Designing Freedom

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"Craft is an antiquated way of producing goods,
I don't see why Indians need to waste time preserving crafts when more important issues like poverty, corruption and education demand attention."

—A participant at a 2002 meeting on craft, design, and technology.[1]

The same participant believed that technology was the primary tool that could help solve the issue of craft in India. In his view, a romantic preoccupation with history as embedded in crafts would do nothing to help chart the nation's future direction. He postulated his defense with an aggressive proposition: "Ask any craftsperson if he wants his child to continue being a craftsperson." Another posed the efficiency argument: "What is the need to have primitive patterns of production in this day and age—why should cloth take so much effort to weave when we have easier, faster, cleaner ways of making it?" So, what to do? "I think the only thing we can do is turn [crafts] into a tourist attraction—make some money by 'branding' craft, culture, and local wisdom." And as a parting shot, "I do like beauty and admire the human endeavor of using hand skills to create. But give me a break; most of the stuff in the emporia is kitsch. As a discerning Indian, I have to either go to a fancy designer shop or abroad to buy a great craft product."

There were, however, also those with positive voices. Even though they sounded tentative in the face of such strong opposition, they were heard. One NGO working in the sector of income generation through craft stated emphatically: "Craft is a viable livelihood option—it is dignified and fulfilling, and it needs support." Other views ranged from "The craftsperson is a respected member of any community and fulfils basic needs—especially in the rural pockets" to "Gandhi got it right, we need the village economies to be robust if our nation needs to grow."

In spite of a healthy debate, there was no resolution on how one could address the complex nature of the issues raised by the dissenting side. To summarize the points made against craft:

1. Craft is an old, inefficient way of production.
2. Craft is not, and should not, be an important item on the national agenda.
3. Technology is the most important tool we have to "solve" our problems; not craft.

1 "Aagaman—Listening to Craft" was a workshop held in Bangalore, India 9–13 May 2002.

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4 Craftsmen don't have a great image of their own work (and perhaps of themselves, too?). They wouldn't want their children to work as they do.
5 The best thing to do is to turn it into a tourist attraction—nothing more.
6 Current Indian craft is mostly kitsch, nonutilitarian.

This list highlights a perception shared by a large group of people as well as the policymakers; it seems to be the current construct in India surrounding craft. The trend is for the government and NGOs to involve designers and design firms to "spruce up" the craft sector; and to move from "traditional" products to "contemporary" products, packaging, and so on. The implication—the "old" will not hold. Design is used to apply ideas such as "brand" to this sector. This has spawned the "designer" product that is said to be successful in urban markets at home and abroad. A good example is Khadi.[2]

> An impressive exhibition of Khadi garments entitled *Khadi: The Fabric of Freedom* has just concluded at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. The exhibition will now go to other metropolitan cities including Kolkata and Bangalore. This exhibition, sponsored by the Volkart Foundation of Switzerland, features ensembles by the seven leading fashion designers including Ritu Kumar, Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, Manish Arora, Asha Sarabhai, and Raghavendra Rao. It is the first one to be held on such a large scale. *Khadi: The Fabric of Freedom* has culminated after two years of extensive research by Rahul Jain, a well-qualified textile technologist from India. More than a hundred different varieties of both refined and coarse Khadi from Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Karnataka, UP, and Bihar are showcased in this exhibition.[3]

Better packaging, the incorporation of new technology, and product design all constitute this current approach to craft—an approach aligned with the thinking of our dissenting participant. Yet, nowhere is the craftsperson mentioned. Ironically, *Khadi: The Fabric of Freedom* seems to do little to create "freedoms" for the people who make it. The development and design of this product seems to exclude real participation of some stakeholders; whereas, as Amartya Sen maintains, we need to include them: "An adequate approach of development cannot really be so centered only on those in power. The reach has to be broader, and the need for popular participation is not just sanctimonious rubbish. Indeed, the idea of development cannot be dissociated from it."[4]

I have been there and done that myself. As a designer, I have worked with precisely this approach in the past—"contemporizing" craft—thinking that it held promise for the sector. The assumption of this approach is: "Good design is good business." And one assumes

2 Khadi is the local hand-spun and hand-woven fabric whose manufacture and use Gandhi said should free India from imports.

