

DESIGN TO CONNECT: ENCOURAGING SOCIAL INNOVATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Seeding Design in India

The National Institute of Design (NID), India has begun its golden jubilee celebrations since November 2010. Established in the year 1961 as the first design institute in India, NID's mandate includes—imparting design training, creating design awareness, and promoting design throughout the country. *The India Report* by Charles and Ray Eames, the iconic designer duo commissioned by the Government of India formed the basis for setting up the National Institute of Design. This document recommended for “sober investigation into those values and those qualities that Indians hold important to a good life ...that there be a close scrutiny of those elements that go to make up a ‘Standard of Living’.” With a major emphasis on improving the quality of life, the Eameses further recommended to begin search for this from the village level. Over the last five decades, NID and its alumni have worked extensively with the country's variegated industrial and social sectors, as well as government and non-government organisations. This has helped the institute understand and solve typical problems that arise in India's labour intensive society.

Education Programmes at NID

Education programmes at NID have matured and evolved as unique design programmes that are most suitable to India's needs. As a multidisciplinary design institute, NID offers programmes in 17 different disciplines, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and through its three campuses. The system of education at the institute lays more emphasis on *learning by doing*, *learning to learn*, and *learning together*, than on mere instruction. Students are provided with a number of opportunities during their study and are encouraged to go out to the field, interact with various stakeholders and learn through these experiences and exposures. Course modules such as Environmental Perception and Craft Documentation require students to stay with the artisans/villagers for a few weeks

and document their macro and micro lives by exploring and learning about their culture, tradition, profession, and artefacts. These and other course modules such as Indigenous Innovations, Service Design, and System Design impart learning and help students develop sensitivity and respect for their surroundings and society; thus, generating the much needed empathy and concern for all the stakeholders involved. Various design projects that the students undertake as part of their study, provide them ample opportunities and challenges to face real life situations. These projects and course modules also help bring the institute closer to industry and society; thereby, developing a mutually beneficial relationship.

The experience gained over the years has helped the institute develop design intervention methodologies that are most appropriate to the Indian context. NID has organised successful international workshops for participants from various developing countries with similar needs and contexts, and shared these experiences and insights. Today, NID supports various government and non-government organisations to set up design institutes across the country.

India: A Cultural Melting Pot

With its over 1.23 billion population, India can be aptly called a land of people. Over 70 percent of these people live in more than 5,50,000 villages spread across 37 states of India. A vast majority (about 80 percent) of the country's population comprises people from the rural and middle-income group segments. Agriculture and crafts constitute the major sources of income for the rural population. And the Indian industry comprises largely of small and medium scale industries (SMEs). Almost 95 percent of the products are manufactured in these SMEs.

The Indian society consists of more than 6400 castes and sub-castes, and is further subdivided into 6 major ethnic groups. While the Indian Constitution has given official recognition to 22 languages, a vast plethora of languages and dialects are still spoken all over the country. India is also one of the fastest growing economies in the world. By the year 2020 it is expected to be the third largest economy after the United States and China. And a major section of its population, it is estimated, would

be in the working-age group by the year 2020. Modern and traditional, rich and poor, new and old, they all coexist in India. Being a 5000 year old civilisation, contemporary India is the sum total of a valuable treasure of knowledge, wisdom, and traditions.

Creativity is recognised as an essential and a common quality and is used and practiced in daily life. People come up with ingenious and amazing solutions for making the best use of resources they may have at their disposal. Design is a way of life in India. Collaboration, sharing, and supporting are integral to the Indian culture. Cooperation, community life, and peaceful co-existence are the distinguishing characteristics of the Indian society. Socialisation is part of Indian culture and it happens at various levels within the multilayered Indian society. Every layer/segment is large enough to form its own group/community; while, at the same time it is also closely linked to other layers/strata of society.

All the festivals, rituals and customs of India are obvious proofs of this. All occasions, be they for sharing happiness or grief, are elaborately carried out. Customs are built such that people can share each other's workload and responsibilities as also the happiness or grief, as the case may be. So, a typical Indian marriage is a big occasion spanning over two to three days where all the relatives and friends are invited not only to participate in the ceremonies but also to contribute in sharing the responsibilities, and physical and financial burdens as well. The unique feature of celebration in India is that it is not limited to the family/relatives alone but also extends to the needy of the society. Customs are so made that they encourage people to give gifts in the form of food, clothes, and money to the needy during various festivals. Even death is not a private affair and extends for over ten days where the relatives and friends share the grief and loneliness. Thus, all these help people to share their grief, their difficulties, and their happiness with each other and thereby help them face the challenges of life and grow united.

