

# Design in Search of Roots: An Indian Experience

## Uday Athavankar

This paper is a substantially updated version of the two recent papers (1) "The Challenges of the Desperate Extremes" presented in the plenary session of the ICSID 2001, Seoul, South Korea on October 8, 2001; and (2) Meeting the Challenges of Globalization: Some Pointers to Design in the Developing World," presented as the keynote address in the "Importance of Design in the Creation of an African Renaissance," conference in Durban, South Africa, on November 8, 2001.

This is a story of the struggle of a young design profession to establish itself and search for a meaningful role in the post-colonial era. The story is based in India, but similarities with other developing nations which once were colonies cannot be ruled out. The last three decades, from the seventies when the first industrial design graduates entered the field, to the nineties, is a long enough period to look back and reflect on these nascent years. As a teacher and a design consultant in India, these three decades gave me ample opportunities to witness the changing trends, and to share my optimistic, and sometimes pessimistic, reactions with my professional colleagues and students. Looking back, it appears that, in responding to the changing political thinking and policies in these decades, the young profession seems to be rediscovering itself continuously. In a way, I am narrating the story of this process of discovery.

Recent political events that have aggressively pushed the removal of the national trade barriers and globalization make these reflections even more timely. The economic as well as the socio-cultural effects of the globalization process on the developing world are too conspicuous to be missed. I plan to present this three-part story of the struggle using the relationship between cultural diversities and economic disparities as a background.

In the first section, I will present an overview of the events up to, and immediately after, independence and reflect on their impact on the emergence of asymmetry in the cultural diversities. I then will look at the exciting beginning of the design profession in the seventies and its search for roots during the first two decades. In the second section, I plan to focus on barrier-free trade and globalization and how these international events in the nineties have prompted Indian designers to develop their own business models to meet the new challenges.

In the concluding section, I will shift to the nagging question that designers in most traditional societies have to face. In pursuing the win-win economic scenario projected by the advocates of globalization, will the traditional culture sustain the onslaught of modernity? As a backdrop, the story uses the efforts of the design profession to find its roots in the conflicts between the two key issues. First, to promote rapid economic development to tackle the extreme economic disparities, and second, to minimize the effects of development on the cultural diversities. Fortunately, in India, much



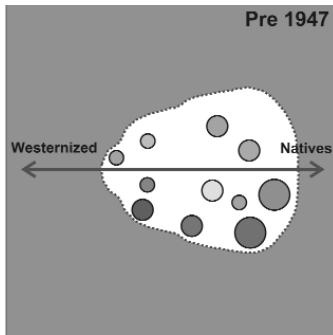


Figure 1

The colonial rule associated higher social status with the “progressive and superior (?)” colonial cultural practices, labeling the traditional practices as “native.”

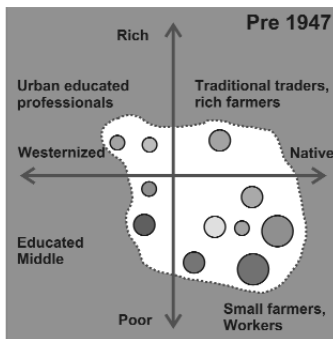


Figure 2

Superimposing the economic dimension gives an overview of divisions in society.

of the tradition and cultural practices remain visible even now, but I am not sure if we will be able to retain this rich cultural resource for long. As in the case of biodiversity, it would be sad if we would be required to create campaigns and organize missions to consciously sustain the remnants of cultural diversity.

The story ends with the lessons that this conflict has for the global design community. It is clear that, as the world globalizes further, responding to the multicultural and multi-ethnic diversities will be the important challenge most of the world design community will have to face in the new millennium.

### 1.0 Emergence of a Nation-State

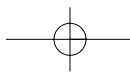
The conflict between the import of new products and technologies, and the consequent effects on the cultural diversities, had started long before globalization, at least in the nations which were colonies earlier. However, it did not become a topic of debate until the colonies got their voices back after independence. Because of the sheer pace and intensity with which the concept of barrier-free trade is being pushed now, this conflict has reached a critical level, but its roots are in the colonial era.

