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RASA, BHAVA AND MATERIAL AESTHETICS: READING ETIKOPPAKA LACQUER TOYS THROUGH INDIAN AESTHETIC THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Etikoppaka lacquer toys from Andhra Pradesh are usually discussed in terms of heritage, geographical indication, natural dyes, sustainability, and artisan livelihoods. This article proposes a different reading of Etikoppaka toys by interpreting them through Indian aesthetic theory, particularly the concepts of rasa and bhava. The study argues that the aesthetic force of these toys is not produced solely by colour, decoration, or market identity, but by a layered relation among wood, lacquer, rounded form, tactile surface, miniature scale, movement, play, memory, and cultural familiarity. Drawing on Bharata's rasa-bhava framework, Abhinavagupta's understanding of aesthetic experience, and contemporary material culture and craft theory, the article develops a material-aesthetic model in which wood, lacquer, colour, surface, and play function as bhava-producing elements. These elements generate rasas such as hasya, adbhuta, shringara, shanta, vira and karuna in the child, viewer, collector or cultural participant. The article further suggests that the child may be understood as a rasika whose aesthetic experience occurs through handling, sound, movement and curiosity rather than through detached visual contemplation. By treating Etikoppaka toys as affective material forms, the article expands rasa theory from performance and literature toward craft, toy culture and haptic experience. It concludes that Etikoppaka lacquer toys offer an important model for developing an Indian theory of material aesthetics grounded in sensory knowledge, handmade skill and everyday cultural life.

KEYWORDS: *Etikoppaka toys; rasa; bhava; Indian aesthetics; material aesthetics; lacquer craft; toy culture; haptic experience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Etikoppaka lacquer toys, locally known as Etikoppaka bommalu, are among the significant traditions of wooden lacquer craft in Andhra Pradesh. The craft is associated with turned wooden forms, lacquer colouring, rounded edges, toy-like scale, and an intimate relationship between hand, tool, and material. Official geographical indication records identify Etikoppaka Toys as a registered handicraft of Andhra Pradesh, while contemporary institutional accounts describe the craft in relation to natural dyes, ankudu wood and child-friendly wooden objects (Geographical Indications Registry, 2017; WIPO, 2023). These descriptions are valuable, yet they do not fully explain why Etikoppaka objects continue to attract affection, memory and aesthetic attachment even when their forms are simple, and their scale is modest.

The present article begins from the premise that Etikoppaka toys should not be examined only as heritage products, sustainable alternatives to plastic toys or examples of rural livelihood. They are also aesthetic objects that activate emotion through material. Their smooth surfaces, balanced volumes, natural colour palette, rotational forms and playful movements generate a field of sensory and affective experience. In this sense, Etikoppaka toys occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of craft, design, sculpture, pedagogy, and domestic culture. They are made for use, but they exceed utility; they are small, yet culturally dense; they invite play, but they also carry memory and symbolic familiarity.

Indian aesthetic theory offers a useful vocabulary for interpreting such objects. The concepts of rasa and bhava, developed in the Natyashastra and subsequently expanded by commentators such as Abhinavagupta, are usually discussed in relation to drama, poetry, dance and music (Bharata Muni, 1951; Gnoli, 1956/1968; Masson & Patwardhan, 1970). However, the underlying question of rasa theory - how emotion becomes aesthetic experience - is not limited to performance. A craft object can also produce aesthetic relish when its material, form, colour and use become sensorial stimuli. This article, therefore, asks: how can Etikoppaka lacquer toys be read as material fields of rasa? What kinds of bhava are produced by wood, lacquer, colour, roundness, touch and play? How does the toy, often dismissed as a minor object, become a serious site for Indian material aesthetics?

