

Design Resource

Wooden Toys of Varanasi

The Craft of Wooden Toy Making

by

Shivani Visen

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/wooden-toys-varanasi>

1. Introduction
2. Varanasi and the People
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Introduction

Abstract

Varanasi, being the cultural center of India is also rich in the craft of toy making and is gifted with a community of craftsman who have been practicing this craft and passing it on from one generation to other. But the scope of this project is limited to the craft of toy making in wood in Varanasi.

The information about the history of this craft, stories behind the toys and the present business model has been gathered by interviewing various craftsmen and their families, painters, salesmen, shopkeepers selling the toys and the local people of Varanasi.

Also, the sites of making the toys and selling them were also visited to document the whole process of toy making. Basic visual elements, colors, themes and cultural and religious motifs have been identified based on the research work.

Introduction

Since ages, mankind has been leaving its mark in various forms for the generations to come. It was started with the engravings and inscriptions on the walls of the caves where early men lived. At first, there were the drawings carved on the wall, reflecting their culture and daily activities like human form, their dressing style, celebrations, animals, hunting and also their gods which were depicted in the form of symbols like sun, moon or other natural powers.

After the development of tools, it took no time for those drawings to materialize into pieces of stones or wood roughly carved to exhibit forms, popular styles of clothing, occupation, social life etc. and after the invention of wheel, a sense of mobility was brought in even into the toys which could be pull along. A much refined example is marbles!

As India has a rich culture of storytelling through its toys, our ancestors have been preserving this culture by making toys which show a perspective of life. Not only does it help in educating the children about their culture, children also grow up playing with these toys, which creates a beautiful bonding them and their toys and nurtures them.

Its not by chance that in this age of industrialization and mass manufacturing, the handmade toys not only thrive but also make their presence felt in the local market. These toys have survived because they make a meaningful value addition in a household in terms of a toy. They are endowed with the natural beauty of a handcrafted object.

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Although, the market is overflowing with the modern plastic and metallic toys, the handcrafted toys are comparatively cheaper and also offer a visual treat to the children. Thus, this project aims at studying this art of toy making, understanding the reason and stories behind it, documenting the whole process and analyzing this craft in this modern era of technology.

History and Background

India has a rich legacy in toy-making. Historically Indian toys date back to 5000 years. The excavated toys and dolls found in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro included small carts, dancing woman, etc. A large variety of natural materials like rocks, sticks, clay etc. were used for making dolls and toys.

Earliest toys were created by the parents or sometimes by the children themselves, as an object of joy and playfulness. Gradually they started having more meaning added to them when they became a mirror of rural India, its folklore, legends and myths. And eventually toys had their own market where some artisans could practise this craft to earn a living. Thus, the incorporation of the tradition and culture of rural India became more evident through colourful toys depicting village scenes Like a women carrying water in the pots, women drawing out water from a well or men riding bullock-carts, elephants, etc.

Later on, many household articles were produced in miniature sizes including sets of toy cooking vessels in clay and wood. These toys were a girl's favourite collection whereas for boys, there were 'chakri', a fast moving paper fan, bow and arrow made out of sticks, etc.

Also, this craft has been through many influences depending upon the culture and happenings of an era which varied with the hindu, mughal and british rule. Indian craftsmen crafted numerous motifs and designs, intricate and beautiful in a variety of hand-crafted toys.

The religious influence has been enormous leading to a different set of toys altogether depicting stories from epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and also influenced by the tales of gods and goddesses, particularly Lord Krishna, Hanuman and find a rapid sale during the festive seasons. Slowly, similar influence also attracted toys inspired by the birth of Christ and made way for other religions in this craft. Initially, such toys were available only in local markets and fares but now they are also carried from one city to another for the purpose of selling.

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Varanasi and the People

Varanasi

Varanasi, said to be the oldest living city in the world, is inhabited on the left bank of the Ganges and is world famous for its Ghats. This holy city has been the seat of Aryan religion and philosophy. It was also a centre of arts, crafts, music and dances. It also flourished as a commercial and industrial centre famous for its muslin and silk fabrics, perfumes, ivory works, and sculpture as well as for wooden toys, bangles made of glass and brassware.

Varanasi is still known for lacquered toys and miniature utensils. The sets of birds, animals, orchestras, soldiers and dance ensembles are made in wood, gaily painted and packed in boxes. The toys can be found in all sizes and prices --- from a 1 inch mobile to a large 2 feet tall doll, and with prices ranging from Rs 10 upwards.

These toys are made in many centers in Varanasi by local craftsmen but for selling them, the popular sites are the Ghats and the galis near the river bank which attracts thousands of tourists everyday.

People

Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, even older than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together" as said by Mark Twain, its very befitting for Varanasi to be the centre of such ancient craft of toy making and toys which have thousands of mythical and religious stories behind them!

Besides Hinduism, Varanasi is also an important centre for Buddhism and Jainism. All the religions sustain peacefully here. The people of Varanasi are fun loving and relaxed. Nevertheless, they are very much attached to the culture of Varanasi and believe in carrying on the family traditions.

No different are the toy makers, who keep on increasing the range of their toys according to the changing taste of people and the market competition. The people of Varanasi celebrate all religions and their festivals. Also, the craft which was once only confined to Hindu myths and traditions has widely opened its arms to embrace other cultures, their myths and traditions in the form of the wooden toys.

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A boat at a ghat in Varanasi decorated with palm prints.

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Vendors sit on the steps at the Ghats and vend freely under open sky.

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Making Process

Procuring the wood

Wood logs are brought from near by areas and are stored generally outside the houses, in the narrow lanes. There are colonies of craftsmen in Kashmiri Ganj and Khojwa, Varanasi, who have been practicing this craft generation after generation.

A circular saw, embedded in a cemented platform facing the lane, is a very common feature in all the houses involved in this craft.

Hand Carving

The wood block as per the size of the toy to be made is cut from the log. The piece is cleaned and sanded to get a smooth surface. The design of the toy to be made is traced on this piece. Extra wood is chipped off according to the design. Fine strokes with the hammer are made on the chisel, to give shape to the wood piece. It is again smoothed with a file. Sometimes, the whole toy is carved out from a single piece of wood whereas in some cases, different body parts are carved separately and joined together with adhesive. Each wooden piece that is cut to make an item is subjected to a process of slow heating to draw out all moisture.

Painting

Carving is followed by painting. Bright and gaudy non toxic colors are used to paint the body. First, the toy is dipped in distemper. When it dries, it is neatly painted with duco white paint. Two such coats are applied followed by the last coat of lacquer to bring shine to the surface of the toys. In the process of painting, painting is done according to the colors of a sample toy sometimes with slight color variations. For fine work, brush made out of the hair from squirrel's tail is used for painting.

The painters have a basic sample piece for reference. For, ex- they have one basic sample for Rajasthani Elephant, which they use to paint a whole lot of toys. During the process of painting, they might make slight changes in color, pattern etc. in a whole lot. For special occasions like Christmas or other festivals, they are given the samples to refer.

They do not finish one piece at a time. They prepare one color and paint all the samples in a batch of toys with it and let it dry before they start with the next color. In one day, one painter finishes atleast 20 pieces.

Wood Turning

Woodturning involves using a lathe to create objects from wood. As the lathe turns, the wood remains in the same position and slowly is shaped by the operation of the lathe. Using this basic process, it is possible to create many different objects from wood, including some designs that are intricate in detail.

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It is of two types- Spindle turning, that involves using wood where the grain runs in the same direction as the lathe bed. Some examples are- table legs, legs for chairs, etc.

Second is faceplate turning in which the wood grain runs vertical to the rotation of the lathe. Some examples are- wooden platters, bowls, and charger plates.

Workshops are setup with turning machines powered by electricity. Around 5-10 craftsmen work together in a single workshop. Wooden logs cut in small pieces using a saw. After this, they are brought here and fit into the machine.

First, the machine peels off the outer rough skin to give a cylinder with smooth surface which is further used to give required shape with the help of skilled craftsmen.

Lacquering

Lacquering is done on a lathe. In the lac turning method, lac is applied in a dry state that is the lac stick is pressed against the woodenware to be lacquered. While the latter keeps revolving, the heat generated by friction softens the lac, making the colour stick to the surface of the wood. Lacquer ware toys are produced in this way. Thus, the craftsmen manipulate the stick where several colours are used.

Some of the lacquered pieces are painted with a brush. Non-toxic colors or acrylic based poster colors are used for this.

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Logs of wood stored outside the houses.



Circular saw are installed outside on the exterior walls of the houses.

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Wood blocks are cut to the required size.



A craftsman chiseling the wood.

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A painter applies the first coat of paint on the Russian dolls.



Batch of toys painted together in one color at a time.

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Lathe to turn the wooden blocks.



Wooden block is fit inside the Lathe machine.

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As turning begins, outer surface gets cleaned up.



Gradually, the block is given desired shape.

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Two pieces are brought together so as to fit them as accurately as possible.



The block is reduced to the shape throughout and not at a point.

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The block reduced to the final shape.



The wooden block is scraped to the closest possible form shape.

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Materials and Tools

The most common wood used for toy-making are:

- 'Safeda' or Eucalyptus is used for lathe machine applications
- 'Kirbil' is used for hand carving.
- 'Bhurkul' or 'Gulhar' wood or Benjamina is used for light-weight toys.
- 'Shisham' or Dalbergia has yellowish white wood.
- 'Gulhar' has thick fibres, hence is used for not so intricate carvings.
- 'Kaima' has thin fibres, hence is used for fine carving.
- 'Bhokul' wood was used in the past, but its not available anymore.

