

## **Services that Sustain**

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With a population of over one billion, India can be aptly called **a land of people**. A vast majority (about 80 %) of this population comprises of people from rural and middle-income group segment. These people, though mature and positive in temperament, tend to become conservative and conscious in embracing new changes due to the constraints and stresses involved in their struggle for life. This is clearly evident from their buying behavior. The products they purchase are expected to perform for prolonged use, mostly for the entire life of the user and more often than not these products may even be passed on to the next generation. This creates an emotional bonding with the products and more money would be spent on its repair and maintenance than its actual cost. Even after this the product may be resold to be reused or recycled, either in full or parts. Even today for producing or repairing, manual labor, as is cheaper, would be preferred in many cases over machines or products. These coupled with the diversity of socio-cultural, religious, lingual, geographical and environmental factors, besides the mythology filled psyche of the people, the challenges that the country and its people offer are enormous and extremely complex. New and old, modern and traditional, rich and poor all coexist in India.

The concept of **service** and **sharing** is deeply rooted into the Indian tradition and is imbibed in the person's life from a very early age. All the festivals, rituals and customs of India are an ample proof 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 occasion/s but also to contribute in sharing

the responsibilities, physical and financial burdens, etc. 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 encourage people to give gifts in form of food, clothes and also 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.

Over sixty percent of the people live in more than half a million villages in India. Agriculture is their main source of income. Labor being the main skill that they all possess, sharing of this skill is a prevalent practice. The villagers as a group would help each other in turn in each other's fields or to repair or rebuild their houses. **Labor is a service that is offered and shared** here in exchange of the same. While the younger men-folk work in the fields, their women manage their cattle, provide necessary help in the farm work and also keep their home. The elders look after their children at home and educate them formally and also about their culture and tradition. Thus, all contribute in these joint families, with their share of work. The structure of these villages, which is generally developed in cluster format with courtyards, open space or road in the middle, is such that it helps better connection between people and knowing each other and thus extend their family – community in a larger group. Also there is a strong community life in the common courtyard further encouraging the bonding between the people.

Thus the design and development interventions have to be, while focusing on **generating employment opportunities**, in line with the social fabric of the community life in the villages. Interventions that are able to en-cash the **existing skills and cooperative behavior** of the people are more likely to be successful. One of the successful cooperative organizations, 'The Mahila Gruh Udhayog Lijjat Papad' 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. More than 40,000 of these women, every day roll out 19 million 'Papadom' between them. These women get the 'dough' from the organization 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', jointly owned by some 2.1 million milk producers, most of who come from the rural background. The organization collects raw milk from villagers and processes them in their state-of-the-art plant and markets the milk and milk products all over India and now in many parts of the world as well. Both these organizations, through their innovative cooperative networks, could provide **an effective interface**, through the use of the modern technology and quality service at the right place, between the traditional Indian society at the grassroots level and the quality conscious and demanding buyers / users at the other end. This has 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.

Due to limited resources and skills and few job opportunities, it becomes difficult for majority of the people to get a job – a regular income, thus **people turn towards self-employment** from very early age. People find ingenious and amazing ways of adapting and accommodating in order to make the most of whatever resources and skills at their disposal to earn their daily living. All kinds of services are therefore available, as they offer the opportunity for the person to earn his / her living with minimum of investment and skill level and also with the flexibility of time and the freedom to be on his / her own. Layers of services get developed around any business, manufacturing units or around any need that is identified in the society. These services that are offered by individuals, some times even by groups, generally remain at unorganized levels only. India is therefore today one of the largest base of the auxiliary units in the whole of Asia.

There are services available that deliver newspapers, milk, grocery, and etc. everyday morning at your doorsteps. And there are also services that buy back the used cartons, containers, used packages and old newspapers from the doorsteps for them to be recycled or reused. The old newspapers are reused as paper bags, containers etc. before being finally recycled. The auto-rickshaws plying on the roads in the cities, double up as school rickshaws to take children from all the nooks and corner of the city to their respective schools. These kinds of unorganized services help reduce the infrastructural investments, otherwise required to be incurred by organizations. For example, in the above case buying of school buses by the schools. All these services are mostly offered by individuals, who are looking for the much needed extra-income / income. Thousands of families get occupied / survive around one product segment. In Mumbai, one of the largest cities of India, more than 10,000 families work in the metal ballpoint pen components manufacturing sector. These families offer their services from their small homes and with minimum of investments. They bring their work home and work in what ever space that is available – be it a living room, verandah or small balcony. All the family members including children would contribute in the work in their free time. Be it handicrafts, traditional products or modern products, they are all made and sold through this service sector. In India, **mass-production means production by masses and production for masses**, as there are thousands of families attached to any one product or object that is produced. The designer has to be, therefore, extremely sensitive and cautious in offering any modifications / new changes.

**Indian economy is thus primarily a service – process oriented economy** rather than the material or products oriented one prevalent elsewhere. It, therefore, demands different solutions; solutions that **are ‘people centric’**, people not as consumers but as human beings. Major emphasis being on generating new opportunities, improving standard of living and preserving the values of traditional society. Designers’ role and responsibilities, therefore, assume extreme significance, as it goes much beyond designing products or

objects to that of **designing services** that encourages sustainability in all its various forms.