

Flying a Kite: NID Report from an American Visitor

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On my first trip to the National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad, India in 1994, I stayed only a few days to give two lectures: one that explained and illustrated the work of a signage project completed by students in my class in New Zealand, and another that explored some notions of authorship in design and the value of theory in design education. Despite the differences in these topics, the lectures were well-attended by students across the design disciplines taught at the school. The students and faculty were interested and eager to hear from the design community outside of their own country. Each of the lectures was followed by a lively discussion that involved both the teachers and students. This general design awareness and enthusiasm permeated the school despite its limited resources.

The following year, I approached the school with a proposal to teach one of the block courses they offered between semesters. These courses were interdisciplinary and open to students of any level, offering me an exceptional opportunity to work across levels and disciplines. I proposed several possible courses to the school. After assessing their needs and my interests, we decided upon the title, "Promoting India to the West." This was to be a graphic design course that helped students to discover and apply Indian aesthetics/design traditions appropriate to Western tastes. The concept was to increase student awareness of the value of their unique art and design heritage, and to foster pride in their differences rather than simply to imitate Western trends and styles in design.

I had forgotten the rubble, decay, mud, dust, filth.

The shops are amazing little networks with actually little to sell in most cases.

No sense of maintenance.

*One shopkeeper washes the walk, while another has animals
and refuse scattered all around.*

The course attracted twelve students, many from graphic design, some from animation, and a few from industrial design. They came from widely diverse geographical areas of India that ranged from the Tibetan border in the north to Kerala in the south and Bengal in the east. Therefore, the languages, religions, values, politics, and cultures represented were diverse.

These students came predominantly from the elite of Indian society. Given the sheer size of the population of the country and the scarcity of design education, they had to have talent, skills, and finances that permitted them this educational opportunity. Two of the students in the class came from tribal groups within the country, and were there on special government scholarships, while a few of the others came from middle-class families who had made financial sacrifices for their children's education. The class was a mixture of men and women, and that added yet another layer of diversity and intention. Surprisingly, a few of the women admitted that they would not be practicing design upon graduation, but were awaiting the arrangement of their marriages by their families. They felt that their families would want what was best for them, so they trusted this tradition. They did not feel that the Western system had been very successful in its methods of finding husbands.

The students were quite knowledgeable about the West. They spoke English very well—even frequently using American slang—dressed in designer T-shirts, keenly imitated Western lifestyles, and adopted many Western values. They told me that, at home, their parents tended to be more traditional, with their mothers wearing saris and remaining at home to cook and raise children. One showed me photos of his house with its Western-style furniture, while another lived in a nearby village with traditional furnishings, food, and music.

The content of the course allowed me to learn a great deal about them personally as they began to explore the identity of India. Because of their diverse backgrounds and unique perspectives, their topics, visuals, and explorations also varied. This led to many intriguing discussions in which they very openly talked about their families and home lives with great pride and affection.

*As I crossed the bridge,
I saw great baskets of flower petals (used for religious purposes)
separated by color:
great heaps of crimson, saffron, and white.*

Ahmedabad is an industrial city in northwest India. It is known for its cotton mills, calico, and block printing. Life moves through the streets day and night. The streets of Ahmedabad, like the streets in most of India, resound with a cacophony of sounds and images that reflect the mixture of past and present. One has to watch every step to avoid potholes and "cow pies" while navigating past donkeys, trucks, cows, carts, cars, bikes, taxis, scooters, and motorcycles. Along the dusty shoulders, with many currents of beasts and humanity, men are winding and dusting string with a pink powder. The whole process seemed quite mysterious to me: what were they doing and why were they doing it in the heat and noise and dust? And these men (always men) remain working at their monotonous task at all hours.

In many of the towns and cities throughout northern India, large numbers of kites float effortlessly in the sky even without a breeze. They seem to float up into the atmosphere and stay there of their own accord. These kites, small triangles of light paper on wooden frames, are held by children of all ages.

It all seemed quite charming, an inexpensive toy that even the poorest child could make and maintain. But then I learned that flying kites in India is not just a pastime for children, nor is it a gentle hobby. It is a highly competitive sport. Those men on the roadsides with the pink powder were coating kite strings with a powdered glass/fiberglass mixture so that the strings would cut the kite strings of others during competitions. The men spent months preparing for *Uttarayan*, the yearly kite festival of color and fun held in Ahmedabad, where it attracts enthusiasts from around the world.

