

The Barefoot Designer: Design as Service to Rural People

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Design: West and East:

Of late, in the world design scene, there is an upheaval. The modern movement, the reductionist the rationalist and the mechanist-type design movement is in a state of crisis.

The cause of this crisis is the emergence of various new post-modern design styles which questioned the earlier ones. The principle “Form follows function” is confronted by “Form follows fun” and “less is more” is countered by “less is bore.” This changing ideological base is seen by the world design community as the beginning of a paradigm- shift in design. This shift is not an accident. It is the inevitable result of a shift in the aims of modern technology and in the social, moral, and economic values guided by that technology.

Unfortunately, this paradigm shift which originated in the West is almost blindly being followed in the other parts of the world as well. One may well question this statement. Why is it considered unfortunate? Why should it be different in other countries?

The answer is not difficult to find.

The type of technological development as well as the socio-ethical and economic changes caused by it are not the same everywhere in the world. There are vast differences. There is a very essential regional factor to be taken into account in each case, and this factor is the local culture of that region. Design is vitally and inevitably linked to culture, society and technology.

At the cost of repetition, let me summarise the Indian context as a case. India is a country with a vast rural population, a population with more than twenty-six regional variations of culture and habits. Amazingly, in spite of this vast diversity there is the commonality of a rich culture with an illustrious past, a characteristic shared with other Asians. A traditional Indian hut with its simplicity, beauty, character and appropriateness to surroundings is a good example.

On the technological side, modern technology in India did not replace traditional technology but quietly found coexistence with it. While the spaceship carried Indian men across the far reaches of space, the bullock-cart still remained the most used vehicle for carrying maximum loads on land. While large-scale industry made inroads into traditional ways of working in the direction of automation and mass production, economic necessity created small and medium-scale industries in the direction of batch production. Parallel to all this, the earlier craft and cottage industries continued to exist. On the social front, a similar situation can be observed—a blend of old values and the new.

Women have come out of their homes to be educated, to do jobs and earn equally with men. Yet they have remained servile, vulnerable and exploitable. Young men and women have become “modern” and more open with regard to man-woman relations and with regard to the family and social norms of dress behaviour etc. Yet the old systems of arranged marriages, dowry system, and caste discrimination continue as before.

An abundance of manpower (including female labour and child labour), unexplored local resources, the scarcity of machine-skills and the scarcity of capital have characterised Indian economy. Spiritually, the Indian remains internally very religious and emotional. Outwardly, however, he is influenced greatly by Western materialism and physical manifestations of living. Coexistence is the hallmark of today’s India. However, most of the contemporary Indian designs do not reflect considerations of this diversity and this coexistence. Such a lack of consideration is found in almost all the Asian and the other poorer countries, (Refer Case Study 6 “The Family Planner” in Section Across).

The design situation in the West is often taken as typifying the situation in the world. This is simply an illusion. Yet, paradoxically, designers in Asia have, by and large, ignored their own contexts and conditions by looking towards the West and being trained in the West.

In the initial stages, about three or four decades ago, when design was in its infancy there was perhaps no alternative to training in the West and looking towards it. But one cannot stay an infant forever Design training and design profession in the West is naturally geared to its own needs, its own socio-cultural environment, its own values and its economy. It is suicidal to transplant solutions on to a completely different ground. Even some of the world’s great designers have failed in such projects, when undertaken in alien, faraway lands. World-famous architect, Le Corbusier’s design of the city of Chandigarh in India would serve as an example. Chandigarh looks beautiful but fails to suit the living habits of the local inhabitants. It may be possible intellectually and rationally to understand a culture, its technology and its economics, but it is nearly impossible, without living in it, to feel the inner truth of this culture, the social values and the ethos, in their many subtle aspects, in order to find suitable solutions.

Two concerns:

Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader and social reformer wrote in 1921, “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people’s houses as an interloper; a beggar or slave.... Mine is not a religion of the prison-house. It has room for the best among God’s creation.”

