

# Philosophy and practice of crafts and design

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MORE than a couple of decades ago, I was told a story about a student of architecture. A competition with very encouraging terms in prize money was announced for designing a commercial building in South Mumbai (Bombay) for students of architecture. While all other entries were of concepts proposing swanky high rises, one student marked the plot *green* on the site map as his entry. I know nothing else about the student, what happened to the entry, or even whether the story is at all true. What has, however, stayed in my memory is the quality of his conviction, the courage to state what is really needed in a given situation beyond the temptation of creating an edifice.

All known professions claim a common purpose highlighted in their philosophy of practice, that is to make this world a better place and to serve the cause of humanity. The profession of design is no exception. However, I believe that design is probably closer to this potential commitment than many other professions. Being trained in and having practiced only design as a profession, I may well be seen as biased.

It is difficult to imagine contemporary Indian design and crafts without accounting for the huge influence of and changes introduced in the Indian craft industry during the decades of British rule. Our recent history of design and crafts can best be understood in the way India was shaped through that encounter. The emergence of the design profession in India as we know it can be traced to the 1950s, to the 'India Report' by Charles Eames, which subsequently became the basis for the first post-independence design institute, the National Institute of Design at Ahmedabad.

The idea is not to delve into history so much as highlight the values and concerns that design is meant to address. The India Report, which became synonymous with the '*lota*' used effectively by Charles Eames, tried to accommodate the Indian context into the philosophy and approach that design incorporates as an underlying premise. Crafts seemed to fit in as perfectly as all other areas that design could address. The model of an Indian village, used as an example to illustrate the complexities of inter-relationships in a design process by one of the gurus of Design Methods, Christopher Alexander, came as a revelation, as did the initiatives of thinkers like Buckminster Fuller and Victor Papanek to see the expanse of design complexities in Indian realities and beyond. The environment for evolving a worldview at macro level was, and possibly even today is, extremely energizing and generates a deep sense of empathetic passion to sustain concerns that design ought to have. Later, other design education initiatives too emulated a similar school of thought.

**H**ow did the two extremes of the Indian sense of opulence and celebrating life and minimalism co-exist? How did the craft, cottage and small industry, as well as the users responding to the Indian idiom of products and processes, needs, function and aesthetics reconcile with the design sensibilities inspired by the best of global design references and

peer appreciation? Can we with any conviction claim that there was a genuine inquiry into the Indian reality and hence a possibility of creating an Indian idiom had only the metaphor of a '*lota*' been seen as more than a symbolic explanation?

This contradiction of aesthetics marks many layers of our society, each with its own benchmarks of refinement in art, music, dance and so on. To somehow develop a taste for such refined expressions is itself a much sought after quality. Unfortunately, for most of us rooted in popular culture, these sensibilities are somewhat alien as the following episode may illustrate. I was once accompanied through the Isamu Noguchi museum at Long Island by the 'man' himself in the company of my Indian host and his wife. At the end of this exciting tour when we sat down for tea, my friend's wife, after a fair bit of contemplation remarked, 'So you make stones!' Isamu, with a beautiful smile on his face replied, 'God makes stones; I only work with them.' Clearly she was ill-equipped to enter Isamu's world. Artisans too face a similar dilemma in dealing with the professed contemporary sensibility coming from 'evolved' design souls.

While this story highlights incommensurable realities, the situations of a shared premise are a little different. An artisan group was to work with their foreign designer using all possible colour threads to develop some furnishing products. With all possible combinations of white on white, black on black etc., the range was truly global. One of the artisans, while diplomatic in her appreciation of this endeavour, was clearly somewhat uneasy. In her own vernacular style and with vehement disapproval, she asked her colleagues why these people could not let themselves go like we do with colours that cover the entire surface. Why are they so 'constipated' in their expression? We know that while Kashmir uses colour to celebrate what exists, Kutchch responds to the absence of colours. The fact is that the walnut woodcarving celebrates material as much as a Scandinavian chair, though its manifestation is completely different.

So much has changed with the formal advent of globalization since the last decade of the twentieth century. Inadvertently or otherwise, an increasing number of sectors have begun to embrace design as a 'value' differentiator – appreciating the value of being at par with the best in the world, a homogenized reality that often imitates established references in style, aesthetics and function as an alternative to the 'imported' labels or products that were desperately sought after until a few years back. Yet, unlike the earlier 'Design for Development', the emphasis today favours 'Design for Business'. Economics drives development, global investments and policies. And designers, whatever they formally espouse, secretly compare notes on financial successes and media coverage. But in real terms we still need to ask whether we have found our Indian heroes.

