

Wooden Toy of Chennapatna, India: Beauty of Form & Socio-Cultural Reflection on the Characterization of Toy

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Abstract

Toy making is a part of almost every civilisation, and still, it is continuing as a living tradition in so many countries. Toys play an overall growth for a child. It developed a child mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally. Though it has started as a folk tradition or community-based craft, it has commercial and strong aesthetical value. This study focused on the Chennapatna toy from India. Chennapatna toy is an environment-friendly toy made with softwood, natural colour, and lacquer. This study critically analyses the beauty of the form of Chennapatna toys and also explore how this toy is made by natural substance. Like other art forms, toys also represent art, culture, religion, society, and civilisation. This study also critically analyses the socio-cultural issues, which are well reflected through this toy-making tradition.

Keywords: Aesthetical value, Craft, Environment-friendly, Social, Culture, Tradition, Toy-making.

Introduction

In India, the Indus valley civilisation is one of the earliest civilisations. We found lots of toys from this civilisation like mother goddess, dancing girl, votive figurine etc. These are just not toys; moreover, these represent art, culture, religion, and society. India is a country that has lots of diversity in tradition, culture, and religion that is reflected well in its toy-making tradition too. Channapatna toy-making tradition is one of the living traditions, which is continuing for the last three centuries. Channapatna is a small town, 60 km southwest of the main city of Bangalore, India. This place is very famous for a wooden toys, craftworks, and lacquerware. These toys are manufactured in the traditional workshop as well as in advance smallscale industries. Channapatna is also called "GombegalaOoru" in the local language Kannada, which means the town of toys.¹ The World Trade Organization protected this traditional craft with a geographical indication (GI) tag.²

Research Objective

This study identifies the Chennapatna toy-making tradition in the area, specifically.

- To discuss the simple display of form in this toy-making tradition.
- To identify the socio-cultural influence in character making in this tradition.
- To identify the medium of toy tradition, whether it's environmentally friendly or not.

¹ Palladwar, A. *Indian Toys Industry Doc Editing*, 2016.

² "GI Certificate for Channapatna Toys, Bidriware, Coorg Orange". *The Hindu*, 2006.

Literature Review

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral and Mr Antony William mentioned the method, materials, and the process of curving. This toy-making tradition uses ivory wood, but initially, they switched to rubber, cedar, and teak wood. This tradition has more than 200 years of history. They also mentioned in this study that invitee artists from Persia trained the local artisans of Chennapatna. They discuss the making process, machinery, raw materials, and craftsmanship.

Jananee Rangaswamy, Tarun Kumarb, and Kriti Bhallaa (2018) making a comparative analysis in their study on Chennapatna toys with PVC (Poly-Vinyl Chloride) toy which is made in China. According to their research, Chinnapatna toys are more environmentally friendly and less toxic than Chinese PVC toys. But these PVC toys dominate the market due to low cost and haze variation. On the other hand, wooden toys are unaffordable in rural areas due to their high cost and less variety in design.

R. Reshmi Munshi & Anitha M Manohar (2018) highlights manufacturing process, tools, and feasibility of forms which created through turning machine in this wooden toy-making tradition. They documented the complete manufacturing process, from the selection of wood to the final polishing.

Rashmi, R and Sadhana D. Kulloli (2020) develop textile motifs from the visual images of Chennapatna toys. Initially, they collect some original toys and images from internet sources. Then they finally select images from their collection. After that, they create a final combination of designs from selected images for digital printing.

Methodology

Only a qualitative approach is used in this study. This research is based on the beauty of form and the socio-cultural reflection on the toys of Chennapatna. This kind of art element does not measure by a quantitative approach. Author search-relevant

scholarly articles for the need to review literature in the following online databases: Google Scholar, Academia.edu, using the major keywords: Wooden toy, Chennapatna, India.

History of Chennapatna Toy

This toy was originated in the reign of Tipu Sultan. He invited artisans from Persia to train local artisans of Channapatna.³ Gradually this toy-making tradition has grown up, and it's continuing with the traditional process and materials. They started by carving toys out of ivory then switched to rubber, cedar, and teak.⁴ But this tradition changed its structure, form, and stylisation over time by diverse influences. Channapatna toy-making tradition goes in a different direction with the contribution of Bavas Mayan. Bhavas Mayan is known as the father of the Chinnapatna toy. His contribution to this tradition is unparalleled. He sacrifices his life for the development of this tradition.³ As early as 1892, hereditary artists called "Chitragars" were engaged in wood-turnery, which is the basis of lacquerware artistry".³ Bhavas Mayan went to Punjab for the study of lacquerware. After completing his study on lacquerware, he started experimentation for a period being. After that, he introduced the study of the craft at the Industrial School in Channapatna. He mechanised the craft through the power lathe. He invited all cast people for joining the course. Even he encouraged Muslims and scheduled cast members to join the course. The noticeable thing is he applied Japanese technology for toy making. He used mainly ivory wood, but rosewood and sandalwood also took place in his work.