Colonial rule brought exposure to the Western world, education, ideas, thinking and more important to us, the products, the technologies and the ideas of industrialization. Colonial architecture, products, dress, costumes and advertising added to the already existing diverse cultural legacies left behind by the several empires that had ruled India earlier. Some of it was a direct transplant; others attempted synthesis with the local traditions.<sup>1</sup> The colonial rule also planted the notions of superiority associated with colonial ideas, objects, and cultural practices. People could aspire for a higher social status by adopting the British objects and following their cultural practice. It created an asymmetry, in which the “progressive and superior (?)” colonial practices served as a standard against which the “native” practices were compared. Figure 1 shows a diagrammatic view of the asymmetry prevailing in this scenario. Superimposing the economic dimension on the diagram provides an overview of the divisions in the society. (See figure 2)

Asymmetry was really the first challenge to the prevailing cultural traditions and diversities, until the freedom movement took root. The nationalistic ideology challenged the colonial import of products and technologies, as well as their cultural influences in the later period of colonial rule. Though we were not part of the freedom movement, most of my generation grew up coming to terms with the lingering conflict between the notions of “superior” Western products and cultural practices and the nationalistic ideology of self-reliance.

In a way, the freedom movement and the idea of nationhood also were an indirect challenge to the cultural diversities. Nationalism that supported a new dream of a nation-state had an implied

1 U. A. Athavankar, “Cultural Identity and Design: Challenges to Designers in Traditional Cultures,” *Formdiskurs, Journal of Design & Design Theory* 3:11 (1997): 68–81; and also U. A. Athavankar, “Objects and Cultural Notions” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Design Education in Developing Countries* (Pretoria, South Africa, March 25–27, 1997).



association with cultural uniformity and social unity. The idea of the nation-state was in conflict with the richness of diversity. Post-independence political authorities recognized this enormous diversity as a resource and made it a part of the idea of the nation based on “unity in diversity,” but the inherent conflict could not be swept under the carpet. The geo-cultural boundaries conflicted with the new political map of the nation. The size of the nation was too large and the cultural practices too diverse for the citizens to perceive it as a community to which they belonged. Should the existing plurality of cultural tradition be subordinated to the need for monolithic and homogeneous national culture? The question remained unanswered as newer issues such as economic development and raising of the standards of living dominated the post-independence policies and politics.

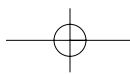
### 1.1 Design and Post-Independence India

Colonial rulers had set up industries and had started developing local manufacturing capabilities mainly to produce, sell, and export products under licenses from parent companies in their own country. With the focus on manufacturing, such issues as local design or technology development capabilities were not a high priority. These product and technology development capability gaps became glaringly visible after independence. Governmental policies favored the quick development of core industries and infrastructure, resulting in large government investments in importing technologies for core economic sectors including steel, mining, shipping, and water resources. The consumer products and durables were left to private industry to produce. Without an entrepreneurial history, private Indian companies chose to collaborate with foreign companies to continue to import products and technologies, and focused on production. The development of design capabilities remained low on their list of priorities.

In spite of the initial focus on infrastructure industries and development issues, the post-independence political vision of a modern India did have design on its agenda. It is significant that the then Prime Minister Javaharlal Nehru had invited Le Corbusier to design Chandigarh. Similarly, Charles and Ray Eames were invited to research and write the “India Report,” which led to the first steps in initiating design, particularly industrial design, in the early sixties. No developing nation could have conceived of a better beginning. Yet, looking back now, the current design landscape in India seems to be far removed from the vision that the early thinking projected.

### Nascent Design Profession and Introspective Seventies: 1970–80

In the seventies, with graduates coming out of the two design schools, design had just begun to make inroads into the Indian corporate world. Interestingly, India went through the political lead-



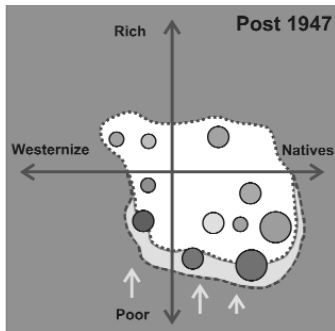


Figure 3  
NGOs focused their efforts on the poor, who were marginally affected by the government development projects.

ership that supported self-reliance in technology development, and severely curbed imports of technology while licensing for manufacturing continued. This was a positive sign for establishing design as a profession. But there was very little to show by way of home-grown technologies waiting to be converted into products, nor was there a cutthroat competition to drive industries to innovation. At the corporate level, the motivation to innovate and improve products by systematic design inputs took a back seat.

