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## ABHOY

### Kya Project lun – “Which Project should I take?”

Abhoy did his student project in the area of Appropriate Technology. His classmates worked on “typical” design projects – designing furniture for offices, products for homes, logos for corporations and collections for textile export houses. Yet, Abhoy was one of a growing number of design students who believed that working in the non-traditional area of Development was the real challenge.

In this, Abhoy was encouraged by the ethos at his Institute, which had built up a network with a community of professionals working in diverse fields – from Ecology to Craft Development, and from Rural Health to Primary Education. People here were excited about learning and applying design principles to solve larger problems of people, societies and communities.

Abhoy was sure that his project work would all the recognition and visibility it deserved. Many students from this Institute had gone on to carve out meaningful and satisfying careers – as designers in the Development domain.

### Mujhe design to ata hai - “I know how to design”

Abhoy once worked on a project with craftsmen making traditional oil lamps in the South of India.

When he started his needs assessment, he found that the craftsmen all just wanted “new lamp designs” from the “expert” – him. Before anything else, he realized that he would first have to restore the confidence of these skilled and competent people in their own ability to design.

He had been taught creativity tools at the Design Institute, also tools like PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal)<sup>1</sup> used by NGOs, and he realised this was a good time to use them. He structured a 3-day workshop on how to think differently, held discussions on processes and markets and made them sketch and tell stories<sup>2</sup>. At the end of the workshop some craftsmen were actually convinced that they could do it. Thus Abhoy became a facilitator of design and not the “expert”.<sup>3</sup>

### Par Design to Chitra bannana hai, na? – “Isn’t Design about Painting Pictures”

During a vacation Abhoy did some work with a group in a rural district on water management. One evening sipping tea at the village teashop, he got into a conversation with farmers from a village 4 miles away. They got talking and wanted to know all about Abhoy’s work. What he studied and the duration of his course. This is the way people talk to each other in rural India.

Abhoy told them he had to do courses on Economics, Development practices, Social Sciences and Ecology. And they were surprised. To their minds, design meant making patterns or pictures. Abhoy then elaborated how design is about creatively solving problems, and how it was essential for him to learn about other things to be able to arrive at an appropriate solution for a given context. He quoted Ray and Charles Eames to them, on how the *lota* (pot) is not one man’s design, but “many men over many generations”<sup>4</sup>. Slowly, one of the older men with a wise nod said, “Yes, yes, that is right”.

<sup>1</sup> Chambers, Robert, *Whose Reality Counts* Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1997

<sup>2</sup> This is a true story. The author, on a project with the Government of Tamil Nadu conducted such a workshop much against the initial views of the client. Appendix 1 showcases some of the material used at the workshop.

<sup>3</sup> Papanek, Victor, *Design for the Real World – Human ecology and Social Change* Thames & Hudson Ltd, London 1985

<sup>4</sup> Eames, Ray and Eames, Charles, speaking at the opening day of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, quoted in Kent, Corita and Steward, Jan, *Learning by Heart*, Bantam Books, New York, 1992

## Zindagi gina – “Living life”

Abhoy has been working in the “real” world for 15 years now. He works with NGO’s on various projects, also teaches. He focuses on village ecology, also the empowerment of women. He works as a facilitator of working groups, also does research.

He gets to meet people from different walks of life - educators, ecologists, social scientists, architects, and engineers, and sees himself as an integrated member of a community working together, rather than a “star designer”<sup>5</sup>.

***These are just some scenarios. But they are not the norm of today.***

## Where are we Today

### ▪ Design Students

Right now, design students are selected based on their ability to visualize, be articulate and be able to demonstrate a creative side to their approach to work.

Little attention is paid to their interest in development, their ability to work collaboratively and their previous engagement with any community projects.

Also most students come from urban environments, where the rural realities of India are something they see in a Bollywood movie at most. Their language is English; they watch MTV, Friends and Baywatch. They aspire to be part of India Inc.

And yet, having worked with this age group for the past 5 years, I realize that they come from an educational system that does not encourage them to look around, question and explore. My experience is that if shown alternative worldviews, most of them want to participate; they can see the challenge.

### ▪ Design Schools

Indian Design Schools today deliver an undergraduate program similar to many American programs. The curriculum is tailor made for smooth transition into the urban, “consumer-led”<sup>6</sup> design industry.

The Government of India set up the National Institute of Design in 1961 based on the recommendation of “The India Report” a document submitted by the late Charles and Ray Eames. Over the years it has done pioneering work in different areas of design. One of its most successful development projects was the adoption for development of a group of villages in Rajasthan. Working in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad the project was a successful experiment that underlined the necessity of approaching the concept of development in an integrated manner. But this is all in the past.

Today, the NID is planning to introduce a department in Lifestyle Products. This indicates an institutional acceptance of the “triumphant market ideology”<sup>7</sup>.

(I don’t want to enter the debate on whether this market ideology is participatory and sustainable, whether it is supportive of appropriate, local methods and processes; and whether it finally empowers and dignifies people at all levels).