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2. RASA, BHAVA AND THE EXTENSION OF AESTHETIC THEORY

In Bharata's aesthetic formulation, rasa refers to the relishable aesthetic experience produced through the organisation of determinants, consequents and transitory states. Bhava refers to the emotional state, condition or expressive stimulus that helps rasa arise. While the original framework is linked to theatrical performance, its deeper significance lies in the transformation of ordinary feeling into aesthetic enjoyment. Rasa is therefore not merely emotion; it is emotion reorganised, distanced and relished in an aesthetic mode (Bharata Muni, 1951; Gnoli, 1956/1968).

Abhinavagupta's commentary is crucial because it shifts attention from external representation alone to the inner experience of the sensitive appreciator. The rasika does not simply identify an emotion; rather, the rasika participates in a universalised aesthetic experience in which personal emotion is refined into contemplative relish (Gnoli, 1956/1968; Masson & Patwardhan, 1970). This insight allows Rasa to be extended beyond the theatre without forcing craft objects to behave like dramatic performances. A wooden toy does not enact a plot in the same way that an actor does, but it can still organise affective cues: colour, touch, movement, proportion, surface, memory and cultural recognition.

The proposed extension of Rasa theory to Etikoppaka craft must be done carefully. The article does not claim that Bharata directly theorised wooden toys. Instead, it argues that the rasa-bhava framework can be used as an interpretive method for understanding how objects generate aesthetic experience. In this interpretation, the toy's material and formal qualities function as bhava-producing elements. The experience they produce may be playful, calm, wondrous, affectionate, heroic, or nostalgic. Thus, a small lacquered spinning top, rattle, kitchen set or sacred toy can be understood as an object that condenses affect into material form.

3. ETIKOPPAKA TOYS AS MATERIAL-AESTHETIC OBJECTS

Etikoppaka toys are created through a process in which material, rotation, pressure and colour are inseparable. The craft uses soft wood, commonly associated with the ankudu (Wrightia tinctoria), shaped on a lathe and finished with lacquer and colour. Contemporary institutional sources emphasise natural dye practices and the role of artisans such as C. V. Raju in strengthening sustainable, child-friendly wooden toy making (DST, 2021; NIF, 2003; WIPO, 2023). These features are not simply technical facts. They shape the way the toy is seen, held and emotionally received.

The materiality of Etikoppaka has a gentle visual and tactile character. Unlike many industrial toys that depend on synthetic brightness, mechanical complexity or media-driven character imagery, Etikoppaka toys often produce aesthetic value through reduction. Their bodies are cylindrical, spherical, conical or modular. Their surfaces are smooth rather than sharp. Their colours are vivid but usually organised around clear bands, contrasts and simple divisions. Their scale is small enough to be held, rotated and moved. This makes the experience of the toy bodily and intimate.

Material-culture theory helps clarify this point. Prown (1982) argues that artefacts can serve as primary evidence for cultural analysis because material objects embody values and ways of life. Ingold (2013) similarly emphasises making as a form of knowing, where the maker thinks through materials rather than merely imposing a preformed idea upon passive matter. In the case of Etikoppaka, the artisan's knowledge is held in the rhythm of turning, the management of pressure, the handling of lacquer and the finishing of a surface safe enough for children. The finished toy is therefore not a mute commodity; it is materialised knowledge.

4. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive and object-based methodology. It combines three forms of analysis: first, a theoretical reading of rasa and bhava in Indian aesthetics; second, a material-culture analysis of toys as evidence-bearing artefacts; and third, visual and haptic interpretation of selected Etikoppaka forms such as spinning tops, rattles, animal toys, domestic miniatures, human figures, and sacred figures. The method is conceptual rather than statistical, but it is grounded in the physical properties and known craft practices of Etikoppaka.

The article also draws on published studies on Etikoppaka aesthetics and sacred toy representation. Prasad (2026) examines proportional and formal aesthetics in Etikoppaka rural handicrafts, while Chaganti and Adinarayana (2026) discuss the simplified, child-centred treatment of sacred forms in Etikoppaka lacquer toys. These studies support the argument that Etikoppaka toys should be read not only as craft products but also as visual systems in which proportion, clarity, recognisability, safety and symbolic condensation become central aesthetic values.

