

Tactile Archieve of Play: Material Memory, Ritual and Cultural Transmission in Vernacular Indian Craft Traditions

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Abstract

Indigenous toys, often dismissed as objects of play, are in fact deeply embedded with layers of material memory, ritual significance, and ecological intelligence. This paper explores traditional Indian toys—crafted from clay, wood, textile, and natural fibers—as tactile archives that encode and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. Drawing from examples such as the terracotta toys of Bengal, Kaavad shrines of Rajasthan, Golu dolls of Tamil Nadu, and palm-leaf toys from Kerala, the study reveals how these objects preserve not just stories but techniques of craft, symbolic aesthetics, seasonal rituals, and ecological rhythms. The materials themselves—mud, fiber, pigment—act as vessels of meaning, linking the toy to the landscape, to mythology, and to everyday life. Through this lens, the paper positions indigenous toys as sensory repositories and tools for decolonized knowledge systems in art and design education.

Keywords

Vernacular Toy Traditions, Ecocultural Craft Practices, Intergenerational Storytelling

I. Introduction: The Toy as Archive

Toys are often perceived as mere playthings—objects meant to amuse, occupy, and educate young minds. However, beyond their surface function lies a deeper, often overlooked truth: toys are tactile archives. They are living vessels of memory, knowledge, and ritual, encoded in the materials they are made from, the stories they tell, and the hands that craft and play with them.

A tactile archive, drawing from the theories of material culture and memory studies, refers to the way in which objects store and transmit cultural memory not through written records but through touch, materiality, use, and embodied practice. These are archives that must be held, used, manipulated, and passed down. According to Diana Taylor, archives are not only written texts but also “repertoires”—performances, gestures, and embodied knowledge passed through action rather than inscription.

Studying toys through this lens reveals them as object-story-tool-ritual—a multifaceted identity far beyond amusement. Their forms are shaped not only by function but also by folklore, spirituality, ecology, and pedagogy. Indigenous toys, especially those made in India’s artisan communities, contain within them a vocabulary of the land, a grammar of belief, and a syntax of craft. As such, they act as carriers of collective memory and tools for intergenerational transmission.

This paper proposes that:

Materials carry memory – clay, wood, textiles are not inert matter but storied substances.

Form carries function – the shape of a toy encodes cultural roles, values, and cosmologies.

Play carries pedagogy – to play with these toys is to engage with a vernacular mode of learning rooted in ritual, rhythm, and relationship.

II. Material Culture and Memory

Toys are made from the materials most intimately tied to their place of origin—earth, wood, fiber—each imbued with symbolic, spiritual, and ecological meaning. The choice of material is not merely practical; it is cultural and metaphysical. These materials are not neutral—they carry ancestral significance, stories of labor, and philosophies of impermanence and return.

Clay is the most primal medium. Drawn from riverbeds and shaped by hand, it connects the object to the earth, fertility, and cyclical rituals like harvests and immersions. Clay toys often accompany rites of passage and are offered to deities before being returned to the soil, echoing the idea: what is made from the land returns to the land.

Wood, particularly in sacred and skilled hands, represents lineage, legacy, and technical mastery. Toys made from mango, teak, or semla wood—like the Kaavad—are sculpted by families that have passed down their techniques for generations. Wood is also linked to sacred carving traditions and often seen in ritual or votive contexts.

Textiles and fibers, whether as stuffed dolls or palm-leaf rattles, are carriers of gendered labor, festival aesthetics, and ecological awareness. The act of dressing a doll or tying thread into a mobile becomes a pedagogical and symbolic performance, reinforcing values of nurture, community, and celebration.

Through these materials, toys act as mnemonic devices—objects that remember not only how they were made but why. They hold stories of the monsoon, the forest, the temple, the festival. They resist obsolescence by returning to nature, completing the loop of creation and dissolution.

