

# Innovation at the grass roots

## Bamboo Rakhee

A. G. Rao

*'Bamboo is a grass'*

*This article was written in June 2014, translated and published in regional news paper! I have long association with Sunilji and SBK. He attended Jagruti, in 1993 and our association continued.*

It was year 1997. I was sitting in BCDI ( Bamboo and Cane Development Institute), Agartala, Tripura State, listening to Krishna Das Paul, the legendary Bamboo Craft person. Most of the president award winners in Bamboo Craft have been his students at BCDI. What he said about the 'tools' made a deep impression on me. He said, " *Muze siraf ye dhau chahiye ! aur kuch tools ka jarurat nahi ! is se mai sab kuch kar sakata hu!*" ( I just need this Dhau. I don't need any other tool. With this I can do everything.) He was so innovative in using 'Dhau', 'sometimes it became a tool for splitting Bamboo, sometimes It became a fine splitting knife, after that it also became a finishing tool and so on....'

At that time I had no idea that I will be involved in designing a tool kit for bamboo. I had taken sabbatical leave to see the potentials of North East in 1997. This had a background. Way back in 1992, I had suggested to Mr. Viren Seth a perfume manufacturer in U.S, that we could use bamboo baskets from India for Christmas gift-packs in which 2 or 3 perfume bottles were put. These 10 dollar gifts had a huge market in West . I was Company's design consultant.

Mr.Seth said, " O.K. professor, it is a good idea. I will finalize in the meeting with my partners today itself. Can you supply 2 million baskets ? I was dumb founded. I had no answer. Then he gave me a long lecture, "professor, in India you have lot of ideas, but there is no organized supply in craft area. Even my brothers are

there. But if supplies don't come in time, we lose our rating in K-mart here, which will affect our other products." With this background I took sabbatical leave for a year and went to Tripura, a North East state known for bamboo work. There, Villagers were making large number of baskets and complained that they have no orders. I was wondering, where is the hitch? There was a Government department with an M.D sitting in an A C room in Tripura, yet no tapping of huge outside Markets!.

Well as it happened we got assigned a tool development project. We came up with an innovation of manufacturing tools by laser cutting, which made it possible to produce them in small numbers ! Subsequently, I was delighted when Krishna Das Paul said in a workshop at BCDI, " Brothers, we need this measuring tool, referring to IDC- gauge in the tool kit!" Eventually Bambu studio at IDC took shape. 50 to 100 new products have been developed. More than 1200 craft persons have been trained and given mini tool kits, in 40 workshops held all over the Country. Yet we have been learning of more and more of problems than solutions to make bamboo craft a viable trade!

Here comes the Melghat Rakhi in bamboo an ingenious innovation of "Sampoorna Bamboo Kendra"(SBK).It is rooted in the very Earth and Culture of the Land! Shri Sunil Deshpande, founder member of SBK took trouble to make a write up of the case study on my request. Shri. Anuj Singh, helped me in translating it.

*'Rakhi is a symbolic thread tied on the wrist of brothers by sisters on an auspicious day of the year'*

Case Study:

Melghat- Rakhi – a sacred thread

" Shristibandh"- a rakhi from Nature made of bamboo

Indian Life style is well known for its variety all over the world. Understanding the foundations of acting such life styles, collecting and preserving the very seeds which sprout into such life styles has been the purpose of creating

' Gram Gnan Peeth'

Traditionally festivals, fasting and ritual practices have been part of our lifestyle.

We may wonder, “Why were these practices created? Was there a concern to keep the village production and utilization intact? Was there a plan to ensure all the families engaged in different occupations to earn a livelihood equitably with dignity ?” A deeper understanding and learnings from elders brings an affirmative answer! The traditional customs and practices have been designed to maintain a harmonious order, safe-guarding the social, economic and intellectual well-being of the Society.

However, in the modern times, adoption of mechanization to all aspects of production, has started affecting both intellectual and social well-being of people. It even had a negative impact on the village economy. As a result, young boys and girls from villages are increasingly migrating to cities. In this process they are not only becoming victims of economic, social and physical exploitation but also losing their socio-cultural roots, often forgetting their own strengths.

Sampoorna Bamboo Kendra has been a close witness to these changes for the past eighteen years by living among Korku, Gond, Bhilala tribes of Melghat. Attempts were made to remedy the situation.