The analytical categories used here are material, form, surface, colour, scale, movement, cultural association and affective response. Each category is interpreted as a possible bhava-producing element. The aim is not to assign one rasa mechanically to each toy, but to understand how several sensory and cultural cues together produce an aesthetic field.

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5. MATERIAL BHAVA: WOOD, LACQUER AND COLOUR

In Etikoppaka, wood operates as the first bhava-producing element. It carries warmth, softness and organic familiarity. The choice of soft wood allows the artisan to shape rounded, child-friendly forms, but it also gives the object a living, material presence. When the toy is held, the user does not encounter cold industrial uniformity; the object retains the memory of a tree, a hand, and a tool. This material warmth contributes strongly to shanta rasa, understood here as calmness, balance and non-aggressive aesthetic presence.

Lacquer functions as a transformative skin. It covers the wooden body, intensifies colour, smoothens the surface and turns the object into a polished visual presence. The shine of lacquer attracts without requiring excessive ornamentation. It also mediates between protection and beauty: lacquer preserves the wood while giving it radiance. In rasa terms, lacquer may support shringara as a charm and an aesthetic grace, especially in dolls, decorated figures, and festive objects. However, in the Etikoppaka context, shringara need not be limited to erotic love; it may be interpreted as affection, intimacy, ornamented beauty and visual tenderness.

Colour is central to the emotional grammar of Etikoppaka. Yellow, red, green, black, orange and natural tones do not merely decorate the toy; they organise affect. Yellow can suggest warmth and auspicious brightness; red can carry energy and festivity; green may evoke nature; black stabilises contrast; natural tones generate earthiness and trust. WIPO (2023) notes the use of natural dyes derived from seeds, resin, bark, roots, and leaves, and this ecological association adds another layer to the aesthetic response. Colour, therefore, acts as bhava because it prepares the viewer for delight, trust, wonder or affection before any narrative meaning is recognised.

6. FORM, SCALE, TOUCH AND PLAY

The form language of Etikoppaka toys is dominated by roundness, symmetry and modular simplification. These qualities are not accidental. Lathe turning naturally generates circular and rotational forms, but the artisan's judgement determines proportion, balance and recognisability. Round forms create safety and visual comfort. They avoid the aggression of sharp edges and invite the palm to close around the object. This is why Etikoppaka toys are especially suited to haptic aesthetics: they are designed not only to look but also to be held.

Scale intensifies intimacy. A miniature vessel, animal, rattle or sacred figure is not a reduced version of a large object in a purely optical sense; it is an object reorganised for the hand. The hand becomes the space of reception. The child grasps, rolls, taps, shakes, spins and arranges the toy. In classical aesthetics, the rasika is the sensitive appreciator. In Etikoppaka toy culture, the child may be understood as a haptic rasika. The child's appreciation is not expressed through critical language, but through bodily engagement, repetition, delight and curiosity.

Movement produces hasya and adbhuta with particular force. A spinning top generates anticipation and surprise; a rattle produces sound and rhythm; rolling toys turn still form into kinetic play. The toy performs, but its performance is activated by the user. This distinguishes Etikoppaka from purely decorative craft. The object contains the possibility of action. Once handled, it produces laughter, wonder and discovery. Hasya emerges through playfulness and amusement, while adbhuta emerges through transformation: a small piece of turned and lacquered wood suddenly becomes a moving, sounding, animated presence.

The haptic quality of Etikoppaka also complicates conventional visual art analysis. A sculpture in a museum is often protected from touch, but a toy demands touch. Its aesthetic success depends upon the pleasure of holding it. This makes touch not a secondary sense but a central aesthetic mode. The surface must be smooth, the weight manageable, the movement satisfying, and the form safe. The toy's beauty is therefore distributed across the eye, hand, ear and memory.