3 Varghese, A. *Channapatna Craft - Complete Process and Demographics*, 2016.

4 Baral, Bibhudutta, and Antony William. "Channapatna Toys of Karnataka: The Art of Crafting Wood." *DSource*, http://www.dsource.in/sites/default/files/resource/channapatna-toys-karnataka/downloads/file/channapatna_toys_karnataka.pdf

Socio-Cultural Elements in Chennapatna Toy



Figure - 1 Couple



Figure - 2 Couple



Figure - 3 Couple



Figure - 4 Couple



Figure - 5 Couple



Figure - 6 Two Women



Figure - 7

In selecting subjects, artisans of Chennapatna choose huge variations like a human figure, animal figure, vehicle, cooking utensils, fruits & vegetables, etc. A keen observation of socio-cultural aspects reflects through the subject of the toy, especially, on a figurative toy. Most figurative toys (Figure- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 7) represent a particular society and culture. The caste system in India is originated in ancient times. In medieval, early-modern, and modern India various rulers transformed this system. In the southern part of India, most of the people followed the cast system very strongly. Though peoples from different cast belong to the same society, culturally, they are very different. Even a job also depends on the cast system. People can easily recognise their unique dressing sense because each cast has its unique style of dress and ornaments.

For example, figure:5 indicate a business class family. Most of the Indian businessman families are healthy and fatty. These characters are well reflected through the form, ornamentation, and dresses. On the other hand figure: 4 indicate a lower cast couple probably associated with farming job those are physically lean and strong. This socio-cultural issue well reflects through Chennapatna couple dolls. In Fig. 6, Two village women engaged with their daily household works. The dresses, ornaments, and the character of the toy represent particular society and culture. These kinds of socio-cultural reflections enhance the beauty of the Chennapatna toy.

Characteristic of Chennapatna Toy

The form is an important element when we analyse a toy characteristically. In this toy-making tradition, a strong minimalistic form makes these toys very simple, attractive, and aesthetically strong. The forms are geometrical; they mostly use spherical

and cylindrical forms. The artisans create a toy from a real or an imaginary source. They transfer shape from real reference (Fig. 8.b) to a simple geometrical form (Fig. 8.a) following the traditional toy-making process. Artisans shape the form of the toy almost with the help of a turning machine. It has some limitations because, in this machine, only spherical and cylindrical kinds of forms can be produced. Belongs to this kind of limitation, the artisan can produce the enormous design of toy from real sources. Artisans join very fewer numbers wooden pieces to make a complete toy. Most of the time, artisans maintain the basic mechanism of the real sources. For example, toys like trains, buses, bicycles can move through their wheels. They did not use any electrical mechanism in the toys.



Figure 8 a



Figure 8 b



Figure 9



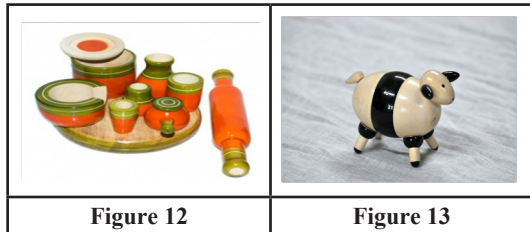
Figure 10



Figure 11

In terms of colour application, this toy-making tradition uses a very bright & vibrant colour. These kinds of colours attract children so much. Colours are mostly primary, secondary, black & white. Before applying colour to the toy, artisans prepare

colour sticks by mixing lacquer and vegetable colour. Toymakers are applying colour on a toy while the wooden block is still rotating on the lathe. At the time of rotation, the wooden block is quite hot, so the lacquer colour is easily fixed on the wooden surface.



The most important character of this tradition is natural elements. Wood, vegetable colour, lacquer, and glue are the only materials of the Chennapatna toy. On the other hand, PVC toys grasp the toy market because of their low cost and first production. These PVC toys are extremely harmful to the environment. Low qualities PVC is also harmful to a baby's health. "The process of disposal of PVC toys also releases energy, during the process of incineration, which is wasted but has tremendous potential for recovery. From literary sources, it is clear that many samples of low-cost PVC Toys contain larger amounts of toxic chemicals than permitted, which hurts children. All factors cumulatively show that PVC toys cause severe irreversible damage to the environment and human health. On the contrary, Channapatna toys are organic and have lesser environmental impacts and are potentially non-toxic." ⁵But Chennapatna toy is a completely biodegradable and environment-friendly product.

Conclusion

Chennapatna toy tradition is one of the oldest toy-making traditions in India. This tradition is well accepted because of its simple form, contrasting colour, skilled craftsmanship, and aesthetical content. Material wise these toys are completely environment-friendly. This study tries to analyse the toy tradition formalistically and socio-cultural

5 Rangaswamy, Jananee, et al. "A Comprehensive Life-Cycle Assessment of Locally Oriented Small-Scale Toy Industries: A Study of traditional Channapatna Toys as Against Low-cost PVC (Poly-Vinyl Chloride) Toys made in China." *Procedia CIRP*, vol. 69, 2018, pp. 487-492.

point of view. Some socio-political issues like the cast system, village life are directly reflected through this tradition. Simple mechanisms and high-class craftsmanship enhance the aesthetical quality of these toys. The observation power of artisans and execution of toys with the limitation is commendable. Creating different characters with simple forms and limited colour enhance the quality of the toy in the next label. For this reason, the Channapatna toy becomes an art object rather than a craft.

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