

Specks of Light

Musings on tradition, modernity and design education.

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Abstract

The morphing of the Indian mindset in recent years, to the global view of the world, symbolizes yet another encounter between tradition and modernity. The contact between cultures is not however an unusual occurrence. The views of the Buddha, date back to the sixth century B.C. but have found their way to the remotest corners of the world.

Personalities as diverse as Romain Rolland and Robert Oppenheimer have found the Bhagvad Gita, a fountainhead of wisdom. Sri Aurobindo's contact with the West during his early education in England was not without significance. Philosophers and thinkers from Jiddu Krishnamurti to Ken Wilber have continued this dialogue between the West and the East.

The interpretation of "design" as an activity where art meets science; the right-brain meets the left; where East meets West; the sacred meets the secular, necessarily implies that design is a dialogue. The new generation symbolizes the modern. The legacy it receives from the past symbolizes tradition. It is the dialogue between these that can lead to specks of light that is generated as dualities meet, transform and reappear as energy.

We live in a time that could be called the golden age of technology. This is a visible truth and surely does not need elaboration. To predict the changes that various technologies would bring to our lives would be at best, speculative. Thus while wanting to shape the future, it helps to understand not just the immediate past, but a sense of the journey that we, as a people, have undertaken, over thousands of centuries. This can provide a perspective that forms the basis of any action-plan that seeks to shape the future.

The growth of democratic structures require a sense of accountability and transparency and a need for systems and processes to handle complex exchanges and transactions. While the democratic ideal attempts to raise the collective sensibilities to a higher plane, it is the less visible aspiration of the spirit and its growth that also need to be fostered. This paper attempts to present some views in this regard.

An invocation

To begin with I shall invoke a few words from the Mundakopinshad. The Upanishads are replete with poetic analogies that contain profound insights. Mundaka removes the super-imposed veil of Ignorance that obscures our vision.

*Dvau suparna sayuja sakhaya
Samanam vrksam parisasvajate,
Tayor anyah pippalam svadv-atty-
Anasan anyo abhicakasiti.*

The transliteration in English, taken from the commentaries by Swami Chinmayananda reads thus:

Two birds bound to each other in close friendship, perch on the self same tree. One of them eats the fruits of the tree with relish, while the other (just) looks on, without eating.

From the London diaries

In a recent visit to the science museum in London I came across the landing gear of an Airbus. It had so many parts that I was even more thankful that planes most times take-off and land safely. The text placed near the exhibit told me that the wheels were filled with nitrogen (If the tyres are filled with air the vapour in them is likely to condense at the sub zero temperatures at high altitudes). It also told me that the tyres were designed to land at speeds of 120 mph and needed to be changed after 300 landings.

The two faces of a one-billion-people

The India that shines

Beginning work in 1985, the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) of India, on the 4th January 2001, succeeded in flying a light-weight supersonic combat aircraft (the LCA). India has therefore demonstrated her capability of producing flying machines that can defend her but is far from creating huge buses that can fly like the Airbus or the Boeing 747. The 747 is a huge machine and it is almost unbelievable that the thing flies. It can also land in bad weather on a narrow strip of concrete a ten-thousand miles away from where it took off. Navigation is other remarkable thing about flight. Flight, navigation, wheels that allow a return to the earth, and good brakes, all of these represent an understanding that comes to us from the West.

In recent times, the magnificent mastery over matter is almost entirely an achievement of the West. The same understanding is reflected in art and design, through the excellence achieved in the creation of bridges, chairs, and more recently chips, computers and cellular phones. Innovation and design in this sense, to put it across without grace, is simply not the stuff that India is as yet capable of.

Detailed documentation of processes is symbolic of the ordered and systematic approach that is typical of the West. Being an oral culture, written documentation is anathema to the Indian. The predominance of books, journals and publications from the West in academic libraries and knowledge management centres clearly reflects this (as perhaps is the resistance on my part, to put down my thoughts as a “paper”!). Most Indians seem to have an innate understanding that all meaningful knowledge is not to be written down but lived. The image that India presents to the world is of a functioning anarchy, where processes,

systems, and standards are files that are meant to gather dust, rather than serve to regulate and improve the life of people.

Proclamations such as “ISO 9002” certified are indicative of the difficulty that companies struggling to change this perception of India confront when dealing with clients from over the world. The complicitous assurance of the shopkeeper selling a fellow Indian some “phoren” made product (*bahar ka maal hai*) and the conspiratorial grin of the thankful customer provides us with a revealing glimpse of the Indian psyche.

