

# Who is afraid of Chinese toys?

In the absence of a national perspective, India's toy world reflects its fragmented policies towards children.

Krishna Kumar

The government's decision to impose a six-month ban on the import of toys from China creates a small window of opportunity to introspect. The Indian toy industry has never been in a state of good health, but the past two decades have been particularly bad. What little drive there was to invent and innovate got washed away by the flood of Chinese toys. They came in millions. They were colourful and diverse, loud and crude, but their greatest attraction was their low price.

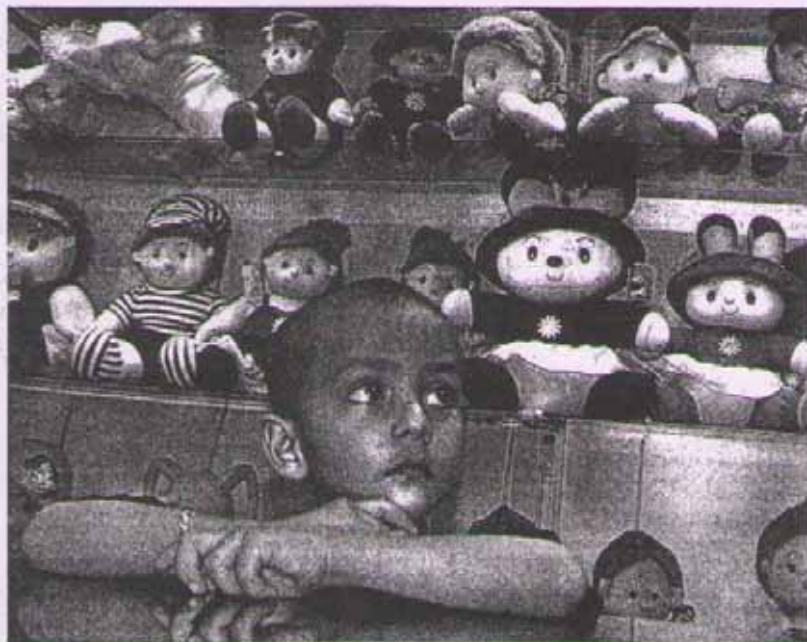
The reason for the sudden decision to ban them is not known, but some guesses are being made. Complaints against the toxic plastics used in Chinese toys have been around for some time now. Powerful western toy companies which outsource their manufacturing requirements to China have also been critical — toy giant Mattel withdrew some 21 million toys made in China because they carried high levels of lead paint. Still, it is hard to imagine that the ban is really a response to toxicity. Many toys made in India are also dangerous, and there is hardly any reliable mechanism to stop them from reaching babies.

## Economic rationale

Perhaps there is an economic rationale. As a regular visitor to the toy pavilion of the International Trade Fair, I had begun to feel in the late 1990s that there was little that deserved attention in the Indian toy industry. Since then, in metropolitan and small-town shops, the presence of Chinese toys has grown to overwhelming proportions. Was the heavy import hurting Indian manufacturers? Maybe, but it is hard to say which ones, for the industry is highly fragmented and largely disorganised. Toy parts form a considerable proportion of the imports, and they too will now face the ban, leading to some immediate distress among low-grade assembly units. If the goal is to encourage indigenous production, half a year is hardly long enough for an unimaginative and mostly primitive industry to develop fresh energy and drive.

Arvind Gupta and Sudarshan Khanna are India's pioneers in toy research and design. Arvind Gupta has devoted the past few decades to devising and promoting inexpensive toys that teachers can make themselves, using locally-available material. His individual initiative in this sphere has had greater impact than that of many institutions put together. Sudarshan Khanna teaches at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, where he has set up a toy centre to train students to conceptualise innovative and safe toys. In his own research, Khanna has focused on the importance of folk toys as a source of inspiration and ideas. His writing reminds us how big a cost India has paid by neglecting its cottage industry of toys, an industry that needs to be studied as much for its aesthetics as for its imaginative use of local resources like paper, bamboo and cloth. Some students trained at Khanna's toy centre have introduced new ideas in toy manufacturing, but this contribution of NID is too small to make a dent in the industry, especially when it is transforming itself into a trading network dependent on China.

