

Design Support in India: Institutional experiences in a growing industrial economy.

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Abstract

Along with a brief historical overview of the growth and spread of design education in the country, the author reflects on the key trends and contextual forces that have helped shape the design support infrastructure in India. Indian industry grew in a protected and highly regulated economy from 1950 to the early 90's when economic liberalisation was ushered into the country. The use of design and awareness for the need for design grew rapidly in many sectors that faced competition while other sectors lagged behind. The textile industry, which was driven by the growth in exports, helped create a lively design support base including an active fashion industry. Similarly the advertising industry and graphic communications sectors were driven by trade and business interest in marketing while the product innovation sector lagged behind due to the license and control regime that prevailed in India limited the options available to the public in a seller dominated market.

While a visionary Government initiative in the 60's had helped set up the National Institute of Design, the faculty and students of the Institute had to struggle to establish a profession in the country. The author identifies a number of trends and contextual forces that have shaped the design support infrastructure in the country and checklists the key Government initiatives to provide supports to small and medium industries over the years and plots the shape of the public and private initiatives that have come up as a result and in direct response to these contextual forces in the country. The absence of any regulatory framework and the failure of any professional initiatives to create systems and collective facilities has resulted in fragmented and organically grown design support infrastructure that needs to be supported and nurtured to enable it to face the future rapid growth of industrial competition and a sudden escalation of demand that is anticipated.

The numerous models of design practise across the many sectors of Indian industry are outlined with a reflection on the specific cases of the design practise conducted by the graduates of the National Institute of Design who have pioneered the creation of the design profession in India. NID's own practise finds a place in these models since design education establishments in India are perhaps the biggest sources of professional service for many large medium and

small industry players. As an outcome of this analysis some recommendations are drawn up and offered for the stabilisation and rapid expansion of the design support infrastructure in India without loss of quality due to the haste in scaling up the support base to meet the growing demands from more than 230 sectors of the economy.

Taking roots and the early initiatives

India had a great reputation for quality of its handloom textile and handicrafts products in the eighteenth century but by the time the country achieved its independence in 1950 its production base was decimated and much of the country was in a desperate condition of poverty and neglect. The country depended on rain-fed agriculture and its industrial base was non-existent. The Government initiatives of establishing a planned economy and a support infrastructure for the creation of a small scale industrial sector focussed on their financial and technological needs while design was left unattended since it was perhaps considered a luxury item in the face of the enormous economic and scarcity challenges. A number of industrial estates were set up across that country to provide integrated facilities for the development of a broad vendor base for industrial components required by large industry. These industries required technical and financial supports more than design and the post independence years saw the establishment of many organisations that could provide the required support. The Small Industries Service Institutes (SISI) that were set up near the industrial estates was equipped to provide these technical services but design was not at the top of their agenda. On the handloom and handicrafts front the Government set up many marketing and technical service organisations, which included some form of design support, which were provided by the artists and craftsmen located in these Weavers Service Centres (WSC) and the Regional Technology and Design Centres (RTDC). The poor quality of goods and services in the market led to the clamour for standards and many product categories were governed by the norms set by the Indian Standards Institution (ISI) which determined their acceptance in Government driven purchases. Thereafter the presence of the ISI mark signified good quality but unfortunately it also spelt the demise of any design initiative in industry. One design that met the standard was manufactured by numerous competing industries, all competing on price by either exploiting labour or by cutting corners on material and process specifications. The markets filled up with poor quality products and an insensitive market that was caught up in corruption and excessive control through numerous regulations. There was a great demand for foreign goods but soon that too was regulated by strict customs regulation.

It was in this climate that the National Institute of Design was set up in Ahmedabad based on a visionary report written by Charles and Ray Eames. While NID was a multi-disciplinary institute, the focus of the early years was on Communication Design and Graphic Design. The market demand for this branch of design far exceeded that of industrial and textiles design services. Both these disciplines therefore looked at opportunities outside the industrial sectors and

from this grew a very active involvement in the handloom and handicrafts sectors, both through research and through design service, which has been sustained to this day.

