



A study of Indian Design Education and Embracing Indian Cultural Identity

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of indigenous design education in India, emphasizing its deep roots in the nation's rich and diverse cultural heritage. It examines how traditional crafts, artisanal practices, and indigenous knowledge systems can be integrated into contemporary design education, fostering a uniquely Indian approach to design that is both globally relevant and culturally grounded. The paper analyzes the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting indigenous design education, arguing for its crucial role in preserving cultural identity, empowering local communities, and contributing to a more sustainable and inclusive future.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, languages, design education, arts and crafts, cultural practices, traditions, nature, craft communities and artisans, endangered crafts and designs.

Introduction:

Design education in India has historically been influenced by Western models. While these models have contributed to the development of design expertise, there is a growing recognition of the need to integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into design curricula. This paper argues for the importance of indigenous design education, which draws upon India's vast cultural heritage, traditional crafts, and local knowledge systems to create a unique and relevant approach to design. While we have hoped to build a case for design in learning, the picture is not all rosy. As established before, design can be interpreted in multiple ways and there is a certain trajectory that got design to India. In this piece, we reflect on a new dimension of what design can mean. Where to find it and how to learn from it.

Our intention with this piece is to reinforce that 'design' is contextual. This means that design has to make sense to people in a certain place and there are dangers of a universal definition of design. This piece expands design to demonstrate its connections with culture and identity. We hope our readers will find a sense of relief reading this provocative piece as it locates design in our everyday, as an approach and perspective bypassing the historical canon.

Design in a literal sense means 'the general arrangement of the different parts of something that is made, such as a building, book, machine, etc.' The word 'design' could be interpreted as a noun or a verb; that appeals to both emotions and intelligence. Designer and Academician S. Balaram writes, 'The human need which is the origin of design is not only physical but also psychological, sociocultural, ecological, and spiritual as well. Design requires people who practice as well as

people who seek it'. This is true when design is aimed at execution of some of the cultural and social needs of the society. It is the DNA of Indian society with a great diversity defined by religion, politics, history, geography, ecology, and culture. This article aims to define design education as an inherent subject of Indian society, practiced since man started drawing on rock shelters in prehistory. It predates speech and language, when visual expressions, such as rock paintings or drawings, were the only mode of communication and planning. The rock paintings of hunting scenes in the Bhimbetka caves in Madhya Pradesh are clear evidence of man's awareness of design. The drawings of the figures with various design elements of patterns and graphic quality show early evidence of man's creativity. It has been since then that the human mind is constantly refining various craft skills in different mediums, and design has been at the heart of it. This article focuses on the organic ways of learning design among the indigenous communities of India, where it is 'learned' and not 'taught' in a school environment.

Understanding Indigenous Knowledge and Practices:

India possesses a rich tapestry of indigenous knowledge and practices, encompassing a wide range of disciplines, including:

- **Traditional crafts:** India's craft traditions, such as weaving, pottery, metalwork, and embroidery, represent centuries of accumulated knowledge and skill. These crafts embody not only technical expertise but also cultural

values, social practices, and environmental awareness.

- **Indigenous knowledge systems:** These systems, often passed down through generations, encompass knowledge of agriculture, medicine, architecture, and resource management. They offer valuable insights into sustainable living and harmonious relationships with nature.
- **Folk art and aesthetics:** India's diverse folk art forms and aesthetic traditions provide a rich source of inspiration for contemporary design, reflecting the country's cultural diversity and artistic expression.

The objectivity of looking at subjects of cultural practice as 'objects of design' is a demeaning way of looking at the ethos of Indian traditions. Dwelling on the philosophy of Indian life, layered in the historicity of civilizations, the Indian knowledge systems mark the excellence of human intellect of this epoch. It has been characterized by ancient religious thoughts, philosophies, politics, and indigenous practices of the inhabitants of this land. Years of migrations have contributed to shaping and evolving the rich heritage of our land. The tangible and intangible aspects of our cultural heritage have nourished human knowledge through the ages, leading to a sustainable lifestyle. Thus, India has successfully survived the global socio-political and economic crises during the last decades. Its roots are deep and historical.

In India, 'caste' and 'community' form a major subject of the social structure. The hundreds of communities that have evolved through the caste system, specific to professions have shaped objects of

necessity (which we have reduced to the subject of 'arts and crafts') of human need for survival and sustenance. The interdependency of communities on each other has constructed the cultural fabric of Indian life. Therefore, in India, the importance of a potter has been equated with that of a king or a ruler, without who societies cannot be sustained. This is further attested by the philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', which illustrates that the familial bonds go much beyond race, colour, religion, caste, creed, culture, language, or province. This stands true in the context of various Karkhanas (workshops) of artistry patronized by the royal states and locals, participated by different communities, which resulted in creating objects of daily human need. For example, a piece of costume is possible only from the labour of cotton farmers, spinners, weavers, printers, embroiderers, dyers, washermen, and tailors. On analyzing this from a social perspective, it is apparent that a dozen communities contribute to producing the final garment. They share a harmonious relationship with each other by valuing each other's knowledge, wisdom, and talent. For example, in the case study of Indigo cultivators, dyers, and block-printers in Bundi in southeast Rajasthan, it was discovered that the Muslim Neelgar dyers were dependent on the Multani Pathan Indigo cultivators to get their supply of Indigo dye cakes. The block-printer Hindu Chhipa printers avoided keeping Indigo in their houses due to their belief that it was inauspicious to do so. Thus, they depended on the Neelgars to get their mud-resist cloth dyed in indigo. The three communities have shared friendly relations for ages to produce block-printed

and indigo-dyed cloth, which is then worn by the patrons.