Laila Tyshji's Dastakar represents a different kind of initiative. An agency devoted to the promotion of heritage crafts, it introduces artisans to larger markets and assists them in generating sustainable surpluses to enable them to refine their art and become competitive.



**ROLE FOR TOYS:** India's toy world reflects its fragmented policies towards children. It's time we started taking children and their diverse needs seriously. — PHOTO: SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH

In the toy section of the Central Cottage Industries Emporium and at the National Handicrafts Museum, one can see numerous examples of imaginative toy-work from different parts of India. The dolls and other stuffed toys produced by traditional artisans have incomparably greater aesthetic and play-value than imported (potentially toxic) dolls and Walt Disney characters moulded in cheap plastic. The wheeled wooden toys of Saharanpur and the musical string toys of Delhi are immeasurably superior to the cacophonous, garish electronic toys imported from China.

## Biased comparison

Someone representing the trading-cum-manufacturing industry can rightly say that this comparison is inappropriate and biased. *Prima facie*, the point is true, in the sense that the two worlds of Indian toys seem irreconcilably far apart today. Who can imagine a dialogue between an electronic toy machine gun and a quiet papier-mache doll? A vast social distance divides the children who consume Chinese toys and those whose parents look for the sophisticated cottage toys. It is a great cultural and economic irony that the imported Chinese toys are a lot cheaper, though they don't necessarily last longer than our indigenous cottage toys. As in the case of certain other items of daily consumption, the overwhelming presence of toys made in China is simply a reflection of its vast productivity. The scale at which mass literacy and basic education have released the productive energies of Chinese society is stupendous. Yet, valid debates over the Chinese development model need not block our view of the emphasis laid on fulfilling children's needs, including toys.

In the absence of a national perspective, India's toy world reflects its fragmented policies towards children. The

division between pre-school and primary education is a fine example. The two are managed by different ministries with little coordination between them. In most States, nursery education is dominated by an unregulated market. In an ideal situation, the few million well-managed nurseries that India needs could provide a vast market to toy makers, both indigenous and industrial. Toys should also be a major part of the equipment provided for the early grades of primary education. Play is the child's work, Montessori had famously said. She also believed that if we want a peaceful world, one concrete step we must take is to surround children with aesthetically beautiful toys which arouse their imagination and make them active. There are any number of schools in India which use Montessori's name merely as a label to delude parents. Neither her vision nor methods are reflected in most of these schools. Abacus, a school in Chennai, is one of those rare schools which honour Montessori's insistence on beauty in all equipment used by children. Schools like Dakshinamurti, which was established by Gijubhai, who was inspired by Gandhi and Montessori, are even rarer. The common trend today is to fill up nurseries with crudely designed and poorly manufactured play equipment. Little attention is paid to ensuring basic sanitation in the school's milieu, let alone its aesthetic management. Unfortunately, one cannot make much of a distinction in this matter between most private and government schools.

Toys face another kind of hostility in the Indian ethos. Not just the common public, but even the individualism running schools for young children have remarkably unenlightened views on play. It is perceived as a means to keep the child entertained, and hence of questionable pedagogic 'usefulness.' Ignorance or suspicion characterises the understanding

of what role fantasy and imagination should play in the young child's development. And those who are somewhat aware of this role often believe that it is confined to the pre-school years. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that as soon as our children enter Class I, play equipment and toys are taken away from them.

## Formulating toy policy

The six-month ban on the import of Chinese toys could be viewed as an indicator of the government's consciousness, what for exactly is not clear, but a consciousness that would do well to be extended to larger action, such as the development of an early childhood policy. This exercise should aim at bridging the gap between traditional or indigenous and industrial toys. It should also include an analysis of early childhood education, covering ages four to eight. It is in this formative age group that India's socio-cultural and socio-economic future is shaped. The attempt to formulate a toy policy for this age group will benefit greatly if we study Japan's success in providing room for traditional designs and skills in the modern industry of toy production.