This rather aggressive tactic realized by a seemingly irrelevant roadside activity harbored the contradiction that I was to find throughout my experiences in India and particularly at the NID. The pink powder that looked soft and feminine really was intended as a weapon of sorts. The general ambience of acceptance and tolerance that permeates Indian life sometimes masks very rigid traditions and beliefs. This can be seen at the NID which now serves as the Indian design education standard. India is a society moving from the mechanical to the technical, with an incipient understanding of the role of the design within this transition. It is a country that longs to compete in the Western world, while also working to improve the standard of living of millions of its citizens.

*Modern buildings in need of repair. Dusty despite relentless sweeping.
A sense of inside/outside harmony though studios are dark.
Trying to maintain a foreign aesthetic must be nearly impossible; air-conditioning is worthless,
screens sporadic, and bamboo shades too short.
All just a little bit off.*

The campus, surrounded by fences and barbed wire, floats like an island within the city of Ahmedabad. The buildings are predominantly brick and concrete, designed in a modernist vocabulary. Most buildings have balconies, open roofs, and terraces that give access to outdoor spaces and provide shade. Each morning and afternoon, the faculty gathered for tea or coffee in the courtyard that overlooked a lawn with large, shade trees and vine-covered sculptures. The entire campus was cool and green as opposed to the dust and heat and noise that hovered outside the gates. It is separated from the real India like the curriculum that comes fully developed from the West with little regard for the needs, strengths, and traditions of the country's cultures. (Note: The school was beginning to realize this deficit and currently requires students of all design disciplines to engage local and regional needs. Students are working with communities to record and learn indigenous crafts such as bamboo

structures, traditional weaving, and textiles; as well as to develop appropriate, inexpensive, locally produced products; and to assist in visual communication about relevant issues.)

The fence is not a means of keeping the students and staff inside, but a precaution for keeping the general population outside. The street, just outside the rear gate, opens onto a residential area of the city with large, well-to-do houses, also protected by walls. Along the walls of the school and side of the streets lived a group of people in makeshift shacks. Here were people who lived and slept and cooked and washed with no amenities right in the shadow of their grander neighbors. The students, staff, faculty, and visitors, because of the constant passing, had developed a rather affectionate relationship with these families.

Men show great affection to their children.

Overall kindness to everyone and a rather gentleness of nature.

In addition to class time, the students spent time with me socially which allowed me to know and understand them and their culture more thoroughly. One Friday night, they wanted to take me out with them. I didn't quite know what to expect, since alcohol is not permitted in Gujarat and I had not seen any nightlife. Their weekly ritual was to go to a nearby roadside vendor for coconut juice. They included me this week. We walked a short distance from the school to a stand where we each selected a coconut that then was handed to a man with a machete. He chopped off the top and handed us straws. We took our coconuts to the small stumps of wood along the road to sit and talk and drink the coconut milk. This was the end of the school week.

In contrast, though the other members of the faculty were hospitable to me, they were formal and reserved—a bit of the East and the West. I was never asked to socialize in any way, except to participate in an obligatory meal as a visiting teacher.

Late this evening, the students took me to Chills and Thrills and Frills for ice cream and lattés.

Often students would join me at meal times in the school dining hall. For me, the Indian food served was wonderful: always a curry of vegetables, rice, freshly baked chapati, yogurt, and frequently a sweet. On each table, communal pitchers of water were passed around and drunk by pouring the water directly into the mouth without touching the rim. Most of the food was eaten with the hands. Large sinks along the entrance/exit wall permitted diners to wash before and after each meal.

The Indian students, like students everywhere, disliked the food and wanted me to experience good Indian food. Therefore, they took me to a few nice restaurants in various parts of the city so that I had a sampling of what they considered authentic cuisine. As usual

in teaching, it is often these interactions which are at least as important, if not more important, than the classwork. These were times of sharing and harmony, while the classroom had a competitive edge; a tension that became part of the atmosphere. Some of this may have been due to the differences in ages and levels within the group, or the differences in disciplines or the differences in backgrounds and gender.

Too many students are using handwriting!

The class was held all day, everyday, for two weeks. This worked well for those students who had strong concepts and commitment, but also meant that some students began to drift away once they had the initial idea and were unwilling to spend additional time in development and refinement. They were used to more structured and repetitive learning, so self-initiated, independent work was difficult to undertake.

I began the course with a short, slide-illustrated lecture which illustrated work from countries around the world such as the U.S., Britain, Japan, and New Zealand; to look for and identify aspects of the design that might suggest particular visual languages which we recognize as local, national, or regional visual identities. Since most of the publications used in design schools come from the U.S. or Europe, we looked at a few of these to see what were the characteristics that so often are envied, adopted, or imitated by designers in developing countries.