Bamboo has been Maleghat’s major resource. We started making use of this as our raw material. Our main activities became bamboo craft, bamboo jewelry and bamboo house-construction. Two years ago we started a bamboo nursery and initiated planting bamboo in the fields as well. Over the period several designs were developed keeping this local raw material, local skills and ease of production in mind. Catering to the city demands with products made in the villages, has not an easy task. In our search for new opportunities, traditional festivals caught our attention.

After several deliberations, we decided to make ‘Rakhis’.

Thus ‘Melghat Rakhi’, the natural bamboo Rakhi made its debut. It was first tested during the Rakhi festival of 2013. Preliminary information revealed that the one-day festival brings business worth crores of rupees. The business volume had great potential to provide livelihood opportunities for people of Melghat.

Soon Craftsmen got on the job and made some experimental designs. Friends and relatives who looked at Rakhis liked the idea. We could easily gauge the response of the people for this product. We realized that making 100-200 Rakhis was not

going to be enough! Thousands were required. This was in April. Then arranging for funds became first priority.

### Financial Support

We contacted NABARD at Bangalore through Nabard Financial Services Ltd, Amaravati with our plan of making the Rakhis . Soon a team of senior executives Arrived at our centre in lawada(Melghat), examined our work and held long deliberations with our workers. Within 15 days, 5 lakh rupees were sanctioned in the name of Venu Shilpi Audhyogik Sahakari Sanstha, an organization formed by our workers for 'Production and Direct Marketing of their produce'.

### Planning for Rakhi production

Soon Craftsmen and workers got together to begin planning for

Raw materials: Bamboo strips comes from three villages.

Rate per piece was worked out. The strips get made to precise size using the IDC- gauge developed at IITBombay. Other raw materials such as hand-made paper, silk thread, and wooden beads were to be procured from Nagpur at wholesale rates.

### Process for making

1. The process of dyeing with natural colours – the strips brought from three villages were dyed using leaves, flowers, bark and seeds. Food colorants were also used. Alum was used for fixing the colours.
2. Cutting: Coloured strips were polished on one side. Then they were cut according to the variety of shapes. Each of these shapes were pasted on a circular disc made out of handmade paper. In the centre, beads made out of wood and tulsi stem were sewed with a needle and a thread. This thread was also used to tie a silk thread below for rakhi-binding.
3. Strips were sized using the Gauge and right lengths were cut to weave them into flowers. Three families from Kotha village agreed to carry out this work. The

bamboo flower was stitched on the hand-made paper disc with beads on the top and a silk- thread was tied below for rakhi-binding.

4. Partnering villages: Rakhi making was carried out in four Tehsils of Amravati district namely,

Dharni, Chikhaldara, Achalpur and Morshi.

Partnering villages were

Dharni : Lawada, Kotha, Didamda, KathKumbh, Dharanmahu, Dabida, Kadhav, Dhulghat;

Chikhaldara: Pili

Achalpur: Karajgaon and Shirajgao;

Morshi : Morshi

5. Partnering girls and boys: A total of 100 girls and boys directly partnered with us, the ratio of girls to boys being 70:30. Indirect partnership went up to 50.

6. Total production: The team successfully made 70,000 rakhis in 12 designs.

7. Packing and labeling : Three rakhis were tied together on a strip of handmade paper with the following screen-printed information:

Concept-

Sampoorna Bamboo Kendra, Lawada,

Post: Duni, Taluka:Dharni, Dist: Amravati.

Mobile:09764639457

Email: sampoorbabamboo@gmail.com

Website: www.sbk.nic.in

Manufacturing and Marketing

Venu Shilpi Industrial Cooperative

At Lawada, Post:Duni, Taluka:Dharni,

Dist: Amaravati 444702

Mobile: 09764634511

Email: sahadodshanware@gmail.com

Each packing box contained either 9 or 12 strips resulting in 27 or 36 rakhis per pack. The lettering on the box said 'Melghat Rakhis'- Made out of Bamboo, Natural rakhi. Thus the packing was done aptly.

Not just the Rakhi work but our entire work on bamboo craft needed suitable branding. We looked at our cultural roots for inspiration. Indian culture lays a great emphasis on the dictum that entire universe is a family or 'Vasudevikutumbakam'. Those born on this great planet Earth have the right to live as a family. This means we are duty bound to let others as well to Live and enjoy the gifts of life, like us. Keeping this philosophy in mind we named the entire production : 'Shrishtibandh'.

