Signboards as Mirrors of Cultural Change
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Change is the process by which the future invades our lives,
and it is important to look at it closely, not merely
from the grand perspectives of history, but from the vantage point
of the living breathing individuals who experience it.
—Alvin Toffler[1]

The young designers of developing nations are faced with conflicts of diverse kinds. Like many other young designers graduated in the recent past from the meager number of design schools in India, I belong to this community and have experienced the conflicts of opposing design ideals. Why is it that the informally trained designers of today, the many street artists and local craftsmen, continue to produce culturally entrenched designs effortlessly, while the formally trained designers cannot produce culturally-rooted contemporary works? And yet they consider local crafts, traditions, and skills of visual depiction as "nondesign." A country with a glorious design history today is considered best only at craft products, many on the verge of extinction. Why do the formally trained designers consider the local designs and manifestations of vernacular culture as inferior and taboo? Why do all congregations of designers in the country vociferate about the lack of design appreciation and design illiteracy in the Indian population in spite of the existence and history of a diverse visual culture and languages?

Visual Culture and Design Sense in Indian Tradition
A rich tradition of design exists in India. The influence of different cultures and religions gave birth to rich styles of design in fields as diverse as architecture, textiles, earthenware, and metalware design. The performing arts as well as the visual arts were at penultimate growth levels. A unique visual language developed in India, traces of which still can be seen in its many surviving crafts. Today, there are two, distinct visual languages in Indian graphic design, products, and architecture. The vernacular designs by the informally trained designers can easily be distinguished from the global and modern designs by the formally trained designers. The global and modern designs often overpower the streetscape in major cities by their sheer size and visibility. The Indian streetscape has evolved in myriad styles, carrying examples of regional variations from both olden and modern times.

1   Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1971).

Globalization Forces

Nike, Coke, Pepsi, Kellogg's, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Gillette are familiar names in any urban Indian home. Indians are accustomed to these brands, and along with them have adopted and idealized a culture that comes packaged with the goods in their promotional campaigns. The streetscape and the various media carrying the promotional campaigns were the first to witness a "culture shock." All media that had the potential for reaching the masses (television, radio, and cinema) were transformed to portray the popular global culture—more appropriately the American culture.

A foreign language and monotonous uniformity are replacing variety at an unprecedented rate. The underlying formal "Western" design practices have become the guiding principle. The uniformity can be seen in terms of materials, colors, layouts, and architectural sameness. Today, most signage, banners, and billboards look similar. The rich visual and symbolic culture is moribund. The uniformity and alien imagery are a part of the globalization package, which has brought in technologies and design practices without a complete understanding of their uses and cultural implications.

Cultural Transformation

Does the change in the streetscape manifest a broader change in the culture? Are the planted and transferred technologies from advanced countries responsible for the change? In the recent past, India and many other developing nations of the world have witnessed tremendous changes in their culture, mostly due to economic, market, and political forces. The interchange of ideas among people from different cultures has long existed, and people always have been fascinated by the unique and unusual things in other cultures. However, while these interchanges were few in earlier times, globalization has expedited the process of interchanges among cultures. It has reached a stage where the expedited interchange not only has enabled the emergence of a global culture, but has started threatening the very existence of local cultures.

Transforming the Streetscape

The conflict in Indian culture can best be witnessed in contemporary streetscapes. The large-format, four-color, digitally printed advertisement of a multinational corporation looming over the shack of a tire repair shop with its tiny, yet effective, hand-painted sign clinging to the base of the huge billboard is a common sight. Similar contrasts are not difficult to find. India is a land where extremes coexist; age-old technologies coexist with the high-tech world, bullock carts share the roads with Fords, and shanties are as much a part of the cityscape as are the numerous skyscrapers.

The streetscapes share a particular history and relationship with the people who inhabit them. In such a visually diverse environment, Indians decipher numerous visual clues from their streetscapes, constantly coding and decoding messages, and understanding more about their environment. The character and arrangements of streets, buildings, hawkers, and other activities are a reflection of the socio-cultural milieu. "Street furniture, architecture, transport, billboards, posters, packaging, animals, and people are all used in the media of calculated design and spontaneous expression."[2] So, Suzanne Langer's capsule definition of architecture: "It is the total environment made visible"[3] does not hold true in the Indian context. In India, it's not just architecture that constitutes the whole environment, but also other elements of the streetscape such as billboards, signboards, film posters, and banners. Often, these elements take dominance over architecture. Although the streetscape always has reflected the changes in the local cultures, today it is transforming at such a rapid rate that the local cultures are not able to digest the changes.

