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The Transition in the Design of Channapatna Toys

A comprehensive study on the evolution of design and manufacturing of Channapatna Toys, based on cultural shifts and consumer psychology.

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.
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Abstract - This research paper is a comprehensive documentation on the transition in design of Karnataka's Channapatna toys. Karnataka's Channapatna Toy Manufacturing Sector, which was also branded the Geographical Indication title in 2005, has been a prominent craft industry in India and continues to produce and export over 5 lakh pieces every year. This art form has been through 200 years of evolution and its designs are a form of timeline which represents a particular era. The primary designs had a hint of Persian influence as the craft originally originated in the Middle East and went through a series of adaptive changes to appeal to the Indian consumers. Every craft has a peak period and the Channapatna toys have had their share in the early 90's. In recent years, the craft went through a massive existential crisis and its revival involved several changes in its design. The craft has been adopted by several non-Governmental organisations and efforts have been made to preserve the craft by altering its design and exporting it to the United States, Canada and some European countries. Through the documentation of changes in design over the years, this paper is an attempt to analyse consumer mindsets, lifestyle and design preferences.

The Indian handicraft industry is a worldwide recognised industry that fosters small-scale enterprises in India and is known for its originality and versatility. The handicraft cluster in India employs over 15% of the country's manufacturing workforce and contributes 4% to the GDP. Karnataka's Channapatna Toy Manufacturing Sector is a locally renowned handicraft industry which manufactures eco-friendly, sustainable and economical toys. Channapatna toys are manufactured using locally available materials like ivory wood (*locally called Aale Mara)*, coloured with natural dyes prepared using turmeric powder, Indigo powder, Kumkum etc and polished using the leaves of Screw pine tree. *The products are made out of wood turning and colour is applied through tinted lac along with polish with Palmyra leaves while turning the wood piece on the lathe.* The old toy designs are often authentic to the native region and include products like dolls, animals, jigsaw puzzles, kitchen sets, telephones, play-horses, miniature boxes, spinning tops and several other products.

The history of these toys, in India, can be dated back to the time of Tipu Sultan (1780's), the ruler of Mysore. Sources say that Tipu Sultan received these dolls as a gift from a Persian Traveller and their beauty and craftsmanship fascinated the emperor to invite Persian artisans to his kingdom and train the local artisans in acquiring this toy making skill. The kingdom became a centre of toy manufacturing across the then famous Mysore State and Channapatna received its new name- *Gombegala Ooru (The town of toys).* The Mysore Wodeyar Dynasty further uplifted this handicraft by including Channapatna dolls in the lavish Mysore Dasara festival celebrations and from that point Channapatna toys became a symbol of solidarity in every Karnataka household. This art of toy making eventually grew popular across India and gained global recognition.

During the early 2000s, the toy business was on the verge of extinction due to frequent changes in consumer demands and the industry's inability to adapt to global changes. Chinese-made plastic toys, LEGO blocks, Jenga, and other toy makers from around the world threatened the very existence of the Channapatna Toy Sector. As raw resources grew more scarce, underpaid artisans began to migrate to other cities in search of other employment opportunities. The number of traditional craftspeople in Channapatna has decreased from over 3,500 in the late 1990s to only around 1,500 in 2020, as commerce has fallen.

During such a catastrophic period the Government and some Non-Governmental Organisations stepped in to rescue and preserve this century old craft. Their proposed solution included exporting the toys to other countries and catering to a new audience. Channapatna began exporting these toys to Western countries like the United States of America, Canada, Germany and some European countries and catering to their needs and demands. The transition in design has been beyond mere adaptation. The 'Woman with a pot' toy is now a 'Canadian Soldier' and the 'horses and hummingbirds' are now being replaced by 'pandas and pelicans'. The traditional, extravagant patterns and prints have been smoothed into minimalist lines. The high prices, heavy competition and

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lack of interest from the local consumers has forced this artform into a new path. Although this design-oriented change has brought profitable business to the industry and several activists call it a 'new look', the fear that the craft will merge into mediocrity bothers some localities.