Some of these woods are procured from following areas in Varanasi:

- 'Gulhar' from Chauka Ghat
- 'Sagwan' from Sonapura
- 'Kaima' from Badau

Some of the common tools used are:

Rukhana, Baaki, Chaurasa, Batali, Berma (used for making hole), Basula (to peel off wood), Chausi- (to peel off), Aari (for sawing), Kholiyan (fine work tool), Reti (file for sanding).

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Various tools used for hand carving process of toy making.

A round blade tool used to shape surfaces in curve.

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Various tools used for chiseling.

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The Creators

The abode of the creators of the wooden toys deeply reflects their life. As one moves through the narrow twisted lanes of Varanasi, more and more houses are revealed with Indian motifs painted on their exterior walls. As their life revolves around creating the toys of gods & goddesses, kings & queens, mythological characters and typically Indian motifs, very aptly are colored their houses.

White walls with colorful paintings on them ooze out the traditional and cultural base of the craftsmen. These paintings are very inspirational in the sense that they show us the pride the craftsmen of Varanasi take in their craft. From the exterior walls to the interior walls of the kitchen, living room etc. are adorned with these beautiful paintings.

The paintings on the walls are very similar to the toys these craftsmen create. For example men riding on an elephant, parrots, toys of gods, esp. Ganesh, Hanuman, etc.

The figures of gods and goddesses painted on the walls, doors and even on the water tank, contributes a lot to the artistic environment in Varanasi and leads to an expression in the forms of the craft practiced by the craftsmen here. Such an environment builds stage not only for the craftsmen but also for the tourists who get lured by the beauty of the wooden toys.

Ghats are unique sites in themselves as they host multiple activities at a time at the same place. People come here to pray, relax and have a boat ride along the Ghats. Other activities happening here range from vending, Yoga, playing Cricket, Kite flying and sometimes classical music performances.

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The exterior walls of a craftsman's house painted with Indian motifs.



Motif 'Kalash' with banana leaves in it.

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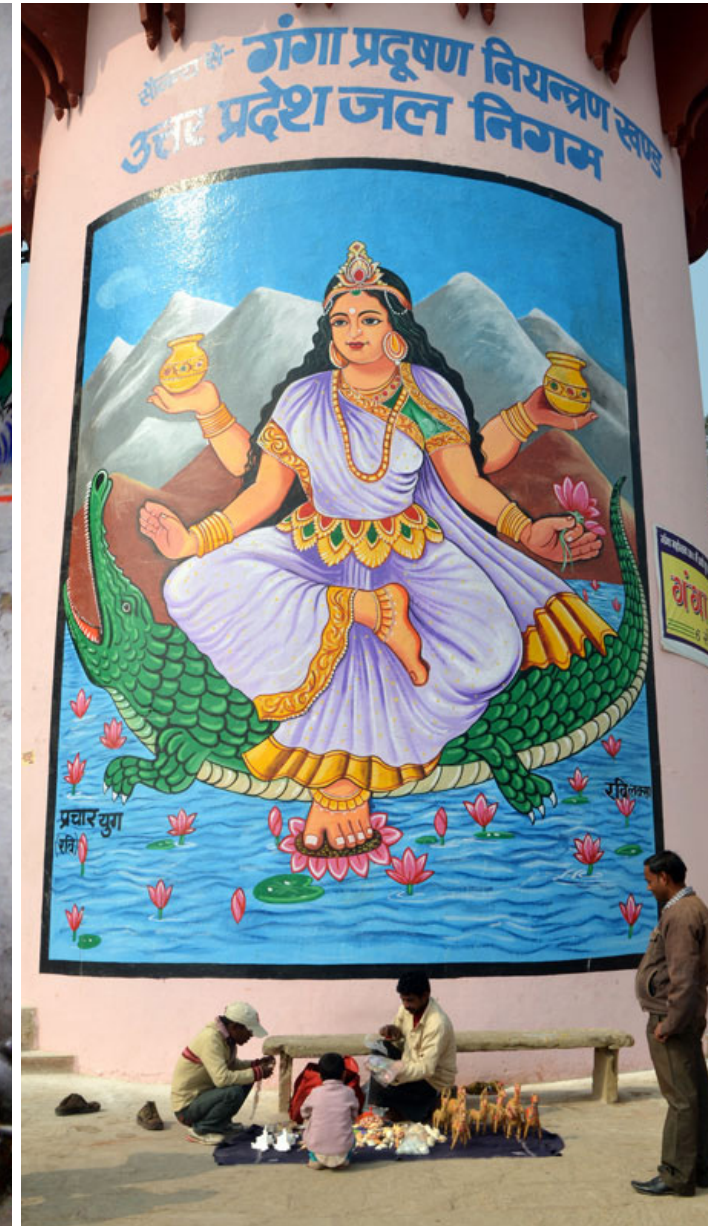
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Motif elephant with its rider called 'Mahawat'.



A craftsmen selling wooden toys at a Ghat in Varanasi. behind him is a painting of goddess Ganga.

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Narrow lanes inside the craftsmen's colonies.



Prayer site at Dashasamedh Ghat



A girl selling toys at the Ghat steps.

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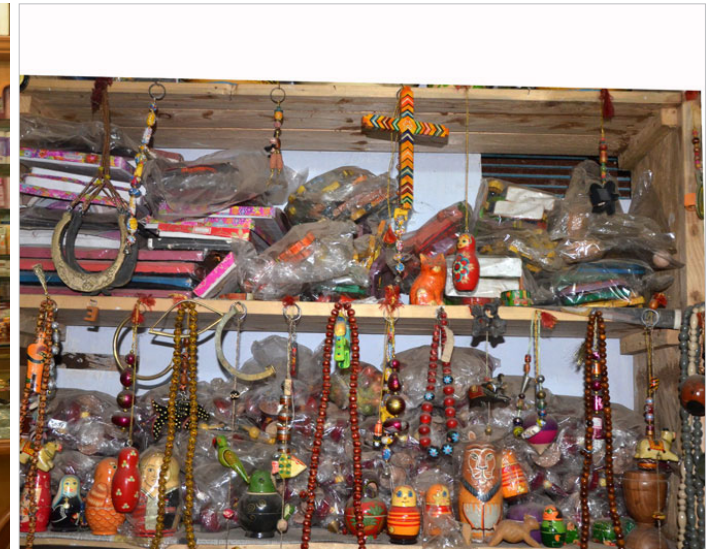
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Shopping lanes inside the famous Galis or narrow lanes of Varanasi close to the Ghats.



Wooden toys and prayer beads, etc. on a shop window.

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Narrow lanes are a mini city in themselves.



Prayer items are another kind of objects sold in abundance.

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Shop selling wooden Russian dolls imitating numerous characters from a sailor to Indian woman to penguin etc.



Russian dolls imitating owl Jesus Christ penguin Indian woman cock Santa Claus etc.



Shelves heaped with toys.



Toys come from all aspects of life like rickshaw animals snake star or anything imaginable.

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Plastic, clay and wooden toys co-exist in the market and have a value of their own depending upon the buyers choice.

Wooden toy with an attached handle.

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A vendor selling toys for children.



Toys are sold along with the postcards having images of gods and goddesses.

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Theme of Toys

The toys studied can be classified into following categories- religious, cultural, animals & birds, and traditional and modern toys.

All these themes have toys treated in a different way—for example—religious toys are generally 2 dimensional, hand carved, and painted gaudily. They exhibit Indian motifs and patterns. These toys also tell mythological and religious stories of their time.

The cultural theme based toys shows the classes of society, the daily lifestyle and activity of the people in rural India and also some profession which were popular in ancient India. Some examples are- women drawing water from the well, men wrestling in 'Akhada' or the wrestling ground.

Whereas, the modern toys are generally 3 dimensional, made by turning and have modern patterns and themes.



Religious



Cultural



Animals and Birds



Traditional and Modern

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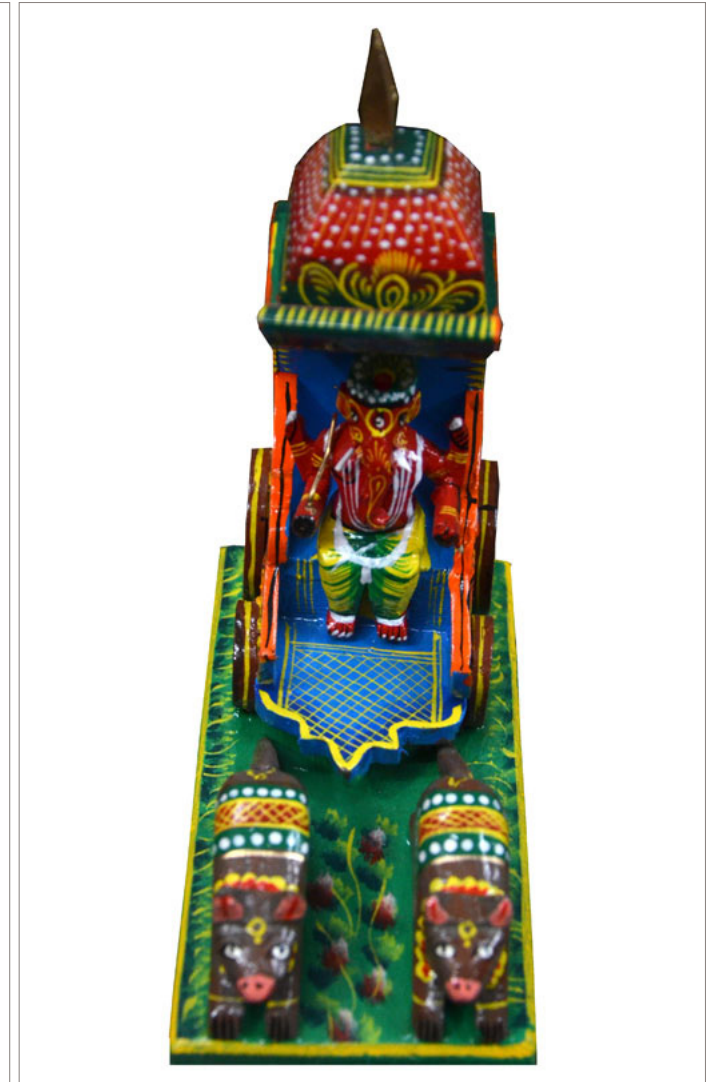
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Religious



A toy showing Three-eyed Ganesha called Triyambakam: Lord Ganesha riding a chariot. a combination of religious and abstract form.