Gandhi's invaluable advice of letting cultures of all lands to be blown about freely but refusing to be blown off one's own feet is worth following not only by the Indians but also by the people of every country. At present, majority of the countries in the world seem to be getting swept off their own feet. Such Westernisation is the first concern of this article. Designers of a country are well advised to look at their own culture, ethos and design vernacular in order to learn from it.

The second and even more serious concern, which should be the concern of every conscientious designer, is urbanisation of design. Design has remained essentially an urban activity everywhere. The attempts of urban Indian designers to design village products such as the bullock-cart or the sickle have been largely unsuccessful. The reason simply is that they were alienated solutions within the same land.

A call:

In a country like India where eighty per cent of the population live in villages, how can design play any role in people's lives when it does not cater to the village population? Therefore, my call is for a design movement. Since the situation is similar in all industrially developing countries one can call this a "majority world" design movement call.

The key phrase for such a call could be—"Go to the villages and take the government with you." Unless there is a massive thrust, a movement in a "designed" direction, design in the "majority countries" may continue to follow the directions set by the West, and designers may, for years, keep on "designing" devices and communication systems for

the urban citizen and the elite and contribute to perpetuating the existing imbalance between the urban rich and the rural poor; rather than alleviating it

The dominant media in countries like India are urban based and these naturally project the technology of an urban based culture, its design and social values, while the rural voices remain feeble and unheard. Popular film, TV, radio, magazines and books—all are urban and in turn western-influenced. The continuing pre-independent education system and a hangover admiration have contributed to this situation. The whole of India, which has created professional practitioners of design for over a quarter of a century, has trained a very small percentage of students from rural backgrounds. Out of these, even further less went back to villages to work for people over there. The media promoted design through glossy picture magazines and flashy FV shows. This type of expensive and elitist design was thought of as "the only design" by the public as well as by industry. It has mooted the widely held wrong idea that design is for the affluent, for the competitive economy and for export. Design has become a "fashionable" commodity.

In India, due to the recent economic crisis, design is talked about only in terms of its power to sell

more and earn profits, mostly for its own good, abroad. The vital fact that design is a tool for the betterment of life has been ignored completely.

It is unthinkable in India, for a slum dweller to approach a designer for improving his crumbling shelter; or a poor farmer for improving his primitive sickle or a washer man for a better way of identifying his customers' clothes.

Even if an Indian designer in a burst of zeal, enthusiasm and probably a feeling of guilt offers to practise a different kind of design for the "real" people and offers to return to the villages, two questions stand paramount:

First, Can he?

Next, Will he?

The former refers to his competence and capabilities and the latter to his values and aspirations in life.

Urban designer and rural survival:

At the cost of inviting the wrath of many designer colleagues I would argue that it is unlikely that a city-trained designer really has the capabilities to operate in a rural set-up, It needs an in depth knowledge as well as an understanding of the local culture, methods, needs and the design vernacular; quite apart from an understanding of the village economy, community, psyche and ecology where the need operates. Indian designers, for example, know nothing about the coconut tree, though it is an abundant local resource with centuries of social, religious, and economic significance and of immense use, in daily life, even today. Mud, bamboo and thatch have been the most widely used housing materials for ages in rural India, yet it is hard to find Indian architects who know enough of these indigenous materials to use them well in their design of houses.

This is also the case with all other disciplines of design. We talk of the brain-drain and how highly educated young graduates go to work and serve in countries other than their own. A similar internal brain-drain is happening within the country.

A minority of the urban designers actually come from the rural areas just as the author does. For a number of reasons they do not go back to their villages. They invariably settle

in the urban area. They are a loss to the parent rural communities, even if they make their mark internationally.

There are a number of reasons for this non-return to their native villages. Some of the reasons are the lack of facilities for living and the lack of facilities for working (designing), The lack of facilities

for living would include modern well-equipped hospitals, English-medium schools, airports, theatres, clubs, electricity and so on. Lack of working facilities would include computers; communication links; infrastructure and so on.

So, he cannot return.

And will not return.