From its Persian origin, to Dasara dolls, to household toys and now to Western influenced antiques, these toys have experienced a massive change in their design and studying these specifics will give us more insight on consumer mindsets and the dependence of a craft on its consumer.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The long-term goal of this research paper is to provide a comprehensive documentation of the transition in design of Channapatna toys over the past 200 years. The record of designs demonstrates how the art has evolved and changed over time and the circumstances which have influenced its changes. This in turn provides information on the consumers attitude, design preferences and how a craft has evolved with each passing era. This study can grow to become a significant part in forecasting the future designs of the Channapatna craft and draw a relation between the rate of change in design with respect to consumer preferences in the handicraft industry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature reviewed:

1. A Survey of Persian Handicraft: A Pictorial Introduction to the Contemporary Folk Arts and Art Crafts of Modern Iran. By Jay Gluck, Sumi Hiramoto Gluck
2. Handmade in India: A Geographic Encyclopaedia of Indian Handicrafts. By Aditi Ranjan and M P Ranjan
3. Wooden toys in India. Aggarwal, P.K., Rao, R.V. and Joshi, S.C.
4. An Analytical study of Wooden Handicraft Products- Global Market Trends and Challenges Sudha, Mrs N; Sing, Sumit Kumar; Koteswari, Bala.
5. International Journal of Sales & Marketing Management Research and Development (IJSMMRD)

In order to understand the evolution of Channapatna toys it is necessary to learn about its origin. Although its history of migration to India under the rule of Tipu Sultan is well established, understanding its essence and stance in Persia would help us get a clearer idea about the art in its initial form.

Woodcarving in Persia (present day Iran) has a long history, dating back to the days when basic tools were employed to carve wood. Naturally, the wood has been damaged and has lost its resistance owing to varying weather conditions and a limited lifespan. With advancement of time, woodturning became an effective method in exploring wood craft. Woodturning is one of the sorts of wooden handicrafts that has remained popular and progressing in this sector since antiquity.

The majority of Persian wooden handicrafts can be found in the country's forested areas and are exquisitely crafted through woodturning using white wood, walnut wood, alder wood, willow wood, and so on. The art of woodturning is a mix of machine rotational movements and symmetrical and horizontal lathes, which have today replaced traditional wooden tools with electric and metal tools, affecting designers' speed and comfort.

Body sculpting is a branch of Persian wooden handicrafts in which geometric volumes are used to design the general anatomy of the human body, birds and animals, and different methods are used to transfer the designs to wood and body.

With reference to the discussed Persian woodcraft, it is plausible that the first edition of Channapatna toys carried an integral part of Persian woodcraft and featured similar manufacturing processes like woodturning and design techniques like body sculpting.

Post the migration of the Persian woodcraft to Karnataka, under the influence of Tipu Sultan, the craft was taught to a group of artisans who belonged to the Chitragars community. These skilled craftsmen were referred to as Acharyas. They primarily worked on creating wooden masks, humans and animal figurines. These designs were initially crafted by turning wood manually and eventually the Acharyas advanced and learnt to use simple lathe machines. This was one of the initial phases of evolution for the Channapatna toys. The slow transition from geometric body sculpting to rounded masks and figurines throws light on the primary stages of evolution.

Channapatna toys experienced their second major breakthrough when they received royal patronage from the Mysore Wodeyar dynasty and were featured in the Mysore Dasara celebrations. The dolls became a culturally significant part of the society and every household in Karnataka wanted to add Channapatna dolls into their Dasara doll collections. This resulted in more culturally significant designs like the Dasavatharam set of dolls which featured the 10 avatars of Lord Vishnu and other designs like the Mysore Dasara Elephant, Figurines of Pandits and Acharyas and so on.