Signs of Changing Times

As a part of the streetscape, signboards are on the center stage of the cultural transformation. Signboards and billboards differ in many ways. Often unique to a shop and a particular location, they can take the liberty of being culturally biased. Their main purpose is to inform, stimulate, motivate, convince, and lead viewers to a product or service, and to create in the mind of the viewer a positive attitude towards the message being propounded. Moreover, the most pertinent factor in deconstructing signboards is that they form a part of the "identity" that is deliberately created to project a desired personality. This fact suggests that signboards are culturally relevant, and reflect the aspirations of a group of people. Signboards fall neither into the domain of craft nor in the domain of art, they can be positioned somewhere in between the two. Following Alvin Toffler, we will attempt to describe the chronological changes that have occurred in the design and manufacturing of signboards from the point of view of people involved in this process. By analyzing the signboards, we hope to arrive at some generalizations that may be applicable to other crafts.

India in the pre-independence period and from the 1950s to the late-'70s, fresh from the freedom struggle and reciting the mantra of "self-reliance," saw a surge in hand-painted signboards. The tradition of carrying forth the ancestral profession by the new generation led to a new breed of signboard painters. These painters, as in many other craft traditions, learned their skills through apprenticeships (Figure 1).

2   Barry Dawson, *Street Graphics India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).
3   Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner Book Company, 1977).

Figure 1
Signboards dominate the streetscape in most cities.

Visual Language Comes into Its Own

The relatively small and naïve Indian consumer products industries provided a platform for these painters to display their talents by painting large advertisement billboards. Elections offered an opportunity for the mass production of hand-painted posters and billboards. The long compound walls of the railway tracks and other public buildings often were used to support advertisements.

The boom in the local cinema industry, now known as "Bollywood," also provided the painters with much work, and gave them an opportunity to experiment and develop a unique visual language. The posters and banners for new films were hand-painted because printing was too expensive. The lack of new large-format printing technology proved to be a blessing for the painters. Large billboards depicting closeups of popular local and national heroes and heroines were given larger-than-life character by these "untrained" but skilled artists. The most notable example is internationally renowned modern artist M. F. Hussain, who started his career by painting film billboards in front of cinema halls in the late-1930s.[4] Hussain's graduation from billboard painting to the international modern art arena is proof of the immense talent possessed by many such signboard painters.

4 Further information on the legendary modern artist is available from: www.sholay.com/personalities/new/mfhussain.htm.

Figure 2
Hand-painted political billboard.

Figure 3
Hand-painted billboards for Hindi film *Ganga Jamuna*, 1961 (Source: Prashant Agarwal, IDC, IIT Bombay).

Large studios with as many as fifty artists mushroomed in most cities. The studios undertook projects that varied from seasonal political posters to film posters and billboards, to advertisements and shop signboards. The painter-artists had established themselves as versatile professionals capable of handling such large tasks as twenty by ten feet of canvas, plywood, or tin painted using oil paint[5] (Figure 2).

Influences on Signboard Designs
This concentration of tasks and control of media had two astonishing effects. First, a set of conventions regarding the layouts and colors developed. These were quite evident in the film posters where, for example, the villain of the movie used to be depicted in shades of purple or blue, and the hero was depicted in pink and light brown.[6] Similar conventions also were common in typography, such as three-dimensional effects and perspectives (Figure 3).

Second, the various elements of the streetscape including signboards, film billboards, and advertisements began to influence each other: symmetric layouts and the use of grids from advertising, 3-D lettering styles and special effects from film posters, and illustration styles from older popular calendar art. These painters

5   Personal conversation with signboard painter M. Nimbalkar.
6   Prashant Agarwal, "History of Hindi Film Posters" (Unpublished dissertation, IDC, 1984).

