



## Craft as an Ideal

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*For the creator, the doing aspect or the process of creating itself is often more important than the object of creation, irrespective of its success with the spectator, who experiences and enjoys the end result of the creator's effort — a beautiful object, a message, a communication or a combination of more than one of these elements. — DEVI PRASAD<sup>1</sup>*

**1a and b.**

A pair of vases, Devi Prasad, Sevagram, 1950s. Earthenware with painted pigment; (L) height: 18.9 cm, (R) height: 19.5 cm. The land, fields and homestead became a primary focus of attention for Devi in Sevagram which can also be seen in an enormous body of his photographs and paintings from this period.

**I**F THE COLONIAL PROJECT OF CREATING ART schools that taught ceramics was the first major intervention in the history of modern Indian ceramics, then, perhaps, the work of Devi Prasad (1921–2011) at Gandhiji's Sevagram ashram is the second. Sevagram was, and is, the large ashram set up near Wardha in Maharashtra. It was created to embody and to espouse Nai Talim, or new education, Mahatma Gandhi's movement to create a new India of conscionable and free people. A modern Indian education system was needed to create a new, postcolonial nation and

Sevagram ashram and Nai Talim were to be the experimental ground to find a way forward. Devi Prasad was selected to be both the art teacher at the ashram as well as the editor of *Nai Talim*, the pioneering education journal that set down these experiments.<sup>2</sup>

Although both are creative processes involving the same materials, "art" practice has been showcased through one set of institutions, and "handicrafts" through another. And although both the colonial art schools as well as Gandhi's ashram worked with traditional potters, there were funda-

mental differences between the two. Devi Prasad was instrumental in defining those differences, and in the process, also defining the role of art, and the larger purpose of a person's engagement with labour and creative work.<sup>3</sup>

An important Gandhian, Devi Prasad (figure 5) had graduated from Santiniketan where he had been taught painting by Benode Behari Mukherjee, but had developed an important friendship

with Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij. At Bose's instigation he pursued his political leanings and joined Gandhi's ashram in 1944. Here he maintained an important correspondence with Gandhi on the place of art and aesthetics in life as prescribed in the Gandhian ideology. A letter he received from Gandhi (figure 2) was almost electric in defining for Devi what principles must guide Nai Talim.

2. Letter from Gandhi to Devi Prasad on the meaning of art and artist, March 1, 1945.

Sevagram  
1 March 1945

Chiranjeev Devi Prasad,

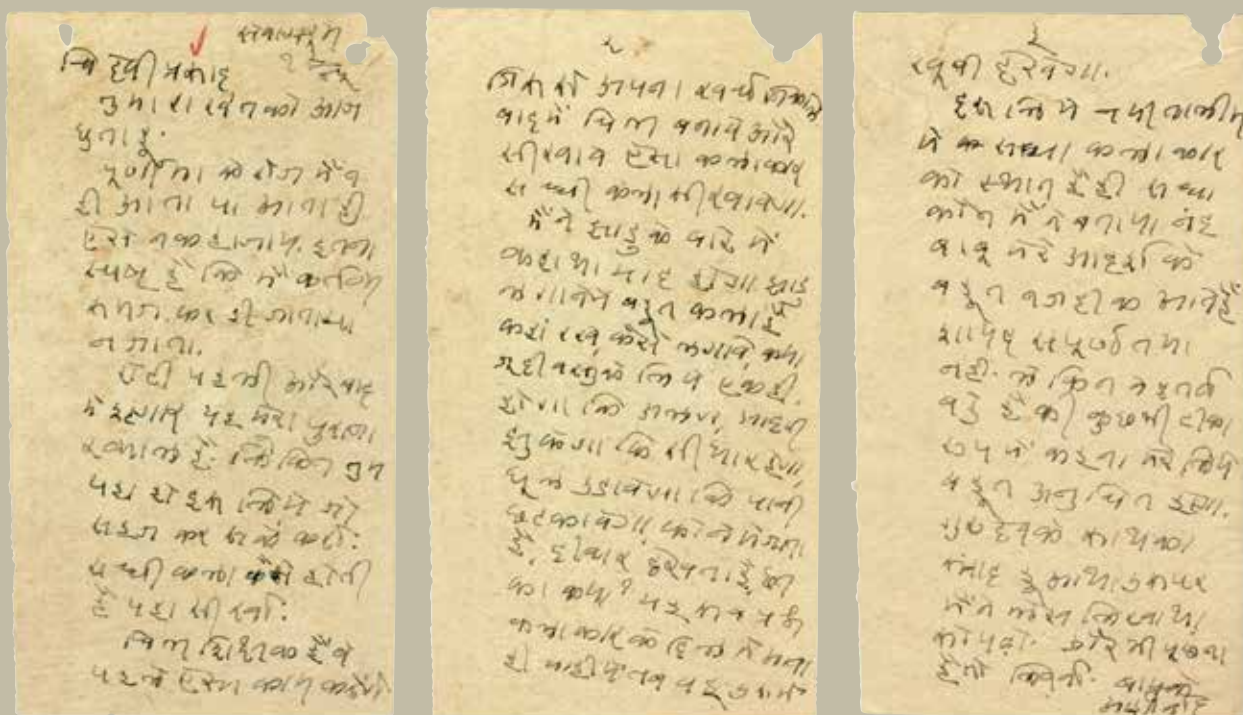
...Food first and adornment/art afterwards—this is an old view of mine. However, you are now here [Sevagram] therefore do what you can naturally do. Learn here what true art is. Art teachers are those who will do such work from which they can first meet their expenses and later make or teach the making of pictures. Only such an artist can teach true art.