In every village, its residents as a group would help each other in tending to each other's fields or to repair or rebuild their houses. Labour being the main skill that they

all possess, sharing of this skill is a prevalent practice here. In their home/family, while the young men work in the fields, the women manage their cattle, provide necessary help in the farms and also keep look after the home. The elders look after their children at home and educate them about their culture and tradition. Thus, in joint families, every single member has to contribute in terms of sharing the work. The structure of these villages, which is generally developed in cluster format with courtyards, open spaces, or a road in the middle, is such that it helps people connect better; thus, enabling them to strengthen their family/ community in a larger group. Also, there is a strong community life in the common courtyard, and this further encourages the bonding between the people.

Diversity of culture, traditions, and ethnic and economic dimensions thus offer Indian designers a variety of opportunities and challenges in terms of creative solutions. The solutions that are more likely to achieve success here are of the *people centric* type. These solutions will look at people, not as consumers but as human beings. Such solutions can generate employment opportunities based on the existing skills and behaviour of the people, and improve the standard of living while preserving the values of traditional society.

Sustainability and Gandhi

According to Mahatma Gandhi, economic activities cannot be isolated from human life. A country's economy can attain sustainable growth only through a balanced development of all the regions. He believed that optimum utilisation of human resources was highly essential for a country like India. Production by masses rather than mass production therefore, would be more appropriate to India. Gandhi therefore encouraged decentralisation and regional self reliance through small scale and cottage industries. These industries would be able to create employment opportunities for the rural population by utilising the locally available sources and skills. Opportunities for self-employment would empower every individual by instilling confidence, self-respect, and entrepreneurial spirit in him/her. This would help bring equality in the society as the income generated will get distributed throughout the working class. A strong supporter of equality, ethics, nonviolence,

non-exploitation of workers and social welfare, Gandhi believed that the sustainable economic growth can only be achieved through development of the entire human personality and by maintaining the relationship between man and nature.

Design: The Indian Context

Design in the Indian context focuses on people, their environment, and various sociocultural issues. Participatory and inclusive approach that centres around the primary objective of improving the quality of life of all the stakeholders involved is the most appropriate approach for design interventions in India. These design interventions preserve the values of traditional Indian society and should generate newer employment opportunities. Design and development interventions here, aim to encourage cooperative and participatory approach. The interventions focus on honing the existing skills and cooperative behaviour of the people and are in tandem with the social fabric of community life. This helps create employment opportunities at the doorsteps of the people; thereby, endowing them with financial empowerment. Designer's role and responsibilities thus assumes greater significance in the Indian context.

One of the successful cooperative organizations, '*Shri Mahila Gruh Udhog Lijjat Papad*' (www.lijjat.com) provides opportunities to thousands of women, many of whom come from the economically backward strata of the society and are also illiterate, to earn their living at their doorsteps with their limited skills. Every day, more than 42,000 of these women, roll out 19 million *papads* between them. These women get the dough from the organisation everyday in the morning and work in the afternoon when they are free from their daily household work and all other family members have gone for their work. The organization also provides them the platform to come together and discuss various issues related to their life. Another such success story is that of the white revolution that was initiated by Amul, (www.amul.com) jointly owned by some 2.8 million milk producers, most of who come from the rural background. Both these organizations, through their innovative cooperative networks, have helped people at the grassroots level, gain economic viability, level of independence, dignity and respect in their life, even while keeping their social and cultural structure intact. Similarly, *dabbawalas* of Mumbai

(www.mydabbawala.com) form another such story altogether. An estimated 5000 *dabbawalas*, every day move around 200,000 lunch boxes freshly made from the home of each person to his/her work places straight from home with utmost punctuality.

There have been several initiatives that encourage the young generation to make voluntary contributions to society and thereby develop their social skills. SPIC MACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth) was established in 1977, and today it has its chapters in over 300 towns and cities. Similarly the *Lead India* initiative, launched by one of the country's largest media houses—The Times of India Group, is another unique initiative that encourages the deserving young leaders with vision and ability to enter into public governance. Its *Teach India* initiative on the other hand connects with the young generation and encourages it to contribute towards teaching underprivileged children. Both these initiatives, through their effective campaigns, have succeeded in connecting today's young generation to the basic demands and needs of society. These and various other initiatives inspire the young generation to take up voluntary work, and in the process inculcate in them a spirit of service that ultimately results in the development of their social skills.

