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Design Education for Crafts Communities: a Global - Local Approach

First Author's name: Shashank Mehta

Affiliation: National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, INDIA

Postal and e-mail address:

Shashank Mehta

Senior Designer

Faculty of Industrial Design

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DESIGN

Ahmedabad, INDIA 380 007

shashank@nid.edu

Second Author's Name: Vijai Singh Katiyar

Affiliation: National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, INDIA

Postal and e-mail address

Vijai Singh Katiyar

Senior Designer

Faculty of Textile, Apparel & Accessory Design

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DESIGN

Ahmedabad, INDIA 380 007

vijaik@nid.edu

Design Education for Crafts Communities: a Global - Local Approach

Abstract

The rich crafts heritage of India is unique and diverse as its customs and traditions. Over 30 million craftspeople still practice crafts as a live tradition and/or as an economic activity. Crafts in India has been continue to contribute to design education in numerous ways. In fact, the very approach to design education in India was laid on the foundations of crafts practices in the country.

Traditionally, crafts were produced and managed by the craftsmen themselves. However, "globalisation" demands innovative products, materials, and processes with new standards of quality and creativity. Today, due to changes in social set ups, culture and economy, the crafts and the crafts persons are increasingly becoming vulnerable to new realities. Though the strengths of Indian handicrafts is increasingly being recognised, but the qualitative market intelligence flow between market-place and the crafts persons has not kept pace with the new environment. Besides, quality of production, approaches for further market development, protection of traditional wisdom and practices through IPR, sustainability, crafts promotion, etc. are the other aspects that need to be addressed for effective growth of Indian handicrafts.

Today, role of crafts and culture is increasingly being recognised for the development of creative and culture based industries. Crafts can provide the much needed customisation and design can complement the crafts to rediscover its true potential to create innovative products and experiences. Design can play a major role in empowering the crafts and crafts persons, both as an enabler and a value adder. Knowledge empowerment and efficient multi- disciplinary networking can lead to cutting edge advantage to Indian crafts. Attributes of Indian handicrafts have a great potential to contribute in this direction if hand held properly. Design education for crafts persons therefore calls for a very sensitive and evolved approach towards capacity building and design-technology orientation.

Though study of traditional crafts has been part of design education for several decades now, the need for innovative and contextual design intervention methodologies is continuously been growing. Since its inception, National Institute of Design (NID) has been playing a key role as a catalyst in development and promotion of design in Indian handicrafts Industry. This proven experience in the area of crafts along with an innovative approach to develop such a programme has helped connect the sector to the mainstream of economic development taking place in India besides adding value to design education in the country.

A variety of other institutional formats exist in the country that deals with education, training & human resource development for crafts, each of which has their own inherent advantages and disadvantages. However, the development of an appropriate model with futuristic vision would contribute highly in achieving the cutting edge that the new generations of craft practitioners require to lay foundations of crafts and creative industries in India.

These pressing needs have led NID to set up a dedicated center called International Centre for Indian Crafts (ICIC) with the primary aim to effectively understand the needs, strengths and weaknesses of crafts sector and apply NID's interdisciplinary design expertise and knowledge base for capacity building and skill up gradation of artisans with a Global - Local approach. The unique approach is to develop a national and international network for Crafts Design Research, Training and Knowledge Dissemination for providing collaborative and sustainable linkages to the Indian crafts sector.

The proposed paper will deliberate and describe the authors' experience in setting up of this unique center dedicated to the crafts and crafts communities of India.

Key Words:

Contextual Design Education, Sustainable Crafts, Design Intervention Methodologies, Global-local

Introduction

Over seventy percent of India's population lives in more than half a million villages spread across thirty five states of the country – crafts being the major secondary source of income for them. With over thirty six million people engaged in handloom and handicrafts sectors, crafts are the second largest employment sector of the country today. Besides serving the local needs, crafts offer great employment opportunity at the door steps of these people who utilise their skills and existing/available local materials; thereby helping crafts-persons gain dignity and respect in the society. Moreover, the burden of capital and infrastructural investments is reduced when crafts-persons operate largely from home. While providing opportunities for self employment, crafts also help them survive whenever agriculture is affected due to any crisis and/or natural calamities. Employment opportunities in the rural areas, thus help stop migration of these people to the cities that are already overstretched for the resources and opportunities.