I had spoken of the broom (jharu)—you will remember. Using a broom is a great art. Where do you keep it, how do you use it, which type of broom do you use for which type of surface; does a man bend while using it or stay straight, do you

allow dust to fly or sprinkle the ground first with water, do you attend to the corners, are you aware of the dust on the walls, and what about the ceiling? All these questions must arise in the heart of an artist. Only then will he see the wonder/beauty in it.

This is why the true artist naturally has a space in the Nai Talim [the New Education Movement of Gandhi]. So who is true? As I said: Nanda Babu [Nandalal Bose] comes close to my ideal. Perhaps not completely. But he is so big that anything in the form of an explication by me would be inappropriate. A discussion was had with Gurudev [Rabindranath Tagore]. I have written an article on that. Read it. Write to me if you want to ask me more.

With Bapu's blessings.





### Progress as a Potter

Devi had been politically minded since he was a child and his political consciousness saw him participate actively in the Quit India Movement in 1942 and in social reforms such as Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan—the land-gift movement of the 1940s and '50s. In his early days at Sevagram, Devi Prasad remained a politically active acolyte of Vinoba Bhave, traversing on foot vast tracts of the Indian subcontinent, engaging with village folk and craftsmen (figure 3). The years at Sevagram drew Devi Prasad into a wider web of artists, educators, political thinkers and activists.

S.K. Mirmira, who had graduated in ceramic technology from the Bangalore Polytechnic and had also been active in the Quit India Movement (and imprisoned for eight months during that time), joined Sevagram in 1948. He helped enhance the small pottery section Devi had created there, using local red clay and carefully observing local potters. Mirmira settled with the Bhadravati potters near Wardha, and after the Khadi Commission was set up by the Government in 1953, became actively involved with training and organizing several local craftsmen communities in India into cooperatives that made new wares for the changing markets. Meanwhile Devi was focused more on activities at Sevagram, and was personally struggling with glazes, studying how to improve the local wheel besides learning how to throw clay pots from a local potter. It was in those days that Devi stumbled upon Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book* in Gandhi's library at Sevagram. This was to be his most significant guide in aiding his

transformation into a studio potter. He wrote:

"Apart from knowing something about the technical side of the art of pottery Bernard Leach's book taught me how to look at a pot and to understand the elements that make a pot a living object. I say living, because Bernard Leach saw a pot as something that has its own personality. Realising fully well that my knowledge is very limited, I am taking the courage to say, even if it is only on the basis of my Santiniketan experience, that apart from Nandalal Bose no other artist would have drawn a parallel between the human body and a pot made with clay, as Bernard Leach did....

"...I met Bernard Leach for the first time in 1972, when I was living in London. I went to his home in St. Ives.

