

Childhood Memories of an Almost Toyless World

By A.N. 'Shen' Sengupta

The recent fiasco over imported toys made me wonder about the place of toys in a child's world. Does a child really need or value toys, as much as its parents or grandparents believe it does! I have good reasons to believe that down deep a child seeks a very different kind of a plaything.



I grew up in an environment which to me, as a child, had no physical or legal boundaries. My only boundary was my elders' careful eyes toward protecting me from becoming a 'bad' boy as opposed to a 'good' (*shubodh baloke* in Bengali) one. But this was seldom expressly needed, since by and large I stayed within the expected norms, such as returning home before the sun went down or being present for lunch when it was served. Outside of these few inconveniences nobody bothered me and I could go anywhere I wanted, do anything I wished, and play and play till I was dead tired. Well, almost. There was this room in the school, in which there used to be kept a skeleton. You could not catch me anywhere near there in the fading lights of the evening. Neither could you find me on the secluded path by a mysterious looking pond after dark.

If you have difficulty in visualizing my world I like you to think of a sort of combination of the worlds of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain except for the violence, Srikanto by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, and Apu of *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay. My world had no boundaries. Yes, people had even boundary walls or fences, some of them green, around their courtyards. But, so far as I and my friends were concerned, they were invisible or nonexistent. We would walk through any place including people's bedrooms at any time without ever bothering to even know that there was such a concept as trespassing. But any- and everybody in the neighbourhood was either my uncle or aunt or sister or brother, because as per our tradition that is how we addressed all people including strangers, and the sentiments were always reciprocated. So, we received water when we were thirsty, snacks when we were hungry, even when we were away from home and we would freely fish and swim in my uncle's pond, pick flowers and fruits from my aunty's garden, under their affectionate eyes! Sometimes we would venture into the wilderness to pick fruits without ever having to be afraid of being scolded. There was unbounded joy in running across fields in the blaring sun, braving the thorns and occasional snakes, in short, in the spirit of innocent adventure.

During one trip I went with a friend to a neighbour's house, which was fenced in well, with a low guardrail at the entrance to keep out dogs and cats. As we were about to step over the guardrail, we noticed an enormous black snake circling around the courtyard, looking for a way to get out. When it was momentarily out of sight, we rushed into the courtyard and made a dash for the house. From inside I noticed that the snake found a hole in the fence and was proceeding to get out. It was not to be so easy for it. I caught hold of a long stick, rushed out and pinned it down to the ground. At this point the table was turned on me, as in desperation it kept trying to strike my hand. I told my friend to hurry and fetch some grown-ups. After some seemingly endless moments the rescuers came and took over. Even though they reprimanded me for my foolhardy act, they were full of praise for my courage nonetheless.

no one. In the ecstasy of it all I lost track of the time and was very late for my lunch. I shall let you imagine the consequences.

I remember well the day during World War II, when a young British soldier, who must have been missing his own younger brother or a son, taught me and some of my friends a game which was very similar to 'musical chairs,' with the exception that we sat on Mother Earth only, in the cool shadow of a large tree. None of us could speak English and he could not speak Bengali, of course. Yet he managed to teach us how to play the game, and the air was full of laughter. Incidentally, this young man used to visit my father, a high school principal, who taught English, and eagerly indulged in having *payesh*, the Bengali-style rice pudding delicacy, to the obvious delight of my mother.

We used to passionately participate in all religious festivities, irrespective of the beliefs. There would be Muharram, Milad Sharif, Id, Christmas, and *pujas* (worshipping) of all the gods and particularly all the goddesses. The common denominator, of course, was being with festive people and sweets. I never enjoyed fasting, but it was mandatory even for children. We used to take an active role in celebrating the puja of the goddess of learning for obvious reasons: we had to learn that 'one who studies eventually rides a car or a horse.' Fortunately, mothers used to take care of the puja of the goddess of wealth. I suppose that they did not want to take a chance. My friends and I used to have our own *jhulan-jatra* or swing ceremony. I do not remember why it was left to us young boys. Nevertheless, we used to meticulously create snow-capped mountains, rivers complete with flowing water, and of course Radha and Krishna swinging on a garlanded swing. Sweet offerings used to be provided by our 'aunties.' The most notable happening used to be our buying one single cigarette, and smoking it in turn in the darkness, behind the cottage. This was an absolute no-no for our age and, I guess, hence, very exciting and memorable.

As I mentioned earlier we spent the most part of our days, outside of the school-hours, playing—playing in a pond, on the swinging branch of our favourite mango tree, in the attics of houses, in a banana grove, around the plinth of a house which was no more, on a dirt path under a tree canopy, and of course on grassy playfields, large and small. Playing hide-and-seek used to cover the entire neighbourhood, and the ones who hid themselves best were often forgotten behind at the end of the day. We used to play hopscotch and several court games, which required nothing more than lines made on the ground with a sharp twig. Using pieces of 'monkey-sticks,' which were fruits of a large tree with a profusion of yellow flowers, we used to play fairly dangerous war games around the deserted plinth. We would also play volleyball, badminton, and even highly disorganized soccer. After collecting the supplies from various kitchens, we used to have real picnics in a banana grove. The food used to be burnt or too salty, but was it delicious! When our parents would give us permission we would walk to a nearby village to watch *jatra*, a rather melodramatic village theatre, in which the stage under a colourful canopy was completely surrounded by the audience and in which both male and female roles were played by men only! The trip back home was memorable too, since in a crystal clear, dark blue sky, the Milky Way shone brightly and shooting stars were a common sight. To add to the sense of adventure, jackals howled in distant darkness. But the matter did not end there. We friends used to put up our own shows after memorising all the lines, wearing special dresses and using a part of someone's house as our stage. You have guessed it right. Usually, our audience was our hapless but admiring mothers!

The oneness with our environment was so strong that we knew every plant, every tree, their flowers and even leaves intimately. We knew what they tasted like and which would provide us with honey! We knew all about the insects and their special attributes. We had no need for weather forecasts. A casual glance at the sky, which we observed often and intimately, was

enough. This sense of oneness with one's environment and his very dear elder sister, who had passed away, is most touchingly portrayed in *Pather Panchali*, as Apu leaves the village, the world he had ever known, for good. "So many things flashed through his mind—the riverbank—their own house with a courtyard—the tree-lined paths—the many afternoons—the many joyful plays—his dear friends—his dear sister. He wanted to say through his tears, 'I am not going away, my sister, I have not forgotten you, I am not leaving you behind—they are taking me away....'"

We had no television, no video games, no virtual world, no computer, no air-conditioning and above all no electricity. There were no paved roads and no cars. So we did not miss them. But there were newspapers, magazines, books, and radios. There were tree-lined dirt paths and agricultural fields, with narrow walks in between. There were small shops and a small market, in which the shopkeepers were known faces. Above all, there were our loving parents, sisters and brothers, and an entire neighbourhood full of uncles and aunts. Our world was slow and not given to change. Everything was real, secure and ever present. Can such a world be created by design! The answer is an emphatic 'yes.' But there is a prerequisite. A society must recognize that a child would rather step on a puddle of water than be indoors playing with a lifeless toy. A society must have the will to create a child-friendly environment. And 'where there is a will there is way.' Rabindranath Thakur's Santiniketan comes to mind as one of the shining examples.

Did I forget to talk about toys? Not really. The toys were indeed us—my friends and I—and all that made up our environment.

The author, A.N. 'Shen' Sengupta, represents any child from anywhere, who grew up in a rural and small town setting, in pre- and post-World War II years.