Figure 4
Café Hind signboard almost seventy years old
at Mumbai.

idolized calendar art gurus such as Deenanath Upadhyay, and tried
to mimic their styles. Posters featuring the gods and goddesses of
India, painted by a prolific generation of poster artists between the
1930s and 1950s including Kartick Das, S. Murugakani, S. M. Pandit,
Yogendra Rastogi, and T. S. Subbiah, among others, also influenced
the works of signboard painters.[7]

A good example of their influence on typography may be
found at the Café Hind in the Hindu Hotel near Victoria Terminus,
Bombay (Figure 4). The hotel still bears a seventy-year-old, hand-
painted signboard; a simple but effective example of early modern
signboard design. What is most notable about this signboard is the
fact that the height of the Hindi type is equal to that of the English
text. This visual correction was made possible by the highly trained
eyes of the signboard painter. This skill almost was lost with the new
breed of designers who learned fonts and layouts on computers.
The new digital signboards, with smaller regional language text as
compared to English text, demonstrate this lost skill.

The signboard painters had the freedom of selecting display
typefaces from existing examples in sample booklets. The painter
also had the ability to modify alphabets to reflect calligraphy appro-
priate for the specific purpose of his client. These were early attempts
at creating expressive typography, an opportunity for the signboard
painters to spontaneously display their talent and creativity. There
was a visual language evident in the choice of fat, cursive, or calli-
graphic letterforms and the selected informal characteristics used to
communicate what is Indian (Figure 5).

New techniques for illuminating signboards also made their
debut in India in the late seventies. Incandescent backlighting,
neon, and fluorescent tubes started appearing in prime shopping
areas. Although these technologies were extensively deployed in
developed nations, they had relatively little impact on the Indian
market due to their lofty price tag. Currently, the neon-embellished
signboards remain exotic and premium products, deployed only by
shops such as jewelers, superstores, and malls (Figure 6).

7   The Smith Poster Archive housed
     in Special Collections at Syracuse
     University contains some 3,500 design
     specimens of popular chromolitho-
     graphs (a.k.a. "oleographs," "calendar
     art," "popular bazaar prints," and "god
     posters") widely disseminated in twen-
     tieth-century Indian homes, shrines,
     schools, public halls, and workplaces
     (www.maxwell.syr.edu/southasiacenter/
     SmithArc.htm).

Figure 5
Signboard painted directly on wall,
Meerut, U.P.

Figure 6
Neon lighting in shop signboards.

Innovative Use of Existing Materials in Signboards

The next major change in the field of signboard manufacturing came with the numerous materials used for cut letters. Wood and metal alloys were used in the form of engravings, danglers, and 3-D lettered signboards. Wood was used for making plaques and tablets. The embossed letters on a signboard gave it a new three-dimensional quality, the signboards gaining almost architecture-like personalities in the early 1980s. The advent of plastics changed the world of product design, and acrylic signboards made inroads into the Indian market during the same period (Figure 7). Acrylic sheet started replacing tin sheet. Signboard makers also used brass and other soft metals to produce letter signboards. The back-illuminated box signboards were put up in the early '90s (Figure 8).

New Entrants, New Tools of Trade

The change in materials had repercussions for the designs and the "designers" as well. Carpenter, electrician, metalsmith, and vinyl cutter were the new professions that contributed to signboard development. As with any new technology, acrylic cutting also initially came at a premium price. This price difference allowed hand-painted signboards to continue to flourish, and they found new markets in small shops with low budgets while large and image-conscious shops moved on to embrace the new technology. Since cut acrylic and neon signboards did not offer any real threat to the hand-painted signboards, many painters decided not to shift to the new technology. However, the new professionals such as carpenters and acrylic cutters with new tools of trade eventually dislodged the painters as the dominating professionals in the signboard market, and brought some novelty, variety, and richness to the medium (Figures 9, 10).

Signs of Globalization

At the end of the twentieth century, the neo-liberal economic stance and the postmodern geographic order created an obsession for a new form of identity—a global identity. Free trade, foreign direct investment, capitalism, and Western culture imports have all been agents of globalization. Popular American game shows or their adaptations are on television; advertisements developed in one particular culture are aired globally, and brands such as Nescafe, Nike, McDonald's, and Marks and Spencer are widely seen. "Indeed, we are connected, interchanged, exchanged, and, most important, denationalized."[8]

With the "coca colonization" of the Indian market in the late-'80s, the signboard industry received its first "culture shock." The cola companies relied on aggressive marketing tactics requiring methods of quick production. Since India lacked any ability for quickly manufacturing large signboards, many technologies were imported including large silk-screen printing, vinyl cutters, and large-format digital printers. These industrial technologies were relevant in the advanced countries due to reduced on-site labor costs and consistency in corporate identities. In India, they resulted in the design action shifting to the indoor and often extraneous design studios.