"...Bernard's greatness was also in his way of looking at the art of pottery. Pottery for him was not just a craft. It was the art of living, just like any other art, painting, music or sculpture, which, if honestly practiced with dedication, takes the maker from the world of forms to a world of anandam—supreme joy. He was scientific in his understanding of the art and technology of ceramics, and the way in which he explained and practiced the scientific aspect of pot-making was unique. His language was of poetical nature and that which everybody could understand. It is also that aspect of *A Potter's Book* that places it in the category of classics—something that remains always alive and in demand. There are thousands of books on the technique of pottery and there will be many more thousands in the coming decades, but *A Potter's Book* will remain the bible for all potters. It surely is mine."<sup>4</sup>

Bernard Leach was himself sympathetic towards Indian art and aesthetics. He was aware of the writings of Coomaraswamy and had met both Gandhi and Tagore in England: Gandhi in London in 1930 during the Round Table Conference, and Tagore at Dartington with the Elmhursts later in that decade.



3. A potter at Sevagram, 1950s, photographed by Devi Prasad. The spirit of abstraction in Devi's painted ceramic work was reliant on disparate sources of influence. His close observation of village art, as revealed in this photograph, is one important component.

4. Vase, Devi Prasad, Sevagram, 1950s. Earthenware with painted pigment; height: 24 cm.

Several art historians have noted how many of the great espousers of the Arts and Crafts Movement were themselves inspired by aesthetic ideals of Indian art, and in turn these fed back to India in the formation of many art colleges.<sup>5</sup> Few, however, have noted how important a part ceramics played in that history.

Devi Prasad left a strong pottery legacy at Kala Bhavan, the art centre he created at Sevagram. The work had all been in red clay, fired and glazed to 960°C in a simple wood-fired kiln. He had also designed his own ball-and-pot mill to run on water power. Much of the technical knowledge for setting this up was adapted to his environment from Leach's book. Apart from Mirmira, also helping Devi in Sevagram was Kalindi Jena, who went on to become a famous ceramicist. By 1956, when the 18-year-old Jena joined Sevagram, Devi had created an active Kala Bhavan there. Having worked alongside Devi for five or six years, Jena stayed on to become an assistant art teacher at Sevagram, spending a total of 11 years as student and teacher there. Jena took over Devi's position when he left for England to become Secretary (and later Chairman) of the War Resisters' International, the world's oldest organization of pacifists. Jena became disillusioned with the changes taking place at Sevagram and then left to join Prabhas Sen at the Design Centre in Calcutta. Gradually, several of the creative lights of Gandhi's ashram abandoned Nai Talim for lack of governmental support and because the system of Indian education was set, by the 1960s, on a very different course, one that had scant space for Gandhian swavalamban or self-sufficiency, for the polemics of swadeshi, or for craft as an ideal and medium for education.

Sevagram attracted a continuous stream of international visitors that included an enormous spectrum of political activists, educationists and artists who were eager to learn from and contribute to Gandhi's ashram. One of them was the ceramic artist John French who had come to live in Calcutta from 1957 to 1960, as a folk art collector for the Design Centre of West Bengal. He was profoundly moved by Sevagram and came to work closely with Devi during that period. They further developed the pottery styles and repertoire of Sevagram.



Other young visitors who came to see how Devi had organized the Kala Bhavan at Sevagram included Dashrath Patel, who later went on to found the National Institute of Design (NID) and remained a studio potter himself, apart from his work as a textile and exhibition designer, photographer and product designer. Inspired by the Sevagram model, he created the first programmes on visual, ceramic, product and exhibition design at NID. He formed a Rural Design School at Sewapuri near Varanasi to continue to work on Gandhian principles. However much of his personal work may have been driven to abstracted ideation, his work in the field of design was always practical, low-cost, made from locally sourced materials and made available to rural consumers. This was very much in sync with Gandhian ideals.