Arindam Banerji in an interesting article “Can India produce billion-dollar innovations?” observes that India has made rapid strides in the world of research and development in the last few years”. He goes on to question “are its (India’s) innovations world-beaters? In an era that has been dominated by American innovations, can Indian scientists and technologists make a lasting impression? What will it take to institutionalize innovation in India? Banerji concludes by saying:

“This century is India’s: innovation on a large scale is a way out of many of India’s miseries. Now the question is: who will do this? Here, I can simply hope and pray that organizations like the CII, FICCI and Nasscom step up to the plate. We all would like to see the next cellphone-like society-transforming invention to come from an Indian corporation or university. After all, if our pharma scientists and doctors can make a similar impact with AIDS drugs and HIV vaccines why not in other areas? Why not in India, really, why not?”

Similarly Subroto Bagchi in BusinessWorld says that ‘India is on the cusp of interesting new times. . . we have the golden opportunity to present ourselves as designers of monuments, not suppliers of granite.’

Banerji ends his analysis with an exhortation. Bagchi too captures the new-found vitality of the young Indian. The realities of global competition seems to have stirred something deep down in the psyche of the Indian people, familiar for years to passive submission and acceptance or at best an accommodative absorption of views that were distant from its own. What one encounters in the youth of today is an ebullience bordering on aggression that they can indeed change the squalor around them. As such a confident assertion replaces diffidence and the promise of economic upliftment spurs entrepreneurship it is little wonder that this vibrant peninsula along with its counterpart China has suddenly acquired attention from the world over. Indeed the humongous populations, which at the same time is a weakness and a strength, infused with a dream becomes a powerhouse of tropical fecundity and potency is an exciting new prospect.

The other face of India

Buoyed by such currents the previous government had launched a campaign that sought to project India as a nation that was shining. The campaign backfired for even today there are millions who live in conditions that are abysmal.

Udit Raj, in an article on the plight of Dalits, people who are so low in the still prevalent caste system that they are denied a ranking altogether, and perform the tasks that nobody else does, says:

"Dalits fight tsunami daily. Caste continues to be a social catastrophe in India. What is more surprising is that the government initiated separate camps for Dalits and others. Is this in the spirit of the Constitution, which says that the state will not practice any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex and race. Human beings don't just need to fill the belly, cover the body and have shelter. Human beings require respect, dignity, and generosity too, and the absence of the latter reduces them to the level of animals. If humanity does not exist, how humanitarian is it to serve tsunami-affected people? Let them be like any other creatures of nature."

Gurucharan Das in his account of social and economic revolution in India concludes by saying that India could do well to bypass the industrial revolution and aim for the knowledge revolution as typified in the burgeoning IT industry and its glass and steel architecture, and an increasing awareness of patents and intellectual property. Such a view does seem to agree with the cliché that matter and its phenomenon is best understood by the West; and India would do well to leave this to them and focus instead on what it does well: the realm of the mind, on knowledge building.

Das observes that "India offers a spiritual guide to the art of living" and spirituality is something that even the bold and the beautiful, the rich and the successful turn to at some point or the other in the course of their lives. In the same breath he mentions that the pursuit of the "Indian way of life" can be no excuse for a hardheaded, rational approach to solving our problems of poverty, illiteracy, and disease."

This is a snapshot of present day India. Weighed down with the billion many of who are far from the luxury of leisure and choices, and almost paradoxically buoyed up by the new-found zest of the middle classes who promise to change the way India shall look tomorrow. The hangover of the socialistic approach of Nehruvian times still lingers and that is good for it is a concern for those less privileged that any society should continue to have. At the same time the new found stature accorded to the creation of wealth, the determination to work hard and play hard, is a quality that the young Indian of today is no longer ashamed of. Indeed the transparency of hidden desires paves the path for a deeper understanding.

In this sense the engagement of modernity with tradition holds great importance. America was a new nation when it decided to build itself. Through honesty, effort, respect accorded to those who laboured, it built itself into the most powerful nation of the world. The *zeitgeist* of our age might well be the hand of Midas that has touched America so that America became gold. The hand of Midas reaches out next to his daughter, India, who begins to glitter and shine. If India's heart becomes a heart of gold where shall we find a heart that bleeds?

For a sense of compassion and tolerance for all others has been India's strength. A history of understanding and absorbing the "other." A history, that a great nation like America, sadly lacks. India has a history that is several thousand years rich. The direction she chooses to take should be guided by the glow of that knowledge.