Design, by humanising technology, helps connect the products/systems to the masses. The emphasis being on improving the people's standard of living through generating newer opportunities, a designer in the Indian context has to design products/solutions that encourage sustainability in its varied forms. These designs are developed locally so as to succeed in satisfying the needs of the region in which they are produced. While converting constraints of resources into unique opportunities encompassing aspects such as their reusability, recyclability, reparability and increased life cycle; design in India aims to improve the working conditions of the people and enhance the technological prowess of the industries. These design solutions are low on capital investment, but technologically intensive. These aspects help to increase the service intensity of the products; thereby, increasing employment opportunities.

NID and its alumni have been actively involved with the country's varied and rich craft sectors, over these last five decades. As a result of this close involvement; NID recently published a design directory: *Handbook of Handicrafts* documenting over 600 crafts of the country. Design here complements craft to connect its skills to the contemporary markets while offsetting its limitations of resources. Thereby design helps create new employment opportunities for the artisans/ craftspersons involved. Similarly majority of the industrial units in India operate on a small scale and they employ people from different backgrounds. Thousands of families/people would be involved in one product or product segment. Before embarking upon any design intervention, it becomes important to gain a holistic understanding of the context, the need, strengths, and weaknesses in terms of resources and levels of skills, training and experience available, socio-cultural issues involved and market demands. Design intervention for these and industries, goes beyond product/design solutions to that of a catalyst to bring in new changes and new vision. Through value addition at every stage of its development/production design helps improve the quality of life of the people involved. Such interventions also have a strong impact on the sustainable development of the Indian economy.

As a part of his design project at NID, an exchange student from Germany worked with a craft community from Gujarat that is traditionally involved in making kitchen knives. These knives were sold at fairly low prices and mostly as single pieces. The student-designer developed a set of knives, each of which could be used for different requirements in the kitchen. By utilising the community's existing skills and resources, the student-designer succeeded in creating a new set of knives that have ergonomically comfortable handles. The motif used on the handle was inspired from the camel, because the craftspersons were natives of Kutch, a desert region in Gujarat, where camels are an integral part of the lives of the local people. This motif has given the knife a unique identity. This substantial value addition has helped revitalise the craft. Such design intervention projects have helped various crafts, SMEs and other social sectors to connect with contemporary markets and demands. These projects have enabled these sectors to sustain themselves, even in the face of limited capital investment and resources.

The institute offers various such opportunities for its students and faculty to work closely with the crafts, industrial and social sectors of the country. Various classroom projects, summer internships and final year thesis project (diploma project) offers opportunities to the design students to explore and learn from real life experience and exposure with the sectors of his/her interests. The faculty members work on live projects through the institute's design service wing. Through the outreach programmes department, the institute reach out to various crafts and social sectors. Various sector specific studios set up at the institute provide opportunities to undertake in-depth research and design intervention projects in the specific domain areas. The Centre for Bamboo Initiatives, set up at the institute is one such example. Similarly the Grassroots Innovation Design Studio (GRIDS) set up at the National Institute of Design in collaboration with GIAN, Ahmedabad, helps provide the crucial design intervention support to the local innovators and organisations. The National Design Business Incubator (NDBI) set up at NID with the support from the Government of India, is another such initiative that helps innovators, entrepreneurs, and designers develop their ideas further into market needs and business success.

Based on these rich experiences of working closely with the country's large micro, small, and medium scale enterprises (MSMEs), NID developed a unique design intervention model —The Design Clinic Scheme for MSMEs. This scheme addresses the critical need of taking design to the doorsteps of these industries where a conventional model of design consultancy and training is not often affordable. With the main objective of seeding design amongst the MSME industries, the scheme provides platform for constant and continuous interaction amongst the designers and the MSMEs. Resulting in increased employment opportunities as one of the outcome of the scheme, the products will be designed based on the local context and needs. Through systematic design intervention and support, this approach is expected to create a sustainable design eco system for the Indian MSME sector. Financially supported by the ministry of MSMEs, Government of India, the scheme targets to reach out to about 200 industry clusters throughout the country within the span of next two and half years.

Conclusion

Design in India means developing solutions together as a team. The design profession brings in the much needed empathetic understanding and holistic vision to connect and integrate various efforts towards a positive outcome. The designer works as a coordinator and a team member to handhold the team/activity and takes up the responsibility of creating contextual and appropriate solutions, systems, services, or products. A sensitive designer, through his/her wide exposure and experience and through his/her ability to take a holistic view can easily connect with the users' needs. Designers can act as catalysts that help bring in new changes and new vision for society, industry, or the team they work with. Keeping such facts in mind, it can be concluded that design in the Indian context encourages social innovation and sustainability in its various forms.

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