Addiction and technology: *Plus ça change plus c’est la même* (The more things change, the more they remain the same)

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**ABSTRACT**

Excessive use of the internet for gambling, gaming and behavioural addiction, are a focus of contemporary interest. The authors delve into the archives to explore the connections between the growth of various forms of technology, commerce, addictive behaviours and responses of the State, in colonial India. The interplay between the growth of the telegraph network in 19th century India, and its influence on various forms of gambling, including speculation on opium prices, and the rain, as a theme of wager make interesting stories, as do the governmental responses to these. Clinical and social responses to information technology raised much the same concerns as they do now.

**Key words:** Addiction psychiatry, behavioural addiction, History of psychiatry, internet addiction

Readers of these ramblings will perhaps share with us the sense of wonder of looking at the events of the world, in the present and in the days gone by, through the rose-tinted spectacles of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and realizing that the madness one sees around us in not of recent origin, but has always been there…

**BEHAVIORAL ADDICTIONS: NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLE?**

One contemporary belief in Indian commercial and political life is the dictum that the economy and the success of the state is dependent on the monsoon. This belief is imbued with an aura of certainty, reflecting not only the cultural history of the various famines, but also the memories of fortunes made and lost by speculation on the monsoon. As we leap forward like a basket of (soon to be extinct) frogs, equipped with the latest phones and high-speed connectivity, behavioral addictions, including not just internet poker and gaming, but also stock market speculations and “forward trading” are now included in the DSM. Clinics for internet addiction are now being established all over the country at prominent institutes of importance. Unfortunately, internet addiction does not often extend to looking for experiences from the past, but is more often limited to “gaming,” which as any purveyor and guardian of morals would say, is a bad, and even mad, thing.

**The telegraph: 19th century disruptive technology and its role in gambling**

We find that the monsoon, telecommunication, addiction, and gambling all combined to create a moral morass a century and half ago, and perhaps many of our current...
impressions about our society are still caught in the same quicksand.

The telegraph was introduced to India in the middle of the 19th century under the East India Company and played a critical role in the conduct of the 1857 War of Independence. The man who played the critical role in establishing this was Dr. William O'Shaughnessy, the professor of Pharmacology at the Calcutta Medical College and a very worthy physician and scientist. He was educated at Edinburgh and Dublin and is credited with discovering intravenous replacement of fluid during diarrhea which could save lives. He joined the East India Company as a doctor and joined the New Medical College in Calcutta, where he did exemplary work in many areas. He published the first accounts of the use of cannabis extracts both on patients in the asylum and the medical students (this combination of users still befuddles debates on the consequences of cannabis use) and conducted an enquiry of the scientific merits of mesmerism (as practiced by James Esdaile at the Sukea Street Dispensary, Calcutta) and became a master of the Mint (producing new currency). He was an enthusiastic proponent of new technology and was put in charge of developing the plans for establishing the telegraph system, laying the lines, and the necessary batteries, in Calcutta, which ultimately connected it to the Northwest where the Empire was extending itself. Calcutta was the nerve center of the Indian Empire, and agricultural goods from India (sugar, cotton, and opium) were the mainstay of these riches.

The prices of these would be fixed in London, where, because of a series of events, cotton prices had been the focus on intense speculation, as the British mills tried to offset the disruptions caused by the sharp reduction in supply of American cotton (due to the Civil War 1860) by increasing the imports from India. Opium prices too were subject to intense speculation, caused by the opium wars in China. To this cotton and opium gambling was added rain gambling, where the intensity of the rainfall would be estimated on a crude rain gauge, and the time and amount of overflow were gambled upon. These activities were centered around Burrabazar and cotton street (the scene of some recent arrests for gambling on cricket) in Calcutta, and gradually spread to Delhi.

**Telegraph offers speedy and effective medium for wagering**

There was an elaborate messaging system between Calcutta and the hinterland, extending all the way to Punjab and the Rajputana states. A network of Marwari businesspeople, who had earlier used a series of gunshots and even mirrors to communicate these prices (an early version of the use of digital symbols to transmit information), now shifted to the telegraph, once it was extended to Churu and Sikar, and ultimately to Delhi and Punjab. Opium gambling and rain gambling became more sophisticated with the telegraph, and the habit of gambling spread to Delhi. The last two digits of the price of a chest of opium were announced in the 1st week of every month, and the correct match could get dividends at odds of 100-1. These activities were centered around Egerton Street, the lane that extended from the Clock Tower to Chandni Chowk (in old Delhi).