III. Case Studies: Toys as Cultural Containers

1. Terracotta Toys of West Bengal

Terracotta toys, crafted from the rich river clay of Bengal, are often shaped into bullock carts, birds, elephants, and fertility figurines. These toys appear in village fairs, are offered during childbirth rituals, and are part of seasonal celebrations like Gajan or Charak. While they serve as playthings, they also encode agrarian life, oral myths, and social roles. The sun-drying and occasional firing of these objects is a practice deeply attuned to climatic rhythms and ecological cycles.

The use of local clay links the toys directly to land and water—a geopoetic relationship—making them not only objects of joy but also symbols of the land’s memory and seasonal rituals (Lambert, 2019; Sabnani, 2014).



Fig 1: Terracotta toys of West Bengal

2. The Kaavad of Rajasthan

The Kaavad is not simply a toy—it is a mobile shrine, an interactive book, a stage for oral performance. Made of mango or semla wood, this brightly painted structure unfolds like a puzzle, revealing layers of narrative panels that the Kaavadiya Bhats use to tell epics, local legends, and spiritual teachings.

Kaavads are painted by the Suthars, a carpenter-painter community who trace their ancestry to Lord Vishwakarma. They use natural pigments—red, blue, yellow, black—each with symbolic meaning. The repertoire is passed orally and visually through generations: from artisan to performer to patron.

The Kaavad embodies the coexistence of play and prayer, of function and faith. It is an example of how a “toy” becomes a tactile, performative archive that preserves memory through action.



Fig 2: Typical Kawad closed (left) and open (right)

3. Golu Dolls of Tamil Nadu

Displayed during the nine nights of Navratri, Golu dolls are arranged in step-like formations representing cosmic hierarchies, domestic life, and epic tales. Families add new dolls each year, often passed down across generations, creating a living genealogical archive.

Materials range from clay and papier-mâché to cloth and wood. The making and dressing of these dolls are tied to gendered labor, especially in the hands of women who prepare these displays with devotion and creativity.

Golu becomes more than a decorative toy display—it is a seasonal theater of memory, faith, and feminine aesthetics, handed down through songs, stories, and shared rituals.



Fig 3: Vilechary dolls (Golu dolls) from Tamilnadu

4. Palm Leaf and Bamboo Toys from Kerala and Odisha

In southern and eastern India, toys made from palm leaves, bamboo, and coconut fibers—such as the Olai Pava (palm leaf dolls) of Kerala and Talapatra Chitra (palm leaf puppets) of Odisha—take the form of rattles, birds, pop-up puppets, and masks. Crafted during festivals like Onam or local harvests, these toys are not only biodegradable but also reflect deep ecological wisdom. In Odisha’s Ganjam district, Lakrasa or lacquered wooden toys incorporate

natural dyes and storytelling elements, while Kerala's coconut shell toys called Thenga and miniature Thoppi hats showcase artisanal diversity. These toys train fine motor skills, nurture environmental awareness, and are traditionally crafted by family members or community artisans. The act of making is as important as playing—these toys teach both skill and story.



Fig 4: Olai Pava Teacup set of Kerala



Fig 5: Talpatra Pothi of Odisha



Fig 6: Thenga Toy of Kerala

IV. Toys, Ritual, and Ecology

Indigenous toys are deeply embedded in seasonal rhythms, ritual calendars, and ecological cycles (Sabnani, 2014; Sharma, 2018). Crafted during specific times of the year, they align with festivals, harvests, and rites of passage—situating them within cyclical temporalities that reflect both nature and culture. For instance, terracotta toys are typically made in preparation for festivals like Gajan in Bengal or Navratri across India, closely following agrarian calendars and the monsoon cycle. River clay, their primary material, is accessible only during dry months, tying the act of creation to the land’s seasonal availability. Similarly, palm leaf toys from regions like Kerala and Odisha are associated with harvest festivals such as Onam or Raja, where ecological abundance inspires communal craft-making and celebration. In Tamil Nadu, Golu dolls are not produced year-round; artisans begin their work weeks ahead of Navratri, and the dolls’ display becomes a ritual offering symbolizing prosperity, femininity, and devotion. The intrinsic connection between material availability and spiritual significance results in an embedded sustainability. These toys are biodegradable—crafted from clay, fiber, palm leaf, and wood—locally sourced, and seasonally produced in small, intentional batches rather than mass-manufactured year-round. In the context of today’s ecological crisis, such practices offer a meaningful alternative: a low-waste, high-significance model of design, where toys return naturally to the earth after use. Their lifecycle embodies a philosophy of impermanence, reminding us that play, like ritual, is ephemeral yet profoundly impactful.