Survival and sustainable development of crafts and cottage industries are therefore crucial for the holistic economic development of the large country like India that is densely populated. Mahatma Gandhi had strongly advocated for the development of village economy that is centered on the local crafts and cottage industries to achieve regional self reliance. *'Production by masses and for masses rather than mass production'* as Gandhi had suggested *'will be more appropriate for India'*. These would also help equal distribution of wealth amongst the large sections of the society.

The rich craft heritage of India is unique and diverse as its customs and traditions. Each part of the country has its own unique cultural ethos, which is manifested in the handicrafts of that particular region. Here, the products are evolved and perfected as many of these crafts are practiced since generations. Beauty and creativity get skillfully integrated into the product along with its function / utility. The traditions and techniques that are transferred through generations, while connecting them to over five thousand years old history of Indian civilization, bring in timeless flavor that captivates the beholder. As these products are evolved based on the local needs, utilizing the locally available materials, and are made by the very people who are part of the same community, many of the ecological and sustainability related issues get well integrated into their designs. Variety of raw materials available in the country like ivory, cane & bamboo, wood, marble, different types of clay etc., have led to the evolution and development of many distinct crafts in terms of their materials, techniques and expression. Dhokara crafts of Bustar, Brassware from Moradabad, Sankheda Furniture and Kutchh embroidery from Gujarat, Madhubani paintings from Bihar, and hundreds more of them from every nook and corner of the country provide some of the brilliant examples of handicrafts that have traversed through the boundaries to bring in international demands and reputation.

The Handicrafts Board under the Government of India has often defined crafts as *"items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, generally artistic and/or traditional in nature"*. The crafts person here is central to the entire activity. S/he is the one, skilled in crafts technique, who converts material/s into unique object with the fusion of aesthetics and function. Traditionally, the crafts person being part of the same village and community was also aware of the unique functional needs of her/his customer/family and at the same time the strengths of the materials available. As these objects were hand made, thereby forming unique expression of creativity, each one was different to suit individual needs and demands.

Since independence, the Government of India has taken several initiatives over the last sixty years, to support and promote crafts at various levels to help improve the quality of lives of the crafts persons. Various cluster development schemes provide financial as well as other necessary support including infrastructure, raw materials, training and skill up-gradation etc. While various craft fairs organised throughout the country and abroad, and various emporia set up by the state and central governments help connect these crafts to the markets. The efforts are also intended to help crafts persons gain the much needed market exposure, understanding, experience, and self-confidence. The geographical indications for craft clusters and 'craft marks' while ensuring quality of the craft products, they also help protect originality and create brand image of individual crafts in today's world. Various awards for crafts and crafts-persons, instituted both by the state and central governments help encourage and promote both, the crafts persons and the crafts. Several Non Government Organizations (NGOs) working throughout the country provide the much needed hand holding support to these craft communities. All these efforts have produced affirmative results in terms of survival, sustenance, and promotion of crafts.

The craft sector today, while serving the local needs of the region, also shares more than twenty percent of India's export market.

These steps however, due to the sheer size and diversity of the crafts sector in the country have not yielded the desired results and in some instances they were inadequate. While craft export and crafts as industry have grown over the years, the economic condition of the majority of these crafts persons is delicate and majority of them still remain at the bottom of the economic strata of the society. Due to such pressures and declining associated respect, many of these people have been leaving their traditional craft practice and tend to work as common laborers to earn their living. The children of these artisans and also the younger generations do not find this profession lucrative and are thus not much interested in learning their traditional practice. The local markets and patronage that was once the bastion of these craftsmen have been steadily marginalized by industrialization and increased preference of masses for commodities. Majority of the utilitarian products that once formed the main feature of these crafts have now been replaced by the mass produced cheaper goods. The markets and the customers that were once so well understood by these crafts persons have now shifted away and the crucial knowledge base required to develop the product is not accessible to them. Societal changes like increasing gaps between urban and rural, rich and poor have further changed the context of their practice completely. New unknown markets and customers have left these artisans dependant on traders and middlemen, thereby exposing them to various kinds of exploitations. Scarcities of materials, poor working conditions, and lack of working capital have further increased their difficulties to sustain their livelihood.

After a long spell of production driven globalisation that was the death bed for many Indian crafts, new hopes are emerging. Trends could be observed that the fierce market competitions have forced companies to shift their focus from mass production to mass customisation that is suited to the regional and cultural needs. Customer is now being recognised as a crucial and important constituent for the success of the products. Buoyant by this new found status, the consumers are now demanding products and designs that are innovative enough to address her/his taste, personality and aspirations. Mass produced items and products are now looked as pale and devoid of emotional attachments. Customer is now seeking the products amongst these increasingly saturated global markets that relate to his/her culture and identity. Ever increasing concerns for environment have further pushed industries to localise and customise their products.