Along with the new technologies, multinational corporations imported a set of design guidelines for their use, and concentrated them in the hands of a few. The late-'80s saw the first vinyl cutter introduced in the market by the cola companies to expedite and expand their advertising coverage. The churning out of signboards increased at an unprecedented rate.

To blame the import of technologies for the Western influence definitely is not fair, at least in the signboard industry. Though the impact of vinyl cutters on signboard-making was, by far, the most widespread and noticeable, in time, the vinyl cutters made inroads into some other industries including vehicle graphics, glass etching, sticker-making, and *"bindi"* (women's forehead dots) manufacturing. Here, unlike the multinationals' approach, the technologies were applied by the locals to produce vernacular designs. These examples illustrate how identity can be retrieved with local initiatives and the use of modern and sophisticated technologies. Such initiatives did not happen in the signboard field. Was it a lost opportunity?

Design Conflict

Despite an increase in manufactured signboards, design did not show much evolution or variation. The prime reasons for this were the design templates issued by advertising agencies and the corporate multinationals. A strict adherence to these templates was required to maintain a global uniformity and standard in accordance with the corporate identity. The templates mostly were adopted

8   Willard Uncapher, "Between Local and Global: Placing the Mediascape in the Transnational Cultural Flow" (www.ctheory.com, 1994).

from those used in the Western world. There also was an aggressive marketing drive by most multinationals into unreachable areas to ensure maximum visibility for their products.

The signboards are facing a conflict because the introduction and dominance of particular technologies, on the one hand, have introduced variety by opening new avenues to be explored but, on the other hand, have reduced variety by imposing sameness in the output. This sameness is not limited to signboards, parallels can be found in television advertising, where the concept of a celebrity selling a popular detergent brand has been "Indianized," but only superficially. Other advertisements, originally filmed for another nation/culture, have had regional languages dubbed in to make them suitable for Indian audiences.

The cola and cigarette companies developed an innovative way to lure the shop owners to support and publicize their global designs. They offered the shopkeepers a free signboard if they allowed the corporate advertisement alongside (Figure 11). This strategy allowed the red- and blue-colored cola signboards or similarly colored cigarette signboards to penetrate every corner of the country. Even the local *paanwalahs* displayed sponsored cigarette signboards on their shops. Even though the traditional signboards still are made when a unique identity is sought, they compete with corporate-donated, free signboards that are standardized and mass produced. What chance does the older system have? As David Stairs rightly pointed out about the economic state of developing nations, "Dependence upon older, communal modes of economic participation—homemade, hand-painted signage, for instance, or printing presses shared by several owners—is more a matter of day-to-day exigency than of a conscious resistance to the West's dominant and domineering metaphor."[9]

9   David Stairs, "Okuwangaaala: The Persistent Vitality of the Vernacular," *Design Issues* 8:2 (Summer 2002).

Impacts on Signboards and Professionals

The erosion of vernacular visual language from the signboard field probably is the most significant in recent times. The current state is the result of the disjointed shift from the traditional to the digital domains in design, relying on available fonts and symbols in a computer and over-bombardment of Western imagery. The mass production of signboards spelled doom for the skilled signboard painters, who relied on their talent to earn a living. There now were fewer jobs with ever-decreasing remuneration. The once growing business stood marginalized, and was patronized only by the informal sector[10] (Figure 12).

The painters who had worked for generations making signboards for shops, posters and billboards for cinemas and consumer goods industries, and occasionally painting number plates on vehicles or decorating trucks now faced extinction. People who can invest in the new tools of the trade such as computers, large-format printers, and vinyl cutters do a brisk business. Even those with less traditional skills and visual sense, but with the ability to handle modern tools, now dominate the market. The rest have been forced either to switch professions or cater to smaller shops. Many traditional signboard painters who had undergone an informal apprenticeship to learn artistic skills now have been replaced by the new "workforce": the digital machines.

It is interesting to note here that the hand-painted signboards, especially in the developed parts of the world, have acquired status though in India they symbolize inferiority and substandard produc-

10 The "informal sector" might be an unfamiliar term in the developed world, but it signifies a major section of the population in the developing world that contributes services and is comprised of self-trained skilled and often self-employed persons.

tion. An example is that of Balkrishn Arts headed by Mr. Vaidya who, ironically, now makes Bollywood film billboards for European markets since the demand has died in India, but abroad their billboards fetch a good price.[11] Since the craft of signboard hand-painting in India has been marginalized to a great extent, it probably will take a few years until it attains the status of a rare skill and returns with a newfound vigor. Then, perhaps, it will adorn not just small shops with low budgets, but will embellish the façades of big and popular showrooms, restaurants, and other shops.