Japan produces some of the best wooden and paper toys in the world. It also utilises its schools to transmit traditional skills like origami to each successive generation. Unlike our Class I, the first year of formal schooling in Japan is structured around play in a serious sense, not in the trivialised 'playway' sense popularly misused in India. One of the key activities initiated involves taking mechanical toys apart to see how they work. Although adolescents have their typical problems, childhood is generally a happy period of life in Japan. This could be true of India too, provided we start taking children and their diverse needs seriously.



## COVER STORY





# Poisonous playmates

Watch out for **toxic toys!** They could cause serious harm to your children

By Malthreyi M.R.

**S**udhakar Pai from Mangalore had severe abdominal pain at the age of seven. Tests revealed he was anaemic. The doctor prescribed medicines for intestinal worms and anaemia. But the pain persisted.

After about four months, he was referred to St John's Medical College and Hospital, Bangalore, for lead tests. Sudhakar had excess lead deposits in his body. "The paints flaking off the slides and swings in the playground he frequented were the culprits," says Dr Anita Bijoor, biochemistry professor at St John's.

Paints on most playground equipment and toys contain lead, which can easily enter a child's body. All it takes is hand-to-mouth contact, which is common among children, from snacking to thumb sucking. Lead, when absorbed by the body, causes anaemia, low IQ, retarded

mental growth, kidney malfunction and high blood pressure. It also harms the nervous and the reproductive systems.

In 2007, lead content in toys created a furor. Toy companies such as Mattel and Fisher Price recalled many Barbie sets, Thomas & Friends wooden railway vehicle, Winnie-the-Pooh sets, Elmo, Diego and Dora, owing to lead content higher than the permissible limits. However, little has changed in India as far as the toy market is concerned.

THE WEEK randomly picked toys—plastic, wooden, and metal, branded and unbranded—from the streets and toy stores of Bangalore and tested them at the National Referral Centre for Lead Poisoning, St John's, headed by Dr Venkatesh Thuppil.

The results were alarming—95 per cent of the toys contained lead at much higher than the permissible



## THE WEEK EXCLUSIVE STUDY

THE WEEK submitted randomly picked toys for evaluation at the National Referral Centre for Lead Poisoning in India, St John's Medical College and Hospital, Bangalore. The following is the list of toys and their lead content

✗ Unacceptable

Lead content  
(upper limit 0.06%)

Yellow plastic dog	✗ 0.46% - 0.56%
Polly Pocket Polly Wheels Glitter Hot Pink	✗ 0.26% - 0.32%
Winnie-the-Pooh spinning tops	✗ 0.28% - 0.32%



✗ 0.22% - 0.26%

✗ 0.22% - 0.26%

✗ 0.22% - 0.26%

✗ 0.16% - 0.26%

✗ 0.18% - 0.22%

✗ 0.18% - 0.20%



level of 0.06g per 100g of dry paint. The toys included trains, balls, spin tops, stackers, abacus, cars, plastic animals and other common playmates. Even crayons of various brands that claim to be non-toxic contain up to 0.26 per cent lead.

Says Thuppl, known as the Lead Man of India for his role in creating awareness about lead toxicity: "A toy is supposed to be a gesture of love. But, what are we giving our children? Toys contain several toxic substanc-

es, one of which is lead. Lead tastes sweet, so children may develop a liking for it."

Lead is extensively used in batteries, petrol, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, candle wicks, paints, cosmetics, food containers, some herbal medicines, printing ink, toys, water pipes... the list is long. Simply put, lead is present everywhere around us.

"Lead is non-biodegradable and it never disappears from where it

is deposited," says Thuppl. "It can accumulate in our body, especially in our teeth and bones, and cause serious damage."