This led to looking at India itself, its size and its diversity, to see what might be considered fundamentally "Indian." I assigned some readings to the students. A particularly helpful one for them by Claude Levi-Strauss explained how a pair of jeans represented core beliefs—freedom, hard work, young life style—of the American system despite the variety of its peoples and differences in many another aspects of their lives. Through this, they then began to develop a list of values and beliefs that were "Indian," such as tolerance, strength of family, tradition, etc.

I asked the students to bring to class one item that meant India for them. I did not place any limitations on what they could bring. They came to class with a range of items that we discussed, shared, and critiqued. They began to see what was meaningful to them, and what it represented in their lives, especially since all of them now were living away from home. The items ranged from a jar of homemade pickled fish to a plant, to coconut oil for hair to a home remedy, to ankle bells. The students explained why they had brought these items to class and what each represented to them. Although we found nothing that was universally Indian, there was something in these objects that held Indian characteristics.

In parallel with this part of the course, we looked at Indian design and Western design, and compared them. Typography was

a large issue since there are fifteen or more Indian languages with separate scripts. The relationship of these scripts to the available Latin fonts led to working with some expressive typographic exercises.

Most worked by hand, without even considering using a computer. A few who worked on logos or typography did use the computer lab. They kept this to a minimum, since they had to pay for each printout. Their hand skills were well-developed. They had a freedom and grace in their drawings and sketches, using a minimum of tools including a remarkable booklet of colored papers that, when wet with a brush, made watercolors. Many had developed good printing and calligraphy skills as well. So with ink, watercolors, and a selection of handmade papers, they executed most of their designs by hand unless the computer was absolutely needed. This approach gave their work a very tactile, personal result that was in keeping with their intentions, since each had worked toward developing a way to express his/her own voice of India.

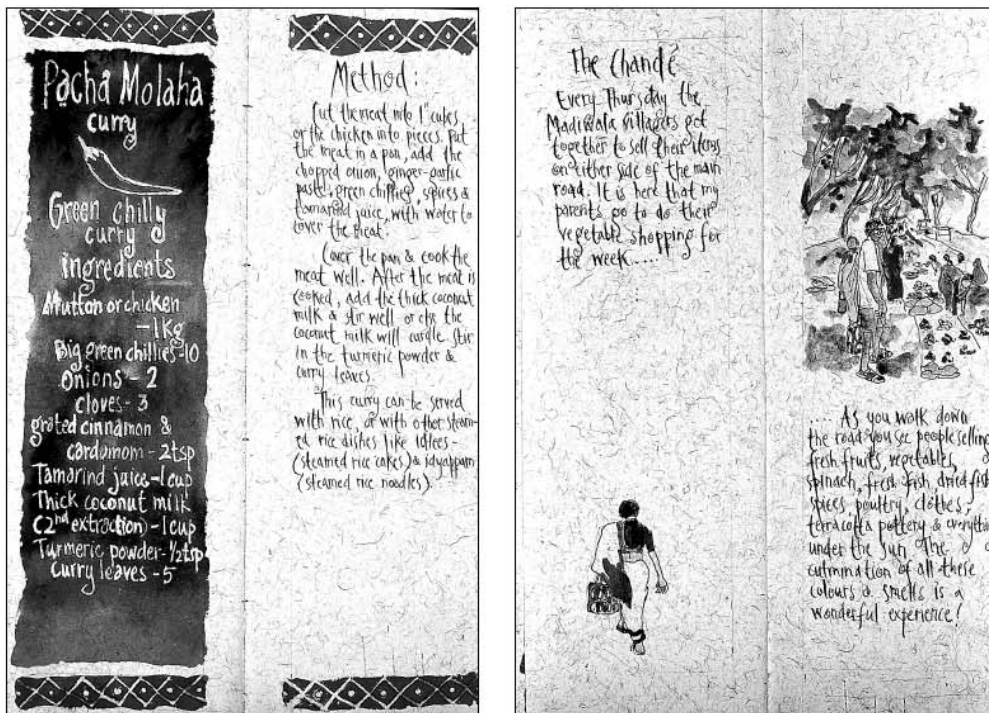
Each student then expanded upon the meaning of their object as well as the formal characteristics, the historical development, and a possible application that would be appropriate to a Western audience. For instance, the jar of pickled fish evolved into an Indian cookbook/storybook. The student used his father's recipe for pickled fish, and then told about how the fishmonger rode through the neighborhood selling from a bicycle. Each of the other recipes was augmented with a related story. Both the recipes and stories of Indian life were illustrated in watercolor on heavy paper. (A publisher is interested in printing the book.) (Figure 1)

The student who brought the coconut hair oil researched the role of Indian women, and eventually focused on several of the stars of "Bollywood" through an identity system for a cafe. She used oil pastel illustration for menus, matchbox covers, signage, etc. (Figure 2).