These imports and exports were dependent on the railways and the knowledge of agricultural activity in the districts, both of which depended on the telegraph. The prices would be transmitted by telegraph to Delhi, and runners would bring it to the gambling shops, where there would often be crowds of several thousand people waiting to hear the result. The public commotion was enough to disrupt the traffic, but it was the moral issues that concerned some citizens. In 1899, it was reported that the “gambling was becoming too common. Sons of respectable families make away with everything (cash or jewelry) they can lay their hands on without the knowledge of their parents and lose all they possess in the game.” The practice had spread from Rewari, where Hatim Mirza in 1898 complained of suicides and public disorder created by those who had lost large amounts of money. The problems did not abate, as the Colonial Government did not perceive it as a problem, as it had already been approved and licensed in principle in Calcutta in 1867. Members of the Kahar community were seen to be more prone to this, and there was even a case of a fakir murdering a prostitute to steal her jewelry for gambling. It was a matter of concern that the “Punjabi of all classes is notorious for this gambling spirit… and it is surely a good practice to nip new developments of this kind in the bud and not to wait until the full grown flower is set around with hard thorns which defy the would be plucker.”

However, in face of public protests, in the early 20th century, a committee of prominent citizens of Delhi was established to inquire into this. The members included Hakim Amjad khan, the elder brother of Ajmal Khan (the famous Unani physician and nationalist politician), and also Lala Jugal Kishore (who contributed the cause of education for girls and to the establishment of the Indraprastha School for Girls) and several others. In its report of January 1908, the committee pointed out that not only men but women too were becoming inveterate gamblers. The women would send money through the watermen or water women, then through servants, and finally, both desperate and emboldened, go out into the streets themselves. On being caught and disgraced, they commit suicide, or run away from home. The laxity of morals introduced by this habit was thus thought sufficient to be a disruptive technology!

**Telegraph revenue interests override moral concerns about the gambling trade**

It was strongly recommended that the practice should be declared illegal, but the administration was still unconvinced.
It was also hinted that the Government was hesitant to act as it earned thousands of rupees from the costs of the telegraph services (much like the price of internet access) used for gambling, was perhaps involved in the opium trade itself, and was reluctant to expose itself, and in any case, was taxing the bigwigs. Despite the social and community protests, the Government decided it was of no “pressing importance” and refused to ban it, and by 1910, the Opium Gambling Association was established to try and make the whole business “legal,” as a note to Sardar Sultan Singh, member, Legislative Council, Punjab reveals. The debate between Government revenue and the larger good, the same concerns obviously resonate and reverberate across centuries, despite the temporary inconvenience caused by social and political reforms.

An exchange of letters between Beadon (commissioner of Delhi and after whom Beadonpura suburbs are named) and Hailey (after whom Hailey Road is named) made the point that both opium eating and opium gambling are “admittedly evil, but people were determined to do both,” and the role of the Government should be to protect the interest of the Satta Bankers, meet the demand with supply, and thus legislate and provide for both (an argument not unfamiliar with the current debates on demand and supply reduction for various addictions, and the ambiguous stand of the rulers regarding both). This was consonant with the response to this gambling in Calcutta, where it was estimated that the Marwari businessman, Sir Sarupchand Hukumchand (Jain) conducted business on opium speculation worth Rs. 5 million on the day he opened his shop, and was worth Rs. 10 million by the year end (his son Hukum Chand Jain donated handsomely to setting up Lady Hardinge Medical College).

Emerging gambler stereotypes

Thus, by 1916, various ethnic stereotypes were coming into play. The owners of the gambling dens were almost invariably banias and mahajans, predominantly from the Rajputana states (Marwaris and Jains) who were “responsible for introducing gambling to Delhi which has formed a fruitful field,” while the Punjabis seemed to be at a high risk of developing addictions.

Interestingly, some efforts are made to check whether transmission of opium prices through the telegraph could be deemed illegal, but since this did not conflict with the rules of treason or safety of the state, it could not be interfered with (resonance with contemporary debates about regulating internet content is obvious). One Bhuni C Jain then offered to pay bulk rates of Rs. 10,000/year (then worth USD 130,000; now worth USD 2.4 million or Rs. 16.5 crores) for the telegraph to ensure that the information flow for the gambling could be unimpeded. It was finally banned in 1916 by extending the Bombay and Calcutta Acts to Delhi, and a few people were prosecuted. By 1922, it had again resurfaced, with even greater vigor, and an anonymous letter writer complained to the Chief Commissioner of Delhi that 300 shops scattered all over from Nai Sarak to Jama Masjid catered to the gamblers, and that a bribe of Rs. 800 was being paid every month to the sub-inspector’s wife (!); and one Khujra Yamin of Chandni Chowk entreated the authorities to suppress this evil once again.

TELECOMMUNICATION, TRADE, TECHNOLOGY, AND OTHER ADDICTIONS

Medical education, from Shaughnessy at the Calcutta Medical College and the Hukumchand family that contributed to Lady Hardinge Medical College, the telegraph which opened up the use of digital technology in business, and addictive behaviors linked to both the digital technology and opium trade that caused social unrest and moral outrage, all converged in the early 20th century in India. Speculative businesses, addiction, and the influence of riches earned through both these on the political and social life of our country continue to worry many honest citizens, especially when it extends to the young. Perhaps, starting at the very top, with the treatment of internet addiction will perhaps stabilize the whole country and lead us to peace and prosperity through the trickle-down effect, as predicted by most economic soothsayers. Let us lay the bets on it!

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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