

## Letter to the Editor

# Gambling and betting in India: an interplay of history, law and public health

Sir,

Gambling and betting in India have a long and intricate history, shaped by centuries of tradition, shifting legal frameworks, and deepening public health concerns.<sup>1</sup> From ancient games of chance to the advent of online platforms, these activities have evolved in tandem with India's political, cultural, and technological transformations. This legacy has produced a fragmented regulatory environment, marked by significant state-to-state variation and influenced by powerful financial interests. At the same time, gambling has emerged as a pressing public health issue, linked to addiction, indebtedness, family disruptions, and sometimes even suicide.<sup>2</sup> This article explores the historical, legal, economic, and medical dimensions of gambling and betting in India, emphasizing the need for policies that balance economic opportunities with social protection and public health safeguards.

## HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

The origins of gambling in India can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with games like dice and familiar formats such as "chopper" and "pachisi" deeply embedded in the culture. Epic tales such as the Mahabharata vividly illustrate the moral and social consequences of gambling, notably in the episode where the Pandavas lose their kingdom in a dice game. In the Mughal era, new forms such as cockfighting became popular, while British colonial rule introduced horse racing and cricket betting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The proliferation of gambling houses and the rise in associated crime during this era prompted the passage of the Public Gambling Act in 1867. This law sought to shut down public gambling spaces and houses, targeting animal fighting bets and public games but stopping short of distinguishing clearly between games of skill and games of chance—a legal ambiguity that has persisted ever since.<sup>3</sup>

After independence, the Public Gambling Act was retained and incorporated into the State List, giving states the authority to amend or enforce it as they saw fit. Over time, the courts clarified the difference between skill-based and chance-based games. Notably, in the R. M. D. Chamarbaugwala case, the Supreme Court ruled that games where skill predominates are permissible. The K. Satyanarayana case (1968) declared rummy a game of skill, while the K. R. Lakshmanan case (1996) similarly

legitimized horse race betting. Despite these clarifications, some states such as Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Telangana continue to ban even skill-based games like rummy, demonstrating the wide latitude states possess.<sup>4</sup>

Lotteries have followed a similarly complex path. The Lotteries Regulation Act of 1998 outlawed private lotteries, permitting only state-run games governed by individual state rules. Today, just thirteen states operate government lotteries. By contrast, casinos and slot machines remain the domain of only Goa, Sikkim, and Daman, where regulation is justified primarily on economic and tourism grounds, with stringent licensing requirements.<sup>5</sup>

## FANTASY SPORTS AND ONLINE GAMBLING

The past decade has seen a dramatic shift with the rise of online gambling and particularly fantasy sports, exploiting pre-internet legal loopholes and the ambiguous line between skill and chance. Fantasy sports platforms allow users to assemble virtual teams and compete for cash prizes, with real-world performance statistics dictating winners and losers. The sector's economic footprint is enormous: each international cricket match involving India can generate up to ₹1,500 crore in entry fees, while industry revenue stood at ₹6,800 crore in 2022 and is projected to exceed ₹25,000 crore by 2027. Major sporting events like IPL finals can command entry pools of ₹73.5 crore, with 1.5 crore participants and significant GST collections for the government. Annual financial flows in this domain now surpass ₹10 lakh crore.<sup>6</sup>

The industry's taxation and revenue model heavily favors the government. For instance, from a ₹500 fantasy contest pool among five participants, approximately ₹226.4 is collected as taxes. Platforms typically retain 15-30% of the pool, while winners face a 30% tax deducted at source. Key beneficiaries include the government, fantasy platform owners, celebrities and cricketers who serve as brand ambassadors, and sports authorities such as the BCCI and IPL franchises. Yet, despite the scale of participation and financial rewards, the probability of winning remains minuscule, estimated at just 0.00000667% for a mega-event. Nevertheless, aggressive advertising and celebrity endorsement have driven a user base of 18 crore, projected to reach 50 crores by 2027. Industry interests are now deeply enmeshed with those of major sports leagues, such that even the threat of a

boycott demonstrates the vital financial role played by these platforms.

## ADDICTION AND MEDICAL IMPACT

Gambling addiction is now firmly recognized by both the medical community and global health authorities as a behavioural disorder, included in diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 and ICD-11.<sup>7</sup> The symptoms—loss of impulse control, compulsive risk-seeking, repeated dopamine activation, and progressive self-destructive behaviour—are akin to those of substance addictions. Individuals may experience anxiety, depression, family disruption, and severe financial loss. In India, the health and social impacts are already stark. In Tamil Nadu alone, at least forty deaths by suicide over three years have been attributed to online betting.<sup>8</sup> Psychiatrists routinely treat cases of fantasy gaming addiction, including children lured into gambling through peer pressure and inadequate age verification.<sup>9</sup> The cycle of addiction is self-perpetuating, with winners motivated to play again to replicate success, and losers returning in an attempt to recover losses—usually resulting in greater financial harm over time. While platforms and their backers, including foreign investors and private equity, justify their economic role in terms of GDP contribution and employment, the public health and social costs are substantial.

## REGULATORY GAPS AND THE NATIONWIDE BAN

Despite clear evidence of harm, effective regulation has lagged behind, leaving room for illegal platforms to operate under the guise of legitimacy. Notorious examples like the Mahadev app, with reported daily revenues of ₹200 crore and links to high-profile personalities, highlights persistent enforcement challenges.<sup>10</sup> Efforts such as geofencing apps within certain states have proved only partly effective, as addicted users often circumvent restrictions.

In August 2025, the central government enacted the promotion and regulation of online gaming act, comprehensively banning all monetary online games regardless of whether they are classified as skill-based or chance-based. This central ban overrides all prior state-level distinctions, forcing the closure of fantasy and paid-entry gaming platforms and ending their association with sports sponsorships. The government pointed to the escalating public health crisis, youth harm, and links to crime as principal justifications for this sweeping measure.<sup>11</sup>

### *Beyond bans and recommendations*

The 2025 legislation acknowledges the risks of addiction and suicide posed by online money games but falls short in providing parallel support measures, such as addiction treatment programs or dedicated counselling services.

Without such support, outright bans may only drive affected individuals toward underground or illegal alternatives, exacerbating risks. The legislation leaves unresolved issues surrounding new monetization tactics such as microtransactions and loot boxes in online games, that blur the boundaries between social gaming and gambling. Furthermore, the centralization of regulatory power, bypassing state authority, may spark future federal disputes, especially in the absence of coordinated strategies.

For a more balanced and effective approach, the policy framework should incorporate mandatory and robust age verification mechanisms, along with tighter restrictions on advertising, particularly the use of celebrity endorsements that could influence vulnerable groups. It should also integrate anti-addiction warnings and sustained public awareness efforts to highlight the associated risks. Equally important is the expansion of access to treatment programs, suicide prevention resources and community support (like Gamblers anonymous), ensuring support for those already affected. Aligning Indian regulation with international best practices will require coordinated legal, medical, and educational engagement from a wide spectrum of stakeholders.

## CONCLUSION

Gambling and betting in India have evolved from ancient dice games to a multibillion-rupee online industry impacting every stratum of society. Legal definitions remain fluid, and regulatory control is inconsistently distributed. As gambling-related addiction rises—and with it documented harm to individuals and families—addressing this intersection of law, economics, public health, and politics will demand sustained reform, robust regulation, and interdisciplinary cooperation.

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