The problem is that student designers get tempted to prioritize commercial attractiveness over developmental concerns when deciding on projects and areas of focus for study. Even worse, students who inclined towards development may not have any institutional support, or meaningful opportunities to work in this area.

<sup>5</sup> Balaram S, *Thinking Design*, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, 1998

<sup>6</sup> Whiteley Nigel, *Design for Society*, Reaktion Books, London, 1993

<sup>7</sup> Sachs, Wolfgang (ed.), *The Development Dictionary*, Zed Books, London, 1992

The powerful fashion lobby influenced the launch of the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), which has a campus at every major Indian city. NIFT offers short term and long term programs and runs successful industry sponsored events and workshops. Since it caters to a highly visible and glamorous sector, it has no funding problems. Accessory design is the latest entrant, which includes Lifestyle products. NIFT has created and aggressively marketed a new career option to many young Indians.

Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology is run by the Ujwal Trust a charitable, non-profit organization which also runs a school and a teacher-training center. Srishti is just five years old, having started with ten students now has 120.

There is also a National Institute of Craft design at Jaipur. The Indian Institutes of Technology offer post graduate programs for designers, engineers and architects. Smaller institutes that offer courses on Interior Design, Graphic Design, Web Design, and Fashion Design are mushrooming in all the major cities.

#### ▪ Design Curriculum

“The overall structure of NID’s programme is a combination of theory, skills, design projects, and field experience. Sponsored design projects are brought into the classroom to provide professional experience. Complementary studies in Science and Liberal arts widen the students’ horizons and increase general awareness of contemporary issues.”<sup>8</sup>

On examination of the flow of courses offered, one notices that there is great emphasis on the visual elements of design and aesthetics; and inadequate grounding in the “context of design”<sup>9</sup>. Learning in the areas of Social Sciences, Ecology, Economics and Development Concerns is not formally included.

Also tools and strategies are not taught, while design firms are already stating the importance of creativity tools<sup>10</sup>. It seems this understanding has not percolated back to the academic world of design.

#### ▪ Designers at work

Leaving the NID campus, what do we see in the real world of designers’ work in India? That successful designers and firms are reinforcing the same ideology.

The public image of “design” is being set largely by the fashion and consumer industries in India. The term design is no longer perceived as a process – it has come to mean status.

*“The term “designer” has moved from noun to adjective. This represents a distinct shift away from the development paradigm that first brought Industrial design education and practice to the country.”*<sup>11</sup>

A critical look at the recent article on Indian Design in Business World<sup>12</sup> reveals that business success for designers comes primarily from the same industries that support burgeoning consumerism. The authors do make mention of the need for designers to be socially responsible, but their case for design as a source of competitive advantage to the corporate world is so overbearing that anything else sounds weak and irrelevant, almost to be dismissed without further consideration.

### **This then is the way things stand in India.**

It means that while there may be an emotional consensus that design can help solve some of India's pressing problems, the all-powerful consumer market is more enticing and seductive.

<sup>8</sup> NID – *Designing your Future: Information Brochure 2000-2001*, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad 2001

<sup>9</sup> Balam S, *Thinking Design*, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, 1998

<sup>10</sup> Kelley, Tom, with Littman, Jonathan, *The Art of Innovation – Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America’s Leading Design Firm*, Currency/ Doubleday, New York, 2000

<sup>11</sup> Chatterjee, Ashoke, *Design for Development: Restoring People to the Centre of Design Education and Practice*, National Institute of Design, 2000

<sup>12</sup> Viswanathan, Vidya, and Singh, Gina, *Design Makes an Impression*, Business World, 22 Jan 2001, Vol 20 Issue 37, pp 20-31

So how do we get Abhoy to be where he is, in the Scenarios?

### **India must create and reinforce the unique position for design in development**

- for is not design a powerful process tool to help solve problems in a sustainable and participatory manner? Examples abound of how designers and design firms have used this tool effectively<sup>13</sup>.

## **The Re-positioned Institute of Design**

We need to create a “Design for Development” Institute, or at the least, a program called “Design for Development” in an existing Design school. And, this Institute and/ or program needs to be aggressively marketed.

The NIFT and the Craft Institute experiences show that it isn't too difficult to create an exclusive school or department to cater for a specific area, so, why not “Design for Development”?

Once this Institute or Program is in place it has to have the right ingredients to create professionals who would contribute to India's development, using design.

### **Ingredient 1 : Raw Material**

#### **What kind of person do we need to enroll and train?**

If development is to be accelerated, we need to look at all available human resources in the country that can be trained to contribute. Age 18-22 is fine, but what about age 40+?

In all the 40 years of NID we have not thought of educating any other age group.

Consider the typical Corporate Worker. He works hard, buys a house, sends his children to an English-medium school, holidays abroad and then as he reaches the age of 39-40 he starts wondering about the meaning of life. He voices his concerns and finds others also saying similar things.

Some of these people are interested in giving back to the community, although they see development mostly in material and economic terms and don't exactly know how they could get involved.

I see this section of people as a vast potential waiting to be tapped for design for development. They are professionals, trained and experienced, aware of best practices across the world, and understand the skills of project management. Just imagine harnessing their talent, energies and commitment for development!