Design education initiatives in India

The NID pioneered the creation of design talent in India and provided trained designers for the Indian industry and its marketplace. Many of these designers were involved in the creation of new schools that came up over the years, each with a particular focus, depending on the promoter and their mandate. The first such school was the Industrial Design Centre (IDC) that was located at the technological institution in Mumbai, the IIT at Powai. IDC focussed on industrial design and much later introduced Communications Design as part of their offering. Being located in a technology-dominated climate it created its own unique brand of design concerns and orientations amongst its faculty and students. The next decade saw the establishment of a department at the IIT, Delhi and more recently another at the IIT, Guwahati, this time at the under graduate level. The advertising industry in India has drawn talent from the schools of fine and applied arts that were established in the metros long before Independence. NID's graphic design programmes on the other hand shunned the needs of the advertising sector while it focussed on the opportunities in brand building for Indian public sector corporations and in Government exhibition design. NID's textile department focussed on the handloom sector but ignored the growing garment sector in the 80's. The Indian garment industry was driven by export opportunities and grew rapidly and the Ministry of Textiles set up the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in Delhi to address the design, technology and marketing needs of that sector. The Government patronage for the NIFT grew rapidly and in less that two decades seven centres were set up across the country, each included Fashion design and Accessory design as core subjects.

With the liberalisation of the national economy, design is finally being seen as a critical resource for industrial development. But due to the neglect of adequate investments in the post Independence era the resources for design education are getting extremely strained and there are signs of a loss of quality when educational establishments try to scale up the output to meet the growing demand without a corresponding investment in faculty development. Many new design schools have been set up in the private sector in recent years and some of these have managed to retain the quality edge by attracting good faculty while others churn out mediocre products and confuse the market, which is still trying to understand this complex discipline. At NID we have been involved in setting up sector specific design institutions which we see as a viable initiative since each sector and its industry can find the funding required to create and manage these efforts from internal accruals and synergies within the sector as well as with informed Government support from the supporting ministry. The Indian Institute of Crafts and Design, Jaipur and the Bamboo and Cane Development Institute, Agartala are two such initiatives in recent years and many more are anticipated

in the years ahead. The private sector success stories in design education include Srishti School of Art and Design, Bangalore, the APJ School of Design, Delhi and the Pearl Institute of Fashion, Delhi. The Delhi University is seriously considering the setting up of a new School of Design, perhaps the first in the University sector, and when this happens design education would have finally arrived as a mainstream discipline in India. Many NID graduates have found a place for themselves as faculty at all these establishments and as practised at NID they too have brought active design practise to their respective institutions by networking with industry in their region.

A new boom in the growth of design education involves the design needs and opportunities of the Information Technology sector. Many training centres in the private sector offer courses in multi-media and as franchise driven schools, established by reputed industrial houses, they have rapidly proliferated across the country as an active business of mass education. The growing IT sector has had its impact on the existing design schools as well and many offer courses in New Media and Interface Design besides sector specific specialisations that are mushrooming in response to exploding demand for design education, sadly with a severe loss of quality standards. In such a climate there is an active need to create a regulatory mechanism that can ensure high standards of education particularly when design education takes on the hue of an active business opportunity for fly by night operators to take over. The absence of a National Design Council or a national body of design professionals or an effective regulator of design education is being sorely felt by concerned students and faculty, in an period of exploding growth, many a times quite indiscriminate, with disastrous results.

Trends and Contextual Forces for design Support in India

Having looked at the design education scenario in the country we can now turn our attention to the models and contextual forces that have shaped the professional service landscape for design in India. Education and the resulting concentration of faculty and students within it has led naturally to the schools being among the largest service providers in the design profession. Design education is an active channel for design practise and many forms of design practise have emerged as established practise in India. The National Institute of Design is unique in its policy of not permitting its faculty to conduct any private practise, although in recent years this strict rule was slightly modified, but with few takers due to some defects of the proposed model. However the Institute has been among the biggest provider of design services to Government and Industry over the past forty years or more of its existence. The Institutional consulting model has gone through many evolutionary stages and from small individual design tasks it has expanded to massive multi-disciplinary projects, some with the delivery of complete projects including fabrication and installation as in exhibition and museum design. With the Government, and our controlling Ministry, the Ministry of Industry, calling for a reduction of dependence on Government funding, there is great pressure on the Institute to supplement its

income from such consulting and contracting tasks that could be handled by its faculty and staff, taking its focus away from more meaningful academic and research oriented tasks that would otherwise have preoccupied the faculty. As a tradition most student diploma projects are funded by industry or by outside agencies in the social funding area. This has got NID students actively involved in real life design tasks, which has become an integral part of the education situation in India. Many other design schools follow this practise and as a result design students are filling a real need while they learn on the job with faculty guidance. These multi layered educational involvements in design practise could be called the Education Centred Design Infrastructure, a model that can be replicated elsewhere if required.

