

Wooden Toys of India: Tradition, Craftsmanship and Sustainable Future

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Abstract—Wooden toys have played an essential role in the cultural, educational, and creative development of children across generations. This paper explores the historical evolution of wooden toys, their socio-cultural significance, the craftsmanship involved in their production, and the environmental advantages they offer in comparison to modern plastic alternatives.

The research paper offers the detailed analysis of how wooden toys are not just simple plaything but they are essential tools for the overall development of a child. Their role in promoting physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth has been recognized by educators, child psychologists, and parents alike. Through a focused analysis of Indian wooden toy industries, particularly in regions like Channapatna, Varanasi, and Kondapalli, the paper highlights how these toys are not only tools of play but also reflections of heritage, art, and sustainability.

Index Terms—Craftsmanship, Cultural heritage, Educational and cognitive development

I INTRODUCTION

Wooden toys are cherished for their simplicity, beauty, and cultural value. As concerns about sustainability grow, these eco-friendly toys are gaining renewed attention. Throughout history, wooden toys have not only entertained children but also helped shape their cognitive and motor development. In many cultures, they serve as tools for storytelling, cultural expression, and education. Unlike mass-produced plastic toys, wooden toys often reflect the artisan's creativity, regional identity, and traditional craftsmanship. This paper explores the journey of wooden toys through time—examining their history, cultural significance, craftsmanship, educational benefits, environmental impact, and the challenges and opportunities in the modern market.

II RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on secondary data (books, research paper, articles, newspapers etc) and qualitative method is used for collection of data.

Historical Background of Wooden Toys

Wooden toys have a rich and ancient history, serving as one of the earliest forms of playthings used by humans. Long before the invention of plastic or metal toys, civilizations across the world crafted simple yet imaginative toys out of wood to entertain and educate children. Archaeological findings from various parts of the globe provide evidence that wooden toys were prevalent in ancient societies, highlighting their deep-rooted connection to human culture and development. In ancient Egypt, wooden dolls with movable limbs and painted features have been found in children's tombs, symbolizing their role in both life and the afterlife. Similarly, in ancient Greece and Rome, children played with miniature wooden animals, chariots, and dolls. These toys were not only for amusement but also used to prepare children for adult responsibilities by imitating the world around them.

In the Indus Valley Civilization (around 2500 BCE), which is among the world's oldest urban civilizations, excavations in sites like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro have uncovered terracotta and wooden toy carts, animals with movable heads, and spinning tops. These findings suggest that even in prehistoric India, toy-making was a thoughtful and skilled practice. These toys were not simply leisure items—they also had educational and cultural value, helping children learn about farming, animals, transportation, and community life.

Wooden toys were also closely associated with folk traditions and festivals. For example, dolls and figurines used in South Indian "Bomma Golu" (a traditional display of dolls during Navaratri) are believed to be descendants of early wooden toys. These toys were not only handcrafted with great care

but also passed down from generation to generation as heirlooms.

Throughout history, wooden toys have served not only as recreational items but also as cultural carriers. They have reflected the materials, techniques, and stories of the societies that produced them. The historical journey of wooden toys demonstrates how deeply rooted they are in human civilization—celebrating the intersection of play, creativity, and tradition.

During the Mughal and later British colonial periods, wooden toys began to be influenced by Persian, Islamic, and Western styles. The introduction of tools such as the lathe enhanced the precision and detail in wooden toy production, especially in regions like Channapatna (Karnataka) and Kondapalli (Andhra Pradesh), which became renowned centers of wooden toy-making.

In the modern era, as interest in sustainable and eco-friendly products grows, there is a renewed appreciation for the legacy and craftsmanship of wooden toys. Their history is not just a record of play, but a testimony to the enduring creativity and values of diverse cultures.

Major Wooden Toy Manufacturing centres in India
India has a long-standing tradition of wooden toy-making, with several regions known for their unique styles, techniques, and cultural influences. These places are not only centers of craftsmanship but also reflections of India's rich heritage. The major hubs for wooden toy manufacturing include Channapatna in Karnataka, Kondapalli in Andhra Pradesh, Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, and Etikoppaka in Andhra Pradesh. Each of these places holds its distinct identity and style, shaped by local culture, resources, and artistic tradition.

1. Channapatna (Karnataka) – The "Toy Town of India"

Channapatna, a small town in the Ramanagara district of Karnataka, is famously known as the "Toy Town of India." The art of wooden toy-making here is centuries old and gained prominence during the reign of Tipu Sultan, who invited Persian artisans to train the local craftsmen. This led to the fusion of Indian techniques with Persian aesthetics.

