

The Future of Design: Craft an Emerging Movement



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Abstract:

The discipline of design is comparatively a much newer one in the Indian context. There is till date no hindi equivalent to the word design. The handmade traditions in the country have certainly given an identity to the idea of ‘Indian Design’. Be it the field of fashions, textiles or interior architecture: each of these newly formed design disciplines were shaped by the craft techniques and inherited knowledge of the communities along with modern ideologies on design. The recently formed sector of design gained popularity with the ‘India Report’ by Charles and Ray Eames which later also established the first formal design school in India. Prior to this many schools focussed on teaching disciplines of art, craft and architecture as allied or emerging disciplines of modernised thinking.

With a country like India, the future of design needs to be thought holistically: where each stakeholder needs to play a crucial role be it a craftsman, a designer or a consumer. There are a variety of arguments that need attention: should the design landscape in India be a continuum of traditions and form a deep rooted indian identity or should it be forward looking and aspirational of the global trends. The craft sector in India is the second largest employment sector and is a powerhouse of talent and creativity. The future of design in India needs to acknowledge the presence of such knowledge and this could pave the way for a new movement for design in India. The design industry is challenged not only by local contexts but through multitude of global issues as well. This paper tries to address how design has evolved and transitioned in the Indian context and suggests how craft can be an avenue that could hold clues for design in the future.

This paper discusses the inherent qualities of craft that are seen in the diverse landscape of India. It further elaborates on the idea of design and craft in the past and present. Towards the end the paper summarises with possible ways in which craft could pave the way for a new movement in design.

Key words: Craft, Design, India, Craftspeople

1. Design in India: a historic overview

The earliest examples of space making in the Indian context can be traced back to the 3rd Century of the rock cut cave dwellings of Bhimbetka. Design began with an expression of the self. A need based outcome of the cave that provided for long durations of shelter, a vantage point for incoming danger and a canvas for personalisation. With the increase in the number of members, the need for larger spaces was realised. Planning of multiple dwellings and response to the context gave rise to a skilfully conceptualised sense of architecture. The Mohenjodaro Harappan civilisations showcase the intelligent use of raw materials available as well as a sense of planning and design. Within the communities, several clusters were formed that practised the same form of occupation. The idea of design started to evolve from utilitarian needs to ornamental and aesthetic forms. The faith and beliefs of the communities resulted in spiritual spaces that would accommodate large groups of people. The architectural response towards the growing aspirations of the community gave rise to spaces larger in volume and scale that showcased skill and acknowledgement of the geographical context. The indigenous workmanship shows a realisation of the internal as well as the external which breaks down the differentiation within the spaces and as a result, craftsmanship emerged (Brown, 2013).



Fig. 01 : Harappan Jewellery from the Indus Valley Civilisation

Photographed by : Jonathan Mark Kenoyer of the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Fig. 02 : Interior carvings of a temple in Ranakpur

Photograph from : Mint Images Editorial

Historically the design landscape in India has been more of an extension of the craft traditions have been a reflection of the immense creativity of ordinary people in the quest of self-expression and contentment. The makers are an integral part of folk and classical traditions and historical assimilations which has spanned over many millenniums. These traditions have evolved with many external rulers coming and setting their kingdoms in India. The position of craft constantly has

evolved and proved to be a reflection of the society with time. Through the ages, the design language started developing from a function based perspective to reimagining with an added aesthetic approach.

“Design was summoned to absorb the shock of industrialization, and to soften its devastating consequences upon the cultural web, in other words, to make industrialized products culturally, socially, economically, symbolically, and practically acceptable. Aesthetics was then its privileged rhetorical tool, followed by ergonomics in the mid-twentieth century, and semiotics in the late 20th century” (Findeli, 2001).

The Industrialisation period saw a rise of new materials, new technology and fast means of construction. The employment opportunities grew multifold and the fast production methods allowed different platforms for consumption and trade. With respect to the Indian context, the small scale industries and craft based guilds, began to be sidelined. Incidentally, public and private industries were failing to showcase the importance of the designing of the product with respect to the choices of the customers. The items created for consumption were ‘one size fits all’ categories and rarely showcased any of the Indian skill. Due to this the creative input as well as the cultural influences, that were contributed by designers or through craftsmanship, failed to be recognised.

Post Independence, bowing to the self reliant systems of design and production envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi, a revolution was seen in the Indian handicraft market. The textile mills began to flourish and it increased in employment opportunities for local people. Craft was looked at as an opportunity that expressed local skill and celebrated democracy. This revolution created an achievement for contemporary design. Design institutions and architectural design schools were started so that design and skill based learning could be introduced. Shantiniketan and Sriniketan schools were started in West India that imparted progressive and contemporary education in art and design similar to the Bauhaus school of thought. Design schools imparted various exposures towards small scale industries and empowered the designers to create a local design language.

“Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay is recognised in India as the person chiefly responsible, after Independence, for the revival of the country’s variegated crafts traditions and for drawing critical attention to tribal art “(Lal, 2018). She founded the Crafts Council of India which continues to preserve and protect indigenous craft heritage. Their mission statement ensures that they help to promote research and documentation that can help in conserving cultural and traditional notions as well as provide resources that help in any future developments. These efforts by the government show that the craft sector has a safety net to be able to sustain with the craft practice they have. There are

still opportunities such as inclusion in collaborative design practice, through academic platforms and through design research that craft can act as a catalyst for design innovation in future.

“ In the face of the inevitable destruction of many cultural values, in the face of the immediate need of the nation, to feed and shelter itself; a desire for quality takes on a real meaning. It is not a self-conscious effort to develop an aesthetic; it is a relentless search for quality that must be maintained if this new Republic is to survive.” (Eames & Eames, 1958)

This insight significantly changed the way in which design was perceived. The initiation of design institutions paved the way in developing an aesthetic that resonated with the Indian context and culture. Customisation and personalisation became possible as designers were able to cater to the demand of the people. As a result the design industry was envisioned as a modern facilitator in a then existing traditional society. As time surpassed the competitiveness increased with the increase in the demands of the users. The advancement of technology and increase in trade opportunities through e-commerce created easy access to products and services.

The Government of India, Development Commission (Handicraft) through their Five Year Plan schemes in Handicraft have created policies for artisans that help them in receiving funds as well as rebate on basic commodities. “According to the 12th five year plan, 2012-2017, the handicrafts and handloom sector would be contributing ten thousand crore to India’s export earnings” (Mubayi, 2015).

The craft sector in India is the second largest industry that provides employment opportunities. Still somehow the user group is detached from the makers, craftspeople, and this causes a stagnation in the supply for demand in the market. “The global market for handicrafts is \$400 billion with India’s share below 2%, representing a tremendous growth opportunity” (Dhar, 2013). It thus becomes important to identify avenues that can aid in the progress of traditional craft and its creators which not only provides economic benefits but also acknowledges their skill. The need to re-design and re-invent is increasing rapidly for artisans as well as designers and thus, if collaborated, the two industries will be able to create innovative, indigenous yet contemporary design solutions.

2. Craft and the roots of design

“Craft is a direct representation of the culture, tradition and surrounding of a particular region” (Chattopadhyay, 1980). The early glimpses of craft can be seen through the tools and equipment, utensils and shelters created by early civilisations. The products and spaces created came as an outcome of their climate context and yet represented their community culture and traditions. The early civilisations in India showcased excellent understanding of design and architecture along with

thorough knowledge of sanitation and need of communal spaces. They also created market spaces that allowed for opportunities of barter trade within guilds. The settlements designed were multistoried and the cities were planned in a way that they reflected the cultural context of the community. Design was an outcome of necessity which went on to be translated into luxury and was executed in a manner that showcased the maximum skill potential of the people. In the West too there is a lively awareness that the separation of the three arts has done harm to all three : the architect, the painter and the sculptor. In India where these three were once entirely one artist, it is essential to employ the painter to use his brush on bare surfaces, and the sculptor to give emphasis with his sculpture or relieve work to the monotony of the mere architect's wall (Fabri, 1963). Thus, craft served as an equivalent to design in the Indian context. There was no clear distinction between where design began as it always passively existed through the formulation of indigenous craft.

3. Craft and Design in the Present :

The craft industry contributes significantly to the design industry today as well as the global economy. They have become a thriving platform for wealth generation as well as through employment opportunities. Yet the craft sector still faces challenges of regional competitiveness and this leads to artisanal migration. The urban scapes are filled with opportunities for financial stability as well as job security. Due to this the artisans that move out of their guilds in search of jobs eventually end up working in sectors that may or may not directly use their skill based assets. To avoid migration many setups have been initiated that support the craftspersons as well as accommodate their aspirations. Design studios in India collaboratively work with artisanal clusters. The Craft Design collaborative works account for an innovative means of approach in the field of design. The products and services created hold potential for personalised designs for users. The indigenous design language thus developed, marks a new milestone for the creative industries today. Anupama Kundoo, a leading Indian architect and designer, in her interview with Designboom, dated November 17th 2020, talks about 'handmade technologies' that shape the environment and expresses,

“In an ideal world, to be an architect is to be visionary. New ideas for the future call for new ways of implementation. Experimentation is an integral part of shaping the future.”