The **Education Centred Design Infrastructure** provides the following models:

1. Faculty Consulting Models: Faculty handle professional tasks within or outside the Institutional framework in some cases to supplement their income or to create active learning situations for faculty development.
2. Student Power and Industry Interface: Classroom projects, design competitions and Term projects and Diploma Projects sponsored by Industry are a source of experience and experimentation as well as revenue for the school and the individual student.
3. Institutional Consulting Models: The schools set up a professional interface with industry and offers services by in-house teams of faculty and special staff appointed to work with the faculty leader with or without student involvement on these projects.
4. Institutional Outsourcing Models: Schools brand equity is used to offer professional service to Government and Industry that is eventually handled by outside professionals who are empanelled by the Institute.

Education in design and the ideology of providing meaningful service are never far apart particularly in a country like India, which is full of design opportunities outside the industry sector, in many areas that attracts social funding from committed Non Government Organisations (NGO's) and departments of Government alike. These **Social Service and Ideology Driven Opportunities** offer many formats for design action in a number of design disciplines. Many design professionals prefer to work in such areas rather than in the core Industry sectors due to their ideological leanings and from the scope offered by development funding that is liberally available in this sector. Here the designers are employed or commissioned by an NGO or Government Department to tackle the needs of a third party who is usually the real user of that design service. In the areas of rural development, crafts, health care, education, training and sector development activities many design activists, if we can call them that, are involved, some for the long haul. The models for design action in this segment are as follows:

1. NGO Factor and Development: Many designers join and work with NGO's who are aligned to their own interests in issues of local development and in bringing social change through the use of design.

2. Government Development Initiatives: Individual designers join the Government networks that are involved in development tasks.

3. Individual in Search of Meaning: Design for a recognised cause has taken many designers to difficult situations as social activists and provided very effective results that large Government efforts have failed to deliver, the difference being in the motivation generated by their commitment and by their need for bypassing of unpleasant pulls and pushes associated with massive political initiatives.

While the social call for service brings out the best in some designers the **Government Audit Compulsions** seems to bring out different challenges in some of their counterparts in the business of serving the Government and organised public sector business opportunities, which are usually the biggest spenders for design services in most economies, which is most certainly the case in India. A great deal of public money is spent in India in the name of development and facility creation to meet real or imagined needs or mega dreams and promises of politicians, usually in very tight time frames. Design is one of the key stages for the delivery of these dream projects but unfortunately while much money is lavished on these initiatives the results are barely skin deep. The nature of projects are usually bundled as turn key design cum execution tasks including design opportunities across a number of design disciplines and in many cases these are multi-disciplinary opportunities such as exhibition design, interior design, integrated communication strategy design and production, event design etc. The models that this segment throws up are as follows:

1. Design by Tender: Large budget integrated design cum production projects are offered to empanelled contractors or through public advertisements for technical and financial tender invitations. It is assumed that the entrepreneur who bids the lowest will be able to muster the required design and technical capabilities to first develop the concepts and then deliver the contracted project in time and by meeting the pre-established standards. This usually results in missed opportunities for design innovation with all concerned choosing to take the beaten path.

2. Design by Committee: Task of drawing up specifications and requirements for many major construction and service initiatives are assigned to a committee of experts and bureaucrats with meetings scheduled at a central venue. Vast sums of money are spent in travelling and this method is used to justify the validity of huge Government expenditure, part of which could have paid for serious design investment that is usually bypassed.

3. Design by following Standards: The Government establishments need to deliver quick results in an accountable manner and once again our penchant for standards as a synonym for quality has led to the loss of major design opportunities that could usher in change and variety to our built landscape. This has resulted in many unimaginative projects being executed based on the use of the so-called standard design and innovation is given a bypass on the claim that it would be too expensive. Design awareness needs to be spread to the

administrators and bureaucrats alike. Management schools and the IAS Academy need to introduce design management capabilities for this situation to change for the better in the years ahead.