The toys made in Channapatna are typically crafted from Hale wood, known for its softness and ease of

carving. These toys are produced using a traditional lathe-turning technique, and then coated with natural lacquer made from vegetable dyes, making them safe for children. Channapatna toys include spinning tops, rocking horses, rattles, dolls, and miniature kitchen sets.

In recent years, the Channapatna toy industry has faced challenges due to competition from plastic toys, but efforts from NGOs, the government, and designers have revitalized interest. The toys now feature modern designs while preserving traditional methods, helping local artisans find national and international markets.

2. Kondapalli (Andhra Pradesh) – The Mythological Model Makers

Kondapalli, located near Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, is another iconic toy-making center with a history that dates back over 400 years. The toys made here are called Kondapalli Bommalu and are traditionally associated with mythological themes, village life, and animals.

Artisans in Kondapalli use a soft, white wood known as 'Tella Poniki', found in the nearby forests. The toys are carved in parts, assembled, and then painted with bright natural colors. Common themes include scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and everyday rural activities like farming or cooking.

Kondapalli toys are especially popular during festivals like Sankranti and Navaratri, where they are used in decorative displays and rituals. However, due to urbanization and declining artisan numbers, this craft is endangered. Efforts are ongoing to revive the trade by introducing training programs, exhibitions, and GI (Geographical Indication) protection.

3. Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) – The Lacquer Legacy

Varanasi, one of the oldest living cities in the world, is also home to a unique wooden toy-making tradition. The toys from this region are famous for their polish work, where bright colors and glossy finishes are applied to finely carved wooden figures.

Wooden toy-making in Varanasi is a family-based craft, often practiced by generations of artisans. These toys include animal figurines, mythological characters, household miniatures, and decorative items used in temples and homes.

The artisans typically use Sheesham (Indian Rosewood) or Kadam wood, both known for their

durability and fine grain. The intricate detailing and finishing in Varanasi toys have made them popular as both children's toys and collectibles. The city's religious and spiritual influence often reflects in the designs, making them culturally rich and symbolically important.

4. Etikoppaka (Andhra Pradesh) – Eco-Friendly Artistry

Etikoppaka, a small village on the banks of the Varaha River in Andhra Pradesh, is renowned for its eco-friendly wooden toys made with natural dyes and softwood. The toys are also called Etikoppaka Bommalu and have been granted the GI (Geographical Indication) tag for their uniqueness.

The toys are made from 'Ankudu' wood, which is light and easy to shape. Artisans use natural dyes derived from seeds, bark, and vegetables, ensuring the toys are safe for children and environmentally sustainable. Typical products include rattles, spinning tops, figurines, and miniature household objects.

Etikoppaka toys are not only admired for their smooth lacquer finish and bright colors but also celebrated for being 100% eco-friendly. Today, they are exported globally as premium hand-crafted goods and have become symbols of sustainable Indian craftsmanship.

Traditional Techniques in Wooden Toy-Making: From Design to Finish

The process of making wooden toys begins with detailed hand-drawn sketches that guide the shaping of wood using tools like chisels, knives, or lathe machines—especially in areas famous for lacquer craftsmanship. After carving the desired form, artisans apply colors derived from natural sources such as vegetables, seeds, and minerals, although synthetic paints are sometimes used today. The final step involves lacquering, where a natural resin is applied to provide a glossy, polished look that enhances the toy's durability and appeal. Together, these steps highlight the precision, artistry, and eco-friendly charm of India's handmade wooden toys.

Educational and Developmental Value of Wooden Toys

Wooden toys are not just simple playthings—they are essential tools for the overall development of a child. Their role in promoting physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth has been recognized by educators, child psychologists, and parents alike.

Unlike modern electronic or plastic toys that often rely on noise, lights, or screens, wooden toys offer a tactile, sensory-rich experience that encourages hands-on interaction, active learning, and imaginative play.

One of the primary benefits of wooden toys is their impact on motor skill development. Toys such as building blocks, shape sorters, puzzles, and stacking rings require children to use their hands in precise ways. These activities strengthen fine motor skills, improve hand-eye coordination, and help develop muscle control. For younger children, gripping and manipulating wooden pieces helps them build foundational physical skills necessary for tasks such as writing, drawing, or buttoning clothes in later years.

Wooden toys also foster cognitive development by encouraging problem-solving, concentration, and critical thinking. Toys like shape-matching boards, pattern games, and logic puzzles challenge children to think independently and make decisions. They learn to observe patterns, recognize differences in size and shape, and understand cause-and-effect relationships. For example, when a child tries to fit a square block into a round hole, they engage in trial and error, an essential learning process that builds patience and reasoning skills.