Children, mainly those under the age of six, are the most vulnerable to lead poisoning. "It can hamper the mental and physical development of a child because their physiology is not well-developed," explains Bijoor. "Adults have the blood-brain barrier in the central nervous system, and the gastrointestinal tract that restrict



Plastic car from the film Cars	✗	0.16% - 0.26%
Plastic spinning top	✗	0.14% - 0.22%
Crayons (2) / colour pencil (1)	✗	0.13% - 0.26%
Wooden abacus	✗	0.12% - 0.16%
Disney Princess Glamour Bag Set	✗	0.08% - 0.12%
Plastic tigers (2)		0.02% - 0.06%
Red plastic bucket (small)		below 0.06%

Rubber balls (2) Not detected

Wooden pull train Inadequate surface

Barbie "Fashion Fever" Kitty Cat House Not detected

Kids' sunglasses Not detected



**Toys contain several toxic substances, one of which is lead. Lead tastes sweet, so children may develop a liking for it.**

DR VENKATESH THUPPIL,  
St John's, Bangalore

GRAPHICS BY JOJO, PHOTOS BY BHARATI PRAKASH CHANDRA

chemicals. In children, they are not matured enough."

Some of the symptoms of lead poisoning are severe stomachache, loss of appetite, learning difficulties, constipation, vomiting, headache, wobbliness, irritability, hyperactivity and anaemia. "When children are picked up in school for problems like attention deficit disorder, they should be tested for lead poisoning," says Bijoor.

Its effects may be alarming, but

very few cases have been diagnosed with lead poisoning in India, especially because of toxic toys. So, is it a false alarm?

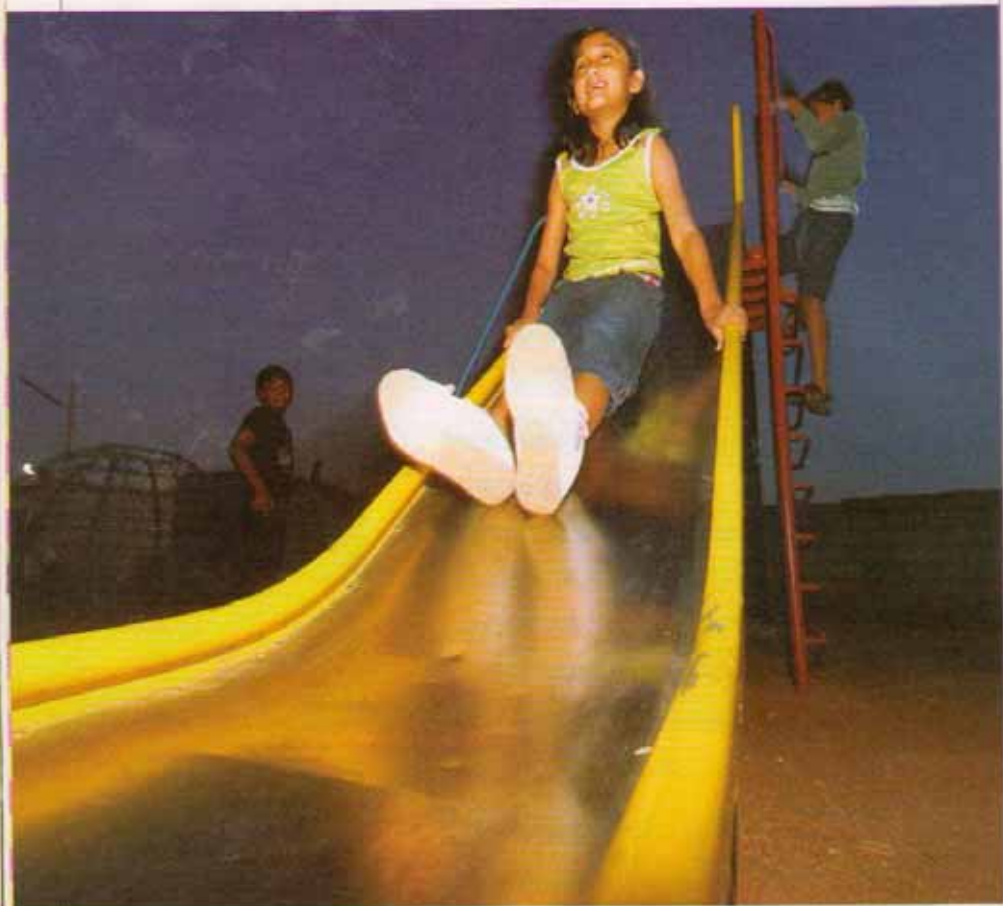
Says Dr. H. Paramesh, senior paediatric pulmonologist and ecologist in Bangalore: "Many physicians have not been taught to look at environmental hazards on health." Paramesh was part of Project Lead-Free led by the George Foundation in 1997.