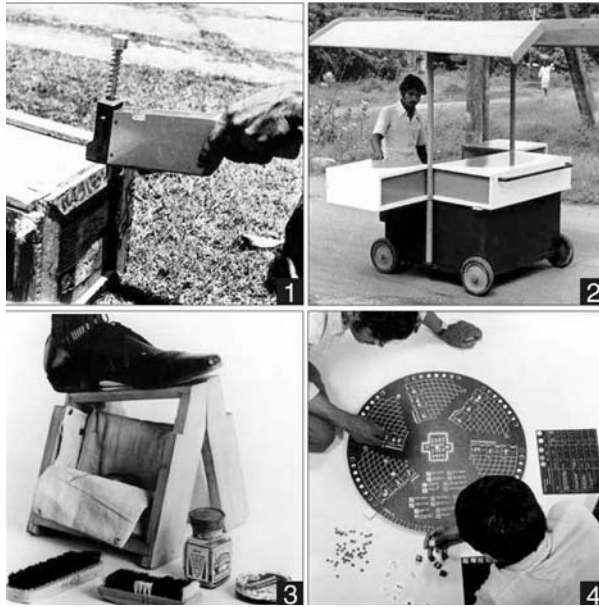
Designers obviously had to struggle to get a foothold in the not-so-receptive corporate world. As a result, most of us in design education collectively took responsibility for “marketing” the idea of design. It was unfortunate that early corporate designers had to struggle in a lukewarm, noncompetitive market economy. While the struggle to establish design in the corporate world continued, the design profession survived because it saw a meaningful role in the broader national vision.

It is important to note that the nascent years of industrial design education and the profession in India happen to coincide with a crisis in the ideas of economic development. What shook the design thinking and education was the debate then on development issues. This ongoing debate made us question the validity of Western orientation in the education and practice of design. The belief that development was both a desirable and an attainable objective was increasingly seen as an elusive phenomenon in the seventies. The large development projects, which were metaphorically referred as “Temples of Modern India” during the early development phase, now invited criticism leading to questioning the definition of development and its relationship to “social justice.” It was more than clear that the top-down government efforts only marginally affected the grass-root levels. The Western models of development came under severe criticism. The debate did affect the international design community, prompting its members to focus on the “real world” issues and appropriate technologies.

### 1.3 Design Inspired by the “Real World” Issues

The important challenge was to find the relevance of design to the lives of the vast majority of Indians, who had remained untouched by the technological developments. (See figure 3) They not only needed design help, but also would truly appreciate the difference that it could make in their lives. Such an opportunity excited designers in India, who were looking for a role in the national development scenario. Designers had to cross their normal professional boundaries as well as the barriers of social class and language to work at the grass-root level. “Barefoot designer” a term that came into common design parlance, referred to the noncommercial work culture and unusual work environment. Grass-root priorities were food, shelter, transportation, a reasonable access to elementary education and health services, and most important, a means of

Figure 4  
Design projects inspired by the "real world."



income generation. Design opportunities existed in creating simple products, domestic aids, educational aids, tools and production aids which were either very cheap or which they could produce themselves. People needed innovative tools, and gadgets that would add efficiency, and ensure quality and consistency in locally produced goods. Direct contact with the grass roots influenced the design thinking, priorities and the projects in the design schools. Figure 4 shows some representative student projects: a low-cost, hand-operated nailing machine for packaging (1); a hawkers cart made from waste packing wood (2); a shoeshine stand made from waste packing wood (3); and as educational board game designed by the author to teach farmers scientific agricultural practices.

Our own assignments during the seventies also reflected these concerns. Looking back now, it is not surprising that, without any implementation prospects, I was motivated to develop an educational game for farmers (see (4) in figure 4), to learn scientific agricultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Our thinking and actions were influenced as much by our direct exposure to the grass roots, as by Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful*<sup>3</sup> and Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World*<sup>4</sup>

As educators, we had started questioning the Western orientation in design education, and had started searching for a new identity in the context of the developing world. We saw this as an opportunity to develop a more country-specific design approach, and treated design as a tool for community development and social change. Designers who wanted to explore these potentials joined hands with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that had carved out a more effective access to the grass roots through their dedication. A project to develop new leather products and improve traditional tanning technology at Jawaja (a local village) by the

2 It is interesting to note that the educational game received international recognition in a competition in 1973. It reinforces the point made earlier about the then focus of the international communities on the development issue.

3 E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973).

4 V. Papanek V, (1971), *Design for the Real World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971).





Figures 5 and 6

Concerns for social change through design intervention dominated the projects.

Development of local capabilities through discussions was the key activity in the social agenda. (5) Actual designing of the leather bags (6) was seen as one of the intervention activity to achieve this larger goal.

Courtesy: National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad.



Figure 7

Design of electronic telephone for office use. These projects were part of the new technology development missions, funded by the government.

students and faculty of the National Institute of Design (NID), along with a business management institute, clearly reflects the designers' concern for social change through design intervention. (See figures 5 and 6)

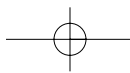
Globalization seems to have substantially altered the international concerns. We now are missing the motivation that also came from the debate on the development issues, nor have we, as a design community in India, been able to keep this thinking and vigor alive. These directions had the potential of helping designers discover a meaningful role and pioneering a new approach. Working at a grass-root level, it would have firmly established the humanist role of design, and demonstrated its effectiveness and relevance to a developing economy. Besides, the products would have remained close to the local cultural practices and thrived on the diversities. Some of these efforts still continue in a small way, but the enthusiasm seems to have waned.

