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## Toys as the Seeds of Vision

*"With Toys I Play, With Toys I grow"*...There is a lot of research being done on Toys and the important role they play in the lives of children: Toys as Pacifiers, Toys as a means of fun and entertainment, Toys to help in the physical and mental development of the child. But Toys are also an heirloom, which are passed on from one generation to the next. They symbolize the aspirations of the society and the role models, which they would like to put forth for the children. It is in this context that I would like to look at toys.

Children are the same everywhere and yet it is interesting to find the subtle differences in the toys and games played by children belonging to different cultures. In India, a variety of cultures: tribal societies, traditional and ultra modern societies, Rural and Urban Societies live and co exist.

"What are the aspirations of these societies for their children? How does it reflect in the toys and games the children play?"

I was fascinated when I first came to know about the games and toys played by tribal children. There is an interesting ball game quite similar to football, which is played by the tribals of Andaman and Nicobar islands in India. There are two teams and each team tries to make goals...but with a major difference in the rules of the game. If the score of one team is 2 goals and that of the other team is 0, then *Both the teams together* try to even out the goals by scoring for the second team and so the game goes on..

How does it affect the mind of the child? Does it help the child to be less competitive and to be more caring and kind? Does it help the child realize that "The Joy of the game is in Playing and not in Winning?"

"With Toys I Play, with Toys I grow..and most importantly  
*With Toys I develop my attitude to Life.."*

A child's attitude to his surroundings, to the people and environment around him is shaped in these early years and has a lasting influence And therefore, I would like to look at toys not only as "children's products" but as important elements of influencing the future society.

The strong animal forms made by a wandering gypsy community, the rattle made from palm leaves in South India and other traditional toys of India speak of a close bond with nature. This gypsy community earns their livelihood from tin smithy work. Just by bending and forming scrap pieces of tin they are able to make wonderful animal forms. Similarly in South India, children weave palm leaves to make rattles. Mundane objects of daily use are felt, struck, folded, bent...and given a new life as a toy by the child. What is most remarkable is the very idea of picking up the available objects and materials and converting them into toys.

Does it help the children to be aware of their surroundings and to believe in their ability to be able to convert it with their imagination? Does it help the child to realize the beauty of using the least and making the best out of it?

“The Tree of Life” and “The Elephant and the Bird” were developed by Sudarshan Khanna, faculty of NID with the same motive of initiating a healthy respect for nature and of never underestimating the weak and the small. “The Tree of Life” is made from a tree twig, handmade paper and a seed. It requires very good dexterity to be able to rotate it, but it requires even more understanding and dexterity to be able to make it. Estimating the weight of the twig and seed with the length of the thread in order to balance it perfectly. Each toy needs to be made with individual care. No two seeds or twigs are similar and neither the resulting toys.

In “The elephant and the bird toy”, when one rotates the bird, the elephant is lifted up! One can explain the principle of centrifugal force with the help of this toy..but what is also important is the story, which follows it. Often, children as well as adults say that the elephant is stronger than the bird. But to their surprise they find that in this toy it is the weak bird, which lifts the elephant up! These toys are also very good examples of toys which participants enjoy making in the many toy-making workshops we conduct for children, parents and teachers from time to time.

In the modern times the important role played by industrially manufactured toys cannot be denied. As a designer one has to deal with the complexities of technological innovations, production set-ups and most importantly with market trends and economy.

The toy should attract the attention of the child in the shop, the toy should fulfill the aspirations of the buyer and engage the child in play, but the toy will also mould the mind of the child in the formative years of his life. After all, about 80% of the human brain is developed before the child is 3 years old!

We try to incorporate this aspect in the designing of toys often unconsciously. For example, while designing toys for mentally challenged children, I realized how important it was not to socially segregate children with special needs. The toys were designed so that in spite of helping in therapy and educational purpose, the most obvious criteria was to make it enjoyable for both, normal children and children with special needs, so that they feel like playing together.

“Save us All” designed by a Aniwat Rerkrai, a Thai designer during a creativity workshop at NID is made even more interesting by introducing the facet of saving human beings from the river! Soft toy human beings lying on the blue quilt are caught, stretched within the loop and placed out. The one who is able to manipulate fast and save the fastest is the winner of this game. In a market dominated by violent toys, this game loses none of its play and fun value by doing just the opposite!

As a toy designer, I also work closely with children and child development experts. One of my child development expert friend told me an interesting experience she had with a group of 4 year old kids playing the Cross and knot game. The children concentrated so much on completing their own row of cross/knot, that they did not realize that it is also important to stop the other player from completing his/her row of cross/knot? Are we teaching our children to selfishly push forward and at the same time to prevent the others from coming forward? Or are we only teaching our children the ways of survival in today’s highly competitive modern world?

All these are open-ended questions. Children today are influenced by a lot of media and means and yet toys, which shape attitudes of concern and kindness, respect for nature and a curious

and creative approach to life or otherwise do make a difference. But it is a fact that today's children are tomorrow's Future.

As Khalil Gibran the famous Persian poet says:

“ Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.....

..Their souls dwell in the house of to morrow, which you cannot visit..” and yet,

“You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.”

And although today cannot visit tomorrow, it is the direction in which the arrow is sent and the force with which it is sent that will determine the future!

All said and done, Toys go well beyond the parameters of commerce and entertainment for they contribute in the shaping of a child's mind- The various types of Toys are indeed seeds of various types of vision!