A study he undertook nearly 10 years ago on 850 children revealed

only 4.7 per cent had levels of lead higher than 10 microgram per decilitre. But, he points out that there is no such thing as a normal or safe level of lead.

One of the reasons for rare detection of lead poisoning is a lack of awareness, says Bijoor who was also part of Project Lead-Free. "When I was doing MBBS, we learnt about lead poisoning only as an occupational hazard. It was a paragraph lost in the medical books," she recalls.





As part of the Project Lead-Free, 21,476 individuals across five major Indian cities, of whom 14,667 were under the age of 12, were tested. More than half of them had blood lead over permissible limits.

However, as in the case of Sudhakar, symptoms are usually not correlated to lead poisoning. At this juncture, when awareness is yet to pick up, seeking clear cases of poisoning due to toxic toys is tricky, says Arun Senthilraman of Toxics Link, an NGO with offices in Delhi and Chennai.

"We have no legislation, no regulatory mechanism to guard our standards," he points out. Incidentally, a recent study by Toxics Link showed that about 70 per cent of toys in India

had high toxic contents such as lead and cadmium. Of 111 samples from Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai, 77 were made of PVC material.

Apart from lead content, soft PVC toys are regularly plasticised with phthalates. Studies say the chemical compounds can cause rodent ulcer

**Symptoms of lead poisoning include stomachache, constipation, vomiting, headache, wobbliness, irritability, hyperactivity and anaemia.**

and genital abnormalities, especially in males.

A recent study by Consumer Education and Research Society, Ahmedabad, revealed high levels of lead, cadmium and chromium in products of eight brands (four foreign and four Indian) of toys such as teethingers, pacifiers and nipples.

Hararay S. Tripathi, senior manager (laboratory), writes in the society's magazine *Insight*: "None of the toy samples tested was free from toxic metals. Infants are more vulnerable to ingestion of these metals as they have a tendency of sucking and chewing the toys.

The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) should restrict the presence of toxic metals in such toys and make



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the limit for the presence of toxic metals stricter."

If doctors are not testing for lead poisoning, it is not merely because of ignorance but for also the lack of importance society gives to long-acting poisons, says Raghavachari Desikan of Consumers Association of India (CAI), Chennai.

"It is difficult to identify lead while in use. That is why we are campaigning for mandatory guidelines from the BIS," he says. "This is being resisted by the toy manufacturers. In India, unless people are obliged by law to follow safety, they generally do not."

As part of their campaign against lead and other metal-based toys, CAI plans to publish a booklet—A Guide to Safe Toys. Apparently, the worst of 'toxic toys' are Chinese toys, which have flooded the Indian market. Chinese toys enjoy more than 60 per cent share of the Rs 2,500-crore toy market in India. The US, Canada and several other countries have barred Chinese toys on grounds of their toxicity.

In late January, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade imposed a six-month ban on the import of Chinese toys. The decision has come as a "pleasant surprise" to the Indian toy makers. Though the Centre has not cited any reason for the ban, it is seen as a move to protect



# You must know

## The effects of lead poisoning

- It can cause anaemia and damage to the brain, kidneys, and the nervous and reproductive systems
- Low levels can cause learning, speech and behavioural disorders
- High levels may lead to retardation, convulsions and coma

## How are children exposed to lead at home?

- Lead dust from wear and tear or repairs of areas with lead-based paint settles on the floor and household objects. It sticks to children's hands and toys, and enters the body through hand-to-mouth contact
- Oral contact with lead-coated surfaces (window sills, railings and painted surfaces)