Equally important is the role of wooden toys in stimulating creative and imaginative thinking. Many wooden toys represent real-life objects—such as kitchen sets, animal figurines, cars, or toolkits—that encourage pretend play. This kind of role-playing allows children to create stories, act out scenarios, and explore different roles in a safe and playful setting. It nurtures creativity, emotional expression, and even language development as they communicate their ideas and experiences through play.

Wooden toys also contribute to the development of social skills, particularly in group settings or during cooperative play. Toys like wooden food sets, dollhouses, or doctor kits invite children to share, take turns, and interact with others. Through this process, they learn valuable lessons about empathy, cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution. Such interactions are crucial for developing interpersonal skills that form the basis of healthy relationships later in life.

In contrast to many digital toys, which can often lead to overstimulation and passive engagement, wooden

toys provide a calm and focused play environment. Their simplicity encourages children to use their own ideas and creativity rather than being led by electronic instructions. The tactile nature of wood—its texture, weight, and natural warmth—also adds a sensory dimension to play, helping children develop a closer connection to the physical world.

Sustainability and Environmental Impact of Wooden Toys

Wooden toys offer a significant ecological advantage over plastic counterparts due to their use of eco-friendly materials. Crafted from renewable, biodegradable resources such as sustainably sourced or reclaimed wood, they have a much smaller carbon footprint. Their production process consumes less energy and generates less pollution, making them an environmentally responsible choice.

Another key aspect of sustainability is the durability and long lifespan of wooden toys. Unlike plastic toys that often break and contribute to landfill waste, wooden toys are robust and long-lasting. Many families pass them down through generations, which reduces the need for constant repurchasing and minimizes overall environmental impact. This quality makes them both cost-effective and eco-conscious.

In terms of health and safety, wooden toys are generally safer for children. They are usually treated with non-toxic, organic dyes or natural finishes that do not expose children to harmful chemicals such as BPA, phthalates, or heavy metals—commonly found in plastic toys. Their smooth surfaces and sturdy build further reduce choking and injury risks.

Altogether, wooden toys represent a sustainable, safe, and conscious alternative in the toy industry. They support a healthier planet and a safer environment for growing children, aligning with the increasing global shift toward eco-friendly and ethical consumer choices.

Challenges Faced by the Wooden Toy Industry

Despite their cultural and educational value, wooden toys face several significant challenges in today's competitive market. The most pressing issue is competition from plastic and electronic toys, which are mass-produced, cheaper, and often more visually attractive. These modern toys dominate urban markets, making it difficult for handmade wooden toys to sustain demand.

Another major challenge is the decline of traditional artisan communities. Younger generations are increasingly turning away from toy-making due to limited income, lack of job security, and minimal recognition. As a result, many traditional skills and techniques are at risk of disappearing.

There is also a lack of marketing and branding support for wooden toys. Most artisans do not have access to digital platforms or export opportunities, which restricts their reach to local markets only. Without effective branding, their products often fail to gain the visibility needed in competitive markets.

Lastly, environmental concerns such as deforestation and unsustainable wood sourcing pose a threat. Although wooden toys are eco-friendly, the raw material must be harvested responsibly to avoid ecological damage. Balancing traditional craftsmanship with sustainable practices is essential for the long-term survival of this heritage industry.

Promotion of Wooden Toys by the Indian Government

The Indian government has launched several initiatives to promote traditional wooden toys and support local artisans. Through the "Vocal for Local" and Atmanirbhar Bharat campaigns, it encourages the production and purchase of Indian-made toys. The Toycathon, a national-level competition, promotes innovation in culturally rooted and eco-friendly toy designs. Traditional toy-making regions like Channapatna and Etikoppaka have received Geographical Indication (GI) tags, helping preserve their heritage and boost recognition. The MSME Ministry supports artisans through schemes like SFURTI, offering skill development, financial aid, and market access. Additionally, the government organizes Indian Toy Fairs and promotes participation in international exhibitions to expand export opportunities. These efforts aim to revive traditional craftsmanship, strengthen rural economies, and make India a global hub for sustainable, culturally rich wooden toys. By combining tradition with modern support, the government is ensuring the survival and growth of India's wooden toy industry.

Conclusion: In conclusion, wooden toys are an integral part of India's cultural legacy, blending traditional craftsmanship with educational and ecological value. From the skilled hands of artisans emerge toys that are not only safe and durable but also stimulate creativity, learning, and sustainability.

Despite facing modern challenges like mass-produced plastic toys and declining artisan interest, the wooden toy industry continues to survive through government support, GI tags, and other initiatives from individuals and NGOs. Promoting these toys means preserving heritage, empowering rural artisans, and offering children a healthier and more meaningful way to play. With collective efforts from artisans, consumers, and policymakers, India's wooden toy tradition can be revived and positioned as a proud symbol of local art in global markets

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