# Design in India:
# The Experience of Transition
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C G Road is Ahmedabad's pride: a new shopping boulevard that turns its back on the crowded bazaars of this medieval city. Steel and glass store fronts, coffee shops, Pizza Hut, the latest in home entertainment, sportswear, fashion and ethnic chic—international brand names from India and overseas, flashing in neon to attract Ahmedabad's affluent youth to a "happening place" that demonstrates the power of what is emerging as the largest consumer market in the world. It wasn't always this way. When I arrived in Ahmedabad in 1975, a "happening" meant sampling the street life of Manek Chowk, the heart of Ahmedabad's tradition as India's textile capital, around which revolved a rich pattern of community living and craft activity. It was in these lanes and marketplaces that Ahmedabad's craft and merchant guilds flourished for generations, giving the city a reputation that rivaled sixteenth century London. Seven bridges span the dry riverbed of the Sabarmati River, which separates Manek Chowk and old Ahmedabad from C G Road and the high-rise sprawl of the new city. The traffic hurling back and forth—handcarts and camel carts, and an occasional elephant, to compete with the city's passion for the newest in two-, three-, and four-wheeled speeders—is symbolic of India's passage to and from modernity, and its search for a confident identity that can link five-thousand years of history with a future in which change is the only certainty.

It is from this experience of transition that design in India takes its meaning. Mahatma Gandhi, arriving in India from South Africa almost a century ago, established his ashram retreat along the banks of the Sabarmati. His "experiments with truth" began in Ahmedabad, experiments intended to bring freedom to his subjugated people and to build a society that could "wipe every tear from every eye." Self-reliant systems of design and production were inherent in Gandhi's mission. They were directed at serving basic needs through a demonstration of social justice and a respect for nature's balance. Symbolic of this quest was Gandhi's campaign for the boycott of British textiles, and for the home production of handspun, handwoven "khadi," the livery of freedom which was to evolve into a handloom revolution that is in itself India's greatest achievement in contemporary design. A few kilometers down the riverside from Gandhi Ashram is the campus of the National Institute of Design. Established here some forty years ago, the NID

was one of several specialist institutions of contemporary knowledge created by free India to ensure that its youth were at the frontiers of knowledge; harnessing it for the developmental needs of a giant democracy mired in postcolonial poverty. The NID was the first attempt by any developing country to use the design disciplines inherited from the Bauhaus as a tool for national regeneration. The catalyst for its creation was an extraordinary one. Barely a decade after Independence, India invited Charles and Ray Eames of Los Angeles to suggest how design could assist the growth of Indian industry. Government officials were expecting a feasibility report. What they got was an extraordinary statement of design as a value system, as an attitude that could discern the strengths and limitations of both tradition and modernity, and as a profession that could use the wisdom of such insights to make wise decisions about India's 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."[1]

Four decades later, if one is to search for the impact of design on contemporary India, C G Road may offer an easier vantage point than Manek Chowk. Graduates of the NID, and of the other design schools that followed it, are part of the international look and the product excellence showcased in the shopping malls of every Indian city. Indian brands that Indian designers have helped build compete successfully at home and overseas, from machine tools, automobiles, and watches, to an astonishing range of textiles, garments, entertainment and media products, and crafts redesigned to meet contemporary needs. All this represents a major transformation from yesteryear. In the early years of the NID's founding, India's market was carefully protected to encourage local production and discourage competition from imports—a policy that reflected the urge for self-reliance that had marked the freedom struggle under Gandhi's leadership. Indian planners were attempting to blend Gandhian and Marxist principles with the nation's multicultural ethic, and to do this through centralized planning. A competitive market would be tolerated, but not allowed to reign supreme. Entrepreneurship and the profit motive (which the Indian Diaspora had taken across the globe) were discounted at home as something vaguely disreputable. Industry, public as well as private, had difficulty in comprehending the importance of design in an environment where consumer choice was deliberately limited. Designers struggled with the contradictions of advocating excellence in a marketplace that did not appear to need it, and in social sectors which needed convincing evidence

1   Charles and Ray Eames, *The India Report* (Ahmedabad: National Institute of Design, 1958).

(which only a competitive marketplace could provide) that investment in design was worthwhile. When India's first design graduates emerged in the mid-1970s, the business community regarded design as a postponable luxury, or as an option to be applied after a product was developed rather than integrated into the development process.