#### 1.4 The Emergence of New Design Opportunities: 1980-90

Surprisingly, the seventies ended on a positive note for the design profession, as this decade telescoped into the eighties. Realizing the possibility of being denied the new technologies, the new political leadership in India supported some extraordinary technology development projects. It was a politically-backed effort to catch up with the technologically advanced countries in areas like telephone exchanges, supercomputers and fighter aircraft. Some of the home-grown technologies required products to be built from scratch. We were called in to join a team developing new electronic telephones. (See figure 7) It was an exciting experience to be part of the new vision that aspired to develop products and technologies, while keeping international standards and competition in mind.

This positive political climate induced private sector industries to develop new products. The role of design and designers now was beginning to be recognized in the corporate sector. Western design norms and standards of aesthetics became the benchmarks. Perhaps, it was the inevitable fallout of the aspiration to follow global trends. Much of the professional design contributions came during the later half of this decade. The positive energy influenced the design education programs, with graduating students looking forward to taking on creative professional challenges.

Responding to the political thinking in the eighties, the design focus shifted from the grass roots to the high-tech. From the idealism of the seventies, the design education programs in India partly moved toward creating professionals who could effectively contribute to the corporate design world. Projects in the eighties brought home the fact that, for the development of a nascent profession, the government's favorable policy framework is as essential as a positive atmosphere and the feeling of being part of a bigger



vision. But were the policies able to retain this positive environment in the nineties?

With globalization and free trade in the nineties, the short-lived positive energy of the eighties seemed like a dream. In the part that follows, I plan to turn to the main issue, i.e., the way globalization has affected and continues to affect the design profession, in turn forcing it to rediscover itself.

## 2.0 Globalization and the Bittersweet Nineties

The integration of the national economy with the global economy often has been projected as a win-win situation, with the promise of prosperity in the long run. However, its short-term fallout is a bitter-sweet experience for the Indian economy. At this point in time, developing nation such as India must face globalization as a reality that cannot be wished away.

### 2.1 The Sweeter Side of Globalization

I plan to start the discussion with the sweeter side of the experience first. In India, globalization has opened up professionally lucrative opportunities in software development and virtual cyberspace products. Newer sectors like these have showed enormous potentials for growth and economic prosperity. As a result, globalization often is projected as an antidote to the ailing economy. (See figure 8)

With national boundaries losing their importance, it was a bonanza for the Indian consumers. An abundance of foreign cars, two-wheelers, white goods, and access to international brands ensured many choices for consumers, at least for those who could afford them. Indian products looked ridiculously outdated and technologically obsolete when consumers compared them with their global counterparts. Consumers in India were now more than ever convinced that global competition has benefited them, except that the competition in the Indian market now was between foreign brands or between products of foreign origin.

The new technologies that these products brought in made the consumer aware of design issues such as no-nonsense efficiency, quality, and reliability. So overpowering was this experience, that it often overshadowed normal buying logic. Most consumers were buying appliances including microwaves and refrigerators, which have little to do with local foods or cooking and storing practices. There were new office building in the middle of the tropics with full glass walls! It appears incongruous that, Indians, with their typical value-for-money attitude, were willing to sacrifice part of the functionality.

### 2.2 The Bitter Side: The Sellout

The dreams of prosperity also were coupled with the bitter side, i.e., the unhappy experience for Indian companies involved in the manufacture of conventional engineering goods and consumer

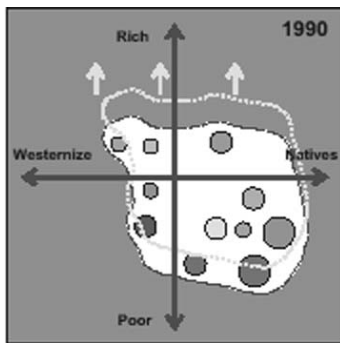
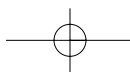
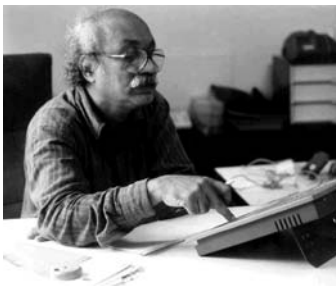


Figure 8  
Globalization was perceived as a win-win solution to achieve rapid economic development.





