

The Avalanche Effect: Institutional frameworks and design as a development resource in India.

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Background

In India the term “Beautification” is alluded to be the process of making beautiful that which is not usually so and this is grossly achieved by some superficial application of a coat of colour and some impromptu decorations or by a general clean up operation, just in time, before the visit of a political big-wig or dignitary and it is usually executed in quite bad taste. The traditions of Indian culture on the other hand are beautiful but their urban and modern interpretations have been devoid of the exquisite qualities that the Eames’s saw in the “Lota” that symbolised for them the elegance of Indian design as it had evolved over the ages. This serious absence of the use of Design as a critical discipline that supports the development agenda of a nation struggling to find a foothold in a global marketplace is truly appalling. I propose the term “Designification” as a counterpoint, and call for a serious use of design as a tool and a strategy for the development of all sectors of the Indian economy particularly since it is so sorely missing from the nations policy frameworks in almost all of these sectors of the economy, quite unlike the prominent position given to the fields of Science, Technology, Management and to some limited extent, the field of Art.

There is a pressing need for the “Designification” of our economy through a rapidly expanded use of design in almost 230 sectors of the Indian economy. The means to achieve this is limited by the current framework of Institutions that can provide the human resources, the research initiatives and the sustained knowledge resources that are needed to support this massive but achievable task. Design in India is sorely under invested in and much change is needed to mobilise the power of design for the development of so many sectors in need. The current levels of investments in design are at appallingly low levels when compared to the investments being made in science, technology and management institutions in the past and as a continuing activity today. It is argued that the such investments made in the past have failed to solve the critical need of creating the required innovations and while a number of technological innovations have resulted from these investments very little of this has been translated into useable products and services primarily because there has been a corresponding lack of investments in design

Defining Design for Development

I must fall back on some of my previous writings to create a framework of definitions and ideas that can put in context the views that I have expressed above and to build the foundation for the strategies that I propose in this

paper for the development of a design initiative for the country as a whole. Last year I used the opportunity of addressing the first National Design Summit in Bangalore to touch upon some of these issues and to take a long look at the last forty years or so of design education and practise in India in a paper titled "Cactus Flowers Bloom in a Desert" (Ranjan 2001) that tried to capture the struggle that the design community in India have put up over the years in the face of extreme deprivation of resources and support from Industry and Government alike. The paper built upon some of the arguments that I had proposed in previous papers on the role of design in the Indian economy with specific reference to the lopsided manner in which investments had been made in India with reference to design and technology education and research. In my paper titled "Design Before Technology" (Ranjan 1999) I had argued that India was losing out in its search for sustainable development by ignoring the investment needs of the design sector and although massive investments had been made in the science and technology sectors we were acutely short of innovative products and services that could only be achieved through the use of design as a layer over the investments made so far.

In an even earlier paper titled "Levels of Design Interventions" (Ranjan 1998) I had outlined four levels at which design action and research could be perceived in the context of a complex global scenario. While design at the 'Tactical level' used the fairly well recognised skills and sensitivities of a designer the other levels were ignored to a large extent in India that in fact needed these levels more than the first which usually resulted in aesthetic and functional solutions. The three other levels that I had proposed in my model were the 'Elaborative', the 'Creative' and the 'Strategic' levels, each that addressed the needs of market complexity, innovation and intellectual property issues and the third the application of vision and anticipatory strategies that the highest level of design affords, respectively. At this level design uses scenarios and maps opportunities to create visionary scenarios that can foster completely new industries and these approaches need the collaboration of teams drawn from many disciplines to build solutions and frameworks that can transform the country in many fundamental ways from a resource poor perspective to one of abundance from the mobilisation of integrated resources that work in synergetic ways due to the efforts of such multi-disciplinary design teams. Design at the strategic level also sets the agenda for many forms of research to be done by a large number of disciplines based on a shared vision of the future that is desirable and can find administrative, political and entrepreneurial supports.