A few months ago, in disbelief I watched a prominent fashion designer pronouncing on a national TV channel, how her work was designed to benefit poor artisans of Kutchch in the state of Gujarat. She explained how difficult it was to even send a letter as the artisans have no proper address, far less engage in business transactions. So, despite her desire to get Ajarakh fabrics produced by the artisans, she decided instead to print (copy) them digitally in Delhi.

The flip side of the reality is that there are more designers working in crafts than ever before. The opportunities in mainstream design to address aspects of product differentiation in an increasingly vast consumer market have grown manifold. In part, the phenomenon of fashion perpetuated by huge media hype seems to have helped the cause of design, at least as an integral part of the marketplace realities that determine purchase preferences rooted in often obscure lifestyle aspirations. In the process crafts too have benefited, in the sense of being lever-aged to rejuvenate the ethno-contemporary idiom distinctly visible in the Indian fashion scenario.

The design profession in India ever since it was formally set up through various institutions across the country has continuously wrestled with a contradiction of focus between the organized and unorganized sectors. From the earlier socialist economic model of development to the current focus on global business, the debate between social responsibility and hardcore commerce has lost the passion that it once aroused. The emerging wisdom is that design ultimately ought to be integrated into the process of commerce and business.

As a part of developmental responsibility, government and development agencies have recognized the importance of design for craft revival and sustenance. Since a large part of funding and initiatives in design flow from these agencies, most such endeavours involve professional designers, design students and design institutions. Among the many issues being addressed through such funding, new product development and training of artisans too is increasingly entrusted to design professionals. However, the absence of significant initiatives from the private sector in handicrafts indicates that either craft is not a good business proposition or is seen as something best left to tradition as a parallel reality.

**M**ore often than not, the efforts through design for crafts development have lacked impact given the limited scale of initiatives, people and funding. One obvious reason is the lack of an overall strategy and a virtual non-critical evaluation of the intent, application and results on the part of agencies that drive the projects. The more serious concern is that craft development often gets reduced to a convenient tool for many constituents to engage in politically correct gestures or ensure self-preservation.

Design and crafts interaction has been realized through many platforms, notably art, design or architecture education and practice sustained through cultural anthropologists, sociologists, historians, art curators and those immersed in tradition. Though the approaches varied, but till recently most fell within the broad realm of aesthetic inquiry. The shift to a clearer development focus has unfolded the complexities that need to be addressed as a more holistic approach demands a reality check of strategies and initiatives to ensure effectiveness at the grassroot level.

The '*jhola*', symbolic of either creativity or diehard social work, has now given way to laptops that mean business, symptomatic of the way design has moved into its preoccupation with business. Design academics play a substantial role in engaging and orienting students through crafts-specific brief.

Craft studies and documentation and craft design projects within an academic structure as well as outside constitute the universe of this sector for a typical design or fashion student. The level of understanding and design opportunities are largely influenced by quality of knowledge, commitment and experience of the institution and its faculty. Hence, inculcating values, understanding and conviction, so critical for a professional manifestation of intended brief, determines the very approach of its practice.

A typical engagement between a design professional and a client is based on the premise that the client is in control of the intended objectives as well as the value assigned to the nature of outcome, financial implications, the potential benefits and its likely impact on the context for which the design assignment is initiated. Moreover, the client is seen as an able judge of the quality of service, ideas, processes and likely success due to his/her proximity, stake, self-interest, larger purpose and all other concerns that may arise out of the initiative. Eventually, it is the client who decides on the remuneration regardless of what a designer may think of the client's ability to judge quality of work. Consequently, both work towards achieving the best user/consumer response. Needless to say that the designers are under reasonable pressure to ensure application of best possible strategies and tactics that may include educating clients on new insights of a given brief.

When it comes to designing for the crafts sector, many of the above concerns get blurred. Artisans are seen as beneficiaries, which in other words implies that they are seen as the user/consumer. The clients are the agencies that fund designers, though often they lack the kind of discerning judgment that tests the intensity, commitment and the professional acumen of the designers. 'Creating value' as a major driver of design goes awry, complicating the whole issue of design for economic sustainability. In a typical marketplace, the consumer has the resource and hence the choice of selecting what is right for him. What does the artisan choose – the design, the designer or the agency? Any designer with reasonably good education or sustained interaction knows that new products are only a small part among many more critical realities of the craft sector and what ideally needs to be addressed. The problem is to address the 'ideal' that is so real for the basic sustenance of crafts.