Figures 9 and 10

Projects such as Gamma Chamber, a research instrument used to give measured radioactive dosages to laboratory samples. These types of products had to be developed locally because no foreign tie-ups were possible in these technology areas.

durables. Grown in the economic patterns prevailing in the protectionist and not very competitive business environment of the seventies, a number of Indian companies suddenly had to face the onslaught of technologically advanced imported goods. It was hoped that competition with global products would be an incentive to the local companies to improve their products, but very few companies could actually match the international design or technology standards.<sup>5</sup> Success stories were too few and far between. It is interesting to note that, with so much competition in the market to drive design and innovation, there was very little by way of local design available. The short-term fallout obviously was disastrous for local design initiatives.

There were other reasons for the depressed market for local design services. Most of the developing world had a very poor record of development, as well as the conversion of homegrown technologies into new product ideas. Besides, consumers in India had gradually started showing a preference for products with technological superiority than excellence in industrial design. To add to this, the local market lacked the numbers needed to make substantial investments in new product development and updates attractive. With so many odds against them, the Indian companies were reluctant to invest time, money, and effort in the risky business of new product innovation.

These developments dampened the technology development aspirations of the eighties and severely restricted the local design initiatives. Many companies chose to import the technologies and also designs from technologically advanced countries for licensed production, and focused more on marketing issues. The short-term fallout was disastrous for Indian designers, forcing them to develop survival strategies by repositioning their services in the new context. These strategies are pointers to the way the design profession in India may shape in the future.

### 2.3 Survival Strategies

With the changed scenario, in hardcore product areas, the market for "classical" product design assignments shrank in size. The focus now shifted to product design needs that were too localized for a foreign company to respond to cost-effectively or to the redesign of the earlier imported products. Similarly, Indian companies had to rely on local design initiatives where the tie-ups with foreign companies were not practical for other reasons. I was, myself, involved in two assignments that used radioactive sources for testing, where technology could not have been imported. (See figure 9 and 10) In many ways, these projects were similar to those of the eighties, and required teaming up with technologists to develop ideas from scratch, except that the positive energy that drove design in the eighties was missing.

5 A. Jha, *Background to Globalization* (Bombay: Centre for Education and Documentation, 2000).





Figure 11  
Because of their visibility on the roads, custom designed and built cars has popularized the idea of design.  
Courtesy: DC Designs.



Figure 12  
Hospital beds, designed and manufactured as custom-built furniture, with the doctors' participation in the development process.

### 2.3.1 Lateral Expansions of Design Services

Faced with this challenging situation, design firms expanded the scope of their design services to tap the growing merchandising market. This included lateral expansion to embrace designing retailing products, exhibitions, and Web-based services. With a number of companies focusing on production and marketing, this was a logical shift. It paid handsome dividends, with much of the design services income coming from these new areas.

In the last few years, some of the new design services have assumed a more contemporary form. With depressed local economic prospects, design firms have even started prospecting for work from outside. They are networking with international teams by giving part or full design services to clients from other countries. Limited design services start with creating virtual models based on rough sketches provided by the designers in other countries, to detailing for production. Larger design firms have started offering a full design service to companies abroad. The success of this business model is as much based on the availability of a large talent pool and skill sets in design as on the low manpower cost of the computer literates. Access to modern tools such as computers and networking further supported this model. For effective online interaction with their client's abroad, some design firms are taking advantage of the local software design capabilities to develop special "industrial-design-centric" communication modules. It is nice to witness some of the recent computer savvy design graduates excitedly latching on to the new opportunities to integrate themselves with the emerging "corporate global village." If these are indicators of what is likely to come in the near future, educators will have to prepare design students to speak the language of global design and to interact with their counterparts in the global village.

### 2.3.2 Design-Based Entrepreneurship

The second strategy was to initiate entrepreneurship largely based on design expertise. Constrained by low-profile design activity that does not give adequate opportunity to their passion and creative instincts, some designers have experimented with design plus limited manufacturing, as well as the marketing of the custom built products. The scope of their work ranges from signage, outdoor furniture, and hospital furniture to custom designed cars. (See figures 11 and 12) Such enterprises obviously tend to be product centered, with a designer choosing a product line that he continues to develop, produce, and market.