7. CULTURAL BHAVA: MEMORY, DOMESTICITY AND SACRED FAMILIARITY

Etikoppaka toys carry cultural bhava through the everyday worlds they represent. Domestic miniatures, kitchen sets, ritual objects, animals, human figures and sacred forms connect children with the visual vocabulary of household life. The miniature kitchen set is especially significant because it translates domestic practices into play-scale objects. It does not merely imitate utensils; it trains recognition, social imagination and cultural memory. Such toys allow the child to rehearse the world through material play.

Sacred forms introduce another layer of aesthetic complexity. Chaganti and Adinarayana (2026) argue that Etikoppaka sacred toys often simplify deity forms for recognisability, stability, tactile safety, and child-centred communication rather than strictly following canonical iconography. This simplified sacredness is not a weakness. It shows how a living craft adapts sacred imagery to domestic and pedagogical contexts. The rasa produced here may combine shringara, shanta and adbhuta: affection for the form, calm recognition of sacred familiarity and wonder at the condensation of divine identity into a small toy.

Karuṇa rasa appears differently. It is not usually produced by the toy's cheerful surface. Rather, it emerges when Etikoppaka is viewed against the vulnerability of handmade toy traditions, the pressure of plastic toys, the difficulty of sustaining artisan

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livelihoods and the fragility of ecological materials. The toy then becomes a memory object: it recalls childhood, village fairs, gifting practices, and pre-digital domestic play. The aesthetic pleasure of the object is accompanied by awareness of loss and preservation. Karuṇa therefore enters the article not as sadness inside the toy's iconography, but as cultural poignancy surrounding the continuation of the craft.

8. RASA MAPPING IN ETIKOPPAKA TOYS

The following table summarises how selected rasas can be interpreted in relation to Etikoppaka toys. The mapping is heuristic, not fixed. The same toy may produce more than one rasa depending on context, user, memory and mode of handling.

Table 1. Rasa-bhava mapping for Etikoppaka lacquer toys

Rasa	Aesthetic Quality	Etikoppaka Example	Bhava-Producing Trigger
Hasya	Playfulness, delight, amusement	Spinning tops, rattles, animal toys	Movement, sound, small scale, child interaction
Adbhuta	Wonder, surprise, transformation	Raw wood transformed into polished, coloured toys	Lathe rotation, lacquer shine, colour fusion
Shringara	Charm, affection, ornamented beauty	Dolls, festive figures, sacred couples	Colour harmony, polish, and graceful roundness
Shanta	Calmness, balance, non-aggressive presence	Plain, rounded toys, natural-coloured objects	Smoothness, symmetry, organic material, safety
Vira	Skill, discipline, craft, persistence	Artisan turning and lacquer application	Tool control, pressure, and continuity of practice
Karuna	Memory, fragility, cultural poignancy	Handmade toys under pressure from plastic alternatives	Nostalgia, livelihood vulnerability, heritage loss

9. DISCUSSION: TOWARD AN INDIAN MATERIAL AESTHETICS OF CRAFT

The reading developed in this article suggests that Indian aesthetics can be productively extended from performance and literature into craft without reducing the specificity of craft. The point is not to claim that a toy is a drama, but to recognise that both performance and craft can organise sensory stimuli into affective experience. In drama, gesture, voice, costume, plot and music generate rasa. In Etikoppaka toys, wood, lacquer, colour, form, touch, movement and memory perform this role.

This approach also challenges the marginal status often assigned to toys. A toy may appear minor because it belongs to childhood, play and domestic use rather than to the museum or temple. Yet precisely for this reason, it is culturally powerful. It enters early sensory life. It trains the hand. It makes colour, form, rhythm and cultural imagery available to the child. It connects everyday domestic spaces with larger symbolic worlds. The Etikoppaka toy should therefore be understood as a serious aesthetic object, not because it imitates high art, but because it reveals how aesthetic experience is embedded in everyday material culture.