The systems model of design that some of teachers adopted at the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, for building courses and to conduct our research and client interventions had over the years given us the conviction that design in India is quite different from that which is practised in the West. Design for development has been discussed at many platforms for discourse on design, many a time leading utter confusion with the debate being clouded by as many differing definitions of design as there are people in the room. Notwithstanding this difficulty with the subject as complex as design we need to use the power of this discipline to further the real needs of a huge population desperately seeking solutions to many vexing problems in a very

tight economic climate. It is our belief that design at the strategic level can be used as a catalytic tool to mobilise innovations and policies that can indeed transform the country in more ways than one that provides the substance for the title of this paper 'The Avalanche Effect' since a relatively small investment in design can indeed produce incredible change in each of the sectors that have been identified by us through a process of investigation on the state of the national economy from a design perspective over the years. We have seen glimpses of this effect wherever policy and action have embraced design in even small ways in the past and the results shown have been dramatic. The two areas that I have personal experience in are the Crafts sector and the Bamboo sector, both of which have made the moves needed to create Institutions and investments to use design along with an integrated mobilisation of investments in related projects and research initiatives at our behest.

Design Education: Perspectives in India

In 1991 as part of a committee set up to prepare a curriculum for the proposed Accessory Design programme in Delhi, I had the opportunity to create a structure for perhaps the first of the sector specific programmes in Design offered outside the NID at Ahmedabad. The Garment and Accessory Sectors were growing rapidly in India driven by massive exports and the low wage regime that prevailed at that time. The Ministry of Textiles had developed a substantial cash reserve from the cess on these export earnings that it was obliged to use for the development initiatives in that sector. The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), New Delhi, had been set up using this initiative as an integrated Institution for the creation of human resources to provide quality service to this booming industry. The structure of the curriculum that was conceived for the NIFT programme followed inputs and assignments in four broad domains of focus, each with its own special knowledge and skill sets, to be offered to students as lectures, assignments and practical projects and field exposure modules respectively. While the domain of design covered core design sensibilities through courses in basic design, and action capabilities being strengthened with design management and design methodologies, the domain of the subject introduced knowledge specific to the areas of product categories that came under its mandate such as jewellery, footwear, bags and travel artefacts, and belts and items of clothing, toys, gifts and other such areas each of which needed specific knowledge to be handled with competence. The domain of Industry was identified to provide students with the tools and concepts of the trade since each industry segment had its own norms and practises and lastly the domain of the user or the consumer was introduced to understand needs and processes in the marketplace.

This four-pronged structure was developed further while I was involved in the curriculum review exercise at the NID in 1992 – '94. All the courses offered at that time, over 250 of them across almost nine disciplines, were reviewed by our committee with very detailed presentations from the teachers who were responsible to conduct each one of these. The four-pronged structure of the domains of Design, the Subject, the Industry and the User/Consumer were used to locate each of the courses and to determine the methodology to be

followed by way of assignments and theory. This brought a lot of clarity to the exercise and helped the committee make a number of corrective recommendations that shaped the texture of these courses and their content and delivery structure. After many years of following borrowed curricula from the west we were examining our teaching resources and methods in a great detail with reference to the complex context that were being perceived in India. This review process was the culmination of a number of initiatives and discussions that had taken place at the NID campus, none of which were unfortunately published, since all of these discussions, held behind closed doors, in the NID's Faculty Forum were labelled as confidential and made available only to its faculty and the Governing Council as abridged notes and references. However the course information structure improved considerably with the introduction of the course abstract paper that was made mandatory for each course conducted at NID and the review process saw the articulation and assembly of all the course abstracts into a multi-volume set that was placed in the NID Resource Centre as the Master Abstracts Set.

The fact that NID had only published its Syllabus and detailed course descriptions only twice in the past thirty years (1970 and 1982) made these course abstracts all the more valuable. The information about the relationship between courses was contained in a tabular flow chart that shows the sequence of the courses and the time duration for each while the time table that was prepared and released each semester showed the timings, dates and the names of teachers responsible for each course. This stark absence of publications about the fields of application of design from NID (and other design schools in India) was a subject of much debate at NID Faculty Forum but the action taken left much to be desired and is perhaps singly responsible for the poor acceptance of design services in the sectors that need it the most even though so many successful forays had been made into these difficult and complex domains by the Institute, its faculty and students over the years. However, the students and faculty who were in the midst of the great happenings, explorations and debates did benefit from this significant exposure to both quality and content of these debates and in these years the NID product, its students and alumni, form the spearhead of the design initiative in India, albeit in small numbers but still sufficient to make an impact in some sectors through a sustained body of work generated over the years. The other design schools in the country too had their share of successes in various fields and these were facilitated by their location or by their affiliation to a different Ministry from which they drew their funds. The Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) in Mumbai (1970), Delhi (1985) and Guwahati (1996) started programmes in Industrial design while the NIFT expanded its reach by setting up centres in Mumbai, Calcutta, Gandhinagar, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Chennai in rapid succession in the late nineties. In the private sector two new schools were set up in Delhi and Bangalore as the pressure for admissions to the existing schools and the demand for the design professionals was rising in the country. Most of these schools used NID trained designers as their teaching resource either as full time teachers or as a visiting faculty resource.