These designer+entrepreneurs have constantly used their creative design expertise to remain competitive and to develop a special design-intensive niche in their chosen product area. They have not only evolved a new business model, but also have made their products locally visible, thus creating public awareness of design. Strange as it may sound, **this business model has maxi-**

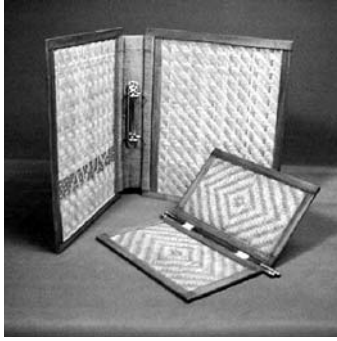


Figure 13  
Office files and memo pads using bamboo frame and bamboo weave infill, designed by Prof. A. G. Rao and Avinash Shinde. Other industrially produced components are mixed freely with the craft techniques. The jigs and fixtures ensured quality and consistency. Courtesy: Bamboo lab, Industrial Design Centre.



Figure 14  
Leather pouches for periodicals. With some design help, crafts can cater to typical urban requirements. Courtesy: Rashmi Ranade.

**mum potential for survival as well as of establishing design as a profession in the developing world.** Considering its ultimate effectiveness, I am convinced that such an idea should be viewed as a viable alternative by the developing world.

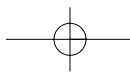
### 2.3.3 Back to the “Real-World” Issues

The third strategy was to shift the focus on real-world challenges. Fortunately, the network of grass root NGOs, had grown over the years, and it was possible for the designers to join hands with them. With NGOs now operating with greater professionalism, the returns on the design services offered were not bad, either. The “barefoot designer,” the pet idea of the seventies, could now cover his feet with decent footwear!

Lessons learned in the seventies gave the new design projects operated through NGOs a greater clarity and focus. Realizing the local priority for income generation schemes, the earlier emphasis on “products for the poor” now shifted to using the existing local craft skills to develop products for urban and export markets. Traditional craft products, made for local consumption, have not been able to face competition from cheap, factory-made products. Designers, with their understanding of the urban and export markets, have been able to get the craftsmen to move away from the economic constraints of the local markets. These designers have been exploring the use of modern design principles and techniques to develop new value-added craft products, primarily based on local skills. (See figures 13 and 14) It is worth noting that such projects not only have a very high socioeconomic significance, but also are becoming an economically viable option for the designers to focus on.

In a way, the widely differing survival strategies reflect the desperate differences in the cultural and economic scenarios. The first strategy required the designers to match their talents and skill sets with their international counterparts and become team players in the “global village.” The third strategy is in total contrast to the first, and required that we radically redefine goals as well as the scope of the design activity to focus on the issues in the “real villages” of India. These two strategies not only differ in the way the design projects are handled, the markets that they address, and the knowledge base that they demand, but also in the skill sets and the design tools they use. The second strategy, an emerging business model of creating a design-based entrepreneurship, potentially can deal with both the extremes. Though it is difficult to judge its efficacy with limited data, the model shows new promise and a direction that has an intuitive appeal.

Looking back, each of the three decades seems to have given a new direction to design thinking. Creative responses to the rapidly changing political policy frameworks and economic contexts have allowed the profession to rediscover new potentials. In the next



section, I plan to discuss the effects of the fast-track globalization process on destroying the local ways of life, cultural practices, and imposing uniformity. I also will show the way designers have responded to these developments.

### 3.0 Development or Cultural Continuity?

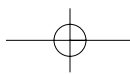
Globalization and free trade had effects that were more far reaching than those listed in the previous section. It talked of a borderless global economy but, in reality, the borders were treated as insignificant only for the purpose of trade and commerce. Its obsessive focus on markets, economic growth, and GNP had obvious effects on the way “Design” was viewed. Design was not seen anymore as a tool for development, but more as a tool in the hands of business.

#### 3.1 Local Cultures as Casualties

Most discussions on globalization focus on the economic issues, with the result that its effect on the noneconomic activities, including culture, often are left out. In India, globalization and free trade allowed people to get access to new technologies and products, but the way the products were (and are) promoted, invariably planted seeds of alien lifestyles. Though the process started in the nineties, in its full force, it is only now beginning to be evident. It is likely that its effects on traditional cultures and diversities, eventually will be far more severe than what is visible now.

It is not just the products that cross the border, but the mindset and the new values that their promotions create, that have devastating effects. **Along with these products, it often is the whole “culture” associated with the image of the product that is downloaded. It is the aggressive projection of images and values which more often conflict with local notions and imagery.** With aggressive promotions and marketing, the global companies have been projecting a profile of a “Global modern man” (read as a typical executive from a technologically advanced country) as an approachable and a desirable dream. **Should a culture with so much diversity look forward to a single role model and a dream born and nurtured in another culture?** These aggressive promotions explain why most colonies have become more Westernized after independence, and that by their own choice! Should globalization and the economic prosperity always automatically lead to Westernization?