In today's era of globalisation, crafts and culture are increasingly being seen as key drivers for the development of creative and culture based industries. Crafts here can find major edge and opportunity as the ones that can provide the much needed customised personality to the products. And design can complement these crafts to rediscover their true potential, while offsetting their other limitations of resources, to create customised experiences for the contemporary users. Crafts have this inherent strength to address such challenges due to their very operational nature. If supported well, crafts can rediscover themselves to meet the new trends that demand innovative products, materials, and processes with new standards of quality and creativity. But the quality of production, approaches for further market development, protection of traditional wisdom and practices through IPR, sustainability, crafts promotion, etc. are the aspects that will need to be addressed for effective growth of Indian handicrafts.

Crafts and design are now increasingly becoming mutually interdependent in many ways to cater to the demands of both international as well as national markets. Design can play a major role in empowering crafts and crafts persons, both as an enabler and a value adding entity. Only knowledge empowerment and efficient multi-disciplinary networking can lead to bringing in cutting edge advantage to Indian crafts. Attributes of Indian handicrafts have a great potential to contribute to design in its efforts to develop new products and services that are aspired by modern day consumers but this will require a sensitive hand holding.

Crafts in India continue to contribute to design education in numerous ways. In fact, the very foundation of design education in India was laid on the approach and philosophy of crafts practices in the country. Though study of traditional crafts has been part of design education for several decades now, the need

for specific and contextual design intervention methodologies suitable to the contemporary as well as future needs is continuously been growing.

International Centre for Indian Crafts (ICIC)

Recognizing the emerging trends-led opportunities and the learning from the past experiences have led NID to set up a dedicated centre called International Centre for Indian Crafts (ICIC) with the primary aim to effectively understand the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of crafts sector and apply NID's interdisciplinary design expertise and knowledge base for capacity building and skill up gradation of artisans with a 'Global-Local' approach. The unique approach is to develop a national and international network for crafts design research, training and knowledge dissemination for providing collaborative and sustainable linkages to the Indian crafts sector.

ICIC - Background

Since its inception, National Institute of Design (NID) has been playing a key role as a catalyst in development and promotion of design in Indian handicrafts Industry. This proven understanding and experience in the area of crafts along with an innovative approach to developing such a programme has helped add value to design education in the country besides helping the crafts sector to connect to the mainstream of economic development taking place in India.

National Institute of Design (NID) is internationally recognised as one of the foremost and trans-disciplinary institutions in the field of design education, research and training for over four decades. NID has played a key role as a catalyst in development and promotion of design in the Indian Handicrafts Industry. Through its Outreach Programmes, NID continues to be engaged in design intervention initiatives for crafts sector through government and non-government organisations/ institutions. Over the years, a number of craft documentations, craft design training programmes and craft development projects were undertaken by NID. Today, a variety of other institutional formats also exist in the country that deals with design education, training & human resource development for crafts, each of which has its own inherent advantages and disadvantages. However, the development of an appropriate model with futuristic vision would contribute highly in achieving the contextual perspectives and a cutting edge that the new generations of professionals require to lay foundations of crafts and creative industries in India. NID has helped set up craft development related centres/ institutions like IICD, Jaipur; BCDI, Agartala; and CDI, Srinagar. This extensive experience and in-depth understanding of the country's diverse and vibrant crafts sector has motivated NID to set up an **International Centre for Indian Crafts (ICIC)** with the support of the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts - DC (H), at NID's Ahmedabad campus for capacity building, design-technology orientation and skill upgradation of artisans and crafts persons.

ICIC - Vision

To add value to Indian handicrafts sector and the crafts persons through design dissemination and training, spearheaded by innovation and design research with an interactive global public-private-community network, to emerge with greater strengths and distinct sustainable identity.

The road map and vision of ICIC have been developed with the long experience and expertise of NID with the handicrafts sector. In order to provide a greater relevance with a meaningful direction to centre's activities, a national seminar, "Indian Crafts: the future in the globalising world" was organised in November, 2005. A number of national and international experts shared their views and contributed to prioritising the needs and crystallising the scope for design intervention opportunities in the crafts sector. The outcome of this shared vision continues to be one of the key catalysts to the future development of ICIC-NID.