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Soon the craft, which was a symbol of royalty, became accessible to everyone and was no longer a simple, antique display piece. It was a token of joy among children and a decorative entity among adults. With the advent of good technology and machinery, new designs like Play horses, spinning tops, intricately designed boxes, jewellery and so on were introduced into the market.

The craft's peak season slowly began to subside and the threat to its existence forced the artform to adopt new designs to cater to its new clients- the export countries. The designs are now modified to simple toys like abacus beads, stacking rings, reindeers and so on. The fine detail and vibrant colours are dissolved to appear more subtle and elegant.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The mixed research approach, which includes both qualitative and quantitative parts of research, is used to achieve the goals given in this study. Primary sources such as interviews with craftsmen, and secondary sources such as statistical data and publications were referred to provide credibility to this work. An online questionnaire was drafted and a survey was conducted to better understand customer mindsets and design preferences. The data gathered through this hybrid methodology will be analysed in order to forecast the craft's future designs.

FINDINGS

Following the literature review and the analysis of the data gathered through interviews and questionnaires, this research has led to the following discoveries:

1. A comprehensive documentation of the various design changes undertaken by the Channapatna toys to arrive at their current form.

   The Channapatna toys have been through a series of design changes which has resulted in various versions of the craft. But, regardless of the multiple external factors, the sole raw materials and manufacturing techniques have not been majorly influenced. The woodturning method, the colour composition, colour imbibing process and polishing have all been retained to reflect the original style of manufacturing.

   On the other hand, the designs have undergone considerable changes. From basic, Persian inspired, geometric shapes to intricate designs and now to smooth lines, the art has witnessed several design changes. From being a symbol of royalty to growing to be a part of every household, the craft has lived several lifestyles. The change in design was often triggered by cultural irrelevance. These changes have positively helped the craft grow and shape into a better artform.
2. The consumer preferences with respect to the Channapatna toys and its future designs.

   To understand the consumer preference and forecast the future market of the Channapatna toys an interview with the craftsmen and survey involving people of various age groups was conducted. The popular toy design was found to be the Horse among the older generation (who fell into the age category of above 25 years old) and the spinning top was voted to be the popular toy design among the younger generation. Through the survey, it was also found that most of the individuals believe that the modernization of Channapatna toy designs is leading to the extinction of authentic designs and their revival involves introducing new locally relevant designs which attracts the younger audience.

Through these findings it is plausible to assume that the consumer preferences in a product's design, changes with the consumer's age and sociocultural factors affecting a particular generation.

DISCUSSION

The transition in design of the Channapatna Toys from the initial body sculpting figurines to well-structured models has been a long journey and it continues to branch into new paths. The craft has found home in places away from home and it continues to inspire millions of people around the world to create something beyond mediocrity. Although its original designs seem to be vanished, everything in this world undergoes change and it's interesting to witness the various spheres Channapatna toys have been through in the past two centuries and how they will mould themselves into the future.

The literature review, interview and the survey offered a deep insight on the consumer choices and attitude towards Channapatna toys. The responses to the questions "Do you think modernization of Channapatna toy designs is leading to extinction of authentic designs?" and "Which of the following design solutions would you recommend to enhance the sales of Channapatna toys?" intrigued my curiosity towards understanding consumers. Most of the respondents agreed that the modernisation of Channapatna toy designs was affecting the traditional toy designs but at the same time went for a change in the toy design to enhance the sales of the toys. Through this back-and-forth mindset, we can assume that the consumer is in favour of new designs to uplift the craft cluster but also prefers a hint of traditionality and authenticity.

The future of Channapatna toy designs appears to flow in the direction of modernisation. Through its past phases of evolution, it is reasonable to assume that the art form is flexible with change. The modifications undergone by this craft is a symbol

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of the change in lifestyle experienced by the society. For example, when Channapatna toys began manufacturing interior decor items on demand, it reflected the society's change in preferences from imported interiors to locally made, sustainable, eco-friendly interiors. Every design is a series of calculated, structured analysis and the future design of the Channapatna toys would include more educational entities, relatable cartoon characters and modernised user-friendly designs with traditional patterns.

