

Only a peaceful society can be a creative society

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*Devi Prasad's work blends the visions of [Mahatma Gandhi](#) and Rabindranath Tagore. Trained at Santiniketan and Sevagram, he's been a pioneering studio potter, painter, designer, photographer, art educator and peace activist. A retrospective of his work, *The Making of the Modern Indian Artist-Craftsman: Devi Prasad*, curated by Naman P Ahuja, was recently held in the capital. Devi Prasad, 88, spoke to **Amrith Lal** :*

Tell us about your work with the War Resisters' International (WRI).

The WRI was a movement against war that started shortly after World War I. It also had a sister outfit, a Christian outfit named Fellowship of Reconciliation. But it was the WRI that made resistance to war a real activity in the 1930s. The term anti-war emerged with the WRI. The organisation's main activity was to work against the law that demanded that everyone had not just the right but also the duty to take part in every war that his country was part of.

War resisters became an important part of the struggle against the principle of war and against compulsory enrolment of the youth. In the beginning, the movement was only against the compulsory aspect of the war service. Gradually, when the idea of social development and the role of the military in it became established, the WRI developed anti-militarism into a movement and introduced the concept of social development into it. I introduced Gandhiji's concept of non-violence during my work with the WRI, first as secretary general and later as chairman.

Was the WRI a Euro-centric organisation when you joined?

It was a European movement, which is not surprising. After all, who brought in militarism? Other countries only followed [Europe](#). Gandhiji's work in [India](#) was in many ways against militarism.

Did the WRI gain a mass base?

It never became a mass movement. But it developed the structure of a mass movement in some countries. The movement never had the support of the rulers. But it deeply affected the thinking of many people.

You trained under Gandhi and Tagore. How different were their perspectives?

One was aesthetically oriented and the other economically oriented. Aesthetics and economics are equal partners in life. Both should complement each other for the society to be peaceful and creative. Gandhiji wanted a peaceful society and Tagore wanted a creative society. I believe that only a peaceful society can be a creative society. Both Gandhiji and Tagore wanted life to be beautiful. When Gandhiji talked about simplicity in life he didn't say that live in poverty or with ugliness. Gandhiji's understanding of simple living was misunderstood. Tagore said that beauty should be a part of simple living.

In Nai Talim, the emphasis is on education through productive activities. Tagore's emphasis was on creating beauty. He said education through creative activity. I would say that education should be through creative and productive activities.

But people tend to differentiate between creative and productive activities. For example, the division between art and craft.

It's a linguistic problem. Craft is also art and vice versa. People have created a difference between them, which isn't there. For Gandhiji, art was something that gave joy and was spiritual. For Tagore, art was something that brought life into your life. Any beautiful thing is beautiful only when it is useful. Art should not be evaluated in terms of money, but on the basis of labour. Tagore had an aesthetic approach whereas Gandhiji's was functional.