Objectives

International Centre for Indian Crafts (ICIC) offers trans-disciplinary knowledge and experience as the cutting edge strategy of design, to improve the quality of life of crafts persons through need based design-led training to add value to the handicrafts sector. The key objective of the Centre is to train the crafts persons from Indian Handicrafts Industry by providing formal contemporary design entrepreneurship and product development orientation through strategic design-technology-skill-management programmes/ workshops at multiple levels on a regular basis. This includes developing richer and need based curricula

and training techniques, providing wider market exposure and better opportunities involving various stake holders.

The goals ICIC is focusing on are:

To raise design and quality standards of crafts products for better marketability.

To capitalise on local strengths in culture and crafts to pursue inter- disciplinary strategic focus.

To utilise design research and documentation as a strategy for enriching knowledge and skills.

To interface between the government and the handicrafts sector for preparing policies and plans to achieve common goals.

To develop knowledge resources for making the Indian handicrafts sector globally competitive through better inflow of market intelligence and integration of new capabilities and skills.

To increase knowledge exchange opportunities through national and international exchanges and collaborative projects.

To help create the environment for consolidated and sustainable growth.

To extend expertise for similar initiatives and in setting up crafts based institutions in India and elsewhere.

To promote events and activities for extending and expanding markets for Indian handicrafts.

To help protect Intellectual Property in the Indian crafts sector.

Approach

More than ever, the traditional Indian crafts persons today are facing challenges of new trends, new markets and changing economies, leading to problems of contextual product development and marketing. It is critical to provide them not only skill upgradation training but also a comprehensive and formal education that helps them to innovate, diversify and maximise their earning potential through the crafts activity.

The following aspects are an integral part of ICIC-NID approach:

Design Research and Knowledge Creation

The soul of Indian handicrafts is their design vocabulary and high level of skills and workmanship. Analysis shows that the artisans have suffered because they have been limited by the lack of contemporary design know-how for product innovation and updated market intelligence.

ICIC aims to reduce this gap through continuous design research in the areas of need. The knowledge created will be documented and shared with the crafts persons in order to provide a cutting edge.

Customisation of Training Curriculum

Sophistication of visual language, branding through design, use of new technology and techniques are the stepping stones to succeed in today's dynamic markets. Both traditional materials and new processes can be interwoven innovatively to result in a contemporary product appeal. Opportunities that are unique to specific needs could be used as a strategic tool to achieve new breakthroughs. Continuous customisation of crafts training programmes will ensure more efficient learning and applicability.

Exchanges, Networking, and Support Systems

ICIC-NID works with a collaborative and co-creation approach with a highly networked environment. The network includes experienced professionals from diverse fields, educational and R&D institutions, NGO's, government organisations, etc. The centre is taking several steps in partnership with institutions and individuals to keep abreast with the latest developments and upcoming resources from all across the world and share them with the stakeholders. The centre also draws its support from the large resource of experienced NID faculty and its state of art infrastructure. This cooperative strategy in design delivers maximum value to the artisans. ICIC also facilitates a unique approach of crafts persons' exchange at national and international level wherein artisans and designers working with crafts and from diverse backgrounds come together for exchange of ideas, experience and crafts practice.

Market Linkages and Crafts Promotion

Through all its training programmes and hand holding exercises, ICIC integrates market sensitisation and exposure. This knowledge and exposure is provided with the help of our network with the importers, individual businessmen, professional designers, international experts and entrepreneurs. Opportunities are created for the craftsmen to interact directly with customers and market outlets. ICIC also organises various platforms such as seminars, design clinics, buyer seller meets, etc. in order to create wider awareness about the role of design for crafts and for creation of new networks besides strengthening the existing ones. Efforts are aimed to establish design credibility and increase the persuasive power of Indian handicrafts as a brand in the international market.

Activities

The Handicrafts industry in India is part of a very complex global socio-cultural and economic scenario. To deal with the situation from numerous perspectives, the activities of the centre aim to provide scope for multiple levels of knowledge sharing and design dissemination mechanisms. Some of the activities that are already in progress:

Crafts Documentation and Need Assessment

ICIC with the support of NID's academic programmes carries out a number of crafts documentation projects. This field research project is taken forward with a region specific mapping of the Indian crafts and to prioritise the needs and opportunities where design intervention could help. In addition, several sponsored projects are also undertaken to develop need assessment survey reports/ feasibility reports to research and articulate market trends vis-à-vis cluster specific needs leading to establish design intervention methodology.