3 Apunkachoice.com, *Khadi Is Back in Vogue,* (1 May, 2002), www.apunkachoice.com/scoop/fashion/20020501-0.html.

4 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

that good business translates to better living standards. However, such a generalization does not allow a real examination of the issue of craft and its development. This assumption needs to be questioned. Larry Keeley writes:

> The idea that good design is good business is a ridiculous statement, most often trotted out by designers who are trying to prove that whatever they do—which they frequently have difficulty articulating—must be really central to business because somebody said this a really long time ago, and it sounded so pithy at that time. This is delusional. I'm convinced that, when it happens, good design rises above, surrounds, and is vastly more important than trivial things like commerce. That's why it's really crazy for designers to have concerns about articulating the relationship between design and business.[5]

I started asking questions such as: "Is there a different way for design to engage with craft?" and "What can design contribute to craft—apart from just 'packaged designs' for others to thoughtlessly reproduce?" I recall Chambers's caution:

> For learning, power is a disability: all who are powerful are, by definition, uppers, sometimes uppers many times over, others relate to them as lowers. In their daily lives, multiple uppers are vulnerable to acquiescence, deference, flattery, and placation. They are not easily contradicted or corrected: their word goes.[6]

A designer, a government official, a development professional, and a cultural academic all are "uppers." To explore what design can do for the craft sector, let us look at some popular myths. Remember, designers are as responsible as others in perpetuating these myths, and must understand their position of power.

Myth 1
Craftspeople can't be expected to design contemporary products; they need to join with someone who has exposure in the urban and international markets.

On the face of it, this seems a logical and reasonable stand. So the trader, the design house, and the merchandiser emerge apparently to support and help the crafts community. Then, slowly a lucrative market compels the industry to move to the next scale of manufacture; and without real freedom to become informed, to debate, or to choose, the crafts community is sucked into a social change the consequences of which are not foreseen and very often destabilizing. This is the real problem—the change uses inequitable processes and decisions which often don't include the craftsperson's point of view.

5 Larry Keeley, *Facts, Forces, Fog: Reckless Guesses in a Time of Change,* Keynote address at Aspen Design Conference, June 2001 (published subsequently in *Blueprint* 186 August 2001).

6 Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997).

> But, of late years, these handicraftsmen, for the sake of whose works the whole world has been ceaselessly pouring its bullion for 3,000 years into India, and who, for all the marvelous tissues and embroidery they have wrought, have polluted no rivers, deformed no pleasing prospects, nor poisoned any air; whose skill and individuality the training of countless generations has developed to the highest perfection; these hereditary handicraftsmen are being everywhere gathered from their democratic village communities in hundreds and thousand into the colossal mills of Bombay to drudge in gangs, for tempting wages, at manufacturing piece goods, in competition with Manchester in the production of which they are no more intellectually and morally concerned than the grinder of a barrel organ in the tunes turned out from it.[7]

Note the word "democratic" used to describe the way products were produced. Urban guilds and village community manufacture were governed by strict rules and laws that made sure there was a distribution of work and protection of the weaker members' interests. The societal framework allowed for what, nearly a hundred years later, Fisher says was an egalitarian framework:

> In the co-operative, egalitarian society, there is fear of the independent self-reliant person, as well as of the "bossy" person. Strength and success are achieved by unity of approximate equals, who must be regarded as powerless alone, for if someone felt competent working by himself he might not cooperate with others when needed. Moreover, since directions for work are given on the whole as subtle suggestions rather than as firm commands, a strong trait of obedience and responsiveness to the wishes of others is highly valued and useful.[8]

The crafts community always has lived on the above premise of "approximate equals," but now in the face of globalization and free market economy thinking, this social structure has given way to fierce competition, loss of quality, and the firm establishment of the "upper." So the myth that the craftsperson cannot design is sustained.

Government policies and development projects reinforce this notion of "inequality." For example, in 1998, the Government of India commissioned me "... to develop new designs which should be easily marketable in the global market." This project involved a community of traditional lamp makers in southern India. Note the language—I was not asked to "facilitate a process of design." I was asked to "provide designs." The implied notion here is that the craftperson is a passive recipient, and cannot be a co-creator.

7 Sir G. Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India* (London, 1880).

8 J. L. Fischer, "Art Styles as Cultural Cognitive Maps" in *The Sociology of Art and Literature: A Reader,* Milton C. Albrecht, James H. Barnett, and Mason Griff, eds. (London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, Ltd., 1970).