Design Initiatives: New Institutions

In 1991 I was involved in an assignment aimed at the articulation of a feasibility report for a school of crafts studies in Jaipur. The result was the setting up of the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur, by the State Government of Rajasthan on the premise that design as defined by us in that report was a critical tool for the development of the crafts sector as a whole and a national mandate was given to the new Institute. The model that was proposed in that report projected the crafts in India as an economic and social activity that could liberate a very large number of decentralised and self-sustaining activities that required a very low capital base to initiate and to grow. The domain of craft was studied in most design Institutes in India by then as a means of sensitising Indian designers to the complexities of rural industries and to explore the need for alternate frameworks for action in India outside the organised industrial sector that seemed least interested in the efforts of the design community here. However this was the first time that a dedicated Institution was set up to address the needs of the crafts sector that was already contributing a substantial amount of employment and foreign exchange from the export activities that were growing year on year since the country became an independent nation. The need for design to lead the initiatives of this sector was by now established by numerous success stories of design interventions in this particular sector. NID was at the forefront of these interventions in the crafts sector through its craft documentation exercises that had mapped the cultural resources of the country in very detailed studies conducted over the years. These too remained unpublished to a large extent but were available for limited review to students and faculty in the Resource Centre. The IICD, Jaipur will be sending out its first batch of students this year and it is well on its way to building a focused body of knowledge that can assist design initiatives in the crafts sector.

The next major demand in Institution building for design education and research came from the Bamboo sector that had started looking up after a series of initiatives in recent years. The Bamboo and Cane Development Institute that existed at Agartala for many years as a training section for young craftsmen was restructured last year at the request of the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts (DC-H), Government of India as part of their National Bamboo development initiative being supported by the United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) in India. NID's extensive study of the Bamboo Crafts of the Northeast India and the numerous papers and design projects that projected the use of bamboo as a sustainable resource brought us into a strategic relationship with the Government of India and UNDP in initiatives that gave us the opportunity to demonstrate the power design action at a strategic level. At the request of the UNDP I was involved in articulating the vision report for the National Bamboo Initiative that resulted in a report titled "From the Land to the People: Bamboo as a sustainable Human Development Resource" (Ranjan 1999). This report was built around six scenarios that were design visualisations that placed a sequence of inputs, events and innovations that could spearhead a veritable bamboo revolution if implemented in form and spirit. In the months that followed, a number of intensive design explorations have created a climate of sustained investments into this sector from as many as ten State Governments and numerous national and non-governmental agencies. The DC-H increased its allocation

to the bamboo initiatives and asked for an improved infrastructure for training and design development. Once again the feasibility report that we developed called for an integrated approach with design at the core of the Institution and the activities covering four clear subject domains. The revamped Institution would focus on Plantation studies since bamboo is a natural material suitable for agricultural development, Product Innovation, Technology Innovation and Market Research studies to sustain a creative design climate that would inform all the activities and set the agenda for research and action in all areas of bamboo related knowledge.