A Brief History of Design Education in India

There is a legacy bequeathed to the new generation of teachers by their teachers who had a commitment to values that were traditional and grounded. Inspired by the call to build “temples of modernity” dams as well as design schools were visualized as places where a community of designers could build a new India.

The two principal centres for imparting design education were the National Institute of Design at Ahmedabad and the Industrial Design Centre at IIT Bombay. The graduates from both these schools are sought after by both the private and public sectors as well as various NGOs working in crafts, education, rural development, and urban planning. One key feature of the education provided in these institutes is to lay a broad foundation through various problem-solving methodologies. In addition the education has emphasized the need for holistic outlooks through sensitizing students through an exposure to films, arts and crafts. This has been possible through the sustained and committed efforts of design teachers and educators.

In the sixties and the seventies educators were enthused by the prospect of building a new nation. After fifty years of independence, educators once again face a new nation. The growth of the middle classes has brought about a shift in the socialistic policies that shaped the years after independence. There are still however large sections of the society without basic amenities. The governance of a country like India is truly a daunting task. Any criticism must be in the light of this Herculean task.

The liberalization of economic policies in the nineties led to a turmoil. This had its echoes in the perception of the role of design. The information age and the proliferation of personal computers, networking and internet led to a demand for computer savvy designers. The digital transformation created platforms that required industrial designers, typographers, photographers, film-makers, animators to be conversant with the computer. While the computer was touted as just another tool, it slowly became an omniscient presence. The resources of the internet came to substitute the usage of the library.

As teachers struggled to come to terms with this new wave, students took to the new tools with greater ease. An invisible perceptual shift took place. A generation that had grown up composing lines of text to compose a page found a new generation that could squeeze and distort fonts without a tinge of regret. The hours spent in developing a curve by polishing plaster were replaced by the slick imagery of modeling software. Those inclined to illustration turned to tweaking vertices in virtual character studios. The demand for computer-based applications led to the development of user interface design. The same principles that underlie the design of images and text on a page came to be applied for human computer interfaces and websites. New words like “user experience” and “usability” replaced “aesthetics”, “form” and “function”.

Outsourcing of business processes and backend work created new employment opportunities. Animation studios sprung up in many places as the requirement for cost effective skill-sets led to a beeline for animation learning. A similar trend was also apparent

in the requirements of the IT driven design. Responding to the new realities created stresses as traditional and modern ideas about design clashed in conference rooms. In the traditional view “experience” played a key role in the learning process. The student was invited through an interaction with diverse people and materials to develop a view of the world. Amongst many who spoke up for the “new design” there was recognition of the old values, but only in passing. The urgencies of the new era required new approaches. Discussion forums became venues of exchanging ideas. New programs in design were started at IIT Delhi, Kanpur and Guwahati. The National Institute of Craft and Design was started at Jaipur. The Shristi School of Design in Bangalore, Symbiosis in Pune and various other private schools reflect the growing need of designers in India.

Challenges for design education

The challenges ahead are discussed as having two principal directions. The need for better systems and processes in design education and the need to foster an atmosphere conducive to creativity and growth through a robust education in arts, crafts and design at a primary and secondary level as well.

Building organic systems and processes

There are larger numbers who flock to design schools. The pressures of excellence and survival at the workplace are sharper. This alters the priorities and mindsets with which students embark on a career in design. There is a demand for more teaching that is specialized and “focused”. This has led to the splitting up of design teaching into specialized areas. There is, at the same time a recognition of interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches.

This necessarily implies efficient systems of information and organization so as to facilitate the teaching of design. The task of bringing about proper systems is not a mechanistic one and necessarily calls for dialogue and an accommodative spirit. When resources need to be shared it calls for even greater degree of interaction between the participants to ensure that systems that are evolved serve the purposes for which they are devised. The imposition of systems without participation of the community of designers is often a cause of stress and discontent. Paradoxically, systems require a much greater need for patience and tolerance.

Websites and publications become important mechanisms to project institutions in the correct light. Guilds and societies for promoting design become essential for influencing policies adopted by industry and the government. Mechanisms of trade between nations are also based on the manufacturing, industrial and aesthetic sensibilities. India has built a reputation for intellectual strength and expertise. The analytical bent of mind finds expression in the huge numbers of software professionals.

Design required by the manufacturing industry lacks a track record of any great degree of vitality. Industrialization was adopted by India much after it took root in the West and lags

behind greatly in this regard. Whereas there will be a certain demand for innovation in design by the industrial houses, India is far from being a leader in this field. In recent history, the exploration of matter has been the playground of the West. The increasingly material culture will certainly bring about a change but this will require changes in our approach not just to design education in schools of design but at the level of primary and secondary education.