The Designer-as-Facilitator

Charles and Ray Eames, in their "India Report," hoped that designers leaving the new Institute of Design would:

> ... leave with a start towards a real education. They should be trained not only to solve problems—but what is more important—they should be trained to help others solve their own problems. One of the most valuable functions of a good industrial designer today is to ask the right questions of those concerned so that they become freshly involved and seek a solution themselves.[9]

Has Indian design, in fifty years of the country's independence, empowered the crafts community to become "freshly involved" and "seek solutions themselves" on how to resolve this problem of designing for new markets? Have designers asked the right questions of the crafts community to lead to such empowerment? Perhaps it is now time to do so. "With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs."[10]

So the point is not that craftspeople don't need links with experts—it's about the quality of that link. Is the link exploitative or authentic in its equality? Design needs to be seen as a powerful tool that can create and nurture this equality—by the institutions, the policymakers, and the designers themselves.

Myth 2

Craftspeople need to be trained in skills and new technologies.

Again, this is a plausible and reasonable statement. Without a doubt, the pace and intensity of change requires inputs from new skills and technologies. This is such a universal need today that it seems ridiculous to state the obvious. Yet, is the training effective? Doing things right is "efficiency," but "effectiveness" is about doing the right thing.[11] Does the current method of training create an empowered craftsperson through new learning that integrates both the technical and the conceptual? Is design contributing to the effectiveness of craftspersons' training? Traditionally, the craftsperson learned through apprenticeship.

Learning still continues this way wherever hereditary craft is practiced. Added to this are numerous government-run training programs and NGOs, who train people to learn a craft to provide a livelihood. And yet creativity, the mainstay of this profession, is not addressed through this or any other process. Craftspeople cannot create strategies for innovation; competence is seen only as a mastery of one or other technical skills. The craft sector has no institution dedicated to the learning, training, and growth of the people involved in it. There is no broad and long-term focus, and a dearth of good trainers in this field amplifies the problem.

9 Charles and Ray Eames, "The India Report," (A report written for the Government of India, New Delhi, 1958).

10 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom.*

11 Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

Most training programs for craft are dull, lifeless, and do not take learning styles or needs into account when being structured. In today's plural society, subjects such as design, semiotics, branding, history, politics, philosophy, and cultural studies all need to be made accessible to the craftsperson. To paraphrase Neil Postman, "Can a nation preserve its history, originality, and humanity by refusing craftsmen access to creativity, innovation, knowledge, and fun?"[12]

Training with a Difference

To demonstrate what design can do to change this, I created a training program for craftspeople that was not Balkanized along lines of material or skill set. I used design and art pedagogy to "teach" creativity, reflection, critical thinking, analysis, exploration, and experimentation. It also relied heavily on visual language, movement, and doing rather than talking and writing. I realized that, in facilitating knowledge creation in this sector, a designer has to tread very humbly. I knew all too well how easy it is to destroy the objective by being insensitive to method, language, myth, symbol, and style. This five-day residential workshop was called "Aagaman—Listening to Craft." The ideas and work generated in this workshop by craftspeople, engineers, students of design, government officials, and NGOs demonstrated the importance of creating invigorating and challenging learning environments to generate innovation through collaboration.

In another project, I transformed a group of fifteen students from different disciplines of design to a "craft cluster," utilizing a traditional government-funded training program. The students, the craftspeople, and I engaged with the notion of design and the design process through a collaborative approach. Students and crafts workers talked together of sustainability and ways of seeing, clarified the lexicon, participated in hands-on classes on urban markets with discussions on form, styles, movements, ergonomics, selling, and myths. At the end of the program, I was convinced that design schools can contribute significantly to the formulation and delivery of effective training in the crafts sector, resulting in win-win positions for all parties.

To quote Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, "... the pride the craftsperson derives from his creation and the delight in the perfection of his finished product sustain him. It is this knowledge that is enshrined in our faith in crafts."[13] Most craftspeople do have an inherent pride in their work, if their work is accorded the due credit, remuneration, and status it deserves. And if they have training opportunities to empower them to face the onslaught of our changing times, they would encourage their children to continue in the trade. Creation of this kind of opportunity also would open up employment options for other people. With a really "fun" place to learn, which then facilitates the earning of a livelihood, we can attract people to a career in crafts. Compared to the professionalism,

12 Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992).