Not surprisingly, the first career opportunities appeared wherever competition existed: in export industries, in working with traditional crafts threatened by mass production, and in the advertising industry. Traditional crafts, conservation of cultural heritage, exhibitions to communicate the Indian experience at home and abroad, service to small- and medium-sized enterprises looking for new markets, programs for health and literacy—these were the demonstrations that won for India (and for the NID) the first international recognition of design for development. In 1979, this recognition brought the United Nations, through the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in Vienna, to the NID campus in Ahmedabad for the first-ever UN conference on design. It was an effort to share the Indian experience with the global community, and its outcome was the Ahmedabad Declaration on Industrial Design for Development. The Declaration articulated a global mission for design: that "designers in every part of the world must work to evolve a new value system which dissolves the disastrous divisions between the worlds of waste and want, preserves the identity of peoples and attends to the priority areas of need for the vast majority of humankind."

The conference suggested actions essential to the achievement of the Declaration, and these were endorsed by UNIDO. Several national and international institutions used the opportunity to reinforce the thinking that had begun to emerge through Europe's "green movement," pointing out that the "world of waste" was being rejected by the very societies that spawned consumerism. The 1979 Declaration should have been a watershed event for design in India, inspired as it was by the Indian experience. Yet the Declaration in India remained largely a statement of intent, and less one of achievement. It came at the opening of a decade that was to reject the socialist paradigm, and what many regarded as its Gandhian baggage. Instead, national policy turned toward global and domestic competitiveness, and to measures that could stress international market success as a new hallmark of self-reliance. Design began to move into the center of corporate strategies, and a profound semantic shift accompanied that movement.

Sometime in the 1980s, the term "designer" changed from a noun to an adjective; and the image of a good Indian life from Gandhian austerity to one of "Just do it." The new consumer culture accelerated as part of a young Prime Minister's decision to open India's door to globalization. Rajiv Gandhi took the first steps of dismantling protectionism. With that, design awareness accelerated

at a speed that would have been impossible to even imagine at the time the Ahmedabad Declaration was signed. Designers who had been urging industry for years to acknowledge the centrality of their role now were being challenged to deliver design of a quality and at a speed entirely new to their experience.

India's own information technology (IT) revolution took off in the engineering campuses that had been created soon after Independence as India's technological frontiers. The computer began to impact every aspect of design training and service, opening vast new horizons of application. A gigantic media boom hit India, with a proliferation of products and channels that convincingly demonstrated design as the cutting edge for market survival. Soon, the fashion industry stormed in, challenging concepts of identity treasured by generations of Indians with its relentless promotion of an "international" (read European and North American) look, and an equally relentless demand for speed and quality. Media hype essential to a fashion culture quickly made it the most obvious expression of design in India, and design education soon was redefined in the public mind as a passport to glamour and wealth. Liberalization and globalization became the gospel of a new generation of international managers from India, leading an expanding middle class that was young and increasingly affluent. Their dreams of a "first-world" lifestyle soon would be fueled along the C G Roads of an India busily redefining itself in the language of global trade. Despite massive swings in the world economy, the market for design has expanded rapidly, and young professionals emerging from design schools are quickly absorbed by industry. Using design to build "Brand India" as a global presence is a job that Indian industry is doing well. Watching the shoppers rush by on C G Road, can one say that Indian design has arrived at last, and that the mission that began with the Eames's report is well on its way to fulfillment?

It often is said that whatever generalization applies to India, the opposite is equally true. Design is no exception: its success is in an organized marketplace that caters to a middle class as large as all of Europe, and to expanding prospects overseas. Its contribution will be essential to the role India now demands of being taken seriously as an economic power. Design capability is reflected in the improved competitiveness ratings accorded to India by the World Economic Forum's annual surveys, including its report for 2002–2003. The UNDP's human development reports tell another story. Here, India ranks among the lowest in the world. The reality is that the vast majority of India's one billion citizens live in rural settings and urban slums that remain well outside organized systems of commerce. For them, the quality of life remains abysmal, touched only at the farthest fringe by interventions from designers motivated by the early inspiration that defined a new Indian profession. For the visionaries who created the NID, the marketplace was an arena of interaction to be treated with great respect. It was here that qual-

ity had to be demonstrated, made practical, and given the power to change attitudes and behaviors. Thus market success was essential to demonstrate the value of design to the broader needs of a quality of life. Today, it often is seen as its only value.

