

Shri S. Krishna Murthy Mirmira

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development-1991

Shri Krishna Murthy Mirmira, a native of Bangalore, took his Diploma in Ceramics from Bangalore Polytechnic. Even while he was a student, he took part in the Quit India movement in 1942 and was jailed for over 6 months. He got keenly interested in the teachings and ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and decided to devote his life for their propagation.

He went to Wardha on an invitation from Dr. J.C. Kumarappa, the foremost Gandhian economist, and undertook research on improving the quality of traditional Indian pottery. He joined the All India Village Industries Association, which put him in charge of the Pottery Department. His urge for a first hand study of village life made him work in the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements for 3 years. He walked on foot in parts of the country, which gave him an insight into the problems of the rural people, particularly the plight of the artisans.

He felt that he must settle down in one place and take it as a mission to work intensively in his own specialized field of ceramics and raise the living standards of potters. With the blessings and guidance Acharya Vinoba Bhave, Annasaheb Sahasrabuddhe and Shri R.K. Patil, Mirmira selected the village Bhadrawati on Chandrapur district of Maharashtra. There were 3 reasons for choosing the village: (a). it had a number of tanks having good quality plastic red clay (b). there were potters who had been plying their occupation for generations 36 families of traditional potters were living and working in a concentrated way in one colony, and, (c). Mirmira had heard from Shri Patil that Gandhiji himself desired that the life of the potters of this village be upgraded.

But the village was not ready for him; he had neither acquaintance nor any money when he went there in 1955. He went there as a Gram Sevak of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi on a monthly allowance of Rs 100/- which was also later stopped. Then he lived on the charity of poor people like potters, bamboo workers, etc. he worked for them and got food in exchange, by turns from different families, which went on for nearly 4 years.

Mirmira started helping the potters in the mornings and he used to teach children and adults at night. He looked after the cleanliness of the latrines, attended on sick people and scavenged the whole colony.

Bhadrawati's traditional pottery was on the verge of total eclipse, the fate of almost all handicrafts, as a result of fierce competition from the advanced industrialized sector. The local potters still depended on their age-old rural techniques and their products were crude and fragile. They had no modern kiln. The need of the hour was to upgrade the potters' skills, diversify products, modernize the methods of production, and attempt more remunerative marketing in short, innovation. But innovation had to be in terms of the needs of the people and without hurting the traditional familial structure and values. Mirmira adopted this social anthropological approach and set about his task.

He started by establishing a common fund, out of the auction sale of pots he collected as donation from each family. The fund was utilized to give loans to members, thus ending their exploitation by money lenders. He also fought the observance of untouchability by potters themselves against those in the profession who made bricks and local roofing tiles. He did bricks himself and showed that it was quite profitable. Gradually others also took to brick-making and social taboos started disappearing. He also demonstrated that by pooling the pots made by all and marketing them in common, the potter could get a better price than competitive selling.

He then decided to enlarge the scope of his activities so as to include training, up gradation and innovation and to give greater permanence to his work.

It was with this idea that he founded a public trust, called “Gramodyog Sangh” in 1955. The main objective of the organization was to organize potters on a co-operative basis, impart training in advanced skills to them and extend them financial assistance for setting up independent units.

One of the first things Mirmira did was to train the potters in the art of glazing their ware. A training centre was started for upgrading the skills, in collaboration with the Khadi and Village Industries Commission. The emphasis in training was on simple techniques with minimum investment. Apart from young local boys, students also came from other parts of the country for training, which was initially confined to improved red clay pottery and then gradually extended to refining tiles, white wares, glazed stoneware jars, etc. More than 1500 young potters have been trained so far, from all parts of the country. For intensive study of glazed white ware and heavy clay technology, Mirmira went to Japan and England.

After the completion of this training the potters were engaged in the production units. Once they had enough experience and production units. Once they had enough experience and were found competent, the same units were converted into co-operative societies and formally handed over to the workers.

Thus, the Gramodaya Sangh has trained and organized half a dozen producers' cooperative societies. At Bhadrawati six separate units employing 300 people have been established, producing goods worth Rs 15 lakhs.

This cooperative structure provided a model to others, and with the assistance to Mirmira, over 15 such production units have been set up in Maharashtra and a few other States also.

Mirmira did a lot of research work as regards the different equipments, tools and kilns required by the traditional potters. Improved potter's wheel, both hand operated as well as power operated, were tried and a workable design was fabricated. In the same way, grinding and processing equipment required in white ware production units were also prepared and standardized, as per the capacity of the small units. This machinery was manufactured in a local workshop with the help of locally trained technicians.

Different designs of improved potters' ovens were tested and a standard oven was finalized. Down draft-kiln with chimney was designed and constructed with locally prepared bricks, for high temperature firing. Using the locally available raw-materials, clay mixture was prepared and standardized for the production of glazed white ware suitable for high temperature. Glazes for the same were prepared and standardized. Ceramic colours were prepared tested with his own compositions.

Shri Mirmira holds exhibitions and sale campaigns in all the major cities of the country and has thus made Bhadrawati a known name among connoisseurs of handicrafts.

Recently, he successfully carried put a project, with the support of CAPART, for establishing model pottery production centres. 25 young boys were trained and they, in turn, trained the artisans' in a potters' village in each State. A production oriented programme was followed in these places.

Mirmira's life mission has made a deep impact on the life of the potters and, in fact, the whole village economy. It has led to new entrepreneurship, more jobs, higher wages and an improvement in the living standards and also the outlook of the erstwhile poor artisans.

As a result of the better earnings they started getting the potters of Bhadrawati were induced to turn their attention to socially useful work. A Balwadi has been started. A number of Gobar gas plants have been set up. Improved type of latrines have been constructed in the village,