## Marketing Support

This year we did not have a professional approach to marketing, because of the experimental nature of the exercise. Friends and relatives spread the word. The experiment was conducted within the state of Maharashtra only. Friends from cities like Nagpur, Wardha, Amravati, Paratwada, Yawatmal, Akola, Jalgaon, Nashik, Mumbai and Pune gave their time for promoting the product. Local high schools joined in as partners. More particularly – Nashik Maratha Vidya Prasarak mandal, Gangapur road, Nashik. Principal and teachers and 16 students worked hard, Jendra Bhave's collaboration was nice. Other partners were: Mumbai- Professor Mandar Bhanushe, University of Mumbai, N.S.S. Students, Parvawaran Dakshata Munch, Thane:Gyan Prabodhini, Pune: Nigadi, Punaruthan Samarsata Gurukulam, Vidyadhar Valpavalkar and Group, Prashant Varsha, Ambulkar Manjusha Pimpri: Girish Prabhune and Chamu, Sujata, Nitin Kulkarni Nagpur :Sampurna Bamboo Kendra Working committee, friends and family, Ahilya Mandir Workers' Group Amravati: Ravi Deshpande, Mandar Marathe, Yashoda Morekar Paratwada : Sanjay Deshpande and Family Akola : Sanjay, Sanjeev Takalkar Jalgaon : Rajendra Nanvare

A total of 100 friends or colleagues worked on the ground following the spirit of co-operation.

The experiment resulted in about 100 persons earning their livelihood with pride. They not only realized their strength but also fulfilled their need. Forty thousand Rakhis were sold. Unsold ones were used for creating new designs for momento, greeting cards and wall hanging with further job creation.

Rakhi's account was collated rather quickly.

We also collected feed back and suggestions for future from Rakhi sellers and friends.

Some of the suggestions were :

1. Rakhi should be small.
2. Do not use black dye.
3. Bamboo strips in the flower should be sharp at the ends.
4. Packing box should be made stronger.
5. Delivery time should be reduced.

We shall implement these suggestions next year.

We are also thinking of a 'Rakhi –Learn, Make and Use kit'.

Prepared strips and other components will be given in a kit, with instructions.

Buyer can Learn to make the Rakhi and use it, with this kit. This can be an attractive product for youngsters.

**-Sunil Deshpande**

Sampoorna Bamboo Kendra, Lawada.

We could see many features of the innovation from this case study.

1. In the Bamboo Rakhi, the IDC Gauge was used, which gave a precision to the flowers that put the product into fine-craft category. because of which People had no hesitation to pay .
2. The items used very little of bamboo. Main value addition came from the 'skill of bamboo workers'! Raw material-cost was very little. Additions like beads, hand-made paper and resham thread were locally available with little cost addition.
3. Coloring of the bamboo was done with locally available natural dyes!

4. SBK with Sunilji's leadership also innovated in creation of brand identity. Handmade paper was used, it was packed in Nos. 9,12,27,76 which are uniquely Indian.
5. Then the learning and training went hand in hand with making and marketing. 50 + designs brought the creativity of the artisans, (majority of them women) into the fore front ! Women in India are exposed to such decorations based on traditional motifs from childhood.  
Wau! This is Post Modern mode of production, successful in front of our eyes.
6. It over-comes all the baggage we have been carrying'of Western thoughts in Design and use of Technology'.
7. SBK also created a unique distribution system with micro entrepreneurs taking part!
8. The designs had all the communications address, specifications incorporated just like any other branded company product.

I have been further reflecting and many questions come to my mind :

Why is that such grass root innovations are not coming out of our IITs ?

Are we expecting too much from IITs?

- IIT frame work did allow a 'gauge' to come out through a UNDP project taken up at IDC.
- A Bambu studio also came up, which made interactions with NGOs possible.
- Even commercial availability of the 'gauge' was made possible through a company formed under SINE(Society for innovation and Entrepreneurship),IITBombay.( I must add that all this only with the initiatives and struggles of individual faculty)

Do we need new conducive structures at IITs for such Innovations to take place? Rather SBK and likes should be recognized as part of IITs. A gauge designed manufactured and supplied was enough for SBK to make a major grass root innovation! Each of the IITs which are there and new ones coming up ought to



have, as a policy, at least 10 to 20 NGOs like SBKs as extensions for Innovations to happen at grass root levels!

I wish the 'melghat Rakhee Innovation' gets included in the "Awards list" with its proven success! 1 Lakh rakhis for next season with a significant turn out of 25 to 50 lakh rupees, generating large employment with no additional demands on Govt.for Energy, Water or Treatment-plants for chemicals disposed into our ecosystem, is not a mean achievement!

Few samples from the 50 designs developed by SBK