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Lord Ganesha relaxing on a lotus flower floating on a pool of water.

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A pull of strings gives an up & down motion to the carrier.



Toy carved in raw wood and different parts are assembled together.

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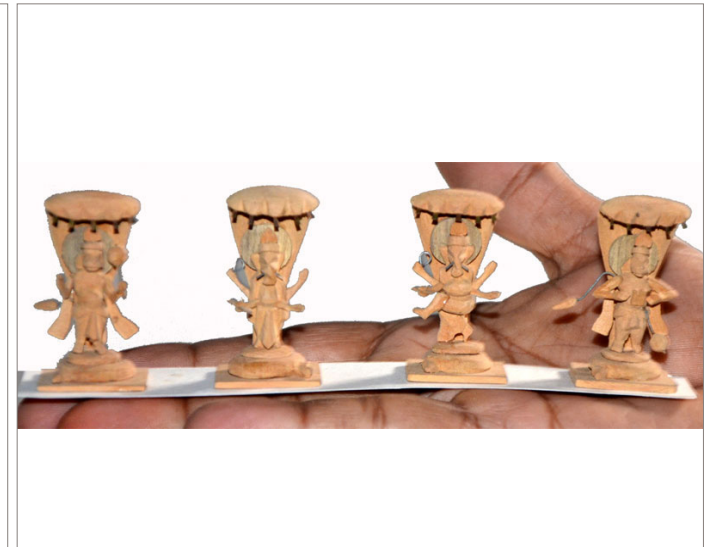
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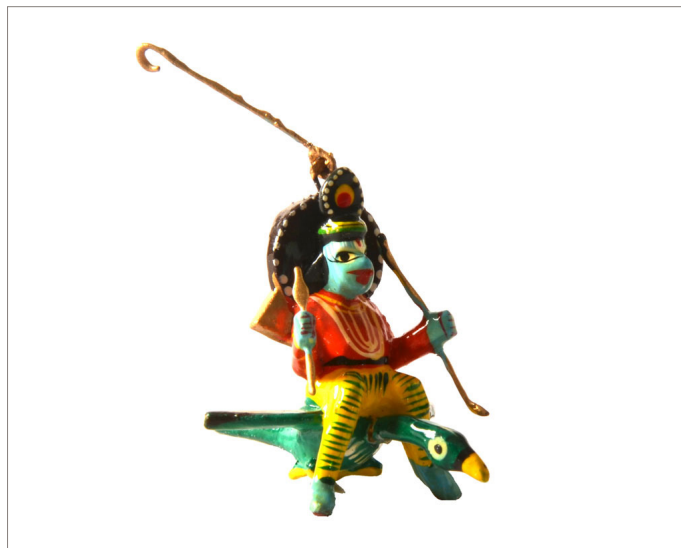
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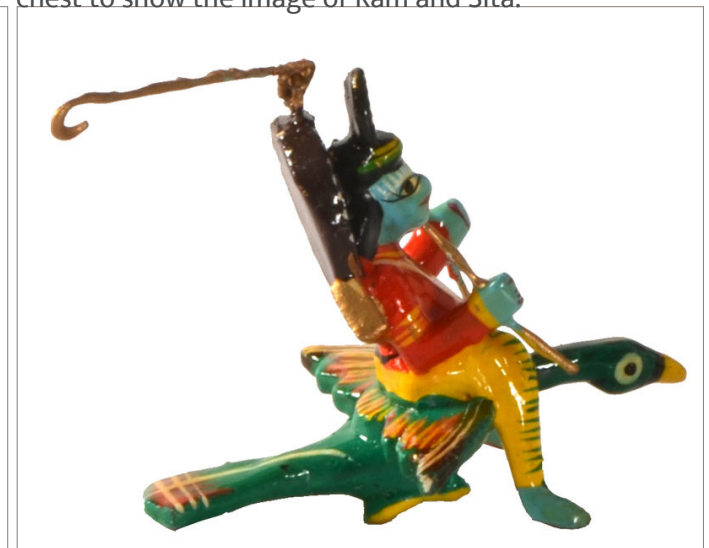
Lord Ganesha in sitting posture.



L to R: Lord Hanuman standing, Lord Ganesha standing, Lord Ganesha dancing, Lord Hanuman tearing off his chest to show the image of Ram and Sita.



Krishna flying on his carrier, a very large bird called Garun.



Side view: the carrier have to be bigger in size than the gods they carry.

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The Craft of Wooden Toy Making

by

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IDC, IIT Bombay

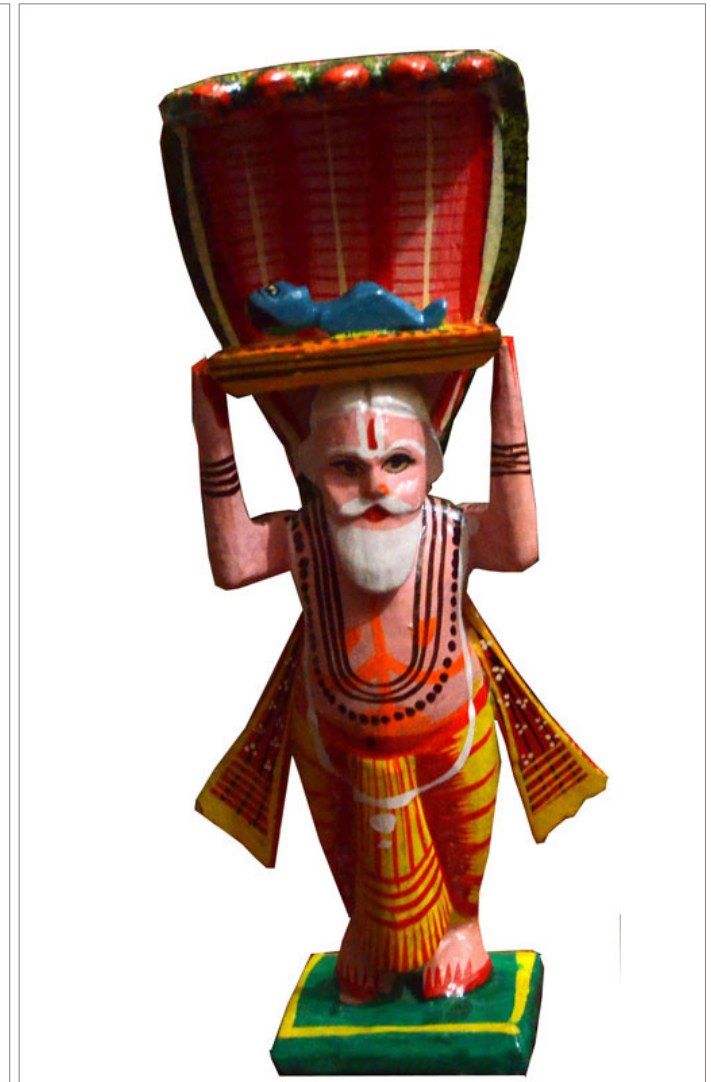
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Vasudev ji carrying his son Krishna safely to Gokul.



Vasudev ji carrying his son Krishna safely to Gokul (2).

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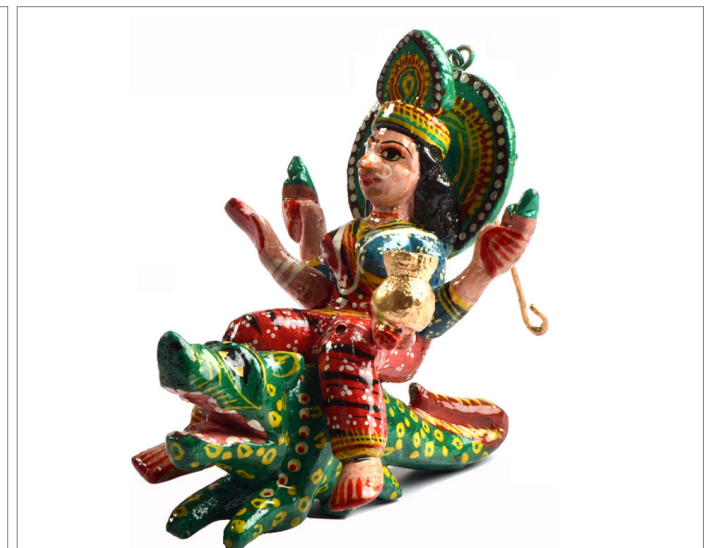
avatars: Ten different incarnations of Lord Vishnu on earth to kill the evil and save peace. (Tenth avatar Kalki, not born yet)



Lord Shiva flying on a huge bird.