CONCLUSION

Through this comprehensive research paper, I discovered that every art form has to go through a certain process of evolution to emerge as its best version. Documenting the various versions of a craft over the past 200 years has enlightened me about the importance of change and how it is a necessity to survive in this competitive world.

As the industry continues to inch towards extinction, several activists have stepped in to help protect the artisans and preserve the cultural heritage. 'Ummeya Women Handicrafts Association', a purely women-based organisation, is empowering women in the manufacturing and trade of this art and craft. 'Maya Track', yet another Bangalore-based NGO is actively involved in promoting the industry with its two active working units, training and employing nearly fifty people from Channapatna and surrounding villages. The Karnataka State government also introduced several schemes like the Vishwa scheme and constructed workplace cum retail stores to enable artisans to work in a hostile environment. Due to consistent efforts, many artisans who had migrated to other cities in search of employment have now returned to Channapatna as the industry gains momentum and economic importance.

Change is the only constant and for the Channapatna toy industry these design changes are the very ground for survival. The Channapatna toy industry has been through a rollercoaster ride to finally arrive at a stage where they're able to survive profitably through exports and client specific designs. Although a part of the craft is lost with every progressive change, it is done to preserve a bigger half of the craft. The future of Channapatna toys lies in the rate of adaptability the craft can exhibit and how the designs can capture the traditional essence in a modern outlook.

REFERENCES

The following books, journals and websites were referred during this research:

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7. *Home | Official website of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India*. (n.d.). Www.handicrafts.nic.in. http://www.handicrafts.nic.in/

SURVEY RESPONSES

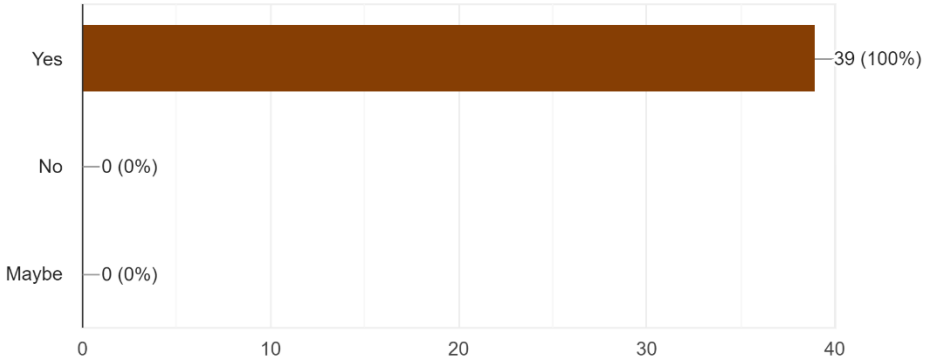
- A survey was conducted to analyse the consumer mindset of the Channapatna toys. The Questionnaire had basic questions about Channapatna toys.
- https://forms.gle/GP3RSwG1pc48yRsw7 - This URL can be used to access the questionnaire.
- The following responses were obtained (The names of the participants cannot be disclosed due to privacy concerns):

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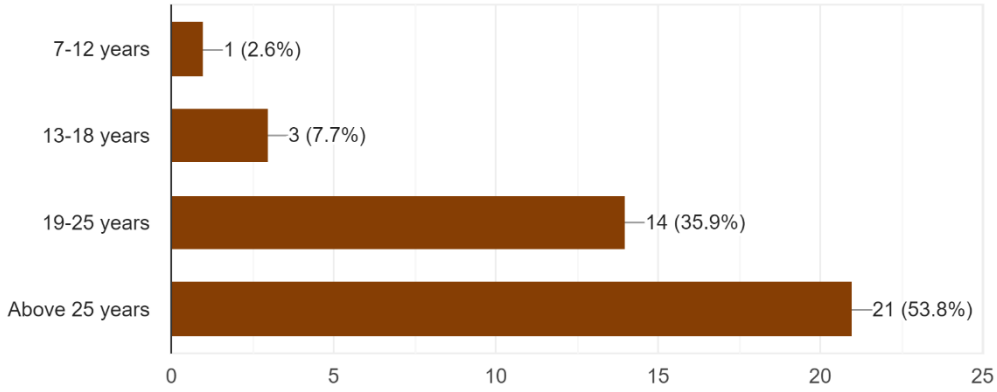
Have you ever heard of Channapatna Toys?