However there is a marked difference to Government projects that are initiated and sustained by **Compulsions of International Aid Donor Agencies** who bring in practice of design use to these Government managed projects. Many United Nations and World Bank supported projects have a clearly articulated design phase as do several bi-lateral and multi-lateral aid related projects. However many of these projects also insist on the use of International design experts even when local talent is available. Local designers and International consultants get opportunities to travel together and some patterns of their involvement are quite consistent and can be seen as operating models for this segment, which are as follows:

1. International Consultant as Mentor: A number of international consultants are usually involved in these aid driven projects and besides providing expertise they are required to play the role of trainers and evaluators of the project achievements. Some are located in the country for long periods of time or through repeated visits over the planned project duration and in this role they play a very constructive role of mentors for the local team of designers and administrators.
2. Designer as International Trainee: Many of these aid driven projects have local capacity building as an objective and therefore Indian designers working in these sectors have benefited from international travel and training opportunities that were part of these initiatives. New capabilities in technology use and advanced design management practises are inducted into local programmes through these initiatives.
3. Design Transfer by Vendors: Many of these projects have an in-built design and technology transfer component which brings new practises, equipments and infrastructure for maintenance that can then contribute to the moving forward of the state of the art available in that field.

Another related avenue for design action is the **Globalisation Driven Trends and Models** of cross border design services, which works in both directions in an increasing manner. India is being seen by the global community as a major source for technical and design manpower as well as a lower cost base for setting up of outsourcing facilities for multi-national design, management and technology initiatives. The rapid expansion of BPO market that followed the sustained IT export boom has created new perceptions of the latent possibilities for access to the large pool of technical and managerial talent available in India. Design is getting attention now and we anticipate substantial growth in the years ahead. The models for this segment are as follows:

1. Import of Design as part of a Technology Transfer: Many India companies are drafting technology transfer agreements that include a large component of design transfer. This is usually associated with the purchase of machine tools along with sets of tools and dies as an integral component of the deal. This brings in old

designs and reduces time to market for the buyer while the consumer is given a non-localised product.

2. Indian Designers working for International Companies: This is a growing trend in many industry segments including machine tools, software interfaces, websites, technology rich products and low technology products that are sourced in India. Indian designers are working on products and services that are manufactured and used in other countries across the world.

3. International Designers working for Indian Companies: This is another growing trend with many Indian companies actively seeking the local involvement of international designers, managers and technologists.

4. Multinational Research and Development Centres: Many multinational corporations in the technology product areas as well as low-tech product sourcing companies are setting up their own design and development centres in India involving international and Indian designers and managers.

5. India as a Manufacturing Base for International Products: The use of India as a manufacturing or service base is driven by the existence of a massive middle class consumer force in India for high technology products, FMCG and automobile products and any many of financial and consulting services. This kind of expansion of manufacturing within India brings in a lot of international designs that are then manufactured in the India located plants. Some Indian designers are involved in vendor development and in the localisation of some expensive components to make the product cost competitive in a fierce battle for market share.

This brings us to the purely local opportunities in the organised corporate industrial sectors and in the creation of an indigenous design Industry in India.

Trends in the Indian Corporate sector have been a slow adopter of local design talent since they were well protected by restrictive Government policies for a large part of the past five decades. Since the liberalisation of the economy began in the late 90's there is a sea change in their attitude towards the use of design as a critical resource. Many companies that faced early competition have set up in-house design teams and established systems for contracting design work from local houses run by Indian designers. Graphic design and advertising were the major areas of design investment but in recent years the investments made in product design and own brand designs is growing rapidly. The models for design interventions in this segment are as follows.

1. Designer as Corporate Employee: Many Indian companies have created posts that employ in-house designers to design and develop their products. While in the early years these designers were limited to small modifications of an incremental nature to product lines that faced market resistance, in recent years the opportunities for the creation of complete new products has grown enormously.

2. Designer as Corporate Design Vendor: Many Indian companies have started sourcing their design work from independent design vendors. Many of these vendors also supply some part of the materials or components as a package of services.

3. Designer as Corporate Manager: Design is being seen as a strategic resource and many companies are looking at the creation of design management posts to employ designers fairly high up in the corporate hierarchy.
4. Corporate Research and Development Centre: Many manufacturing companies and India export houses have set up their own design centres with considerable investments in technology and human resources.