Apart from teaching development to designers, consider teaching design to people in social work. They already have an understanding of development – and could do transfer courses or a one year program in design for development.

### **Ingredient 2: Curriculum**

#### **Once you have an interested student what do you do?**

The stated mandate of NID in its information brochure seems inconsistent with the curriculum. There are no courses on Development Concerns, Issues and models of intervention, Participatory methodology, International aid and Sustainable practices. So how will students be competent to “undertake macro and micro level design intervention for the government, NGO's, industries and act as a catalyst for economic prosperity<sup>14</sup>”?

Having studied at NID and then being involved in setting up a new Design School it is clear to me that a curriculum to teach design for development needs a fundamental shake-up of all our existing beliefs and patterns of seeing design, and teaching design. We have to re-visit objectives, methodologies and content in all aspects of the course.

<sup>13</sup> *The Art of Innovation – Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America's Leading Design Firm*

<sup>14</sup> *NID – Designing your Future: Information Brochure 2000-2001*

My experience at Srishti is that we don't have all the answers yet – to questions like: What courses do we offer?, How to equip them to survive and contribute in the real world?, What are the requisite skills and tools that each student must be familiar with?, What is the School's role in dissemination for design for development?, and How can we truly achieve a multidisciplinary approach to design education?

Since I am a founder faculty at Srishti, this paper is also a way to clarify my own thoughts to achieve as Nigel Whitely says – **“a staged way forward.”**

### **Ingredient 3: ENVIRONMENT**

#### **You have an interested student and a well-designed curriculum. What next?**

The design school usually perceives that its job ends with providing student a qualification, and perhaps a lead to a job afterwards. Schools don't usually develop long-term relationships with NGO's and other educational institutions. They do not see themselves as being the vital link between the development sector and the pool of human resource they are training. They lack the strategies that the corporate world uses in building sustainable supply chains.

So - students often get frustrated, bewildered and finally disinterested by the amount of follow-up, and paperwork that is involved to get an NGO or government-aided development project.

A design school offering “Design for Development” should build up a strong network of people and agencies that have worked to create a difference in any sector. People from the field must regularly visit the school, and interact with students in the class as well as over projects. The atmosphere must contain a conviction that one can work creatively and collaboratively to engage with the domain of development. Different perspectives would be encouraged, and research, documentation, and dissemination of information would be a core institutional task.

Today, there is no place in India where truly multidisciplinary approaches to solve development concerns is found. There are lots of successful projects that dot the face of the country but if there is one group working successfully in water management, they don't often collaborate with other groups working in rural health or aids for disabled people.

I sense this is a real need. I also think an educational institution, which has an ongoing program in dissemination, would be the ideal instrument that can act as the net-worker. NGO's have begun to understand the importance of the designer and hence would be receptive to participate in such an initiative. (Samples of where an NGO has used the services of a designer effectively are at the end of this paper). So within the structure of the Institute there would perhaps be a department, which specifically works on maintaining and servicing this network.

Another area for change is the student project. I have seen students complete a craft project – only for the designs to lie in a dusty government office. I know of someone who did a communication project on AIDS awareness – which was not fully utilized by the NGO because the test run proved the need for a lot of rework (by then the student had moved on, and the school was not involved any more). Students' portfolios are full of such projects, unfortunately real impact has been low.

Schools must elevate student projects from just an academic component, to a link in a larger chain. One of the learning from development initiatives is that a long-term association with a community or issue is imperative. It is not that today one designs a teaching aid for a village school, and that's the end. Sustained interaction is a must to ensure an enabling process. Soon the local teacher should be able to design her own tools; and in time will enable other teachers from schools around her district.

This sustained interaction is possible if the Institute has a mandate to support development. Re-training teachers, hiring people from the Social Sciences, actively involving other education institutions, and creating the systems to deliver this service are only some of the tasks that would have to be undertaken. Design for development would then achieve the much-needed “status”, respectability, and acceptance by the young Indian and it might become the new way for a shift in career option for the middle-aged yuppie!

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## Some Examples of NGO's using Design Effectively



Work that I did in Kutch after the Jan 2001 Earthquake. The booklet was then used by the Government as the official mason training manual and used to train masons in the new technology to build earthquake resistant buildings



"A few years ago I would have introduced myself as a *majoor*"  
Now I can proudly call myself an artisan. We design patterns, set deadlines, embroider and market ourselves. The work you buy is not just embroidery, it's an expression of our pride."

Source: Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan  
www.kmvs.org

Part of a brochure designed for Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan to sell their products.  
The bold text says –  
A few years ago I would have introduced myself as a "*majoor*" (daily wage labourer)  
Now I can proudly call myself an artisan. We design patterns, set deadlines, embroider and market ourselves. The work you buy is not just embroidery, it's an expression of our pride.  
Designer Arvind Lodaya (NID Batch of 1988) has a long-standing relationship with this NGO



Workshop material designed by me in two languages for craftspeople in the South of India



Center for Science and Environment, New Delhi, is a non-profit research organization involved in disseminating information, promoting awareness and generating public opinion on issues of environment, governance, science, technology and sustainable development. It uses design extensively.