I hope this introduction will inspire mothers to pick up the games of their youth, and teach their children. It will be time well spent.

The simplest game is 'paramapadam', better known as snakes-and-ladders. There are a hundred squares on a board; the ladders take you up, the snakes bring you down. The difference here is that the squares are illustrated. The top of the ladder depicts a god, or one of the various heavens (kailasa, vaikuntha, brahmaloka) and so on, while the bottom describes a good quality. Conversely, each snake's head is a negative quality or a demon. As the game progresses, the various karmas and samskaras, good deeds and bad, take you up and down the board. Interspersed are plants, people and animals.

The game serves a dual purpose: entertainment, as well as dos and don'ts, divine reward and punishment, ethical values and morality. The final goal leads to Vaikuntha or heaven, depicted by Vishnu surrounded by his devotees, or Kailasa with Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha and Skanda, and their devotees. In this age of moral and

ethical degeneration, this would be a good way of teaching values to children who think they already know more than their parents.

If 'paramapadam' teaches moral values, 'pallankuli' develops skill and quick thinking. Two players compete on a board consisting of between seven and twenty pits per player; each player has to collect the coins or shells or seeds with which the game is played, the player with the maximum number being the winner. There are nine variations of this game, each a 'pandi', with regional, caste and religious variations. It was very popular among

women and required a good memory and alertness, as they had to count and remember the number of coins or seeds accumulated by the opponent.

'Chaturanga' was the Indian version of chess, played with the four parts of the army — foot soldiers, cavalry, elephants and chariots. However, the popular version had eight similar pieces on either side, and the goal was to get to the other side and knock out the opponents. There is evidence of 'chaturanga' having been played with dice, which is still not uncommon, although it involved more skill than chance in this avatar. In fact, Yudhishtira and

Duryodhana, in the *Mahabharata*, played a version of 'chaturanga' using a dice. Tamilian variations of 'chaturanga' are 'puliattam' (goat and tiger game), where careful moves on a triangle decide whether the tiger captures the goats or the goats escape; the 'nakshatraattam' or star game where each player cuts out the other; and 'dayakattam' with four, eight or ten squares, a kind of ludo. Variations of the 'dayakattam' include 'dayakaram', the North Indian 'pachisi' and 'champar'. I am sure there are many more local variations.

The difference between the board

games of yore and those we buy off the shelf is that the items required for the former were made at home, sometimes temporarily as in 'pallankuli' where cups were dug out in the ground, and sometimes permanently, whereby carved wooden boards were commissioned to be designed and carved by sculptors for rich families. Or made by women who strung together colourful beads or embroidered elaborate designs to form the base for the game, the lines and squares marked by different colours. Some of the most beautiful items of everyday art left in old families are the exquisite carved wooden or embroidered game bases. Seeds were collected from the tamarind or *Erythrina indica* (kalyana murungai) tree, the latter having beautiful red and black (crab's eye) seeds. The games brought together men and women, servants and masters, children and adults. Democracy was unselfconsciously at work here.

I am appalled at the amount of time children spend watching television nowadays. Parents try to justify it by saying that they watch the National Geographic or Discovery channels. For every educational programme they watch, they see at least twice the number of film-based programmes, which are neither desirable nor educational. The damage caused by TV is that it stops the thinking process. Young people cease to think or analyze or create. The tube gives them all the information, beautifully packaged, making them into unthinking dummies. It is not for nothing that the television is called the "Idiot Box".

Let's face it, TV is terribly attractive, and none of us are immune. The trick is to give them something equally interesting and more challenging. Summer camps are a better alternative. As a teenager in Bombay, I took part in one where the great K H Ara was instructing us. He just let us follow our ideas and merely helped us with the drawing. I even learned to draw with a brush. Having pioneered the concept in Madras in 1981, and seeing the difference it has made in my own children and others, I am an ardent believer in summer camps for kids. Here, the children do a variety of activities and learn new skills. Most summer camps have a heavy dose of the arts — drawing, painting, craft, music, dance and theatre. These are neglected in schools, and this may be their only opportunity to learn these skills and develop their latent creativity. Spoken Sanskrit and cartooning, yoga and karate have all been subjects in our summer camps. The range and potential are enormous.

Computer camps are a new craze, but these should be selected carefully. Many just leave the children to play games on the computer. While computer games develop fast hand-eye-coordination, the children get hooked, and

this becomes a new version of the Idiot Box. Learning to use computer applications would be far more useful for the child. Sports camps are yet another good activity — cricket coaching, tennis camps, swimming classes are good ways of keeping young people busy.

Then there are the outdoor camps, a great craze abroad. There are several in the North, where kids learn all about trekking and mountaineering, surfing and sailing. There is very little in the southern states, although the possibilities are great. WWF (World Wildlife Fund) India also organizes outdoor camps where young people learn about living in the wild, tracking animals and appreciating nature. Unfortunately, eco tourism is still in its infancy in India. Most of it is organized by state government corporations who lack imagination — although, to give them credit, they try very hard! We Indians also hesitate to send out our children out on their own, and forests, with imagined dangers, would definitely be a no-no.

Entertainment today has become somebody doing something for us. We watch games on television instead of playing them ourselves, we play games for their packaging, not for their challenge, we participate in activities for their future utility, not because we add to our skills and knowledge. The biggest casualties are our youth, who are denied the opportunity to create their own fun. As a child, my son once asked me whether my parents had permitted me to watch television — he had unfashionable ones who did not! When I told him that there was no TV, and radio was limited to once a week, he asked what I did for entertainment!

What did we do? We played simple outdoor games instead of watching them. We cut and sew clothes for our dolls instead of buying Barbie (not available in India in those days) and her wardrobe: it taught us to stitch and became a handy tool to make our baby's clothes or replace husband's lost buttons and kids' torn shirts! We used old magazines, cardboard boxes and cloth to create craft items long before "wealth from waste" became a fashionable slogan. We sharpened our wits against each other over simple board games that required a good memory and quick thinking, like 'pallankuli' and 'dayam', increased our vocabulary over scrabble, and improved our IQ over chess. Does it sound familiar? We too craved entertainment and fun, but created our own. We were not spoon-fed from an idiot box that specializes in entombing young minds inside a TV set.

So, what are your kids doing this summer?

The author is Director, The C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, Chennai

So, it's vacation time for kids. What have you planned for them?



CREATIONS  
Nanditha Krishna



# Alternatives to the idiot box