The article further proposes that bhava in craft is not only represented but also materialised. The rounded edge is a bhava of safety. Smooth lacquer is a bhava of attraction. Natural colour is a bhava of trust. Miniature scale is a bhava of intimacy. Movement is a bhava of play. Sacred simplification is a bhava of recognisable cultural access. These material bhavas do not remain isolated; they converge into rasa through user experience. This convergence is the core of Etikoppaka's material aesthetics.

Finally, the concept of the child as rasika has theoretical importance. Classical rasa theory often assumes a cultivated spectator capable of aesthetic appreciation. Etikoppaka shifts attention to embodied and pre-verbal appreciation. The child's repeated act of spinning, shaking, touching or arranging is itself a form of aesthetic participation. In this mode, rasa is not produced by textual interpretation alone; it is produced by tactile curiosity and sensorimotor delight. This insight can support a broader Indian aesthetics of craft, play and material learning.

10. CONCLUSION

Etikoppaka lacquer toys demonstrate that rasa can emerge from small, handmade and everyday objects. Their aesthetic value is not confined to visual decoration or heritage status. It arises from a subtle interaction of wood, lacquer, colour, roundness, scale, touch, movement, memory and cultural recognition. These elements function as bhava-producing conditions that evoke delight, wonder, affection, calm, courage, and poignancy.

By reading Etikoppaka through rasa and bhava, this article contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, it expands Indian aesthetic theory beyond performance and literature toward craft and material culture. Second, it positions the toy as a serious aesthetic and

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pedagogical object. Third, it proposes material aesthetics as a useful framework for understanding Indian craft traditions in which sensory experience, handmade skill and cultural memory cannot be separated.

The article does not argue for a rigid rasa classification of Etikoppaka toys. Rather, it argues for a flexible interpretive model in which materials and forms are understood as affective agents. A polished wooden rattle, a spinning top, a domestic miniature or a sacred toy becomes aesthetically meaningful because it is seen, touched, moved, remembered and culturally recognised. In this sense, Etikoppaka lacquer toys constitute a living field of rasa. They show how Indian craft can transform simple material into emotional knowledge and how the hand can become a site of aesthetic experience.