Top View: Lord Shiva flying on a huge bird.



Goddesses Ganga riding on a crocodile, her carrier.

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Lord Rama, his wife Sita, his brother Laxman and his ardent devotee Lord Hanuman.



A court scene showing Lord Rama, Sita, Laxman and Hanuman, after returning back from the exile.



Raavan in kneeled down position .



Raavan with 11th Rudra on top of his head.

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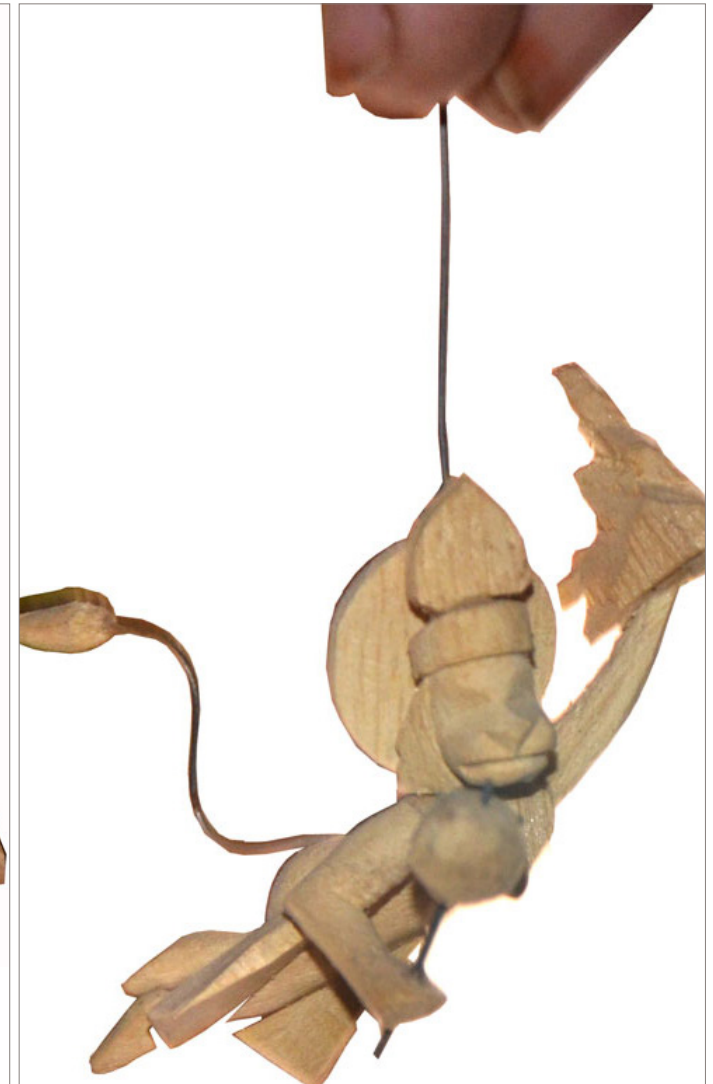
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Lord Hanuman carrying Sumedh Parvat (mountain).



Lord Hanuman carrying Sumedh Parvat (mountain).

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Lord Rama marrying Sita after breaking the 'unmovable' bow of Lord Parshuram.



L to R: Jesus Christ, a court scene depicting goddess Ganges jetting out of Lord Shiva's hair.



Lord Krishna stealing the clothes of girls bathing in the river.



Goddess Kali.

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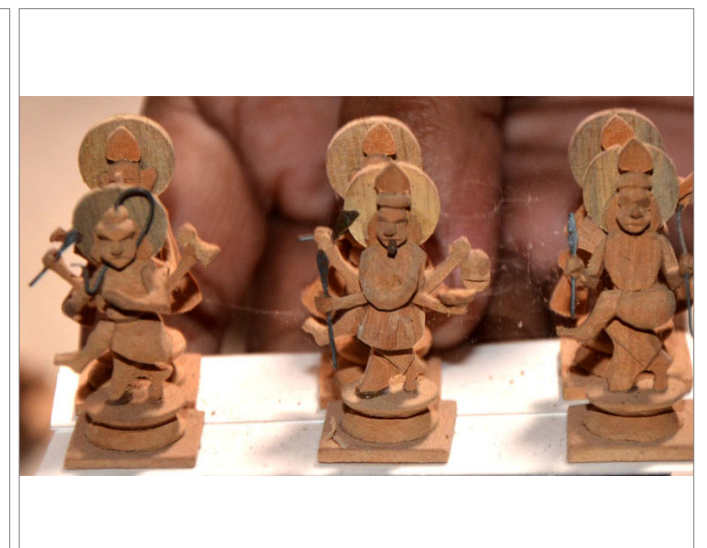
Lord Narsimha: half human, half lion.



Three wise men visiting Jesus Christ at his birth.



Lord Hanuman sitting in the court.



Goddess Kali fighting the devil.

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Cultural

One gets to see the real culture and tradition of India in its villages. Many activities like farming, drawing water from a well, bullock carts, etc. are still thriving in the rural part of the country. Thus, the toys made on this theme primarily show the culture of the rural India which consequently affects the clothing style, patterns, colors, etc. shown in the toys by the craftsmen.



Bablas stored at the house of the craftsmen.



Welcome to India:: The Air India mascot made in wood.

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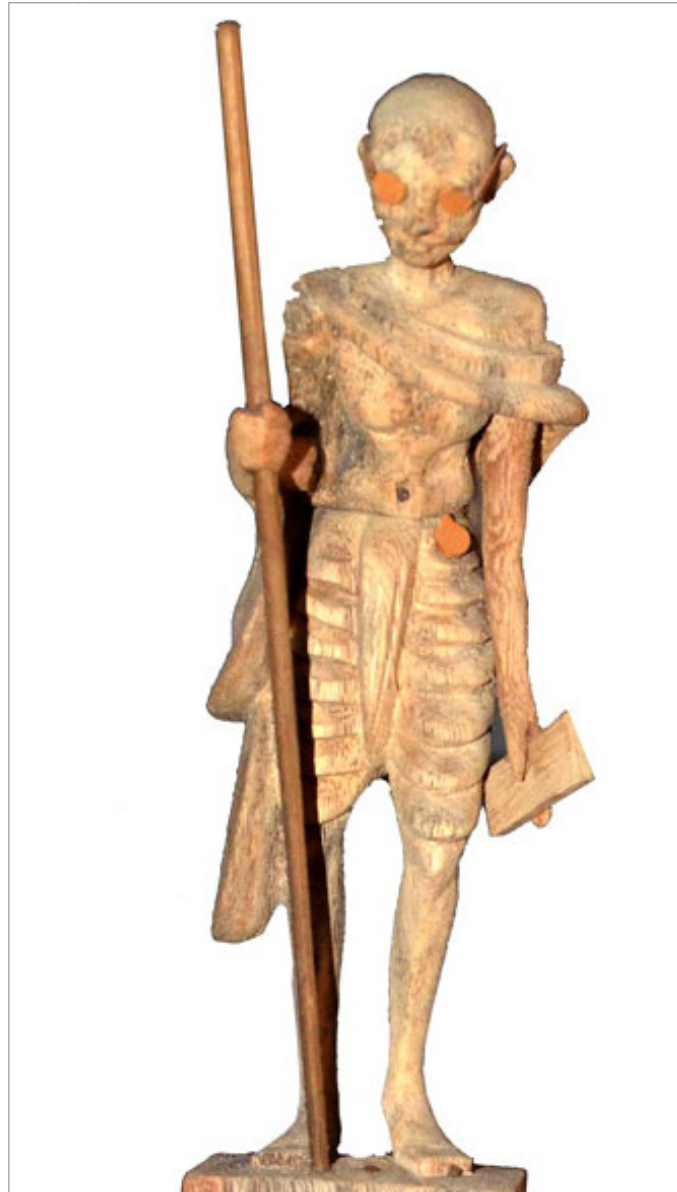
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Mahatma Gandhi.



Hunting troop on an elephant and horses.



Women drawing water from the well.

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A man riding a bullock-cart.



A boat being guided by an elephant at one end and a bird at the other end.



Wrestlers exercising in 'Akhadas' or wrestling ground.



A man and a woman rowing a boat A tiger and a leopard attacking an elephant from front and rear.