Similarly, at the first All-India Potters' Conference (figures 8a and b) set up by Devi Prasad at Sevagram, the first prize was won by a young Haku Shah, who represented the Chaudhary community of Gujarat's votive terracotta sculptors. Shah studied at Baroda in the 1950s and became a renowned ethnographer of the craft traditions of Gujarat, documenting several folk arts and crafts, and in particular textiles and ceramics traditions. The 1950s and '60s saw enormous intellectual support for the "folk" arts, and an examination of the living traditions of music, dance, art and ritual cultures was strongly encouraged in art schools. However, there were hardly any private contemporary art galleries interested in "high" art at the time, let alone any that were interested in "crafts" and rural artisanship, and these artists were particularly reliant on governmental initiatives to find an

5. Devi Prasad.  
PHOTOGRAPH:  
KRISTINE MICHAEL.

ethical means of sourcing outlets for their creative expression alongside rural artisans.

### Why Swavalamban?

For Devi Prasad, the village was never an isolated space arrested in some eternal eastern utopia. The internationalism in his Sevagram works can be seen from the beginning of his time there (figures 1a and b, 4, 6 and 7). Devi joined various photography societies and built a well-equipped darkroom at one end of Kala Bhavan, as well as a carpentry workshop and a painting room. At the other end he built a wood-fired updraft kiln and launched a full-fledged pottery programme in the school.

At the base of this internationalism, however, lies his profound brand of Gandhian ideals. Much of his work was at the grassroots level. The process of making the artwork had always to be in tune with its setting and technology; the means for making an artwork had always been a part of the process for him. Paintings were executed in natural dyes, buckets of water were left out overnight in the hope that they might be cool enough to process photographs at dawn, clays were locally found, glazes invented, sophisticated kilns were built, adapted and innovated on at the village. Self-sufficiency, swavalamban, was both an ideal and a necessity at Sevagram. Just as making khadi became a cornerstone of the Sarvodaya Movement and a weapon in the struggle for independence, the Sevagram ashram extended the spirit behind those Gandhian ideals into all other aspects of making almost everything a person needed. Spinning was as much a part of daily life as washing and eating in Sevagram. Necessity apart, Sevagram was to set an example to rural India. Although basic supplies like paints and paper were available, brushes were handmade in the art school, some of the paint was made from vegetables and coloured earths mixed with resin. Fortunately the very rich Indian traditions of folk as well as courtly art and craftsmanship were still available to be documented and learnt from. Devi met many craftsmen across India during the Bhoodan walks with Vinoba Bhave. He constructed various experimental potter's wheels and kilns and eventually achieved a creditable studio with several kick-wheels and an updraft wood-fired kiln. Although he mentions it only in passing in his writings, it

is clear that Devi Prasad's art practice is inseparable from swavalamban. It gives an added, perhaps spiritual or moral dimension to his love of making and doing. The joy in doing, indeed in *DIY*—Do It Yourself—ran strongly through his work.

“The educational philosophy of Gandhi (Nai Talim) lays the individual, social and moral foundations of life. By education, Gandhi meant an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit. He would begin the child's education by teaching a useful handicraft and enabling him to produce from the moment he begins his training. He held that the highest development of the mind and soul was possible under such a scheme of education. Every handicraft had to be taught scientifically, not merely mechanically.

“In his system, there were three centres of education: the art of creating things using manual labour, the art of living cooperatively in a school community and the art of being one with nature. The actual education plan had to be prepared by the community as a whole, not imposed from above. The relationship between the individual and the community on the one hand and nature on the other, should have the perspective of the whole universe as a family.”<sup>6</sup>

Devi Prasad's innovations in this regard have become useful for all Indian studio potters. Not



6. Two views of a vase, Devi Prasad, Sevagram, 1950s. Earthenware with painted pigment; height: 20 cm. Controlled brushwork was combined with sculptural form, very much in the spirit of early Indian modernist art.

only did others like S.K. Mirmira, Kalindi Jena, Dashrath Patel and Haku Shah use and adapt what they learnt at Sevagram, Devi himself crystallized his ideas in writing short books on how to make pottery tools, and teaching his students how to make kilns and wheels apart from the usual processes of making clays and glazes. In time these ideas were disseminated to various small industries and also formalized in a project for rural uplift by the IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) in the 1980s (figures 9a and b). Today, when in liberalized India it is possible for studio potters to import materials, wheels and so on, it is relevant to remember that this was certainly not the case even 15 years ago.