While the major national Institutes for design that were set up over the years continue to perform their tasks of design education and research, the massive need anticipated from all 230 sectors of our economy in need of design resources and sector specific knowledge is still largely un-addressed. The two new sectoral Institutes that we helped set up, the IICD and the BCDI were relatively easier to fund and create since the message to the stake holders was more focussed and the funding agencies saw value in each offering since the results could be funnelled directly into their ongoing activities and thus justified in internal communications and through the complicated sanctioning process of Government. It is also easier for industries from within the sector to see direct benefits and to align themselves to such Institutes and – while design is a general discipline – a great deal of domain specific competence is also needed by the industries and promotional agencies alike. It was this premise that I brought to my class last year when I asked the group of Foundation students at NID to look at the Indian economy and to try and build macro-economic models for design action in India. The development of this course at NID is also a very significant aspect of this discourse. Over the years the definition of design has shifted in many directions, each pulled along a different vector by a vocal advocate of an inherent quality of design. Leaders of design thinking that influenced NID education were many early international visitors to the Institute such as Charles and Ray Eames, Armin Hofman, Louis Khan, Frei Otto and others and authors of some critical books made available to the faculty and students of the Institute by its presence in the Resource Centre which was always well stocked and protected, and in the context of design theory the works of Christopher Alexander, John Chris Jones and Bruce Archer and the publications from the Bauhaus, the hfg Ulm, and the Basel school of graphic design come to the top of my mind. Many of these books were subjects of great debate on the campus and they provided the intellectual stimulus to some of us who were interested in such discussions.

Design Theory: New Frameworks

The Design Methods course provided the limited framework for discourse on design theory at NID and in the mid seventies the course went through its first metamorphosis with the appearance of the environmental agenda into the Foundation Programme being introduced by the then coordinator and teacher Mohan Bhandari and this layer has persisted over the years. I started teaching this course in 1982 soon after Mohan Bhandari left NID and by then I had started bringing in my own convictions to this course in some tentative way at first and later with a more definite value orientation that is reflected in

my own engagement with design research and practise over these years in the crafts, bamboo and small industry perspectives and later in the domain of digital design all informed by the context that is India. The case material and the concepts being developed caused me to change the name of this course to Design Concepts and Concerns (DCC) in the mid nineties. In this period we also embraced systems design philosophies that came to be accepted at the senior years of the industrial design programmes at NID and its intellectual bearings came from the works of Stafford Beer and Gui Bonsiepe besides Buckminster Fuller and Victor Papanek. Bonsiepe's books and documentations of the work in Argentina and Brazil continued the thought processes started at the hfg Ulm and brought a new perspective that of the difference between design in the West and that of the Periphery and its associated social and economic implications.

For me the Design Concepts and Concerns course became a platform to revisit the domain of theory each year after several fresh and new experiences in research and practise during that year since all NID faculty are expected to teach, research and practise within the Institutional studio and professional practise framework. Design Concepts and Concerns is about Finding, Knowing, Doing and Feeling, the last word of the quartet being the most important in my opinion. Which is why the name of my course was changed from Design Methodology that was used in the sixties to suggest that design was a scientific discipline and later on it was called Design Process to suggest that it was steeped in good management but now we understand that it is neither Science nor management and it certainly is not Art. I changed the name of my course without official sanction several years ago since NID gave a great deal of latitude to its teachers to experiment and evolve their courses as they too developed a better understanding of their subject. I am grateful for this liberty as a teacher but bemoan the fact that many colleagues do not read enough and pursue an intellectual debate to argue these positions nor do they understand these ideas fully nor support these views from a form of apathy that seems to permeate our intellectual landscape. My model for the "Profile of the Emerging Designer" that I use in my class to sensitise design students to the range of possible professional profiles was first published in 1994 at a seminar on design education at the IDC in Mumbai provided a framework to look at all design professions from this tetrahedral view of the skills and knowledge base of a design professional. (Ranjan 1994)

No one is comfortable when we talk about ourselves as designers in India and the role that we should, could, or would play as a designer in the Indian context. It is the context that gives us the shakes. We get perplexed at the sheer size and complexity and cannot see where to begin or we see the opportunities for our special skills at the comfortable and special end of the economy where about two percent of our population lives and push away our sense of guilt when someone asks us about the other 98 percent and our contribution to these people or even the middle 60 percent of India. However all our students know that design as we are discussing it in the DCC class is about looking, knowing and doing what needs to be done, however uncomfortable. Doing it thoughtfully, skilfully and with a great degree of empathy for the user. The value orientation in this class is deliberate and the

model of the designer as a tetrahedron of vertices with Finding, Knowing and Doing as its base and the most important quadrant, in my view is the apex, which is that of Feeling. This is what we bring to our students each year and throughout their stay at NID.