To create and explore innovative ideas in design, crafts can act as a guiding tool to be able to express local narratives, culture as well as style. Collaborative interventions with craft may be one of the solutions to relook at design today. Leading designers today in different branches of design namely, fashion, interior as well as furniture design have seen to incorporate craft in their practice.

Anju Modi, a leading Indian fashion designer, has been known to create her apparel inspired from Indian aesthetics and is co-created with local weavers. Her collaborative initiatives with weavers showcases contemporary Indian fashion curated and styled for iconic personalities. She has been able to recreate traditional attires for period dramas that included works of multiple craft communities. Her

work as a designer has given opportunities and exposure to local craft and has created a platform for fashionable traditional attires.

Designer Sandeep Sangaru works extensively with bamboo artisans from Tripura to create handmade furniture pieces. His furniture design pieces go to show the versatility of bamboo as a raw material and in turn contribute to a sustainable practice through use of crafts.



Fig 03: Anju Modi with Judy Frater and artisans in Kutch, Gujarat

Photograph from: Verve Magazine, June edition 2014



Fig. 04: Sandeep Sangaru's Ottoman

Photograph from : Gaatha website for designer Sandeep Sangaru

Fig. 05 : Decor items at Anantaya, Jaipur, by Ayush & Geetanjali Kasliwal

Photograph by: Anantaya decor

Fig. 06: Krushi Bhavan designed by Studio Lotus

Photograph from : ArchDaily feature of Krushi Bhawan by Studio Lotus

Ayush & Geetanjali Kasliwal from Anantaya, Jaipur based designers, creatively incorporate local crafts to design contemporary interior design elements. Their works have been able to present Jaipur's local craft small scale industries ranging from textiles, metal, stone and even wood. The design process is conceptualized with the craftsman's perception of the outcome as well. Their craft design

collaborative works have also been shared through documentaries on social media platforms available for audiences globally.

Studio Lotus through their architectural and Interior design projects consciously foster a culture of collaboration with a base of indigenous history and local context expressed through skill and materials. They have been able to work with artisans and show the scalability of craft as a technique with architectural design solutions. The potential of crafts to expand from just the idea of product design to space making elements opens numerous possibilities for craft in the design industry.

These few examples portray a few of the many possibilities that one could work within the area of craft and design. These overlays could create innovative opportunities for designers and round the year enterprising opportunities for artisans.

4. Conclusion:

In India, the word Design has many meanings and past/present associations hence it is a difficult task to define Indian design (Balaram, 1984). The global aspirations of the people and the desire to be connected to the roots is often a dilemma every design professional in India faces. As discussed earlier, the historic Indian society intertwined the concept of skill, craft, art, technique all in a singular concept of Kalaa. The word design has been integral to these concepts. Design became a means of education that eventually created employment opportunities and generated avenues for income. Professionally applied approaches defined the design to dictate a scope of improvement in the quality of life of people (Balaram, 2011). The craft industry has played a major role in defining indigenous concepts of design. The space making methods involve the works of local skilled artisans. Design in India is far from being a problem solving activity. It is a practice that has been curated with a holistic view with the inclusion of local aesthetics, arts and craftsmanship. Also one cannot forget that these craft traditions also form one of the most important parts of Indian culture and economic development. It is imperative that the design fraternity today sees the craft sector as a potential tool in developing an identity of Indian design rather than thinking of a future with no roots in the context of India. The last part of the essay elaborates on how many design practices today are adapting the contemporary needs with the traditional craft techniques inherently present in the country. They indicate that one could ideate the future of design in close collaboration with craft traditions of the country.

It is crucial that as designers we understand that the identity of Indian design could also be innovative and contemporary by incorporating and collaborating with the involvement of the craft industry. This will not only create employment opportunities but in return also create a new identity for design.

Every region in the country has a variety of local crafts that can be explored. Crafts and design together will be able to identify with the local as well as with the global audience and can act as a fitting solution against standardised mass produced objects. In a globalised world today, it is important that the designers are able to relate to the culture and the surrounding context. The inclusion of craft would open up discussions about sensitising the users towards the native skilled communities and thereby opening a new movement for design in India. As a collective of design professionals we really need to question the future of the design industry-it must address the complexity of social and cultural values our country possesses. The future of design could be contextually rooted and globally relevant and craft could indeed create a new movement and become an important part of the design industry in the future.

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