13 Shakuntala Ramani, *Sari: The Kalakshetra Tradition* (Chennai, India: Craft Education and Research Centre, Kalakshetra Foundation, 2002).

ambience, and culture in our corporate offices, a typical government craft center looks and feels depressing. This urgently needs to be changed.

So the solution to address failing performance in craft is not to "let craftspeople have training"—that is the mediocre, rote, and one-dimensional training primarily responsible for the kitsch that fills our emporia. We ought to be preparing them for the future by developing their capacity to cope with the pressures of ambiguity and change, and empower them with resilience and creativity. Yet, who will bell that cat?

Myth 3

We must gear up to increase export—it is the best market for Indian craft (look at our software industry).

Government policies during the last ten years tend to see globalization as an opportunity for economic growth. The buzzwords are "craft for export" or "income generation through craft export." We are urged to follow the examples of our neighbors further East—Bali, Thailand, and China. The Export Promotion Council of Handicraft extols the few "houses of craft" that have become supply houses to the retail chains of Europe and the U.S. They are held up as the models to emulate, models that can be applied across every situation. India had a 3.8 percent share of the world handicraft trade three years ago, and this year it hopes to corner ten percent. Das shows the link between this myth and earlier ones:

> There is an old idea in economics ... that if a rich and a poor country are linked by trade, their standard of living should converge in the long run. It makes intuitive sense, because the standard of living depends on productivity, and productivity, in turn, depends on technology. When a poor nation is connected, it merely adopts the technological innovations of the rich one without having to reinvent the wheel.[14]

While everyone is happy (I am too) that India clocks another one-hundred-million rupees in the export turnover of handicraft, we need to ask if it changes the relationship of the craftsperson to his craft? This question was raised at the Bangalore workshop during a panel discussion on the future of craft. Some interesting insights emerged. Prem Chandavarkar, an architect, said, "Craft objects originally were objects of use as well of contemplation. A coconut scraper is a coconut scraper, but it also is shaped in the form of a horse head. The thinking and making of an object always was interlinked." Today, when we talk about making new designs or responding to markets, we are slowly separating the thinking and the doing. In globalization, craft is viewed in noncontextual boundaries. A craftsman in a village may be producing for a consumer in Mumbai or New York, and hence the act of creating is grounded in "market perception," and not a particular worldview. Chandavarkar also added:

14 Gurcharan Das, *India Unbound* (New Delhi: Viking, 2000).

> Craft really is a rooted tradition—it is a process by which a community reflects on its condition—this sort of reflection is actually a search for identity. The more we move craft towards "market" and "customers," the more we move it away from its greatest source of renewal. That is not to say customer requirements are not important; rather there is a need for dialogue with craftsmen about ways of dealing with these concerns.

Related to this, Sen says: "We come back to the perspective of capabilities: that different sections of the society (and not just the socially privileged) should be able to be active in the decisions regarding what to preserve and what to let go."[15]

If pushing export implies the basic relationship of craft to craftsman and society is put under pressure, it would be appropriate to seek solutions that counter such an effect. When designers provide the craftsman access to larger markets through design inputs, they also have the responsibility to provide the concomitant tools and strategies that allow him to relate to the context, and thus greater control.

Design as a Tool to Decision Making

So export means great markets, yet the sense of identity must be protected. Design can be used to help make decisions, both to articulate possibilities and futures as well as weigh costs. With the new opportunities, craftspeople also must be provided with the means of relating to the new contexts, and thus freed up to make the "right" decisions. In the words of Coomaraswamy, "The heart and the essence of the Indian experience is to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instinctive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom."[16]

I see design as the integrator; the crucible within which to create opportunities for dialogue between customers and craftspersons, between buyers and exporters, and between the markets and the villages. Design can empower the individual craftsperson to create balance between these forces, and thus make the "right" decisions.

Myth 4

Craft is antiquated—it needs to get in line with the twenty-first century.

If the attributes of a decent livelihood were to be drawn up, then income, work conditions, growth, and development opportunities would figure as the basic minimum. Craft scores on all counts, and therefore often is used by NGOs to create livelihood options.

15 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

16 Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., 1924).