Strategic Design and New Education

Last year with the Foundation class of 2001 we were compelled to innovate our teaching strategy because our city of Ahmedbad was seriously affected by the continuous bouts of rioting that prevented the usual movement of students into the field for user centered studies. Therefore we decided to look at macro economic issues as our point of reference for this particular course in design thinking. The results were startling to say the least. The "Concept Mela", a sort of concept sharing exposition, which the students put up at the end of the course shared visualisations and explorations that the seven groups of students had created and each was the proposed framework for a sector specific initiative for design action in India. These explorations were informed by a series of brain storming sessions and the usual lectures and coupled group assignments that followed the structure that this course has been known for at the NID. This time however the young students were in the process of transforming India from a resource poor country to a self confident and successful economy that it can be since nobody told them that this was not possible, the sceptics were missing. They were told to research the various macro parameters and use the NID faculty and senior students as their immediate source of expert consultants. The groups formed went through a progression of assignments at building models of the economy with a view to discover structural relationships and functional proximities between related industries and economic sectors. Five groups looked at the same issues and discussed these with great enthusiasm and captured the major attributes of these sectors and their interrelationships by a process of brainstorming and discussion. The thus identified parameters were arranged using Post-it stickers into intermediate structures and based on a consensus within the team and amongst the consultants that they chose to involve.

The resultant structures were represented the form of presentation posters, each using a suitable metaphor for organising the elements. The five groups had five different models but several aspects of these overlapped and some models were more amenable to further manipulations than the others. However at this stage all the students were highly motivated and demonstrated a very high degree of clarity about these macro economic parameters and their impact on the National economy and its related issues and contexts. One group proposed a Ministry of Design and divided the economy into basic producers (primary), processors (secondary) and services. The representation was in the form of a city road map with a downtown circle that had the three forks, one for each category, which got further divided into a branching diagram that accommodated all the individual sectors identified by the group. (fig xx)

Another group selected to depict the economy as a Venn diagram with here major areas of economy, ecology and society with the interstices of these accommodating the critical sectors that needed inputs across these areas. (figxx) Yet another interesting strategy was to look at the interrelationships

between a few key-driving parameters and this was represented as an interactive wheel where the outer circle defined the individual sectors where design could and should play a critical role, and these numbered 230 in all. (figxx)

Design Initiatives: Sector Specific Strategies

The efforts of the students and the resultant flow of ideas was further supplemented by a series of lectures by the author on the institutional frameworks that were needed to make this initiative a reality in India. I shared the work done for the two institutes dealing with crafts sector and the bamboo sector with the students and asked them to identify specific opportunities that they could locate for immediate action in the Indian context. The teams were further divided into seven and this time the students were permitted to join teams that they could align themselves with on a personal interest and ideology basis. The result was startling and the motivation levels kept these students active in groups on an almost round the clock basis in a seemingly inextinguishable flow of energy and creativity. Each group created panels that described the issues visually and built models to share their vision of the proposed framework for action, each in a small panel based exhibit that could be taken to the public. This time we invited the public into our campus, and over two days of intense interactions, the students got a great deal of feedback and critique from a large number of visitors. Seven sectors were selected from a larger list of possible choices and the Institutional frameworks developed to address these are as follows:

1. *Badal* (Monsoon Clouds)

Proposed as a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO), the metaphor of the monsoon clouds is used to describe a process for strengthening micro-enterprises through the use of research, assimilation, refinement and delivery of know how to the micro-entrepreneurs just as the clouds perform a function of delivering rain to the people. This is way of understanding self-employment strategies of some successful people in one part of India and to be able to share these with the others in need.

2. *Udaan* (Flight of the Spirit)

A strategy for the empowerment, modernisation and for Information Technology enabling of rural India with a deep understanding of the needs of this particular community or groups of such communities distributed all over the country, each in their own environment and unique cultural and linguistic space.

3 *Aavriti* (A Platform for Change)

The child and its activities are the focus of this initiative. The design opportunities area of toys, games and active education are addressed in this framework. India does not have a single agency that is capable of embracing the design needs of children although they form almost 60 percent of the total population.