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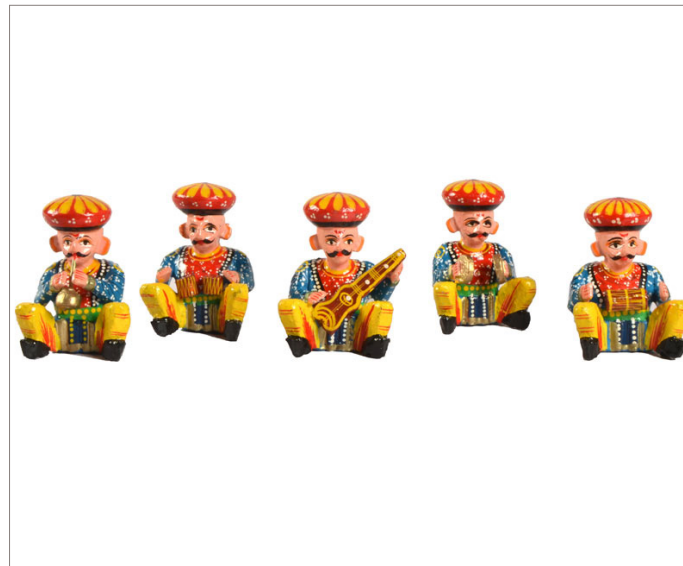
<http://www.dsource.in/resource/wooden-toys-varanasi/theme-toys/cultural>



A royal family member riding an elephant with the 'Mahawat'.



An rural Indian couple.



A set of Balblas playing different musical instruments.



An elephant fighting a tiger.

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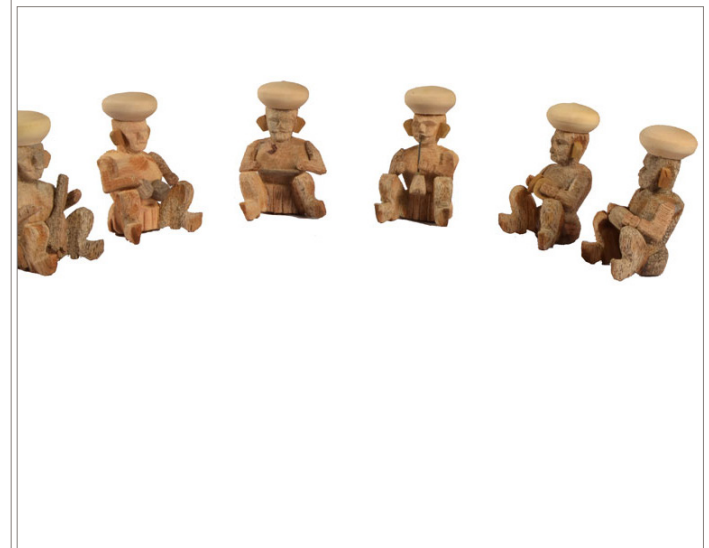
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The dacoits with their guns.



Some more court dancers and musicians stacked on the An unfinished set of Babla shelves.

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Animals and Birds

Animals play a very important role in Indian legends and myths. There are many stories of kings and queens to support the loyalty of their animals. This has made some animals appear a lot in the toy form.

Also, as craftsmen experiment with their craft, they bring in more subjects to deal with. Therefore, many others forms of life, like lizards, fishes etc. have also found their place in this craft.



A beautifully decorated elephant.



A camel made in wood.

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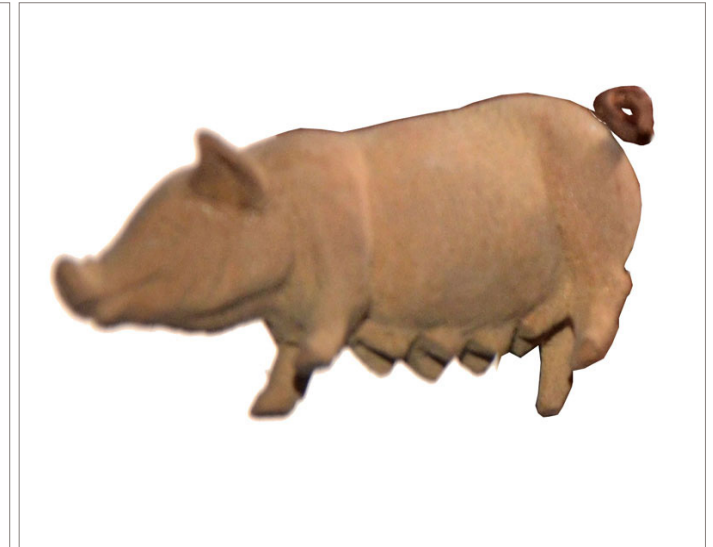
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A decorated elephant.



A female pig.



A frog sitting on a tree leaf.



A pair of horses.

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A horse head.



A young calf.



An antelope showing Andhra Pradesh toy making style.



An elephant toy made out of coconut fibers.

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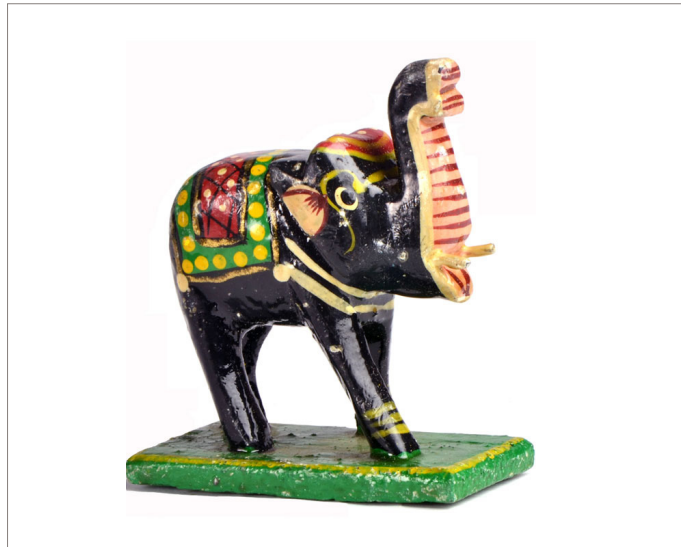
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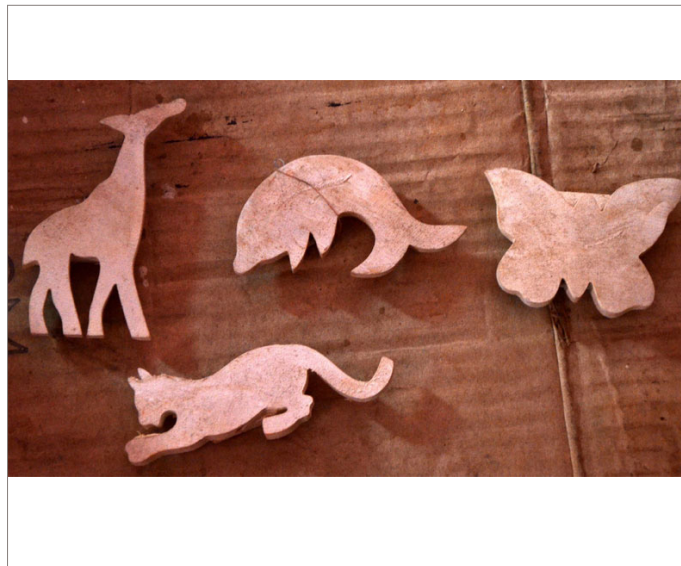
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An elephant screeching out.



Blue cow and horse.



Animals, and other life forms cut out of wood.



Camel and Elephant.

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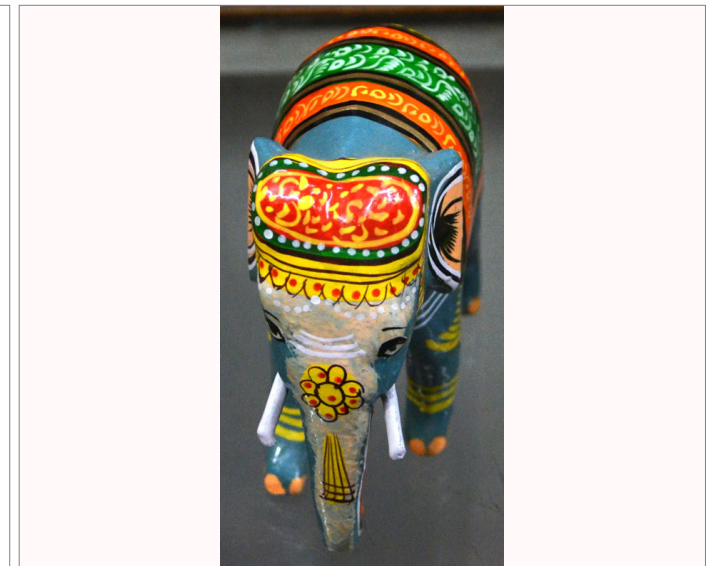
Camel and Elephant.



Cock.



A camel made out of coconut fibers.



An elephant made in wood.

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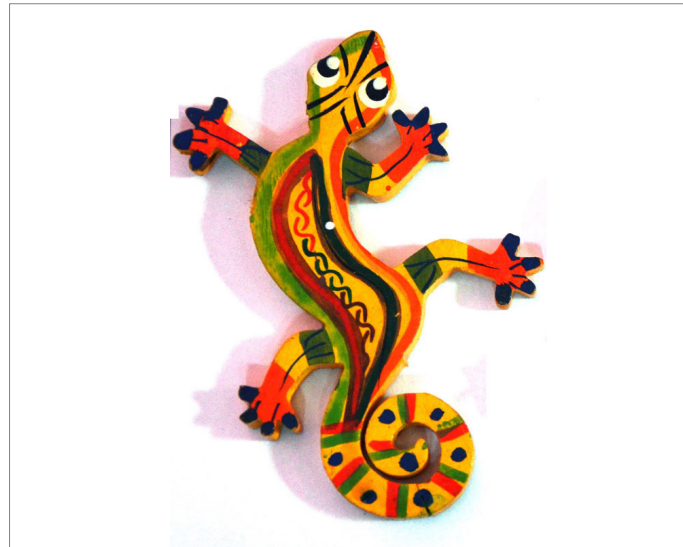
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Lizard.