Fostering links between arts, crafts and design

There has been a discernible divide between the arts, crafts and design, not just in India but the world over. This superior status accorded to the mind over tasks performed by the body, to the intellect over skill, is a malaise that afflicts most modern societies. Whereas the dignity of handling matter in the West ensured a connection between the manual and the intellectual, the Indian attitude to the material world and manual tinkering as lower order tasks than the journey of the mind, led to a compartmentalization of education. Even now art, craft and design are often viewed as separate activities in India, with a certain step-motherly treatment meted out to practitioners of arts and crafts by the relatively "high-brow and happening" field of design. The practitioners of art and craft in turn have viewed the self proclaimed superiority of designers with a certain distaste. Such a mutual distrust and suspicion has helped neither design, nor the teaching of art and crafts. It is imperative to build bridges between centres that impart art, craft and design education through student and faculty exchange programs. It is the spirit that connects the two realms of mind and matter. The subject of the three graces, painted by Renaissance artists is also interpreted as the third quality that held together two divergent inclinations.

Whereas the fine arts have explored the subtler realm of the spirit, craft has implied a high degree of skill learning, design has been viewed as a tool that provides an edge to products in a global market place. The design intervention in crafts has also been similar. The realities of the market-place, leading to a development of mechanized tools and production methods, has sought to create a new idiom for craft activity. This approach necessarily upsets something integral to the craft activity and this is the personal involvement of the craftsman that is at the same time inspirational, intellectual and skill based. Dissected by the designer into components and processes, with an eye on meeting steady supplies, reflects the reductionism of analysis that is highly critical and no different from the bent of mind that looks to innovation of new and better designed industrial products, consumer durables, entertainment software forms for a different sort of a marketplace. Indeed it is such a tendency in the arts that has led to protest forms such as "Dada-ism" and more recently site-specific installation art that could not be possessed.

Indeed the activity of "design" has come to be linked with profit that very often design, ends up missing the point altogether. It is important that design does not forget the spirit at the heart of things. For an African sculptor, a mask was not just a decorative piece, but was imbued with significance. For a calligrapher, a letter was not just a font that suited some specific application, but a breathing entity.

Specks of Light

I shall end by recounting a story from the West. It is the story of “The Little Match Girl” that was animated by a student at the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay.

I shall tell you briefly the story of the making of the story. In our initial round of discussions with students when they begin their project the initial statement by the student was to do an animated film on a story by Hans Christian Andersen. It was my suggestion to the student that she chooses a story that was closer to our own surroundings. There is at times a tendency on the part of a teacher to instill a value that seems so important to instill in a student. I felt that I should impart the lesson about reading and researching and at the same time another lesson of being open to the realities that we saw around us. “Why not an Indian story?” I suggested. “Are our libraries not full of books and magazines from the distant West. Are you aware how insidious is the conspiracy underlying the films from Hollywood?” However when the student suggested that she would like to take up a story called “The Little Match Girl” I immediately relented. It was a story that I had read and a story that had reached out and touched me. Sure someone in the West wrote it but I saw the story in life around me; at traffic signals where children come and touch your knee for money for a meal. I also remembered an insight that I had read. “Animation” it said, “is not so much about moving things as about moving people.”

It strikes me that some stories transcend the borders that we create. These are stories that spread specks of light.

Conclusions

Beauty draws people towards it. It is not just writers, artists, musicians and designers but just about everyone is drawn to beauty. Designers have often sought to measure beauty, for indeed beauty can be measured. And yet there is something about beauty that is beyond measure.

There was a time when the formal was considered beautiful. Then came a time when the functional became the beautiful. But the spirit has always been beautiful.

The challenge for design education is to infuse systems with a spirit that transcends the borders and divisions created by insecurities of various shapes and sizes. Creativity, imagination, but above all, a sense of tolerance and generosity has to be present so that centres that educate are centres of energy, warmth and light.

Profile of author:

The author teaches in the Visual Communications programme at the Industrial Design Centre, at IIT Bombay. He holds a degree in electrical engineering and a Masters in Visual Communication. Despite a professional career spanning over a decade in which he has worked in diverse media such as Print and Publishing, Multimedia and User Interface Design, Set Design and Television, he has managed to retain a certain cheer, though he is prone to bouts of cynicism.

As a therapy for manic depression he cooks and creates books that he illustrates and sometimes writes. Currently he is working on a project that involves collaboration with traditional painters from Orissa, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. He may be reached at IDC, IIT Bombay. E-mail: rajam@iitb.ac.in

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