V. Cultural Transmission and Threats

Toys are generational objects—passed from elder to child, from maker to player. They carry more than just physical form; they embody knowledge systems, belief structures, and emotional vocabularies. Their survival depends not on written instruction or formal education, but on observation, participation, and memory. The transmission of toy-making knowledge is deeply embedded in everyday life and ritual, making it an inherited practice akin to oral literature, song, or dance (Talatule, 2021).

In Kaavad-making families of Rajasthan, for instance, the knowledge transfer is gendered yet collaborative—boys learn to carve and paint by watching their fathers, while girls assist with preparing the base and finishing the surfaces. In Bengal and Tamil Nadu, similar intergenerational learning takes place in the lead-up to festivals like Navratri or Gajan, where toy-making becomes part of household labor. These toys are not “taught” through formal instruction; they are learned by doing—absorbed through immersion, repetition, and familial intimacy.

However, this delicate chain of transmission now faces multiple threats. The rise of mass-produced plastic toys—cheap, standardized, and disconnected from local context—has led to the decline of traditional toys. Urban migration and the fragmentation of extended

families have disrupted the apprenticeship model through which such skills are typically passed down. Moreover, the increasing devaluation of manual labor and craft knowledge, coupled with the dominance of digital screens and virtual entertainment, has rendered these tactile and narrative-rich objects less relevant to younger generations (McMahon, 2020). The commercialization of folk toys has further flattened their complexity, reducing them to decorative souvenirs devoid of the layered stories they once carried.

In light of these challenges, meaningful interventions are necessary to sustain these cultural forms. Art and design colleges can play a crucial role by hosting hands-on workshops, field visits, and practice-based research projects in collaboration with traditional toymakers. Museums and archives should shift from merely collecting finished products to documenting the entire process—gathering oral histories, techniques, and cultural contexts. Schools can integrate toy-making into their curricula, using it not only as a creative exercise but also as a means to understand local history, ecology, and values. NGOs and community collectives can adopt storytelling toys like the Kaavad to raise awareness on social issues such as gender equality, health education, and environmental conservation. Through such interdisciplinary and community-based efforts, toys can be reclaimed as tools of cultural pedagogy and living memory.



Fig 7: A family-tree project done in kaavad style (Creations, F. 2017)

Children can be encouraged to create Kaavads as part of school projects, exploring different materials in the process. They can illustrate stories from their textbooks or bring narratives to life through simple animations and 3D interpretations. This hands-on engagement not only makes learning more enjoyable but also helps pass the tradition beyond artisan families, allowing younger generations to actively participate in preserving and reimagining the craft.



Fig 8: Digital Adaptation of Patachitra katha. Sulekha.com advertisement story drawn in traditional pothi style and animated (Creations, 2017; YouTube, 2018; Sulekha.com)

VI. Conclusion

Indigenous toys are not merely objects of nostalgia—they are vessels of memory, ritual, and ecological wisdom. In an era where learning is increasingly detached from sensory experience, these toys ground knowledge in the tangible, the playful, and the local. Actions like unfolding a Kaavad, arranging Golu dolls, or spinning a palm-leaf rattle are more than play; they are acts of cultural remembrance.

This paper advocates for seeing toys as tactile archives—tools that transmit generational wisdom, embody pedagogical intent, and reflect seasonal and spiritual rhythms. Recognizing toy-making as a form of cultural knowledge, rather than just craft, invites collaboration across disciplines to preserve and revitalize these living traditions—through design, education, and community storytelling (Sabnani, 2014).

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