## The steps to minimise hazards

- Regularly wash children's hands, bottles, pacifiers and toys
- Ensure children eat healthy, low-fat foods
- Don't use lead-based ceramic or cooking utensils
- Have children tested for lead, even if they look healthy
- Regularly clean floors, window sills and other surfaces
- Repaint surfaces where paint is flaking off

Courtesy: The George Foundation, Bangalore

## Lead trail

- Food grown on soil with excess lead
- Old toys
- Window sills, doorframes, walls and floors
- Hair dyes
- Kohl
- Newsprint
- Inks and paint
- Leaded petrol
- Nipple protectors and nipple creams
- Medals, coins, ornaments and castings
- Water pipes
- Exhaust pipes
- Batteries
- Brass cookware
- PVC products
- Door stoppers
- Paperweights
- Pencils
- Pigmented plastic goods
- Plumbing washers
- Soldered cans containing food
- Cable insulation
- Tile and brick glaze
- Cast toys
- Crayons





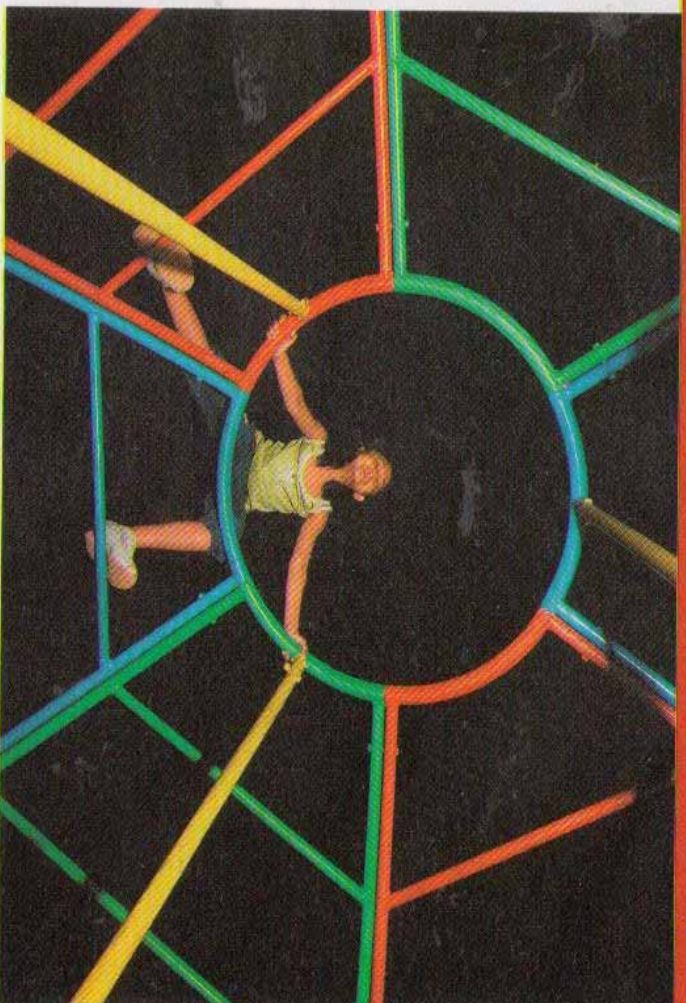
## When children are picked up in school for problems like attention deficit disorder, they should be tested for lead poisoning.

**DR ANITA BIJOOR,**  
St John's, Bangalore

India's toy industry.

"The global turnover of the toy market was over \$110 billion in 2007. We don't even have 1 per cent share of the global market," says V.S. Agrawal, former president of the Toy Association of India, which has about 600 members. "We have had little government support and negligible projection of our products abroad."

The Indian toy industry is, indeed, growing with a rise in exports from Rs 123 crore in 2002 to Rs 700 crore



in 2007. But, it is puny when compared with China's Rs 35,000-crore global market share.

Regarding the safety of Indian toys, Agarwal says there has to be immediate and cohesive efforts to improve quality. "We are fighting for

a toy design and development institute to usher in better manufacturing practices," he says. "But, what can a toy maker do if the paint supplied is toxic?"

Lead-based paint, in fact, has been a major source of poisoning. When