In any case it is impossible to provide design service to large numbers of rural communities using highly trained urban professionals. The cost of training a designer is so enormous that the number of such trained designers will always be insignificant compared to the vast number of rural people who need their services. Their fees will be high and unaffordable by the rural people and their knowledge is urban and western- oriented. At the same time, the rural people also need their assistance badly.

Designers and design students in countries like India must educate themselves in the local culture, its needs and the vernacular. This has to be done on a war footing because everything is changing with utmost rapidity. This should be the first and foremost activity.

There is a strong feeling that physical proximity and involvement are two essential ingredients one must possess, without which there may be severe limitation of one's depth of understanding and feeling for the people one is concerned with.

Good efforts:

Perhaps it is worth reviewing here the efforts of some individuals and organisations in India who are deeply concerned about this serious problem.

A committed Gandhian named Ishwarbhai Patel runs a school for cleaning. It is called "Safayee Vidhyalay." It concentrates on the most important yet socially most looked- down work of cleaning latrines. Although the school is located in Ahmedabad city, every summer vacation he conducts training camps in villages. The students of the school live and work with the villagers to build latrines for them. Most villages in India have no latrines at all. Ishwarbhai designed special latrines which are inexpensive. He used village materials and constructed latrines which require the least amount of water for flushing. After the initial training, the villagers built the latrines themselves. In this way Ishwarbhai covered hundreds of village families, and this approach is worth emulating. (Refer Case Study 13 "The lotted" in Section Across).

There are many non-government organisations (NGO) which are based in cities but do field work in villages. For visibility, fund raising and for administration, city base is necessary. Designers are an important part of these voluntary, sustained terms. The advantage of such an arrangement is that the

designers can work simultaneously for the urban as well as rural clients which ensures good earning on one hand and satisfaction of social work on the other.

The few design institutions in the country such as the National Institute of Design and Industrial Design Centre undertake rural design projects as classroom projects to encourage students to work for the rural areas. Many a time the institutes based in cities collaborate with voluntary organisations working in rural areas. This is necessary because the NGOs due to their sustained contact and work experience, act as guides and facilitators to the inexperienced students. The Institutes also include in their design training curriculum, courses such as craft documentation which requires students to visit villages and closely observe the craftsman's and their families and document their work. Thus a respect for their work as well as a rapport with rural craftsman's is developed.

The National Institute of Design has innovated an interesting course for the Foundation Programme students. It is called "Environmental Perception" (rural). During this one-month course, the students go to a village and stay there, experience village life, eat the villagers' food and work with the villagers. With deeper understanding they record the experience in the form of drawings and notes. For many urban bred students this experience works as an eye opener. More importantly they develop friendship and empathy for the rural people. As a result, after graduating some of them decide to work in the villages.

Design institutions in India also attempt to conduct training programmes for the village craftsmen or village communities. These are usually not conducted in villages due to lack of facilities. When these are conducted in cities, the response from the villagers is poor in spite of improved communications, the city and its gloss frightens them and alienates them.

Barefoot designer:

Some years ago, when this author was invited to address an international design conference, I first brought in the concept of the "barefoot-designer," taking a cue from the Chinese barefoot doctor. The idea behind this concept was to take design to the heart of the villages and make it useful to the people there. It will not work if we force the urban designer to go and practise design in the villages. Neither will it work if we ask the designers from a rural background to go back to their villages to work for their people. It also does not seem practical at present to establish design schools in villages or introduce design courses in the existing village schools as there is a severe shortage of schools in villages. Perhaps a workable approach for the barefoot designer would be to increase the number of design institutions in the country to the extent we can. Some of these should be located in small towns but their curriculum should be geared to rural needs.

Let us look at the "barefoot doctor" concept of China. It happened in the late 60s as part of

Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution.

“China is an enormous country with a huge population and in 1950, at the time of Liberation; the new government recognised that it had few material resources to cope with a disease-ridden population living in an extremely unhealthy environment. It realised that there was no way in which China's problems could be solved by health care along Western lines, using a hospital-based curative approach, high technology and highly trained and therefore expensive health professionals. National principles of health care were agreed upon covering four main areas for immediate action.