Curriculum and Training Resource Development

Need based curriculum development for training modules for specific crafts are a continuous process at ICIC. The curriculum and training strategies are enriched with the outcome of design research carried out by faculty and students at ICIC-NID. New designs, samples, prototypes, specimens, design/ process manual, etc. are also developed for providing visually rich content that is comprehensible to the trainees. While ICIC-NID acts as the core design resource centre, it continues to harness external resources and expertise with multidisciplinary approach.

Training Programmes/ Workshops for Specific Clients

ICIC undertakes and conducts a number of short term Design led workshops and training programmes for diverse range of crafts. These programmes not only provide skill development opportunities but also provide contextual design inputs including product development and diversification. A range of unique value addition strategies are integrated in each of these programmes including market testing of new products.

International Crafts Design Programmes/ Workshops on Indian Crafts

The centre has already conducted some international exchange programmes successfully and several more are underway. Plans are in progress for offering international workshops in the area of Indian Crafts for international participants in chosen craft techniques. These new programmes will provide unique opportunities to the participants to appreciate and learn develop new products with the Indian master crafts persons.

Seminars and Lectures

With the success of a national seminar, "Indian Crafts: the future in the globalising world", ICIC plans to hold periodic seminars and lecture series with the support of various sponsoring bodies, knowledge partners, experts, and experienced crafts persons.

Hand Holding and Design Clinics

In order to bring in sustainability to the outcome of various efforts made by ICIC, the centre has adopted a unique approach to hold post-training design clinics for imparting inputs on various issues related to design and development for earlier participants. A cluster development perspective is also taken while

planning of such on-the-spot consulting clinics. This helps in building capacity of crafts persons in an incremental manner that is critical for design and product success.

Since its inception, the International Centre for Indian Crafts has already conducted a number of training programmes successfully for varied crafts from several states of India. These workshops addressed a wide range of design and product development issues related to Indian handicrafts. Also an International workshop for South African artisans along with Indian crafts persons was conducted at NID that led to a whole new range of contemporary products suited to international markets. This intervention successfully paved the way for design capacity building through cross cultural exchange of ideas, techniques, and perspectives amongst the participants. ICIC was also one of the hosts in an innovative international project called "Here & There" (HAT) from UK that enables and encourages the exchange of crafts persons/ designers/ artists through fellowships for the activities related to crafts.

Convergence of Crafts – A Case Study

In early 2007, with a request from the directorate of Handicrafts & Cottage Industry, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, the center conducted a series of workshops on design and product development for the artisans in the area of dhokra casting, terracotta, tribal jewelry, bamboo and textiles. Each of these crafts is very distinct and holds very strong traditional characters that are rooted deep in the history of arts and crafts from Orissa.

With extensive need assessment survey that was carried out in the field, in the areas where these traditions are rooted, it was soon realized that the traditional skills available with the participating craft persons were very good and their sensibility for traditional aesthetics was extremely strong. What they lack was the understanding of the new consumers and the markets that are located far away from them. These crafts persons were also producing a good variety of products that were frequently of ritualistic or decorative value. There is also a stiff competition amongst themselves or with the similar crafts from other parts of the country, posing threats to the survival of their traditional practice. There was also little collaboration and coordination seen amongst different groups of crafts persons located in the same geographical area.

Looking at the prevailing market trends, the design team devised the approach to initially sensitize individual groups of crafts persons from each craft area, for modern design sensibilities and new product developments for benefit of their respective traditional product range. Thus, five workshops, each in the area of dhokra casting, terracotta, tribal jewelry, bamboo and textiles were conducted. Having acquired a good level of proficiency and insights in developing contemporary forms that also have functional value for the customers, a series of new products were developed and refined. Five artisans from each of the above workshops were then selected, who formed a group of participants for the final concluding workshop. The criteria for selecting these individuals was their learning ability, level of enthusiasm and excitement for carrying the process forward after going back to their respective environments. During the concluding workshop, the concept of conversions in design and product making was imparted to them. They were also taken out for field exposure to modern retail stores and boutiques, so as to help them understand the context of design and the contemporary trends. Thereafter, they were encouraged to propose new ideas and their coordinates in form of collections that suits the emerging trends and could be developed collectively.

Each material and technique has its own unique strengths that could be meaningfully utilized for a specific range of products only. The craft practice with one technique and its material/s may not suit many other kind of products. This creates a kind of saturation to the explorations that could be made for developing new products needed by the markets today. Today's' consumer lifestyles often require a coordinated approach, where products of different characteristics need to co-habit in a user environment.

