

## Simple folk toys so rich in value

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By Tan Hui Yee

There is something magical about sitting with a toy designer who loves to show more than tell.

Like a grungier, alternative Santa Claus, Mr Sudarshan Khanna, one of India's foremost authorities on folk and traditional toys, holds the audience rapt as he fishes toy after toy from two weathered shoeboxes. He passes them out to test how they take to his creations.

The adults may not admit it, but their delight shows.

Speaking to The Sunday Times while he was in Singapore for an innovation summit organised by social enterprise Qi Global last month, the 64-year-old education development consultant and retired professor from India's premier National Institute of Design regrets the meagre attention given to toys today.

They are not just playthings but an important 'educational and cultural resource' in every society, he says. This is especially true of indigenous toys which inspire discovery, teach scientific principles and even impart values.

He should know, having headed the International Toy Research Association, done research on folk toys for more than 30 years and authored three books on toy design, culture and creative education. He also travels around the world conducting toy and design workshops for both adults and children.

How do you teach a child about gentleness, for example? For this, he wields a supple strip of wood, pulled taut in a U-shape by red string bearing a paper cut-out of a fish. He squeezes the contraption ever so slightly. The paper fish takes a dive, before leaping out of an imaginary water line bounded by the two ends of the strip.

This Fish Acrobat will not 'dance' when handled roughly - something that curious kids will quickly understand and accept.

Through this, he says, children start to see why certain household objects need to be handled carefully. They will also learn why they need to be sensitive in their behaviour towards other people.

Folk toys are valuable because they can be replicated by children themselves, says Mr Khanna.

And children learn most when they can take the toy apart or build it from scratch by observing movement, experimenting with designs and making creative use of everyday materials.

'Nobody is there to tell them what mistakes they have made,' he says. Instead, driven by curiosity, they feel their way forward through trial and error.

The problem is that many parents think learning is more cerebral than tactile, and do not appreciate such 'homemade' toys. Worse, many time-strapped parents buy toys as novelties or status symbols without truly understanding their real value.

In the 1999 book *Toys And Tales With Everyday Materials*, which Mr Khanna co-authored with writers Gita Wolf and Anushka Ravishankar, he laid out basic guidelines to assess the value of a toy:

- 'What experiences does the toy offer in terms of creative participation or imaginative possibilities?'
- Another tip warns against choosing toys which form part of a specific context and need many ready-made accessories, as they are 'short-lived and geared towards consumerism'.
- 'Does the toy also bring in values you do not wish to endorse?'

Mr Khanna does not think that children will be unduly damaged by playing with such toys as Barbie dolls or commercial action figures, as he believes children are naturally perceptive. Kids, he says, gravitate towards toys with the most value even though it may not be apparent at first.

'A lot of children pretend they like some toy because it is the 'in' thing,' he says. But when left alone, they turn to toys which stimulate them most. This may not be the most expensive toy.



Mr Sudarshan Khanna with a toy he designed for an NGO in Germany which helps special needs children exercise through play, as well as toys he developed through traditional play. -- ST PHOTOS: LIM WUI LIANG

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This would bode well for folk toy production, if it were not already on its way to extinction.

When Mr Khanna started researching toys 30 years ago, local toy fairs in India were attended by over 100 craftsmen producing 30 to 40 different kinds of handmade toys.

These days, he finds no more than a handful of different varieties on display.

'All the others (have been) replaced by plastic cheap things,' he laments. The 'irreversible' damage is a global trend.

Most toys today are designed by European or North American conglomerates, made in China, and sold around the world. 'Local toys' these days are no more than cheap knockoffs of brand-name ones rather than clever concepts brought to life through local and more sustainable materials.

That children often end up with mass-produced toys 'is not the fault of parents', he stresses. With so many folk toy makers out of business or reduced to peddling novelties to tourists, most parents have nowhere to buy alternative toys.

The problem lies not with mass production, but with dominance.

'It's like McDonald's. It's a very nice joint... but it should not replace the local joint.'

Diversity is crucial in education, he says. 'This is an essential component of growth.' Hence, he suggests setting up toy museums or toy libraries to reinstate folk toys in people's consciousness. He is looking to start one such library with Qi Global in Singapore.

On his own, he is trying to make folk toys more widely available through Gammat, a firm he founded with a former student.

The Gujarat-based company sells eco-friendly toys designed to develop motor skills, promote heritage and culture, and teach science through play. The products, which include the Fish Acrobat, bear hallmarks of sophisticated design despite lacking the polish of mass-produced toys.

They are made of everyday materials such as cardboard, wood and string but, as far as Mr Khanna is concerned, their real value lies in what they represent.

'You buy toys because of the idea it contains, like a book. You don't buy a book because it has 100 pages. You buy it only because someone told you it is an interesting idea.'

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