GLOSSARY

Rasa	Aesthetic relish or refined emotional experience produced through artistic encounter. In this article, rasa refers to the emotional and sensory pleasure generated by Etikoppaka toys through colour, form, touch, movement and memory.
Bhava	Emotional state, condition or expressive stimulus that helps produce rasa. In Etikoppaka toys, bhava may arise from colour, surface, material softness, scale, movement and cultural familiarity.
Sthāyibhāva	A stable or dominant emotional condition that becomes rasa upon aesthetic transformation. For example, joy may become **hāsya rasa**, and wonder may become **adbhuta rasa**.
Vibhāva	The cause or stimulus that evokes an emotional response. In this study, a toy's colour, shape, sound, movement or sacred imagery may function as vibhāva.
Anubhāva	The outward manifestation of an inner emotion. In object analysis, the visual and tactile qualities of a toy may be read as material expressions of feeling.
Vyabhicāribhāva	Transitory emotional states that support the dominant aesthetic experience. Curiosity, surprise, nostalgia and tenderness may accompany the experience of Etikoppaka toys.
Rasika	A sensitive appreciator capable of experiencing aesthetic relish. In this article, the child, viewer, collector, artisan and researcher may all function as rasikas in different ways.
Sahṛdaya	Literally "one with heart"; a cultivated or sensitive receiver of aesthetic experience. The term is useful for discussing how cultural memory and sensitivity shape responses to craft objects.
Śṛṅgāra Rasa	The rasa of beauty, affection, charm and love. In Etikoppaka toys, it may appear through decorative dolls, sacred couple imagery, graceful colour and polished surfaces.
Hāsya Rasa	The rasa of humour, amusement and playfulness. It is especially relevant to rattles, spinning tops, animal toys and playful miniature forms.
Karuṇa Rasa	The rasa of pathos, tenderness or sorrow. In this article, it may be linked to nostalgia, childhood memory, the decline of handmade toy traditions and the vulnerability of artisan livelihoods.
Vīra Rasa	The rasa of courage, strength and heroic energy. It may be interpreted through artisan skill, technical discipline, craft survival and intergenerational continuity.
Adbhuta Rasa	The rasa of wonder and astonishment. It is central to the transformation of raw wood into luminous lacquered toys through turning, friction, colour and polish.
Śānta Rasa	The rasa of calmness, balance and inner quiet. In Etikoppaka toys, it may emerge through rounded forms, natural materials, smooth surfaces and gentle colour harmonies.
Material Aesthetics	An approach that studies how material qualities such as wood, lacquer, colour, weight, texture and surface contribute to aesthetic experience.
Material Culture	The study of objects as carriers of social, cultural, emotional and historical meaning. Etikoppaka toys are treated as material-cultural objects rather than merely commercial craft products.
Haptic Aesthetics	Aesthetic experience based on touch, bodily contact and tactile perception. Etikoppaka toys are haptic objects because they are meant to be held, rolled, spun and handled.
Embodied Making	The process through which artisan knowledge is expressed through the body, hand, tool, rhythm and material control. It is central to the lathe-based Etikoppaka practice.
Affective Object	An object that produces or carries an emotional response. Etikoppaka toys become affective objects through play, memory, touch and cultural symbolism.
Ankudu Wood	The locally used soft wood associated with Etikoppaka toy-making is commonly identified with *Wrightia tinctoria*. Its lightness and workability support rounded, child-friendly forms.
Lac / Lacquer	A natural resinous material used to create the smooth, coloured and polished surface of Etikoppaka toys. It functions both as protection and as an aesthetic skin.
Natural Dyes	Colouring materials derived from natural sources. In Etikoppaka, natural dyes support ecological value, child-safe identity and visual softness.

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Friction-Based Lacquering	The process in which lacquer colour is applied to rotating wooden forms through heat generated by friction. This process transforms surface, colour and touch.
Lathe Turning	The technique of shaping wood by rotating it against hand tools. Etikoppaka's rounded, symmetrical and modular forms are largely produced through turning.
Miniature	A small-scale representation of objects, animals, humans or domestic forms. Miniature scale creates intimacy, recognisability and child-centred engagement.
Sacred Couple Imagery	Representations of divine or auspicious couples in toy form. In the article, such imagery is read through the lens of śṛṅgāra, śānta, devotion, harmony, and cultural memory.
Domestic Miniatures	Small toy versions of household objects such as vessels, kitchen sets or ritual items. These connect play with domestic life and cultural learning.
Child as Rasika	A theoretical idea proposed in the article is that the child is not merely a user of toys but an aesthetic appreciator who experiences rasa through touch, play, movement, and curiosity.
Play-Value	The capacity of a toy to invite handling, imagination, movement and interaction. In Etikoppaka toys, play value is closely linked with rasa experience.
Tactility	The quality of being touchable or inviting touch. Smooth lacquer, rounded edges and light wood give Etikoppaka toys a strong tactile appeal.
Cultural Memory	Shared memories, associations and meanings carried by cultural objects. Etikoppaka toys evoke childhood, festivals, village craft, family gifting and handmade traditions.
GI Status	Geographical Indication recognition that links a product to a specific region and tradition. Etikoppaka toys received GI recognition as a regional craft identity.
Craft Knowledge	Practical, embodied and inherited knowledge held by artisans. It includes material selection, tool use, turning, colouring, finishing and design judgement.
Vernacular Design	Design emerging from local culture, material practice and community knowledge rather than formal industrial design systems. Etikoppaka toys are strong examples of vernacular design.
Ecological Aesthetics	An aesthetic approach that values natural materials, sustainability, non-toxic colour and environmental sensitivity. Etikoppaka's wood, lac, and natural-dye tradition supports this reading.

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