

Dynamic Folk Toys

Sudarshan Khanna

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Book Review by Prof. Krishna Kumar

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Sudarshan Khanna has done a fascinating and unusual job. At a time when Indian toy manufacturing is making rapid strides towards wholesale dependency in ideas and designs, Khanna has put together his discoveries in the world of vernacular toys. Call them what you will "folk" "cottage" or "indigenous"; basically, one is talking about toys that transcend poverty. They are remarkably inexpensive even today and many of the toys that figure in this book cost a mere fifty paise a piece. You can't buy anything at this price these days, let alone something beautiful that works well, and combines hard work and the love for perfection. Last Diwali I bought a dancing doll (a little paper figure that revolves at a furious speed when an air current blown through a paper whistles hits it) for fifty paise from Chandni Chowk. My little son still plays with it. Its price mystifies me unless I see it as the economic dimension of that code which symbolises the complete doll - its stick, colors and the paper umbrella above the head. It is a cultural code, still intact despite the invasion of light machine guns and robots. Khanna's book is a grand occasion to remember and unravel that code.

Things matter; even trivial things, such as the one's we throw away. And they don't just matter, they have a life of their own, and are capable of providing immensely beautiful and touching experiences, like Hans Christian Anderson's tin soldier. This is the basic idea behind the code that folk toys represent. Since everything matters, nothing need ever be destroyed, only reincarnated. In this scheme of things, a slip of paper or a clip has many lives, so its value is not to be measured by what it costs, but what it is capable of doing in its many lives. Indeed, in this anti-economics, the cheaper a thing, the greater its value; and the value increases as it gets older and reused. A whole civilization was built around economizing along this line in our country, a civilization which made it possible for the poorest child to enjoy the right to play with a toy.

Sudarshan Khanna collected the material to prepare this book during his work-related travels. He teaches at the National Institute of Design, and once during his teaching he devised a course of study on how to combine materials to make the best use of their individual properties. To find examples of how combinations might enhance properties, he and his students looked around and found that folk toys precisely what they were talking about. He examined the *chidia* made of bamboo, stick, paper, string, and a square of sheet metal scrap. "When played on the ground the toy looks like an unusual but nondescript piece of construction, perhaps even an abstract sculptor. But when manipulated, it is transformed into a *chidia*; a flying, chirping bird." As he describes it, one knows he is describing the magic that takes place when one's normal supine self is hit by an act or object of imagination. It is magic not only because it is remote from the routine world, but rather because it belongs and still has a personality of its own. This, I feel, is what the modern Indian toy industrialist does not understand. He is after things that do not belong so he goes to Hong Kong, Singapore and occasionally New York and brings home inane toys he wants to sell to the neo-bourgeoisie of the Indian metropolis.

"India is one of the few countries in the world today with a living tradition of folk toys," says Khanna, and it is true to a certain extent. There is no doubt that the tradition is still living even if it is under great stress. If one goes by money value, the cottage toy industry can only be seen as a marginal activity. Indeed, the critical test of its capacity to survive is coming now. And not just traditional toys, but all traditional crafts are going to face this test. Can they survive alongside industrial development, much of which will be in the dependent mode - that is, dictated by the interests of the rich countries? The question covers a wide range of choices our country has to make in the matter of its development. These choices will determine what development will mean for us. In the realm of toys, development could mean the obliteration of folk toys and their makers, or it could mean a reincarnation of folk creativity in a system, which would provide to the toy maker both a chance to survive and the opportunity to experiment.

One of the four toy makers whose life sketches are given in the end told Khanna about the deal that his father had made with a foreigner. According to this deal, he "had to pass on all his information about toys to the person in exchange for an assured royalty." It is sad to realize that this is the compromise our culture must make to survive. This realization alone permits one to step out of the romance woven by the thirty pages of color photographs in this book. The drum cart, the paper snakes, the mystery toys - they all are romantic little dreams, condemned to evaporate at the slightest mention of the conjurer, the toy maker whose pale eyes show the hard life he leads. He has not raised his prices, for he does not want to disappoint his buyers. His transactions are directly with children, not with adults, and children often buy with small coins. One of the joys of childhood is to possess a coin, and then to find one day that you can actually buy something with it. Many things in this world have now gone beyond the buying power of a coin. The joy of buying a folk toy is that you don't need your parent's intervention to buy it.

Can things be different for the toy maker in the years to come? Khanna feels that the market for folk toys can expand if they are introduced as teaching aids in classrooms. "Toys demonstrating the principles of mass and gravity, friction, sound, centrifugal force and simple mechanics could even replace some of the expensive scientific equipment." Khanna's idea is definitely a sound one, for it envisages a new life for both the folk toy maker and our education system. If I curb my optimism a bit, it is only because I know that if folk toys, indeed any folk arts, are to be received in the Indian school, it will happen only after the school is radically restructured and its culture transformed.

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