From this comparison, an analogy can be drawn between the mobility of social status in a society to the mobility of status in business. The mobility of social and business status depended on the choice that the signboard makers made from the three options available to them: leave the profession, update their skills by either owning the latest technologies or maturing to designer-like roles, or explore new markets for their vernacular products.

Lessons in Resilience from the Signboard Makers

Cultures have moved closer, affected each other, and constantly are transforming. New global symbols have begun to exist along with the traditional symbols. Signboards, as case examples, have illustrated how the underlying cultural changes are affecting the streetscape at all possible levels. But as Capstone suggests, "It is also not, and that is often confused, the disappearance of certain cultural attributes that make a culture disappear or no longer exist. A culture is more than just the attributes that are displayed. It is a deeper, more profound system that makes the cultures distinct. Cultures converge, but they do not disappear, as yet."[12] They are converging towards one mono-culture, and this is difficult to digest.

Merely changing languages on signboards does not necessarily make them suitable to a region. The numerous multinationals also need to realize that creating superficial variations of a product based on regional preferences is not the perfect solution. The products need to be developed in collaboration with, or participation of, the consumers. Only then will they infuse completely with the lives of their users. The signboard makers, like many other traditional craftsmen with their close socio-cultural connections, demonstrate the example of a parallel-design community that interacts with their clients and their community in such depth that their products blend easily with the environment. Also, the influence of the new "mindset" often is not as severe on the signboard-makers as on the formally-trained designers. Culturally-rooted designs come naturally to the signboard makers, but the formally trained Helvetica-bred designers have to work hard to create culturally-sensitive designs. (Figures 13 and 14) Today, many signboard makers perform designer-like roles when they conceive the design, produce sketches, and then employ other professionals such as computer operators, sign-cutters, and electricians to execute their projects.

11 Ivor Vaz, *Billboard Blues*, Times Property, *The Times of India* (September 21, 2002).
12 Willard Uncapher, "Between Local and Global: Placing the Mediascape in the Transnational Cultural Flow" (www.ctheory.com, 1994).

Figures 13, 14, and 15 (page 92)
A few successful attempts at presenting
culturally-rooted designs with the new tools
of the trade in a modern, yet Indian, style.