39 responses



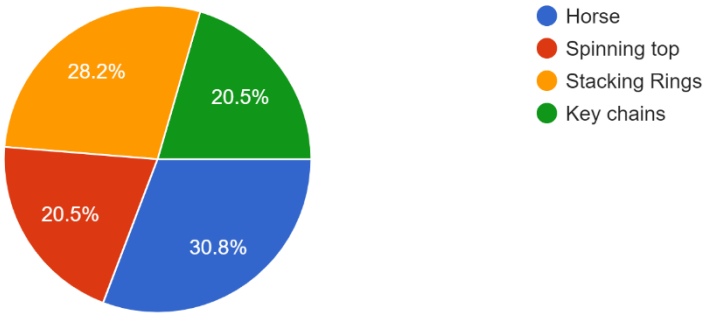
How old are you?

39 responses



According to you, which of the following toys was the most prominent Channapatna toy design?

39 responses

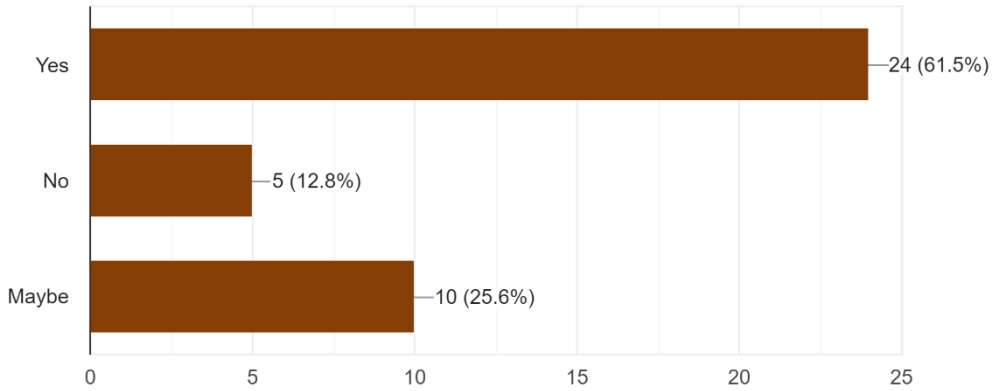


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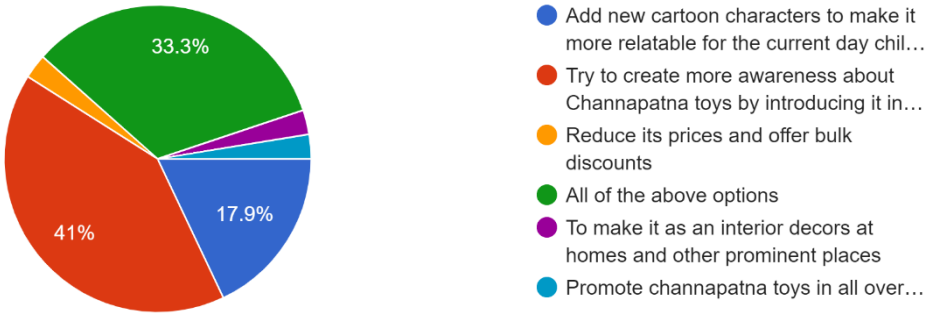
Do you think modernization of Channapatna toy designs is leading to extinction of authentic designs?

39 responses



Which of the following design solutions would you recommend to enhance the sales of Channapatna toys?

39 responses



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