The Indian design sector extends well beyond the facilities created by the Corporate Industries in various product and service categories. It is fact made up mainly of the large number of independent design studios and offices that were set by **Designers in search of Freedom and Autonomy** across many sectors of the economy and hailing from many design disciplines. These private design studios range from small home office set ups of the young start-up design graduates to fairly well established design houses that have grown over years of persistence. The typical models for design action in this segment are as follows:

1. Start-up Home Office Design Studio: Many young designers, particularly from the NID's under graduate programme prefer to set up their own design consultancies and after a few years of struggle are able to find satisfying work from the small and medium industries in need of their expertise.
2. Small Design Partnerships: A number of design offices are set up by professional couples and buddy teams who collaborate in the professional space as well. In many places two or three partners, each with complementary skills, get together to offer design services and these have tended to be fairly stable business models in India.
3. Integrated Design Houses: Some of these grow out of their small beginnings and become full service Integrated Design Houses with a substantial reputation.

In the emerging era of the open markets and the **Promises of the WTO Regime** we would have anticipated two more models for this segment:

4. Royalty driven design Services: This is partly successful but in most cases it has not worked due to the very lax PR regime that prevails in many sectors. One design house tried a second experience at charging the royalty model, which was scuttled by many well-established venture finance and industrial development agencies.
5. Patent Protected Design offerings: Small and medium enterprises are realising the value of patenting export related products and services to stave off severe competition from Chinese manufacturers with a fair degree of success. Design at an innovative level provides these companies with market penetration barriers that are legitimate and in the International markets these can be protected at a price.
6. Reverse Engineering as a Euphemism for Copying: Industrial copy cat activities of Industrial Design features continues unabated and with the arrival of new restrictions and increased compliance of IPR norms this segment will be on the decline after the opening of the economy in the year 2005 when the WTO agreement comes into place for the first time in India in full force. Many of the small enterprises that depend on their own technical prowess in copying

international products will face a crisis of lack of design ownership and many are expected to be wound down as a result.

Designers are people with special skills and in some cases they are astute business persons themselves. Such individuals enter into **Business and Trade Driven Opportunities** and set up appropriate businesses to enhance the reach of their skills and abilities. The typical models for this segment are as follows:

1. Designer as Entrepreneur: There are a large number of opportunities for starting a business of manufacturing low technology intensive products with a very small investment especially since skilled labour is easily available in most of the urban metros in which they live. Many successful shops and manufacturing and producing companies have been set up by designers and some of these are beginning to grow and flourish on their own steam.

2. Designer as Contractor: Unlike the field of Architecture which has strict regulation of practice the design disciplines do not as yet have any regulatory mechanisms. Many designers undertake design cum fabrication contracts which are lucrative making them increasingly like design contractors rather than consultants.

3. Designer as Incubator: The Government of India through its Science and Technology department has helped NID set up the country's first Design Business Incubator late last year. This is modelled after the numerous science and technology incubators that are being tried out in the technology education centres across the country. While this experiment has just begun only time will tell if this route will be superior to the various models described above in creating the much needed design capabilities available to a growing industrial base in India and whether this will create the much needed awareness and climate for design and innovation to flourish in the country.

Some Key Recommendations

Design in India needs a champion at the highest levels of Government to provide leadership and direction that the science and technology initiatives got in the past several decades. The absence of a National Design Council and any form of promotional organisation at the National, Regional and local levels has left the professionals in the field isolated and exposed to the vagaries of market forces without an iota of benevolent regulation. Design education too is in a period of crisis. Established Institutions are throwing caution to the winds and expanding furiously to meet imagined and projected demands with a marked decline in quality standards. There is no formal recognition of the various programmes offered by the different educational institutions and in the absence of a national regulatory mechanism much damage is being done that will be difficult to repair in the years ahead. Having started on a firm footing over forty years ago and having established a vibrant design profession in the country we need to take stock of the rapidly changing field ahead and plot our moves with vision and conviction. The needs of particular sectors are expected to explode and these threaten to derail the established flow of talent creation and the absorption of these into the professional mainstream. The country should now think of sector

specific initiatives that are not to be seen as areas of specialisations, since design is not a specialisation, but as knowledge integrators which can bring the general abilities of design thinking and action to particular needs of each of the numerous sectors that in need of design today.