

Potters and Planners

THE exhibition of pottery and earthenware at the Convocation Hall was a pleasant relief from the common run of exhibitions which go all out for the spectacular or the purely meretricious, instead of displaying dungs which have value in use and are vital for living. Behind the modest exhibits are years of patient work in Kumbharwada, the Potters Colony at Dbavarn. The potters of the locality were organised into an industrial co-operative in 1949 by a devoted band of social workers who were genuinely interested in the potters' craft and wanted to help the potters to improve their wares and organise their marketing.

Shrimati Prabha and Shrimati Malati Shah (now Jhaveri) are the leading spirits who have been steadfast in their work for the potters, in the midst of a thousand and one other engagements. The emphasis is on the utility aspect of the craft, on its functional rather than ornamental value. This has been brought out in the selection and arrangement of the exhibits as also in combining display with sales. The articles sold were immediately replaced by others kept in stock; none bore the label "sold" to disappoint the late-comer or the not-so-enterprising collector. And yet the whole thing was neatly arranged, both the exhibits and the display were simple yet beautiful. The hand of Santiniketan was visible, yet only in the background. To repeat, the emphasis was not on ornamental but on beauty of line and form. The Souvenir Programme is itself an achievement of high merit, bringing out, within a short compass, with the help of a number of intelligently selected photographs, the entire range of activities from the collection of clay to the shaping of pots and pans on the potter's wheel, finishing and painting.

Beginning with the traditional types of pottery, the range, gradually extends, as in *surais* and pitchers, to Persian and Korean types, to adaptations of designs excavated from Harappa and Mahenjodaro or unusual shapes in ancient Indian pottery. The modern adaptations are largely in painting and designs but are sometimes also highly functional and utilitarian, as in adding brass taps

to water-containers or making pots into stands for table lamps. Embossing, punching of designs on baked ground and chiselling of ornamental designs are some of the interesting lines of development which promise fruitful results.

If a handicraft is to be revived or—rather, an existing one is to be revitalised and made more remunerative for those who ply it than it is today, the lines followed by the Prajapati Sahakari Uthapana Mandal at Kumbharwada certainly merit careful study. The wide variety of forms that the deft fingers of the potter moulds from clay are only the beginning of an adventure which, if it is to be fruitful and not to lead to a blind alley, must finally result in products which fulfil a real need, preferably a common need, that is existing rather than one which has to be created. In other words, if the handicraft is to survive, quality and saleability at competitive prices, which most pottery do not have today, are to be given prior consideration. Otherwise, potters would be just surviving on the margin of subsistence instead of thriving and making good money.

Here is an attempt to show the way. How potters can make good. New types of kilns to produce glazed pottery which will hold its own against chinaware, enamel or aluminium utensils, are only one of them. The others are to secure for the potters the raw materials they need for producing pottery of an improved type—cotton waste, husk, coal for firing the kilns, right type of clay, paints and varnishes and a thousand other things. Social workers in Bombay, especially if they happen to be as well-connected as those working for the industrial co-operative are, can manage to get these materials by pestering their millowner friends or relations and by exercising persuasion beyond the range of most potters or other craftsmen. But that is not all.

If materials and organisation are to meet the final test of producing the right type of wares, things that are in common demand, the right type of products have to be thought of and the proper designs worked out. This calls for a combination of imagination in craftsmanship and knowledge of markets, more

especially of potential demand, which cannot be taken for granted. If public interest can be awakened and the right type of talent tapped for the purpose, even this exacting demand can be met to a certain point.

On a miniature scale, the exhibition focusses attention on the possibilities and limitations of handicrafts which are not primarily art products and then—fore assured a market, again within limits. Even a cursory examination of the exhibits will suggest the possibilities and limitations. The most unsatisfactory and unimaginative among the exhibits was the collection of ash-trays. Here then—were no traditional designs to draw upon and such artistic talent as the organisers could tap had not devoted the time and care necessary for visualising the function that these articles are to serve. Design must be informed by feeling for the material used. When clay is moulded in the pattern of a metal tray, it does not acquire the functional value of the latter. Neither does it have the beauty of form that the potter's wheel can impart.

The flower vases, of which there was an interesting collection, of great beauty of form, illustrate deficiency of another kind which goes to the root of the problem in a way that ash-trays do not. This is because ingenuity cannot solve what is fundamentally insoluble, viz- functional adaptation to a function which is socially non-existent. Cut flowers are essentially a western idea. We use a lot of flowers, as hair-braids, for decoration or Puja but in the average Indian household we do not use cut flowers with long stems and put them in flower vases. Those who do, are a minority of the population, who have adopted western style of living and have a drawing room with tables, a mantle piece—its decorative piece that has lost its function—for flower vases. The vases, being made of clay, are quite cheap and cost only a few annas but enough cut flowers to decorate them adequately would cost a couple of rupees or more. Now, those who are prepared to spend this much daily on flowers do not mind paying much more for a really good flower vase. If they pick up an earthenware flower vase, it would be out of curiosity, just for a change, to be used only for a little while. It will in due course make room for more expensive ones which will be prized for their

decorative value. Flower vases made from clay in short have no functional use for the common people and therefore, no adequate market.