On my wanderings, I met Maruthi, who studies law at a small town called Channapatna in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. His father was a craftsperson who used a hand lathe to make turned wooden products—utilitarian, ritual, and decorative. Maruthi also turns wooden beads in the morning on the veranda of his village home, before he leaves to catch the bus to college. Asked if he would like to make craft his career, he thought a bit and said he saw no reason why he can't do both—law and craft.

Every time I talk to craftspeople who highlight this flexible aspect of their work, I contrast it with the struggle the corporate sector is having with this idea. Social scientists tell us that we are living in the age of "flexible economies." In this age of networked connectivity, corporations advertise their workspace as "flexible" to attract employees. Flexibility often is portrayed positively as a way of creating work that is more meaningful and holistic for individuals. But in actual practice, the transition of a capitalistic industrial society into a post-industrial flexible economy can create "work environments and social structures that are elitist and divisive; with autonomy, discretion, and more meaningful work being reserved for small technical elites; while the remaining workforce is relegated to work that is low-grade, part-time, temporary, un-pensioned, and assigned in erratic ways."[17]

Here in India, craft is practiced most often in "flexible" scenarios. The craftsperson follows work methods and processes that are not standardized, but are integrated into his life and the rhythms of the community. "Simultaneous," "nonlinear," and "networked" are ways of thinking that come naturally to this community. It is part of their inheritance. It is a way of life. They don't need to learn about "flexibility"—they live it. It is ironical that the very strength of this type of production is perceived as a weakness—both by themselves and the world they interact with. The government tells them to standardize, the designer tells them to upgrade, modernize, and change, and the market tells them to make things they never have made before. They don't know which is the appropriate way to respond.

> Fortunately for the Indian weaver, while he slept like Rip van Winkle, the world has come a full circle, and having soared the skies plucking fabrics out of thin air, has now returned to earth, and is seeking its roots in earth-borne products. Western cultures are slowly turning away from the glitz of synthetic fibers and wash-and-wear clothes, and are reaching out for natural fibers and dyes that do not pollute the earth. The devastation of nature has brought humankind to its senses, and there is growing realization that we are of the Earth and we destroy ourselves when we destroy nature.[18]

17 Andy Hargreaves, *Changing Teachers, Changing Times* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1993).

18 Shakuntala Ramani, *Sari: The Kalakshetra Tradition.*

I can see design used as a tool to clarify these issues and create ways to strategize and leverage the situation for the benefit of craft. The time seems appropriate too—the world seems ready to value traditional materials and processes, not spurn them. Craft could teach the citizens of the twenty-first century a thing or two about life and living. We need to listen and encourage, not condemn and force-fit. Design could be the means of creating this bridge.

The Role of Design Schools

The design school in India is a relatively new entrant in historical terms. It is not like an engineering college or a management school. It is not like a fine arts school, either. It combines the right brain with the left in its approach to pedagogy, itself a novelty in a culture like ours. It is this space that can and must take on the task of building bridges between the traditional and the modern, and the technological and the mythical, in our culture.

1. First, because of the available resources of young, energetic designers-to-be. They are the ideal ambassadors of such a process. They do not carry sufficient authority to intimidate craftspeople, yet they still have the required training and thinking associated with design. If the school also teaches facilitation skills, then the design student could collaborate with all the stakeholders concerned to visualize solutions.

2. A design school can spend longer periods of time on projects, with a component of research and engagement that purely commercial setups have trouble doing. Craft needs that kind of time.

3. Also, a school is a space where multiple stakeholders can converge, and since its primary function is learning, the environment is right for experimenting, investigating, and making mistakes. It is the ideal platform for multidisciplinary teams to begin the job of designing the frameworks and materials that can solve the problems of the crafts sector's search for identity, freedom to make decisions, and ability to face globalization, change, and growth in the future.

In conventional terms, so far design has been seen only as a contributor to the economics of craft. This narrow and shallow engagement is one of the reasons why the dissenting voices seem reasonable and true. Design must redefine its boundaries to go beyond this rather limited and circumscribed role to be able to contribute to the development of this sector. Sen says, "In looking for a fuller understanding of the role of design, we have to take note of its direct relevance to the well-being and freedom of the craftsperson, its indirect role through influencing social change, and its indirect role through influencing economic production."[19] I believe that the design school is the right place for this process of "role realization" to begin.

19 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom.*