Cow and Horse.



Cows.



Dolphin.

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Elephants.



Fish.



Horses.



Lizard(2).

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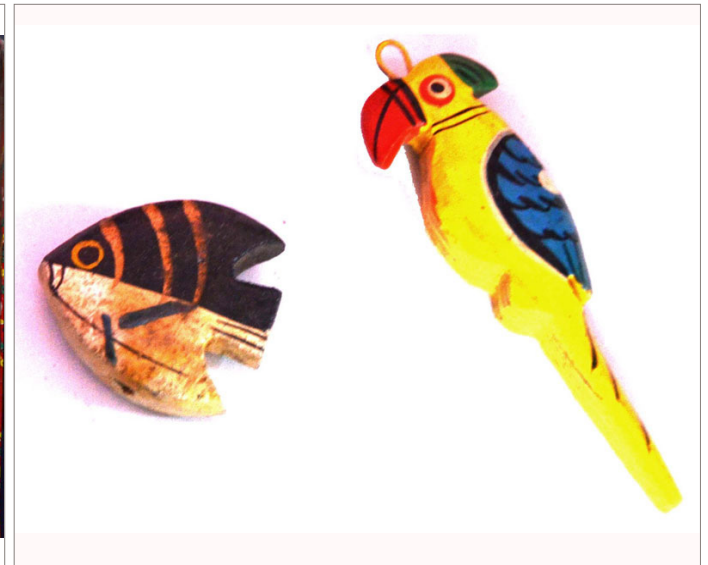
Maina.



Mice.



Miniature birds packed in a box.



Miniature fish and parrot.

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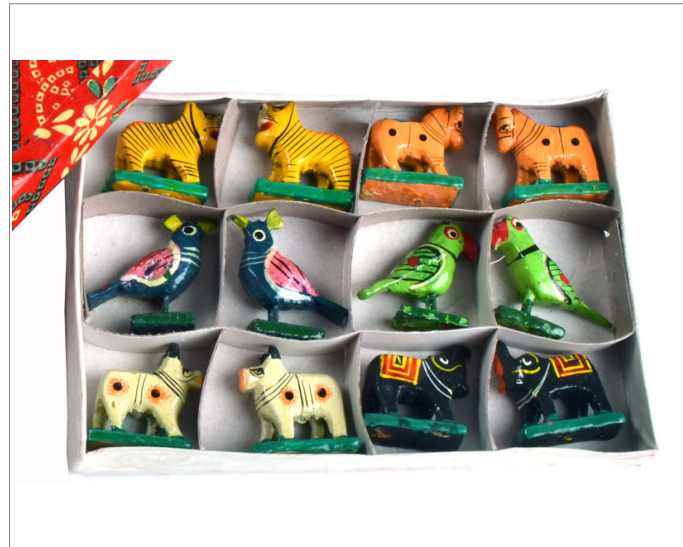
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Miniature toys packed in a box.



Miniature toys packed in a box (2).

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Parrots.



Puzzle rabbit.

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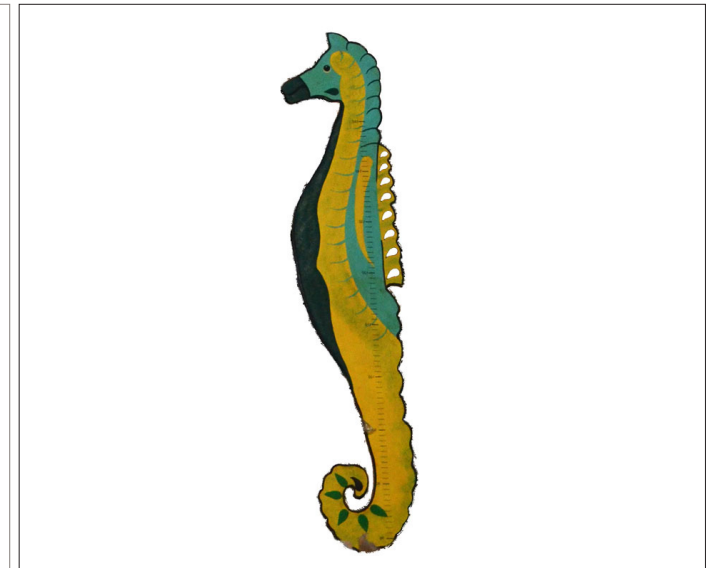
Puzzle Tiger.



Rhinoceros and Camel.



Three cats 3 Dimensional.



Sea horse.

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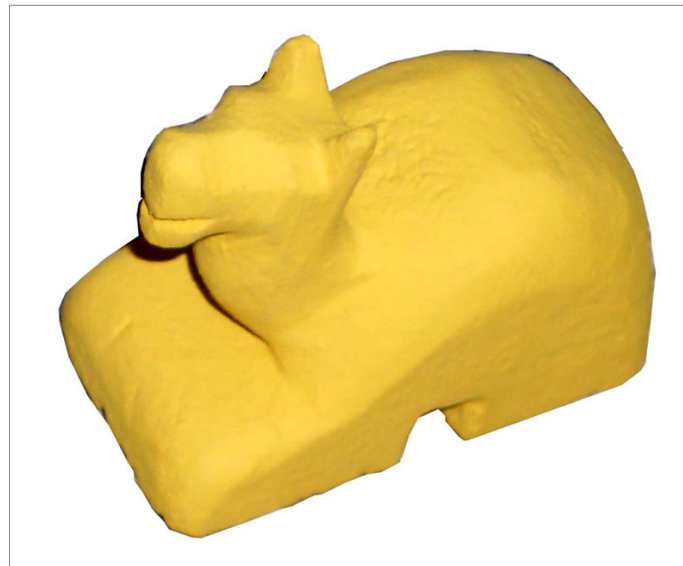
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Donkey.



Two horned Rhinoceros.



Sitting Deer dipped in distemper.



Three cats 2 Dimensional.

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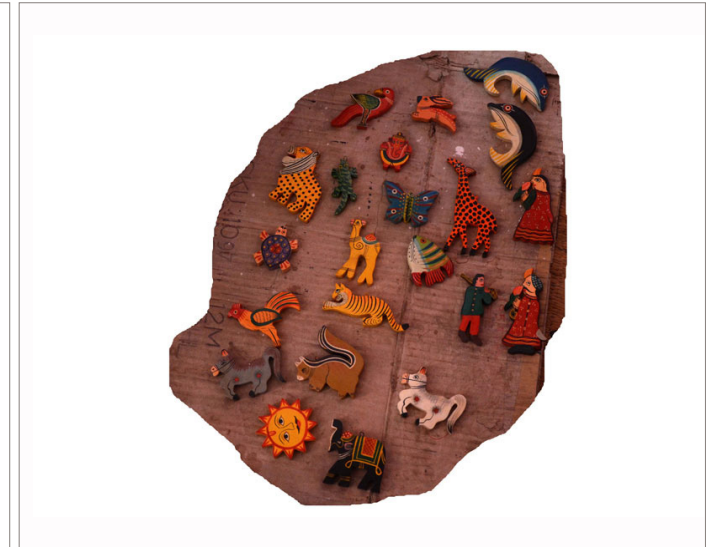
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Tigers.



Top to Bottom: Dolphin, Rabbit, Parrot, Ganesha, Leopard, Crocodile, Butterfly, Giraffe, Indian couple, Tortoise, Camel, Fish, Cat, Cock, Squirrel, Horse, Donkey, Sun God and Elephant.



Two piece frog.



Two piece rabbit.

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Two piece turtle.

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Traditional and Modern

Some kind of toys are not affected by time and generation and they remain the basic toy that every one as a kid, wants to play with. The best example is the kitchen set for girls. Though lots of modern toys are present in the market. All the girls play with and imagine themselves cooking and doing other activities with these traditional toys.

Such toys take us back to the earliest and the simplest kind of toys that our ancestors used to play with. They also show us the glimpse of our present and past culture and tradition.



Seven birds feeding at a time.



A miniature kitchen set.

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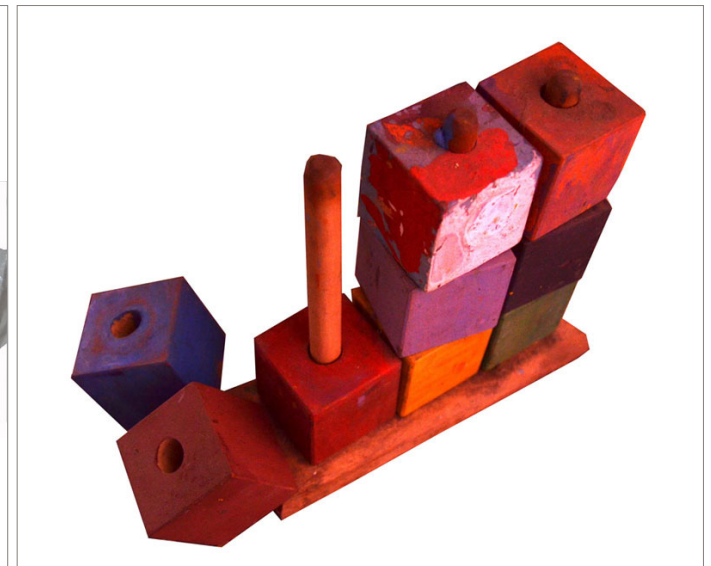
A rickshaw.