The same consideration applies to a lesser extent to table lamps made from earthenware pots. But since the use of electricity is spreading and it is no longer a special privilege of a particular section of society, decorative lamps have a wider scope.

When all the improvements have been effected and pottery of the right type has been evolved, the question will arise whether the development itself will not call for a high degree of centralisation. After getting all the raw materials and skill together, will it be economical to produce pots and pans only for the local market: The social cost of setting up the necessary organisation, in real terms or terms of money cost, will it not automatically call for marketing on a wider scale, bringing in its train problems of distribution, transport and handling on a large scale? If it does, some day, Kumbharwada, thanks to the energy and intelligence of the organisers of the industrial co-operative, will develop into a centre of pottery, supplying the whole of the Bombay State. Modern kilns worked by electricity will have solved the problem of glazed wares, producing pottery which will be durable, cups and saucers which will not chip or crack. If this happens, the deft finger that shapes the brim today will be replaced by an electrical gadget, adjusted to the nearest millimeter, by industrial designers working with the latest calibrating apparatus of the day.

The social workers of Kumbharwada do not anticipate any such development. They live in a world which can be still made beautiful with the potters art and with fabrics from handlooms. They know that the number of hereditary potters who can still make a living from their traditional craft has been going down day by day but do not see it as part of a general process of substitution of more economical for less economical means of production. While fully aware of the blunted art sense of the dwellers in the cities, they do not seem to be aware, equally keenly, of the poor housewives' craving for metal pots and pans

which will not break and will therefore be cheaper in the long run, if only they could have them.

When Major-General Sokhey says that the only answer to our health problems is socialised medicine or economists suggest that the public sector has to be expanded if the targets of the Plan are to be realised, they mean, in effect, the same thing though they say it differently. Take the health programme, says Maj-Gen Sokhey. There is a shortage of 290,000 doctors, if we are to have one doctor for each thousand of the population, say, as in Britain. The Plan shows that the training facilities are being extended to turn out 2,782 doctors a year by the end of the planning period. At this rate, we will take over a hundred years to catch up with the demand, if we ignore the yearly increase in population. But let that go. During the period of the Plan, about 14,000 doctors will graduate but the Plan provides employment of only 1,000 doctors in six hospitals and 948 dispensaries which are proposed to be organised. Let us say, another 1,000 will be absorbed in public health activities. This will still leave 12,000 doctors unemployed. When we remember that 75 per cent of the doctors are already in urban areas, further additions to their numbers will make the chronic under-employment still worse. The incentive offered in the Plan of Rs 50 per month as a stipend to be paid to them under the present social order, will not induce the doctors to settle in rural areas. In short, doctors may be turned out, there is no provision for utilising their services adequately.

For the industries, or for that matter, in agriculture also, targets are similarly worked out from an examination of existing resources. But the possibilities of the eventual realisation of these targets are not ensured. Extension of public sector would make the realisation of the targets independent of the fluctuations of the market and hence, assured. So will socialised medicine, which means building up an adequate number of health institutions, rapidly increasing the strength of the medical services and establishment of an adequate number of institutions to permit of diseases being taken care of in the normal stride of medical work.

Both raise questions of cost capital investment in one case and development expenditure in the other, into which it is not necessary to enter here.

Protagonists of family planning will be perturbed by Maj-Gen Sokhey's outright dismissal of family planning as a possible solution of the problem of poverty. It is an error to attach importance to mere reduction of the pressure of population on economic resources, says this learned doctor, independently of the direction and speed of development of these resources. South Africa has a density of population of only 13 per square mile and yet its people are extremely poor. If methods of production remain unchanged, it would not perceptibly improve the conditions of the rest, if halt the population were to disappear overnight. Finally, Maj-Gen Sokhey makes the statement that even if the conditions could be created where universal use of birth control techniques were made possible, it would not help. "Demographers say that it takes a 100 years to stabilise a population so that it may have a proper ratio of different age groups."

This statement will puzzle the lay students of population problems. P M Lad, at one time a keen student of our population problems had drawn the comforting conclusion some years ago that Indian population showed signs of stabilising itself. This, he argued, on the basis of the observed fact that both birth rates and death rates had stabilised themselves as the major disturbing factor upsetting these rates, viz, the incidence of famines had greatly abated. Now another expert advances the opposite view. Who is to be believed?

A demographer, consulted on this point, offered the explanation that both are equally right. Stabilisation of population is a theoretical concept which can be interpreted in the sense which Lad had in mind, as also in the sense in which Sokhey interprets it. In the first case, the indicators are natural rates of growth. In the second, a quite different concept, the rate of growth resulting from the action of control measures, natality subject to universal practice of birth control techniques and mortality, under full application of social medicine. We remain suspended between these two poles for the time being.