The story of signboards and signboard makers reflects the
cultural transformations in India. Many other traditional crafts that
also have undergone similar transformations and marginalization
can now look upon the signboard painters as models. The success
story of a few signboard painters can be an inspiration for craftsmen
in other fields to initiate change. By either adopting new technologies
or by guiding the products from these technologies, the craftsmen
can contribute and also command social respect as neo-designers
of the new millennium. The ability to create culturally-entrenched
designs should now be upgraded using new tools and technolo-
gies. Christopher Jones, while describing the craft evolution in his
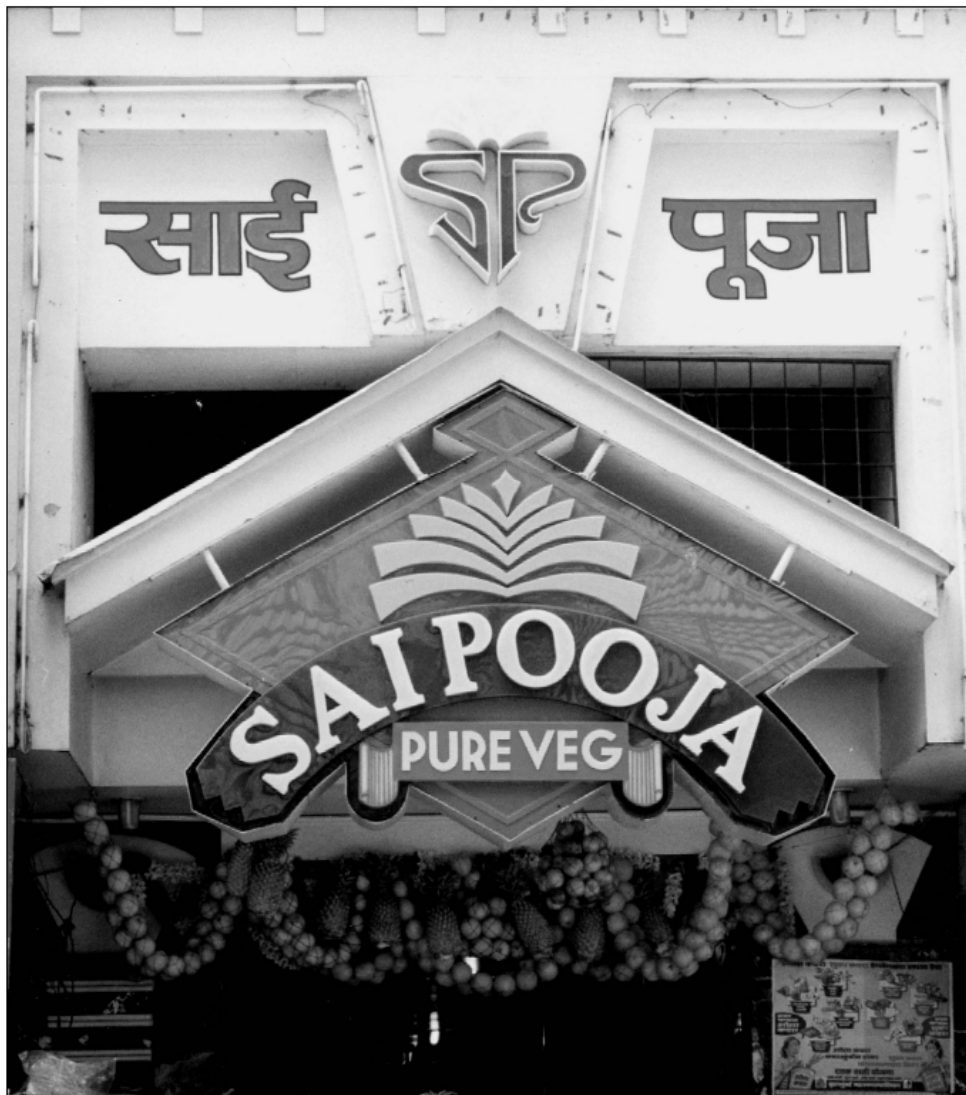
Figure 15

book, summarized the situation as: "We can see that the designers of the future can expect to find new fixed points of departure. Their job will be to give substance to new ideas, while taking away the physical and organizational foundations of old ones. In this situation, it is nonsense to think of designing as the satisfying of existing requirements. New needs grow and old needs decay in response to the changing pattern of facilities available. To design is no longer to increase the stability of the man-made world: it is to alter, for good or ill, things that determine the course of its development"[13] (Figure 15).

13 J. Christopher Jones, *Design Methods: Seeds of Human Futures* (London: Wiley-Interscience, John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1970).

14 Sudhakar Nadkarni, "Design at Crossroads in India: The Challenge Amidst Confusion" in *A Design Perspective, Selected Papers by Faculty of Industrial Design Centre* (Bombay: IDC Publication, 1997). Readers might also be interested in the work shown in Steve Rigley, "India, Retooling the Culture for an Empire of Signs *Eye* 13:52 (Summer 2004): 56–64.

Even the formally-trained designer, at such a crucial juncture, has to respond proactively to the situation. A definite form can emerge through concentrated efforts even in the current state of flux. The ability to understand culture and the transformations taking place in it will provide the designer with an advantage for the design process. The designer can bring variety and richness back to the current banal and clichéd environment with a strong vocabulary of visual icons, languages, and symbolism rooted in the culture.

Whether we like it or not, globalization and its impacts are here to stay. Change is inevitable, and the design community cannot simply lament the past. It is best to ride the waves of transition and steer to establish an Indian identity rather than fall prey to the global semblance. The words of Professor Sudhakar Nadkarni seem ideal to describe the current transformations and the designers' dilemma: "Nowhere is a sense of transition more painfully apparent as it is in India today. This transition, arriving on the crest of time and spearheaded by technology as anywhere else, marks for us several changes: old to new, rich to poor and poor to rich, rural to urban, rusticity to chicanery, and most of all … natural to artificial. While we welcome change as the harbinger of progress, we hold our own reservations about what this bridge to transition should be."[14]

Acknowledgment