A story of a girl & a cat on Russian dolls.



A tiger in motion.



Color Cubes Toy.

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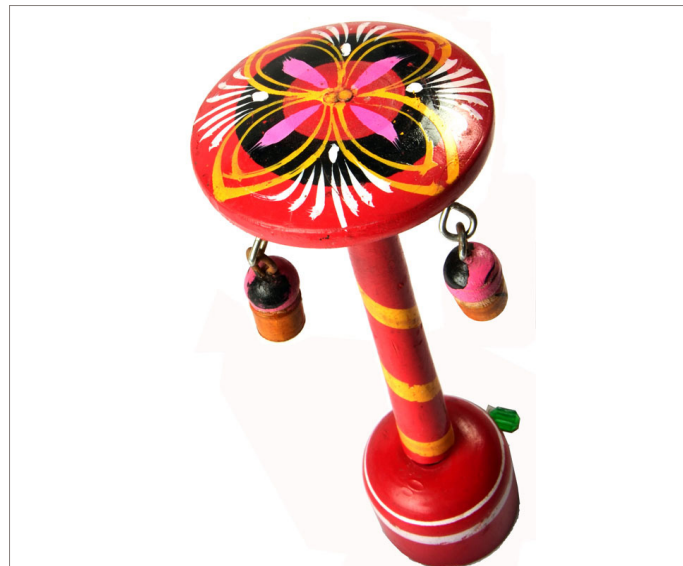
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A number game.



A one wheel toy.



A rotating ride toy.



Arab female.

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Abstract angel.



An elephant in motion.



Arab male.



Artistic Letters.

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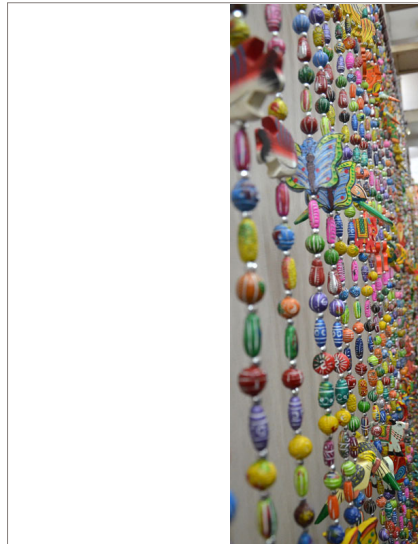
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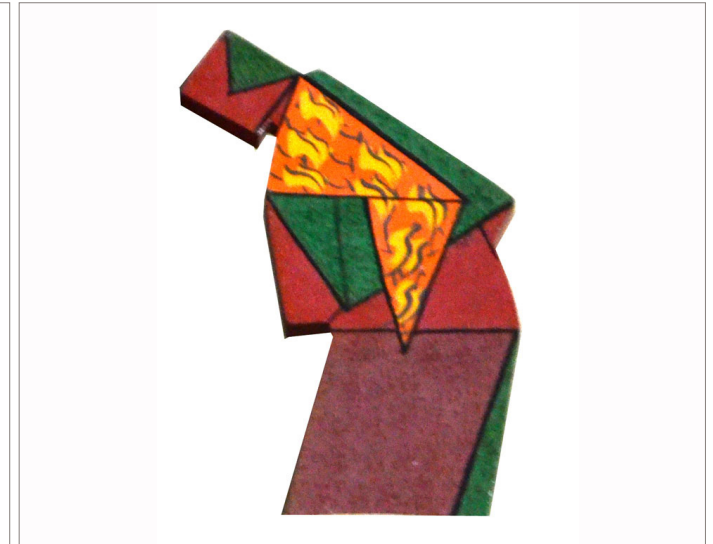
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Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/wooden-toys-varanasi/theme-toys/traditional-and-modern>

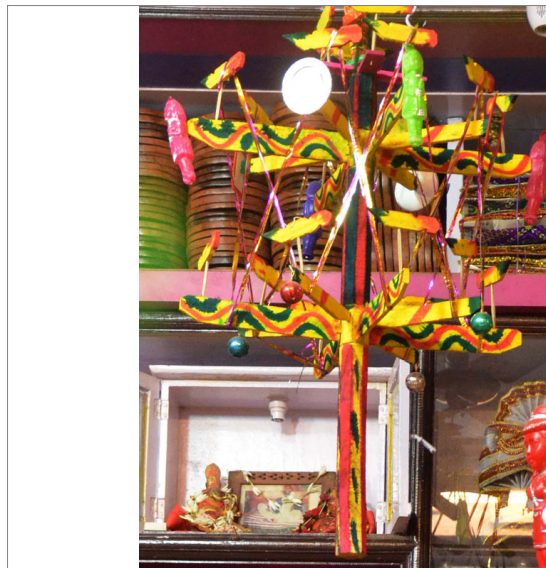


Curtain of Wooden beads.



Abstract woman form.

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Daal.



Chinese girl.

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Colorful cross.



Different parts of the toy.



Disassembled parts of the toy.



Disassembled parts of the toy (1).

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Penguins.



A temple in wood.

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Disassembled parts of the toy (2).



A swing for Lord Krishna and Radha.

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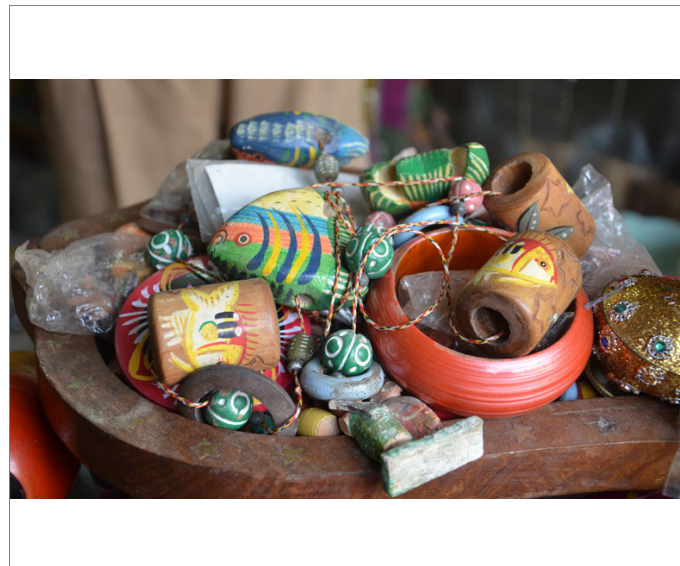
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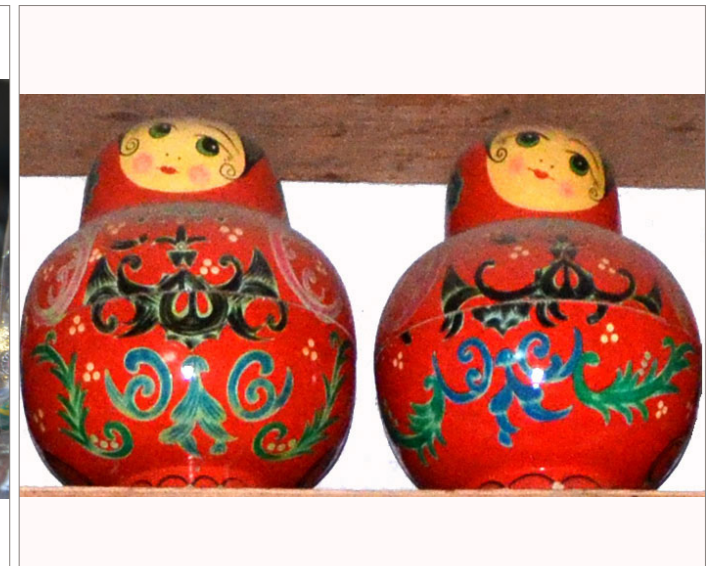
Balancing doll.



English soldier.



Random miniature items.



Indian brides dolls.

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Miniature 2 D fishes and flowers.



Parrots and other objects are attached to the daal.

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Mirror frame.



Photo frame.

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Pull along toy.

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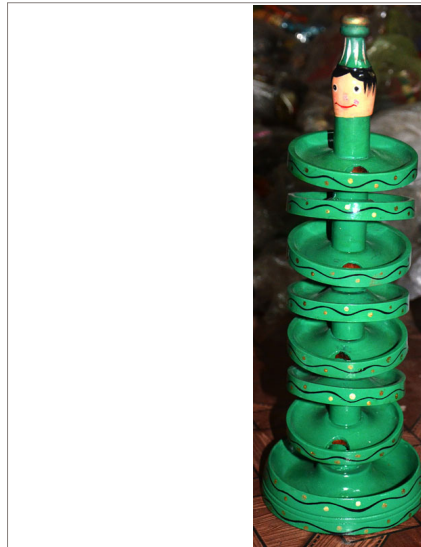
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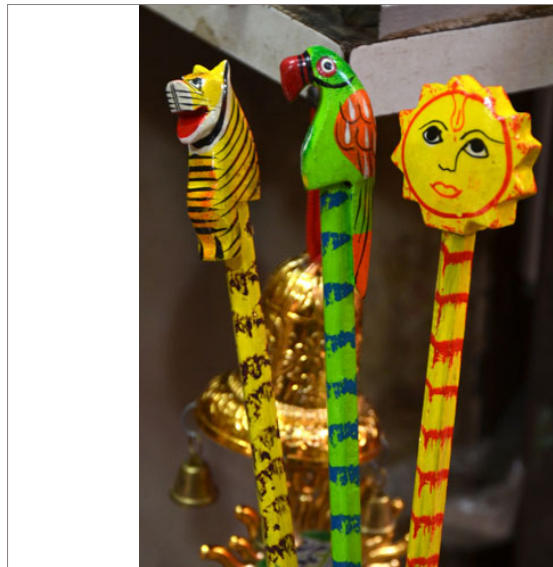
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Marble slide.