For global companies, linking “modernity” with “Western lifestyle” always has made commercial and marketing sense. By associating the role models and images from the advanced countries with the idea of upward social mobility, they have successfully managed to manipulate the preferences of the trend-setting class. Modernity implies cutting the umbilical cord to the tradition that existed before. The concept also always had undertones of blind uniformity, homogenization, and conflicts with the idea of diversity.



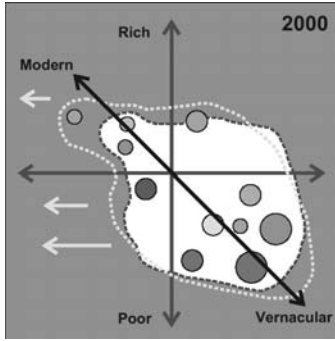


Figure 15  
Conflict between the “modern” and “vernacular” is accentuated by the bipolarity in the society.

Unfortunately in India, it also is equated with products, images and aesthetic norms that did not evolve in local cultures.

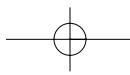
In a way, associating the ideas of upward social mobility with Western culture relegated the prevailing traditional notions, perceptions, and imagery associated with local cultures to a lower status. It has succeeded in repositioning the products of traditional culture as “vernacular,” with not very good connotations. Traditional cultures have learned to see a bipolar situation of Western culture as “modern” (or contemporary) juxtaposed with the local tradition as “vernacular.” It is almost a recast of the colonial “Western/native” value scale associated with cultural diversity.

Perhaps this reaction is typical of my generation, which has experienced the conflict between the notions of superior Western culture and the nationalistic ideology of self-reliance. More recent generations may not react to this with the same intensity, but the fact remains that there is a perceivable loss of pride in the creations of the local cultures. There are plenty of examples of Western ideas gradually replacing the existing cultural stereotypes. Western dress, ornaments, and food habits are just a few of them. A Gregorian calendar has replaced the traditional Indian calendar that reflected the local seasons and regional festivals. Worst casualties are the local languages, with new generations learning their own mother tongue as a second language!

### 3.2 Bipolarity: Global Village vs. Real Village

The economic as well as the socio-cultural effects of the globalization process on Indian society are too conspicuous to be missed. It is possible to view the social landscape as a stretched rubber band. Figure 15 shows the bipolar extremities on the diagonal stretch, with the top-left occupied by “trendsetters,” a small but prosperous and influential social class. They are more or less committed to the Western ways of thinking, values, imagery, and also the way of conducting business. They are professionally and psychologically in sync with the “global village,” speak English, dress in Western outfits, surround themselves with high-tech products, visit pubs, and also prefer to listen to Pink Floyd, Sting, and Brian Adams.

The people who belong to the “real village,” occupy the other extreme end of the bipolar scale. At this point in time, they only have limited or no access to new technologies and products, and have no place in the scheme of globalization. This is the vast, often not educated, vernacular class that remains rooted in tradition and is excluded from the revolution and prosperity promised by globalization. Yet they have learned to share these dreams and aspirations, hoping that they would be able to afford the new lifestyle someday. The contrast in the design services that we discussed at the end of the previous section can be understood better if seen in the context of the bipolar nature of the society in India.



### 3.3 Political Fallout of the Stretched Bipolarity

The conflict created by the stretched extremities has had political fallout. Relegated to the label of vernacular, the culturally rooted locals have been aggressively reacting to certain modernist legacies of Western mass culture. They view these legacies as a threat to the traditions and values that they have cherished for generations. They want technological, but not cultural, modernity; and economic prosperity through a free market, but not the commodity culture.

There are two visible reactions to this conflict. The first, and often politically motivated reaction is intolerance to the extremities of cultural pluralism. This reaction manifests itself in the form of moral police, who have been successful in creating an organized resistance to symbols of Western culture and modernity, such as fashion TV, music TV, and McDonalds outlets. A second reaction involves political balancing by marrying the cultural imperatives of modernity with the need to assert one's cultural identity. This has led to synthetic search for inventing cultural markers that reflect modernity as much as native identity. It is almost like synthetically fashioning and showcasing a new identity. Yet it has become politically expedient to focus on expressions of regional and national identity through visible cultural markers. They are manifested in dresses that people wear, the objects that they surround themselves with, and the interiors that they live in. Even though the cultural markers may be superficial, they serve to distinguish the owner from others by visually communicating the differences.

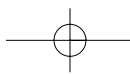
What does the superficiality of these efforts indicate? In fact, it can be viewed as a failure of contemporary designers in pioneering new expressions of modernity that are rooted in local cultures. Can the designer, through his work, reverse the value scale and recreate the pride in the local expressions of modernity?