These were services to the people, disease proven, integration of traditional and modern systems of health, both curative and preventive and mass campaigns involving everyone, especially the doctors. These campaigns increased public awareness of health issues and led to widespread acceptance of the responsibility of individuals for their own health and for the health of the community.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, environmental improvement came about through the elimination of pests such as rats, flies, mosquitoes, bed bugs, etc., and with the introduction of improved sanitary facilities, which also controlled and made productive use of human wastes. There were specific programmes of action: vaccination against smallpox; elimination of sexually transmitted diseases; broader vaccination campaigns, including vaccination of all newborns against tuberculosis; control of both malaria and schistosomiasis through mass case findings; treatment and environmental action against the vectors of these diseases. To carry out these programmes, auxiliary workers were specifically recruited and trained and the programmes received full support socio-politically, including extensive use of the media.

Having, so to speak, cleaned up some of the most obvious and urgent health problems by the mid-1960s, the Chinese leadership, using the gathering forces of the Cultural Revolution, focused on the more personal health care needs of the population. Only about 70 per cent of the people lived in the urban areas, but this small percentage included almost all the professional medical personnel, leaving the vast majority of the population to their own devices, health wise. One third of all health professionals were forthwith ordered to the rural areas and, for the next ten years, either permanently or periodically, they provided health services to the villages in the shape of mobile medical teams. Coming face-to-face in this way (probably for the first time) with massive health care problems of the vast majority of their countrymen, it had an interesting as well as a salutary effect on China's high-level medical academics and public health officials. The vast burden of ill health was impossible for them to handle on their own and they may also have felt that the work that was needed was to some extent a waste of their own expensively acquired skills. A rural health service had to be provided and the decision was made to recruit and train village-level health workers—barefoot doctors, or more literally from the Chinese term “doctors without shoes.”

Initially the barefoot doctors were multipurpose health workers chosen by the mobile teams in conjunction with the communities to be served, and trained as near as possible to where they were to work. Their training would sometimes be for short periods between times of intense agricultural activity since the barefoot doctors remained a part of their communities and shared in the day-to-day work of the peasants. They had the responsibility for preventive health care such as environmental improvement, vaccination and family planning. They also dealt with everyday illnesses and accidents and with pregnancy and delivery. They referred problems beyond their capability to the nearest medical centre. They seem to have had a very valuable impact on the health status of the Chinese rural people.

There is continuing education for barefoot doctors and career opportunities to the extent of eventual entry into medical schools.”

In the proposed “barefoot” design system, each village or community initially would nominate a well-inclined person (preferably literate but not necessarily so) to get trained

at a Centre for design. The Centre may be located in the city. He will not be away from his village for a long time at a stretch. He or she will be trained in specific design skills and the knowledge relevant to, and most required by his community and its changing needs. He will learn to innovatively explore his regional resources in the best possible way, and create indigenous design solutions for the present-day market user needs, He will be equipped to cope with the scarcity of certain traditional materials (like ivory and rose wood in India) and to find judicious applications for new materials, like plastics, in forms most appropriate to the materials, and their processes. He will be made capable of finding appropriate alternatives for any unforeseen situations. He will be made aware of his innate sense of aesthetics and its application for human needs. He will be guided to design and do all this within his own cultural milieu, taking into account the prevailing economy and the present day socioeconomic and ecological conditions.

Thus a good rural design service will be provided. The village community will pay partly for his training expense so that his service later is obligatory. Trainees after this pilot training programme return to their village, practise designing as well as train others in the village as apprentices.

It is important that the barefoot designers remain part of their communities and share the day-to-day work of the poor villagers. They should not be away from their communities for too long. They should keep their ties alive.

In such a situation, the main function of city located central design organisations will be “training the trainers” or to use a clichéd expression, “being a seed farm.”

This hypothesis was evolved based on my years of experience in India in organising and conducting design training programmes and field workshops for craftsmen, villager’s, small entrepreneurs and

voluntary workers-as well as from a few projects carried out by the National Institute of Design where the seeds of some of these ideas found successful application.