The challenge is to innovate a client system that can harness design skills toward products and services that finally must deliver a freedom from want for all Indians. Such a system cannot reject market mechanisms. Instead, it must use them with the highest degree of managerial competence to build new sources of support for developmental priorities that can be sustained without total dependence on government programs. If this is to happen, Indian design must evolve strong partnerships and networks with institutions of civil society. Tomorrow, these institutions will be the prime clients of design for development.

In the years of centralized planning that followed India's Independence, government was the prime engine of social change in India. This is no longer the case, and recent years have seen a strong movement away from official controls and patronage to demands for decentralization, with decision-making and problem-solving at the local level. In the current period of transition that marks India's new fascination for market economics, government is withdrawing from the "commanding heights" it once occupied, leaving a social vacuum that private enterprise cannot be expected to fill. The case for design, carefully built over the years, had just begun to impact planners when major shifts in policy took place. Planners in New Delhi and the state capitals now are preoccupied with new priorities, and the case for design for development will have to be made elsewhere. The answer may be found in the newly empowered civil institutions. Building their understanding and support for design then can be used to restore real needs to the center of design education and training. If this is to be achieved, it is India's design schools that will need to assume the responsibility for forging the partnerships that can provide a client system responsive to issues of real need. This must be accepted as a marketing job; one that will require articulating the case for design with the highest level of professional skill. Support must come from "funders"—governments, international agencies, and industries—currently besieged with competing applications. Therefore, potential donors must be attracted by hard-headed proposals, carefully prepared with budgets, timelines, and benchmarks for monitoring progress. These are skills that the social sector often lacks, but without them no one will listen.

An immediate step might be to document key experiences in design for development from the past: documented to demonstrate the design process as a proven strategy for poverty alleviation. The case must be built to demonstrate economic and social impacts, cost benefits, extension and replication opportunities, the barriers and the opportunities for sustainability, as well as the possible cost to India of not involving designers in efforts for social change. Indian

designers have demonstrated the potential of design for development. This now could be used for advocacy: the regeneration of crafts, the protection of fragile ecosystems and environments, the conservation of scarce materials, aids for the less able (India has the largest population of such persons in the world), communication and media efforts that have impacted campaigns for health and for human rights (particularly those of women and children), the generation of new opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, educational materials that help enliven the bleakness of India's classrooms, and the application of ergonomics to the reduction of drudgery, fatigue, and occupational ill-health in India's workplaces and homes. Social scientists, particularly economists, and professional managers need to be recruited to help make the case for design credible and watertight.

Critical to the success of such an Indian effort will be to link it with global efforts toward sustainability. Perhaps the most important of these emerged from the Earth Summit at Rio in 1992 as Agenda 21, with its urgent demand for alternative patterns of consumption that are compatible with ecological sustainability. Despite all the disappointments of the past decade, the power of Agenda 21 has been demonstrated again at Johannesburg in 2002, and it remains the most important element in rethinking lifestyles and development patterns in India's industrialized North as well as developing South. Another key opportunity for integrating design has come through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in New York, and its new system of Human Development Reports. This system transforms the traditional understanding of living standards currently limited to measurements of gross national product and per capita income. Instead, the HDR approach defines development and progress in terms of a quality of life that can enlarge people's choices and their capacity to fulfill them. In 1998, the HDR investigated consumption from a human perspective—consumption *for* development—in what could be interpreted as a charter for design in the new millennium.

Other opportunities have emerged. These include movements for the empowerment of women and for consumer protection, the new respect for the knowledge and wisdom of indigenous traditions, the revival of crafts worldwide, the search for alternative patterns of income generation and employment to meet the needs of expanding populations, the growing respect for institutions and professions that have a capacity for interdisciplinary teamwork, and the search for values more enduring than brand names. All of these forces represent major opportunities for demonstrating the power of design. None of them was as strong or as clearly organized as they are today when the Ahmedabad Declaration on Industrial Design for Development was ratified in 1979. Each force suggests an opportunity to communicate the experience and contribution of designers around the world, brought together in a collective strength that can help take their efforts to scale. Charles and Ray Eames in their India Report spoke

of design as an ultimate expression of "dignity, service and love." Contemporary design in India began with that message. Almost half a century later, India can help to ensure that this message remains as the non-negotiable heart of design as a twenty-first century profession in India and in every other part of the world.