



No child's play

Social outreach and contemporary designs are helping ensure the survival of the intricately carved Channapatna toys in a modern market

Channapatna, a town around 70km from the Karnataka capital of Bangalore, is known as the land of toys. Its broad streets are lined with shops packed with colourful wooden handmade playthings.

The craft dates back to the 18th century, when Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the kingdom of Mysore, was gifted a toy from Persia. Impressed, the Sultan brought over skilled Persian craftsmen to train Indians on how to make these lacquered toys. Since then, Channapatna toys have been granted a Geographical Indication (GI) tag from the World Trade Organization – a testament to their cultural importance.

To make a Channapatna toy, a piece of cut and dried *aale mara* (ivory wood) is first fitted onto a lathe and shaped with a knife. Once carved, the artisan applies natural, non-toxic dyes before rubbing the toy with a pandanus leaf to enhance its sheen.

Channapatna toys can take various forms such as rattles, vehicles and rocking horses. Local artisans have also expanded to

produce home décor items, jewellery and mythological figures. This diversification has been one attempt by local artisans to try and compete in a market increasingly flooded with cheaper, poor-quality replicas from China.

Those aren't the only threats. In recent years, some artisans have been using inferior materials to make a quick buck, diminishing the products' appeal.

Fortunately, social enterprises like Varnam and Maya Organic have been working to keep the craft alive. Varnam works closely with local artisans to create toys using contemporary designs and techniques such

as combining lacquer with block-printing. They also participate in various art festivals to increase the awareness of these evolving products.

In the same vein, Maya Organic is actively working with local women to make this a sustainable livelihood; originally, the craft had been shaped by men.

These social enterprises offer hope that Channapatna's handcrafted toy tradition can thrive despite modern-day challenges.



KARNATAKA'S OTHER GI PRODUCTS



BIDRIWARE

Bidar district is known for its distinctive metal handicrafts – silver inlaid on a blackened alloy of zinc and copper.

MYSORE SILK

Karnataka produces 70% of India's mulberry silk, with the city of Mysore at the heart of this industry.

ILKAL SARI

The ancient weaving town of Ilkal gives its name to this traditional handwoven sari made from local cotton and silk.