#### Design Challenge

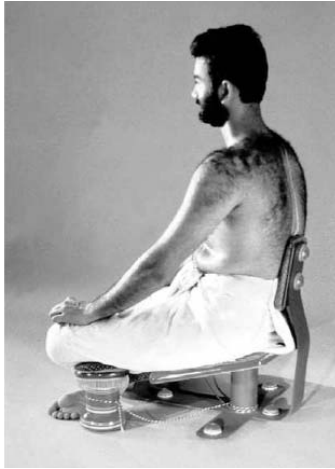
The real challenge is to evolve an approach that is not only sensitive to local functional needs, but also to the shared cultural notions and imagery. If we agree that products speak their language through form, then we must allow them to speak in their own mother tongue, and also permit local dialects to be established.<sup>6</sup> We must first accept modernity as a plural concept that changes from culture to culture. Only then can we evolve expressions of modernity and its local dialects that would make the current as well as the future generations feel a sense of belongingness and pride in local objects.

In India, small groups of independent designers are becoming conscious of their cultural roots, and are experimenting by developing a new language in architecture, furniture, product, and fashion design. They are attempting to assimilate functional and visual clues from the design practices prevalent in the local cultures. Their work is contemporary and yet makes references to the past. I have attempted to reflect these concerns in some of my own

6 K. K. Ashraf, "Land, Water and Man in Bangal: Themes from the Deltaic Architecture" in *Contemporary Architecture and City Form*, Farrok Ameen, ed., (India: Marg Publications, 1997), 25-39.







Figures 16 and 17

Design of this chair borrowed the inclined seat-principle to support the traditional Indian squatting posture. It borrows identity clues from other precedents, such as regional furniture.

projects. The chair project I was involved in, supports the body in the traditional squatting posture, and borrows other precedents from the regional furniture as identity clues. (See figures 16 and 17)

There is a need to rediscover the roots in the traditions and try to evolve new expressions of modernity rooted in the local cultural context. The task is difficult, but not impossible. These remarks by Mahatma Gandhi, best sums up such an approach:

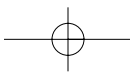
I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides, and my windows to be closed. Instead, I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

Such an approach was difficult to implement during the modernist era of technological orientation and minimalism. Fortunately, post-modernism has given the designers enormous freedom of expression. Cultural continuity is not new to post-modernism. This is an ideal opportunity for designers in India and those in other developing countries to pioneer local versions of post-modernism.

I am aware of the fact that, at the moment, it may be difficult to propose this as a general approach. The freedom to explore roots in tradition often is not available to designers working within the corporate framework. They are fighting a losing battle with the much-hyped Western notions of modernity which these companies continuously bombard us through the media. People are facing double bombardment, from products as well as from advertisements, that is designed to directly change their notions and mindset. However, it is still worth continuing the battle. My guess is that the corporate mindset, currently sold on Western notions and ideals, will change. It may not be out of awareness, but by realizing that differences based on place-identity would give their products a competitive edge in the global market.

### 3.4 New Millennium Agenda for Design Community

The story of the struggle does not end here, but begins afresh with the new millennium. The ever-increasing diversities in the stretched bipolar landscape obviously will be reflected in the kind of projects that Indian designers will be expected to handle. Should not this mind-boggling variety then be reflected in the education of those designers? We have to inject new thinking and develop new skill sets in design education to create a breed of extremely versatile design professionals, who can work on grass roots as well as on cyberspace projects. It is a challenge to function in the "global" as well as the "real village" with equal ease. Besides the competence to handle corporate projects, they have to explore the role of design in tackling the "real world" issues, and learn to view design as a tool for development. They have the responsibility for reestablishing the humanist role of design and demonstrating its value in the devel-



oping economy. The extremities in the Indian landscape will offer the design profession varieties of new challenges to continuously rediscover its roots and to make meaningful contributions. It can look forward to adulthood with an identity of its own. Will the powerful pro-globalization forces encourage the process of rediscovery? Only the future will tell.

Interestingly, the cultural diversity issues are not restricted to the developing world, nor are they confined to the traditional cultures anymore. There are several modern nations that have multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, and are proud of it. The new generation of designers must be sensitized to respect diversity and to view it as a source of innovation rather than a problem. If we want to retain this cultural resource, global designers, too, will have to develop a respect for these diversities and address them in their design approach. To the international design community, this is major challenge offered by the new millennium.

#### **Additional Reference**

U. A. Athavankar, "Globalization and the Roots in the Culture," *Architecture + Design* XIII: 6 (Nov-Dec, 1996): 98-99.