Some interesting product ideas came up where different components of the same product were done by the artisans, with their respective techniques and materials. They also developed innovative collections of coordinated range of products where individual products utilized intrinsic characteristics of materials and techniques best suited to their function or purpose. This value added outcome in terms of new range of products, was meaningful in two ways; one, it provided new expressions to traditional aesthetics with contemporary forms that were so far non-existent in the markets. The workshop further encouraged inter-

group collaboration amongst the artisans for strategic co-creation. This approach also addresses the critical need for setting up an assembly line within the cluster that could cater to the retail outlets in the urban areas that requires quality as well as quantity. The establishment of such a critical mass of the producer group at cluster level enables the government support and further safeguards the craft persons against exploitations at individual level. Such strategies and products strengthen the personality of the cluster that offers quality and efficiency much needed in Indian craft situations today.

In today's era of mass production, the customer needs a contemporary product that has a touch of local expression. Frequently the traditional crafts have the evolved design vocabulary that could meaningfully energize a product and interest the customer. The materials integrated by these artisans are easily available in their regional surroundings.

The project was successful in terms of developing a culture of innovation within the framework of their local resources, infrastructure and sensibilities and yet provides a scope for catering to the niche markets. The new found attitude helps them to connect and build on hereafter. The office of the directorate of Handicrafts & Cottage Industry, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, has taken up the role to mentor and hand hold. So far the results have been extremely positive in terms of the market viability of the new products developed during the above workshops. This new attitude has helped change the rigid mind sets while providing with a cutting edge to future.

AUTHORS' PROFILES



A Mechanical Engineer and a Post Graduate in Industrial Design (Product Design), SHASHANK MEHTA is a faculty of Industrial Design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. Currently, he is Additional Activity Chairman, Education at NID. Prior to this, he has also headed NID's Outreach Programmes, Industry Programmes & Project Departments.

Shashank holds rich professional experience of working with the small scale as well as large industries as a Design Consultant. His Design projects range from Consumer products, Medical equipment, Electronic products, Children's equipment and Furniture & Interiors to public utility systems. Before joining NID in 1993, he worked with Kinetic Engg. Ltd, Pune, M/S N.R. Jasani, Mumbai, and with a voluntary agency, AGNY.

He has extensively worked in the area of Technology & Design Fusion, Sustainability and Indigenous Innovations. He was involved in conceptualizing the first e-learning module on package design and also helped set up the country's first Design Business Incubator at NID. He has successfully anchored various national and international training programmes, workshops, and design clinics. Shashank has authored various articles and actively contributed to various bodies in diverse capacities. He has widely lectured on the subjects 'Imperatives of Technology & Design Interface', 'New Product Development', 'Understanding Design' etc.

Email: shashank@nid.edu



VIJAI SINGH KATIYAR is a *Senior Design Faculty* at National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, INDIA. He graduated as a Textile Designer from NID. Before which he trained as a Textile technologist at GCTI, Kanpur. Currently, he is pursuing his Doctoral Research in the area of Crafts Design Education. As Design Educator he has given impetus to a number of academic activities at NID including Professional Education Programme, International Exchange Programmes and has developed new Post Graduate Programme in Textile Design. He has been responsible for the development and execution of the System of Educational Excellence in Design (SEED) at NID. Currently, he looks after the crafts and social development activities of NID as Chairman, Outreach Programmes. He is also a Founder Member & the Head of 'International Center for Indian Crafts' set up in 2005. He is also a Member, policy & Planning Committee of NID.

As a *Design Consultant*, his long professional career of over 17 years has helped a number of business enterprises for both domestic as well as exports sectors, contributing at strategic level design planning, product development and implementation. As a designer, his specialization includes the area of Yarn Design, Woven Fabric Design, Surface Ornamentation, Home Textiles, Made-ups and Design for Crafts. He also has keen interest and contributes in the areas of Textile CAD, System Design, Visual Merchandising, Photography

and Graphics. He continues to be the Team Leader and Head for several large design development, research and academic projects at NID.

He undertakes considerable amount of work in all aspects of Design and Design Education. He has also organised and anchored four national seminars and an international conference on Design Education, DETM 2005 (Co-organised with Mr. Shashank Mehta). He has authored several articles on design and related topics and served on jury panels of Design Competitions. His recent publication as Co-editor is 'Design Education; Tradition & Modernity'. Currently, he is authoring a book on Indian Sari due to be published in 2007. He is also a Member, Governing Council, Kumarappa National Handmade Paper Institute, Jaipur besides actively contributing to a number of many other professional and administrative panels/ committees.

Email: vijaisk@nid.edu