

Guruji, a treasure of untold traditional knowledge

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This article was written in August, 2012 for a book brought on Dr. Ravindra Sharma to celebrate his 60 year birth day! By that time he had spent 33 years at Kala Ashram at Adilabad which he built!

I first came across Guruji in Delhi, 12 years back. IIT Delhi had organised an exhibition and Seminar on Indigenous Science and Technology .

Sunil Deshpande of Sampurna Bamboo Kendra and Dr. Rajendra Prasad, organiser at IIT Delhi took initiative to call us. I was to give a talk .

My student Ravi Koka who had designed a chair in woven Bamboo, had exhibited the newly designed chair in the exhibition.

Ravi and the craftperson who made the chair had gone ahead of me.

As soon as I met Ravi at Delhi, he said "sir you must meet 'Guruji'". He was very excited about meeting 'Guruji', a popular name for Ravindra Sharmaji.

Guruji could keep narrating Tribal Practices in Hindi and Telugu for hours.

I was fascinated and listened to him for hours. We developed a bond in the very first meeting. Though I am from Andhra Pradesh, I had never been to Adilabad, situated in the borders of Maharashtra and Andhra.

I realised that Guruji had a treasure of knowledge of local practices and he could narrate in an informal fashion which grips one's interest. He also has deep knowledge on Hindu Traditions which he puts across in unique original style. Simplicity of his narrations makes him such a good teacher, one would never forget things he has told.

He said,

"Devatas are those who give, without expecting anything in return
Danavas are those who only take from others and
Manavas are those who give in return for some thing."

How simple, yet profound!

We can see many Danavas and Manavas around. We have to search for Devatas!

After the Delhi meeting, I was eagerly waiting to see Guruji in Adilabad.

'Ugadi meeting' gave that opportunity. Kala Ashram he has built is amazing. Hours and hours of discussion and talks we had brought many insights to me !

I started feeling, ' Here is a "selfless treasure of Bharat". We need to listen, record and spread what he is saying'. I learnt that "Guruji" studied Fine Arts at Baroda. He also got "self revelations" through Art at Baroda through endless, Intensive hours and days spent in self search.

Amount of time and energy he had spent in learning the local traditions and discovery and nurturing of an old tribal carpentry specialist who could make 120 joints in wood can easily become the content for a film or a TV serial like 'Chanakya'. I absorbed many insights in Indian Traditions, which he revealed.

They enriched my search for Indian thought which can be related to Design
I learnt many fundamentals from Guruji.

He beautifully tells the roots of balance in our traditional economy. He said, 'when a child is born, several services in the villages are involved: to cut the umbilical cord a barber is called. A potter gives a special pot to dispose off the cut portions. The child is kept in a new basket made by the bamboo weaver.

A Jeweller is called to make a golden necklace or a golden thread to wear depending on girl or boy. All of this takes place as a traditional ritual practice. But what is important is each one of the servicemen is given two baskets filled with food. A jeweller is not paid more than a basket maker. The rituals were created to keep everybody engaged in their trades. The economic balance was the essence. To sell any material coming from outside the village, permission of the village head has to be sought. No outside produce was brought and sold recklessly. Village head takes the decision keeping the overall economic balance of the village.

Guruji said, "Muslim rulers did not disturb this distribution system. It is the British rulers with their capitalistic requirement who destroyed the internal balance by allowing any product to be sold anywhere!"

We can see the present conflicts of globalisation of Retail Markets going on in the Country! Apart from the economic disturbances a well harmonised relationship between the buyer and seller is going to be disturbed. The human element which builds the culture is at stake. A supermarket has a cold relationship between the buyer and seller. Seller becomes a mere employee.

New changes to be brought needs to be carefully evaluated and modulated to enhance rather than destroying the present traditions!

Surely 'Innovation' is at demand!

Guruji also revealed many interesting tribal traditions. In a 'Resham' weaving community Men do the house chores like cleaning, cooking and washing clothes. Women do only fine weaving, where the 'delicateness' of their hands are valued and nurtured. Surely it is an advanced post modern social system compared to the male dominated world we have all over the world. Another practice of Tribals told by Guruji is very fascinating. Tribal groups leave their houses when white ants attack the wooden pillars, doors and other wooden material in their huts. They believe that it is a spirit to be respected. May be in this process they contain the spread of white ants, as killing them outside does not solve the problem. Queen of white ants is somewhere deep in the furrows of Earth laying hundred and thousands of eggs.

I keep repeating these to my students at IDC, IIT. I invited Guruji to come to IDC at IIT Bombay and talk to our students. Guruji was initially hesitant to accept the invitation. He was not comfortable with the Western styled environments which are pervading fast in Institutes like IITs. I said, "Guruji, Your talks can be in your own style with no time constraints. We will take care of all details according to your requirement, please come!" He was gracious to accept my invitation. He was the guest faculty for an elective Course called " Craft, Creativity and Post Modernism" which I conduct. Post Graduate students and Phd scholars of IDC and from other departments of IIT Bombay opt for this course!

His talks given under the tree, at the Design circle of IDC were unique and wonderful . Students forgot time and listened to him! It left a lasting impression on them. Many other faculty members of IIT also came and

listened to Guruji. His style was incomparable and content original !

I got one more opportunity to visit 'Kala Ashram' during the Meeting of Karigar panchayat. Kala Ashram had completely changed. It was cool with all the trees which had come up! Till today Guruji's many narratives linger in my mind. He once mentioned that he had heard of a 'Veduru Purana'. In Telugu Veduru means Bamboo. I am still waiting for the possible revelation of that ! Guruji had told many more stories.

A 'bhiksha gallu' community who not only beg but keep the record of village folks for generations . 'Pata chitra makers' is another community he had mentioned. I wish a good film maker makes a film or video series of his talks,

A professional writer writes a book on him and what he says!

In the times to come more and more people will be coming to Kala Ashram to listen to him ! I fondly wish "Guruji" a healthy long, long years ahead !