4. EDD (Education Design Developments)

The proposed network of designers would work towards improving the quality of education in India. The design needs of the education sector are both complex and fund starved at the same time. The use of the web and face to face strategies form the basis of this design scenario that could build a network of designers with teachers, students and other interested specialist contributors.

5. SEEDS (School of Ecological Design Studies)

This organisation fosters a holistic approach to issues of environment through education, research and action strategies that are unique to the problems of India. The belief system embedded in this proposal assumes progress through a two way learning process in building contemporary design solutions and in learning from the traditional wisdom of an established society.

6. Green Dots (Design Organisation for Sustainable Transport Systems)

Transportation strategies that do not damage that environment need to be innovated and made acceptable to our society if the quality of life in our cities and villages is to improve. This strategy includes the use of novel solutions and sustained information campaigns to build acceptable models with the involvement of people.

7. IID (Institute of Interface Design)

To supplement India's software engineering strengths there is a need for the capacity to make products that are usable and appropriate for a wide section of indigenous users and for export needs. The proposed framework and associated scenarios fill a real need for value added approaches to enhance the interface design capabilities of our existing software industry.

This effort gave us a glimpse of concepts that were both necessary and achievable. The next stage in this course led to the development of scenarios by each student of one sub-opportunity that they individually felt could help precipitate the necessary investments or action in the sector of their choice. The fact that these explorations reached concrete action plans with well-defined objectives and a visual expression of the possible scenarios made it easy for visitors, senior students and faculty to engage in a deep discussion on the merits and risks of each specific approach. This is the hallmark of design thinking and action that is rooted in the domain of the visual scenario that can locate the discourse at the macro level and at the micro level simultaneously. The future of design too lies somewhere along this path and we can and must find new roles for design in the production of images that can inform decision processes, some of which are so complex that they need many iterations and political mediations to resolve in an amicable manner. Most importantly these design processes need the involvement and partnership of a multitude of stakeholders and such visualisations make the concepts, decisions and issues available for visual review in a transparent and understandable manner that fosters long term partnership needed to achieve the lofty results. Design at this level has the ingredients to create the avalanche effect, a great positive mobilisation, an overwhelming quantity of something hopefully new and beneficial, with a very small designerly effort.

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Abstract for proposed volume of Design Issues on Design and Design Education in India.

Title: Institutional Frameworks and Design Promotion in India.

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The author has been involved as a faculty at India's National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad for over thirty years and as a design professional advising government and industry on strategies for the use of design services in numerous sectors of the economy. He drafted and produced the NID Professional Education Programme Syllabus in 1978 and was a key member in the Institutes curriculum review committee in 1994. He was a member of the committee that evolved the curriculum for the new Accessory Design Programme at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Delhi (NIFT) in 1991. He was responsible for visualising the feasibility reports for the setting up of two new institutes of design, the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur and the Bamboo and Cane Development Institute (BCDI), Agartala, each focussed on the needs of the crafts sector and the bamboo sector respectively. He has been advocating the expansion of the Institutional frameworks with a sector specific approach particularly to meet the needs of the diverse nature of the Indian economy and the lack of awareness of design in many of these sectors unlike that of science, technology and management disciplines.

Design in India has had a chequered existence over the past forty years and the use of design has grown and expanded in recent years due to increased competition as a result of liberal policies and the trend of globalisation. The expanding role of design in a developing economy needs new institutional frameworks and some of these have been experimented upon and developed in India by the author. Many opportunities exist for the creation of new institutions to meet the growing needs of the various sectors that are facing

emerging sectors for design action and the strategies for meeting these challenges.

The work done by the author for the new curricula in the national design institutions NID and NIFT and the institution building experiences gleaned through setting up of the IICD and the BCDI are reflected upon in this paper in the context of the need for a framework for new design institutions with particular reference to India at the turn of the century. This paper will focus upon the lessons learned from these four key experiences and explore the nature of the opportunities in India for design action in the emerging sectors of the economy along with models of sector specific approaches for design promotion with examples of work done at the National Institute of Design which has done pioneering work in many of these sectors over the years.

Approximately ten to fifteen line drawings in the form of models that define the institutional frameworks that have been proposed for the new institutes in India and five to eight photographs of key projects that exemplify the sectors that need to be focussed on in India today will support the paper.

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