Muslim businessman.



Pencils with animal head.



Picture cubes.

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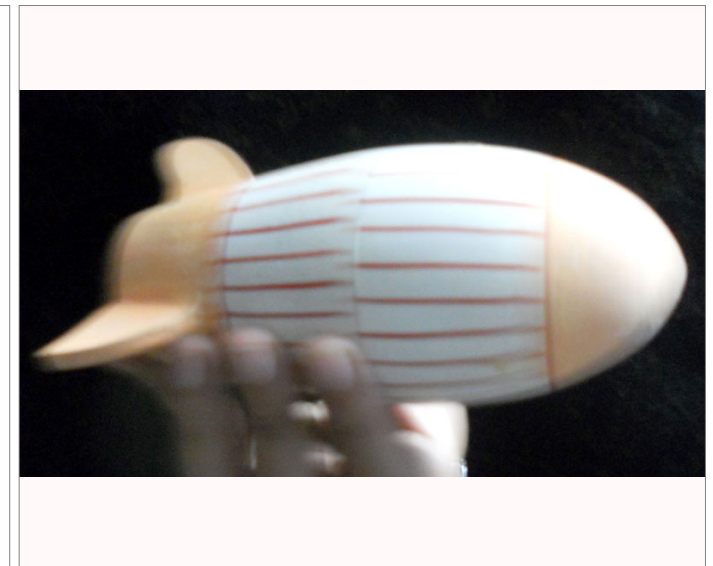
Picture cubes (2).



Picture cubes (3).



Picture cubes (4).



Rocket shaped Russian doll.

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Rotating elephant.

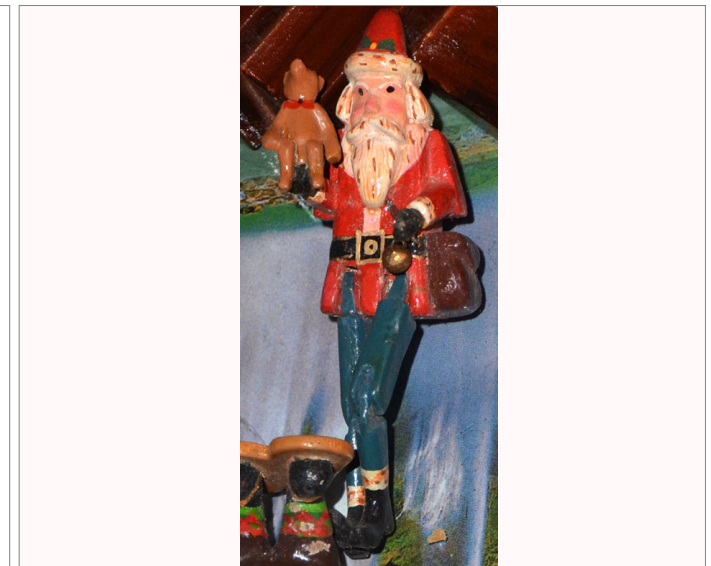


Russian dolls.

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Russian dolls(2).



Santa Claus.

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Spinning top with a thread.



Spinning top.



Tweety doll.



The toy in motion.

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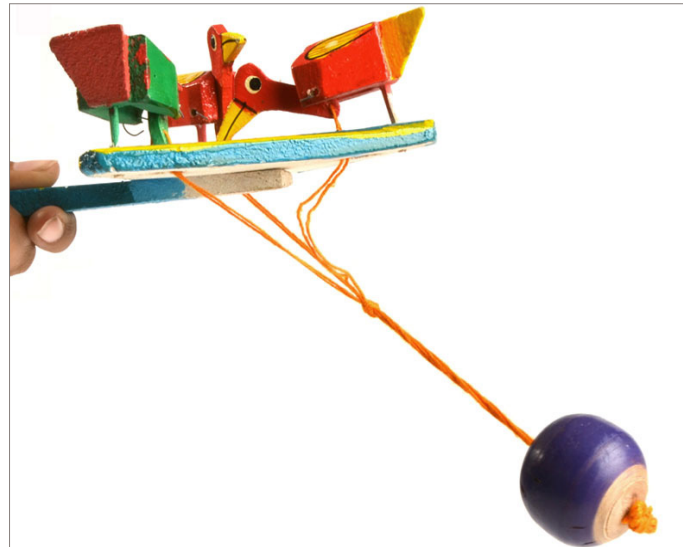
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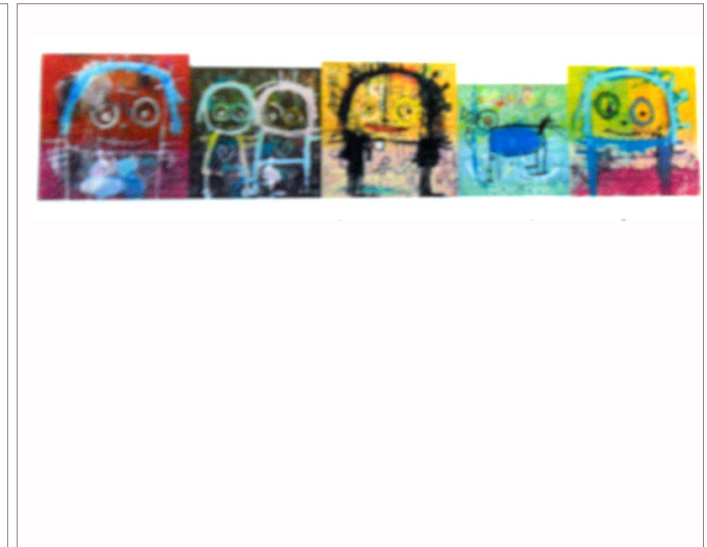
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Side view shows the connection of strings.



The child like painting for custom made Russian dolls.

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The cup and the ball.



Winnie the Pooh.

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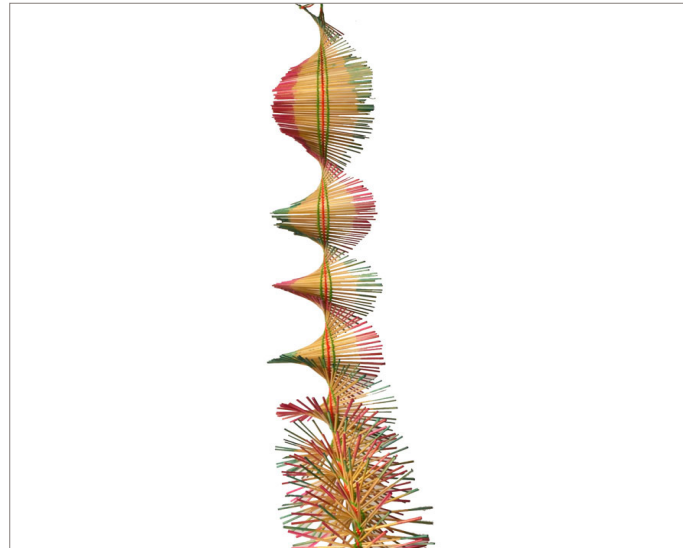
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Spiral mat.



Spiral mat(2).



Wall hangings.



Wall hangings(2).

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Conclusion

The beauty of wooden toys is in the fact that they are carved by craftsmen and painted by them. They show a perspective of life. Craftsmen make them according to their knowledge of history, Indian mythology, Mahabharata, Ramayana, etc.

But as the craftsmen make some innovative prototypes in Wooden Craft, they lack the knowledge to copyright and sell it. Other problems faced by them were lack of fast machines, lack of manpower, newer generation doesn't want to be involved, slow process of finishing a toy, skilled craftsmen required for using Lathe machine.

Because of the above problems, they are not able to cater to large orders and consequently lose business.



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Source:

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- History of Indian Toys (<http://crafts.indianetzone.com/toys.htm>)
- History of Toys - woodentoys-shop.com (<http://www.woodentoys-shop.com/toy-history-toys-games.php3>)
- Wooden Toys (<http://handicraft.indiamart.com/products/toys-dolls/wooden-toys.html>)
- Handicrafts of Varanasi (<http://varanasi.nic.in/culture/handi.html>)

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Contact Details

This documentation was done by Shivani Visen at **IDC, IIT Bombay**.

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- Human Welfare Association,
Consortium of Handicraft and Artisan's Development Society.
- The Benares Metal Craft Development Society,
Kashi Craft, AHVY, O/o D.C. Handicraft,
New Delhi.
- GM, DIC, Varanasi
<http://woodhandicraft.in/>
- Khilona Udyog Shahkari Samiti Ltd.,
Kashmiri Ganj, Khojwa,
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Working since last 30 years in the field of handicraft mainly with wood and stone craft at Varanasi region which is famous for wooden and stone handicraft products.

- Ram Khelawan Singh, State Award,
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- Wooden Toys

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