In producing any piece of 'craft', the artisans involved in the process are bound through social relationships irrespective of caste and class. This relationship is further defined in terms of cultural history, social relationship, language, traditional patronage, sustainability, ethics, environmental consciousness, aesthetics, and pride of excellence. In modern times, this relationship has broken down due to mass consumerism, commercialization, profit-making greed, and industrialization. There is a growing concern regarding 'sustainable products' in the design market. This is being defined in terms of practice, but not through the perspective of human relations and wisdom; and consciousness towards the Mother Earth and Sky, worshiped as 'Dharti Mata' and 'Akash Devta,' respectively. How could a society that has revered the elements of nature attempt to pollute it? But the growing environmental crisis is one of the greatest challenges of design education that needs to be dealt with in the coming years.

The Need for Indigenous Design Education:

Integrating indigenous knowledge into design education is crucial for several reasons:

- **Preserving cultural identity:** Indigenous design education helps to preserve and revitalize India's cultural heritage, ensuring that traditional knowledge and practices are not lost in the face of globalization.
- **Empowering local communities:** By recognizing and valuing

indigenous knowledge, design education can empower local communities, providing them with the skills and resources to develop sustainable livelihoods and preserve their cultural traditions.

- **Promoting sustainable development:** Indigenous knowledge systems often embody principles of sustainability, offering valuable lessons for designing environmentally responsible products and services.
- **Creating culturally relevant design:** Indigenous design education fosters the creation of design solutions that are culturally appropriate and relevant to the needs of local communities.
- **Developing a unique Indian design identity:** By drawing upon its rich cultural heritage, India can develop a unique design identity that distinguishes it in the global design landscape.

The gatekeepers of design education

Mothers have been the first natural teachers of children, which still holds true among the indigenous communities aided by fathers and grandparents as the child matures. In remote corners of the country where the power of text-based literacy still does not dominate over oral knowledge, survival is based on lived experiences and not on the modern means of development. Many natural ways of learning still exist. These learnings are time-tested, attested, and defined by the cultural practices of hundreds of indigenous communities. The gatekeepers of such knowledge are the people of that land. Such knowledge is participatory and communal in nature but has various elements of individuality also. For

example, among the Meena tribe, every woman knows how to decorate her mud house naturally year after year, but among them, a few are perfectionists who do fine paintings, which gives them special status and recognition in society. Daughters learn from mothers, but each evolves her own distinct style instead of copying her mother. Similar intent is noticed among the artisan communities, who, instead of copying their masters, try to add distinct features and excellence in their creations. While studying the Multani block carvers of Jaipur, who have been making blocks of Sanganeri block print designs for three to four centuries, it has been noticed that every generation of block carvers has added its identity to them by tweaking or refining the designs. This shows that traditional designs are necessarily not static or standardized; they keep evolving over time. The skilled printers and block carvers have made them more complicated and refined, also increasing the number of steps/stages of dyeing and printing, making it more complex. This practice among the traditional artisans needs to be noticed and recognized by the design fraternity.

Another example is of Ajrakh hand block textile printing, which could be completed in 10 to 12 steps by the regular Khatri printers, but the master printers among them have evolved double-printed and double-dyed Meenakari Ajrakh, increasing the number of steps to 16 and more. On further studying the Ajrakh printing tradition of Sindh (Pakistan), Kutch (Gujarat), and Barmer (Rajasthan), it is noticed that it has adapted itself to these three different geographical regions by adopting different recipes of using the local material. The Ajrakh prints from

these three areas may look similar in surface design but have great diversity when studied in detail, defined by the linguistic diversity of the craft practice and regional patronage. This shows that design has adapted to regional differences and has developed a local character.

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Design Curricula:

Integrating indigenous knowledge into design education requires a multi-faceted approach:

- **Incorporating traditional crafts:** Design schools can offer workshops and courses on traditional crafts, taught by master craftspeople, providing students with hands-on experience and knowledge of traditional techniques.
- **Studying indigenous knowledge systems:** Design curricula can include courses on indigenous knowledge systems, exploring their relevance to contemporary design challenges.
- **Collaborating with local communities:** Design schools can establish partnerships with local communities, providing students with opportunities to learn from indigenous practitioners and contribute to community development projects.
- **Promoting design research:** Design research can focus on documenting and analyzing indigenous knowledge and practices, making them accessible to a wider audience.
- **Developing culturally sensitive design methodologies:** Design education can emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and user-centered design, ensuring that design solutions are

appropriate for the cultural context in which they are intended to be used.