A case in point is a presentation I attended recently. After seeing some wonderful furniture designs from a well-funded initiative in Africa, an experienced scholar in crafts, history and culture posed a simple question to the designer. Where is Africa in this work? The reply was, 'the matt finish'!

It was strange that the session with the furniture designer ended in loud applause – a typical response in many such gatherings that otherwise have the potential to question esoteric efforts and help develop a larger understanding as well as shared concerns and approaches that can be put into practice to achieve the very purpose that brings people together. To be fair, the work was from a context the designer was strongly immersed in through an aesthetic sensibility practiced in her part of the world. For her the challenge was to communicate the concept of quality integral to products made with high-tech tools for contemporary and evolved western markets. This is a challenge few have succeeded

in meeting as a sustainable practice, even in the more organized and industrialized sector of craft exports from places like Moradabad and Jodhpur.

Given the all-pervading brief to find markets for crafts in the contemporary urban milieu, we may miss out on the fact that crafts are at best a tiny enterprise leveraging the diversity of cultural expressions. While a few crafts may successfully mould themselves to the nuances of universal aesthetics, for most others such transformation results in a violation of the spirit of ownership deeply rooted in their intrinsic vocabulary and expression. The danger is that while many commodity products have been able to leverage multifold value realization through emotive appeal, crafts, despite having the potential value of exclusivity, are getting closer to commoditization. Positioning, value enhancement, pricing and retail strategies, marketing and so on used effectively by designers for a corporate client seem to become alien in the context of their application in crafts.

It has long been recognized that successful development of the craft sector is largely dependent on development of artisans at an individual and community level. Training of artisans in costing, marketing, design development, technology and materials and new skills is often realized through design expertise. While the intent is worthwhile, the premise that these short bursts of action can change the level of artisan competency is unrealistically ambitious. Unfortunately, all those who are involved pretend ignorance of wastefulness which is evident to anyone with memories of their own learning, even with a formal education and worldview that artisans lack.

If we believe that efforts in promoting crafts are to attain self-sustainability, we ought to treat artisan/s as a mini enterprise with two clear elements – self-employment and pride and dignity in the value of the practice that have so far helped its survival. However, there are no institutions for artisan education at par with the now mainstream design/management/enterprise education. Worse, the qualifications seen as necessary to even access such expertise so needed by artisans, rules them out. It is time such preconceptions are challenged, as there is nothing to suggest that formal education per se is critical to entrepreneurial intelligence. Without such proactive action, the craft sector may only serve as a rationale for gainful engagement of design, development and the NGO community.

Crafts form an important part of creative cultural industries so critical to the world's diversity and identity. Many businesses in the developed world have been successfully built around crafts and account for turn-over in billions of dollars. Notwithstanding these business models, the space for handcrafted objects has always served to counter techno-aesthetic dominance. Add to that the 'connect and the concern' of being a patron of sustainable practice that crafts inherently represent. Clearly design needs to go beyond products to people and business issues, as one cannot possibly practice design in any other manner given the current and future realities of its context.

It is not that there are no meaningful engagements between crafts and design, driven through a great sense of conviction, drive, competence and synergy between individuals, institutions, government agencies, international development agencies, NGOs and artisan communities. The craft communities have been better served with almost a parallel reality of design, training, knowledge sharing, promotion, fair trade practices, markets and finance. Yet much of this depends on continuous funding support. At some point this will need to change as the younger generation may not have the patience to wait their turn for a *haat* here or an exhibition there. We will still have crafts, but as possible sweatshops that may cater to the Indian clones of Wall Marts.

**T**he interest and focus on India has never been greater. With the growing purchasing power it is also possible to explore the deep-rooted cultural depth. Today there are more customers for crafts within India than was the case a couple of decades ago. Crafts and cultural tourism may well be the impetus that is required to rejuvenate the craft sector. Yoga as a practice took off more seriously outside India before it re-manifested in the country. That is what we need to find for the craft sector. The answer lies in design and designers.

If the B schools have moved to becoming D schools, there is something unique in the way design addresses issues. We need with utmost commitment to demonstrate that design as a process is not limited to products. For I see design as a true mirror of empathetic, informed, honest and value-driven endeavour with little to differentiate between self and practice.