### Craft, Labour and Ethical Conscionable Living

Devi Prasad was able to amalgamate three disparate sources of influence: Gandhian ethics, Marxist ideals along with romanticism and ethos of the Arts and Crafts mentors as they had been adopted in India by Tagore. In their totality, this grouping presents a persuasive way of thinking about craftsmanship and labour; the role of an artist and his/her terms of engagement with the sourcing and handling of the material of art-making, its market and patron; above all, a model for how artists dealt with issues of the responsibilities of a signature style and personal ambition.

The espousers of the Arts and Crafts Movement adhered to various principles that had begun to be widely disseminated by the start of the 20th century. Amongst them were a series of democratic phrases including “joy in labour”, “unity in design”, and “fidelity to place”. These potent phrases allowed both practitioners and the viewing public to locate the Arts and Crafts Movement’s many ideologies in the materials used, methods employed in their making and ethos of the traditions where they were made. This was given a very tangible reality in Devi Prasad’s work.



7. Two views of a vase, Devi Prasad, Sevagram, 1950s. Earthenware with painted pigment; height: 21.5 cm. If some vases celebrated the female form, this contemplated the artist’s own shifting gaze on the body.

At the same time, the movement was capacious enough to admit the undergirding of spirituality or the legacy of tradition in art practice; as well as see artwork as both utilitarian and decorative on the one hand, and guided by aesthetic systems that were time-honoured or even religiously motivated, on the other. In its quest for progress, modernism’s disengagement with tradition has meant that a large constituency of artists have ended up being excluded from the canon, being seen as “artisans” rather than “artists”. At the same time, there have been several efforts at a conflation of fine art, applied art and design. The study of a group of mid-century modern Indian artists like Jamini Roy, Devi Prasad, K.G. Subramanyan, Gurcharan Singh, S.K. Mirmira, Haku Shah and Dashrath Patel is enormously revealing of how they negotiated these disparate worlds. Significantly, each of them has shown more than just a sympathetic engagement with traditional craftsmanship.

#### FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All photographs, unless noted otherwise, are courtesy Naman and Sukhad Ahuja.

**8a and b.**  
The First All-India Khadi and Village Industries Pottery Conference, Sevagram, 1955, photographed by Devi Prasad.



**9a and b.**  
Plans for "Sahyog" kiln and wheel developed by Devi Prasad for IIT, New Delhi, mid-1980s.



**NOTES**

- 1 Devi Prasad, "The Art of Making Pots", in *The Studio Potter*, exhibition catalogue, New Delhi: Eicher Gallery, October 1995–January 1996, pp. 12–13.
- 2 Devi Prasad's work with children became his mainstay at Sevagram, and the many experiments and ideas for Nai Talim were put down in the eponymous journal published from Sevagram which he edited for close to 20 years. Some of those experiments and deductions drawn from them can be found in the following books by Devi Prasad: *Art the Basis of Education* (originally in Hindi as *Bacchon ki Kala aur Shiksha*, Varanasi: All India Sarva Seva Sangh Publications, 1959, later translated into English and now in Thai by National Book Trust, 1998); *Education for Living Creatively and Peacefully*, Hyderabad: Spark-India, 2005; and, *Gandhi and Revolution*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2012.
- 3 The matter has been dealt with comprehensively in Naman P. Ahuja (with contributions by Krishna Kumar, Bob Overly, Kristine Michael and Sunand Prasad), *The Making of the Modern Indian Artist Craftsman: Devi Prasad*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2011.
- 4 Devi Prasad, *Clay my Friend*, exhibition catalogue, Delhi: Art Heritage, 1997.
- 5 For instance, in her monumental 2005 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Wendy Kaplan set out the history and ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement that showed the inexorable link between "Design and National Identity" that arose from the philosophies of "Art and Industry" and "Art and Life". Despite looking at the political and cultural implications of this in European countries, the book inadequately acknowledges the enormous impact of and on India. Wendy Kaplan (et al.), *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America: Design for the Modern World*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004. On the decisive role played by Indian craftsmanship in guiding the aesthetic pedagogy of Victorian Britain, and impacting, later, the Arts and Crafts Movement, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977 and 1992, p. 224, and further, pp. 225–51, 277–86. Further, Tapati Guha Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 146, 148–84.
- 6 Devi Prasad, *Peace Education or Education for Peace*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1984.