One of the students brought handmade wooden beads to class that were made during the long winter months in the north of the country where his uncle had a repertory theater for traditional Indian drama. He developed a logo and logotype, and eventually refined it with the computer for implementation by the theater (Figure 3).

The student who brought in some traditional medicine had a difficult time translating her ideas into packaging for the West. She wanted to use some traditional cloths and papers on the package, but they conflicted with Western expectations of cleanliness and sterility in connection with health remedies, even for alternative medicines.

The student who brought in the plant created small packages for seeds with tribal designs for indigenous native plants, along with some educational materials aimed at children so they would learn about the Indian environment and climate (Figure 4).



Figures 1A and B (above)
Spread and illustration from a cookbook of Kerala recipes and related stories.

Figure 2 (right)
Parts of an identity for a repertory theater company.



Figure 3 (below)
Matchbox covers illustrating some Bollywood female stars as part of a complete identity for a cafe.



I had used a very homey, personal approach that directed the students to think about expressing an individual design sensibility, which did not fulfill the administration's concern to align itself with big business. This was a source of some distress on both sides that I did not realize immediately. My analysis of their design needs to recognize and utilize their heritage did not encompass their need for acceptance and recognition by Western institutions. This left us both with a sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Figure 4 (right)
Seed package with tribal art as part of an educational packet.



*I am getting used to seeing parrots and canaries and peacocks.
As I came in the gate tonight to pick up my key, I spotted a peacock standing on the seat
of a motorcycle.*

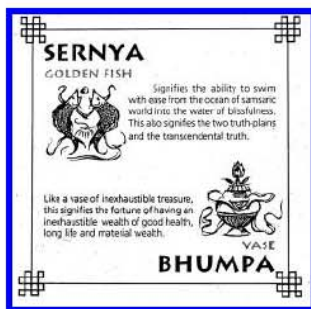


Figure 5
Part of the packaging for Darjeeling region tea.

As part of the evaluation process for the block courses, the students were required to make oral presentations on the final day. This gave everyone at the school a chance to discuss and critique the work. The students made some very strong presentations. They clearly articulated their concepts, processes, and objectives. They obviously had had a lot of practice with this in other situations. They also were good listeners, and gave everyone their full attention. The acceptance and tolerance of the differences among them added to the diversity and spirit of the work and discussions, but added some negative undercurrents that occasionally flared up. The disagreements tended to reflect deeply-rooted political differences. One student who had created an identity for a tea company in the Darjeeling area used elements from the architecture there. Many students took exception to this because they saw it as Tibetan rather than Indian. Old rivalries easily escalated, and although potentially threatening, served as an exciting way to discuss differences of region, religion, values, and cultures. The students took great care not to be offensive since they all are part of this community, so their exchanges over their years together tend to develop more cooperation than competition. In this particular case, friends of one student from another class or major became heatedly involved in expressing their opposing viewpoints, but controlled themselves. (Figure 5).

*It is so hard to sleep in the morning with the blaring of the Islamic call to prayers
very close to the campus.*

As is often the case in these situations, problems and options that might have been explored are brought out just a bit too late. One of the more serious blunders was that of the student who researched the female stars of Bollywood. A few members of the faculty took exception to the use of Indian women in a humorous application. Though we had discussed the role of women in Indian society, the class had not found the final result offensive. This particular project, in addition to my more personal/boutique approach for the course, attracted severe criticism.

*Outside the walls of the school, I hear the beeps and honks of cars, bikes, buses,
and trucks on the road that crosses the river.
In here are the chirps of birds and the breeze rustling the branches*

Although the school did not establish any guidelines or limitations, the graphic design faculty did mention during the last day that the whole issue of corporate identity had not been addressed in the course. The course and the critique ended on a rather negative note. The department obviously was expecting that a large part of promoting India would be done on a corporate scale, while I was more concerned with the students developing and/or expanding their thinking about their culture, their identity, and their country's identity.

The results of the course could have been extended into the development of corporate work even though I had not emphasized this aspect. The premise of the course was to investigate the visual traditions of India in order to understand their potential in contemporary design, especially at a personal level, to stimulate each student to consider his/her cultural heritage. Perhaps had I had time to discuss the relationship of the course to their curriculum, I could have resolved some of the department's misperceptions. Unfortunately, the formality of our relationships as well as the shortness of the course did not allow for an open discussion of our differences.

*Ashram Road continues for many kilometers
beyond Gandhi's settlement,
leaving the congestion for scattered concrete, project-like buildings.
Dreary.
Hopelessly isolated.*

This gives way to an electronic industries commercial area.

*Finally,
fields so lush and green
that it is hard to believe the city sprang
from such soil.*