The study of design in the Indian context is a most interesting subject because its tangibility and intangibility are closely connected, establishing its importance and relevance to the society and its practices. For example, the Mandala designs have different meanings in Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Shinto, defined by distinctive spirituality and religion. The historic development of these has facilitated the spiritual practices among the masses. This shows the socio-religious aspect of these Mandala designs, whose education has been imparted through different religious schools of thoughts through a rigorous classical training. Unlike the Mandala, the Mandana floor drawings are done only by the women in personal living spaces and are learned naturally by instinctive observation and practice. These two subjects differ in their approach of learning and education, satisfying the need of two different classes of people. Here art, craft, and design are not separate entities to define these two practices. The classical aspect of the Mandala represents a religious class, whereas the folk Mandala represents rural people. Thus, the distinction among art, craft, and design is futile, because these are interrelated, complementing each other. No piece of art is complete without craftsmanship and design and vice versa.

Colonial design education leading to the decline of traditional arts and values

If we look into the history of art education in India, the earliest evidence that we find

are the guilds of artisans working under the patronage of royal states. This was not a time to distinguish between puristic arts and traditional crafts; everything of artisanal value fell under one umbrella. Many crafts reached their pinnacle being promoted and patronized by the state. Some examples are the Rajput miniature paintings, double Ikat in weaving, Sozani in Kashmiri embroidery, hand-painted Kalamkari in natural dyes, chintz prints of coromandel coast, muslin weaving of Bengal, semi-precious stone inlay of Agra, etc. It was a time when artisans received direct patronage and rewards from the community and the royal states.

During the East India Company and British rule, the first formal art institutions were established in Calcutta and Madras in 1854 and in Bombay in 1857. The purpose of these was to propagate Western values in art education along with the colonial agenda aligned with the Government School of Design (1837) in London, which was later reformed and re-established as the Royal College (1896). Another important art institution, the Mayo School of Art in Lahore, was established in 1875 on the lines of the Kensington model, in conjunction with the Central Museum. Its aim was to document the arts and crafts of the Punjab (now in Pakistan), with the aim of training excellent craftsmen who would serve the demands of craft production for the western market. These art institutions were under the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which emerged from the attempt to reform design and decoration in mid-19th century Britain. In the years of their development, these institutions catered to the growing demand of the craft industry and infrastructure projects by

supplying skilled draughtsmen, designers, and engravers for illustrations.

The traditional Karkhanas of craft patronized by the imperial rule faced indirect challenges from the colonial influence and economic pressures. Traditional patronage declined; western education values marginalized the Indian arts. The industrial production of decorative arts inspired by the Art Nouveau movement of England led to the closure of the Mughal karkhanas of bigger cities like Delhi, Agra, Lahore, and Murshidabad because of the easy availability of cheap, industrially produced goods from Europe. The inexpensive textile produced in Manchester mills killed the handloom textile centres in India. The influence of the German Bauhaus art school and movement (1919-1933), along with the American Arts and Crafts movement (late Victorian period), further diverged from the traditional arts and values of Indian crafts.

To fight back the industrial production from the west flooding the Indian markets, Mahatma Gandhi revolted through his peaceful Satyagraha which was devised as a tool of self-rule (Swaraj) and freedom. The nationalist values propagated by Gandhi revived Khadi production and installed pride within the Indian society to consume handmade goods to promote the village cottage industries. To add value to Khadi, he did various experiments by improvising the charkha, spinning, and natural dye techniques. Social reformer Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) carried forward the idea of Mahatma Gandhi for the promotion of Indian handicrafts, handlooms, and theatre to improve the

socio-economic standard of Indian women. She set up craft institutions for the revival and preservation of Indian crafts. She also founded the Crafts Council of India (CCI) in 1964 to protect and enhance India's heritage in the nation's transition to modernity. Parallel to it, government organizations like the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVYC), Weavers Service Centres, Indian Institute of Handloom Technology (IIHT), National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), etc., are the pioneer institutions in modernizing traditional crafts and finding a global market for them.

Initiated by Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, the newly established Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs) and the National Institute of Design (NID) started working towards the need of Industrial Design. They catered to the industrial demands of agriculture and transportation initially. Craft was not a priority for them and was looked down upon as a traditional subject. During the last quarter of the 20th century, there has been an intervention of modern designs influenced by western market principles to position India in the global market.

Nai Talim – Gandhi's view of education for self-reliance

Gandhi presented a nationalistic view of education through a pedagogical view that knowledge and work are two important pillars of basic education. This was in contrast to the traditional and colonial education that catered to the upper class. He said, 'The curriculum and pedagogic ideas that form the fabric of modern education were imposed from Oxford and Cambridge, Edinburgh, and London. But they are essentially foreign, and till they

are repudiated, there never can be national education'. He further stated that, 'The fact to be realized is that India, by the very fact of her long-established and elaborate civilization, had once the advantage of an educational system of her own, the only thing entitled to be called 'national''. Gandhi proposed to make handicrafts the centre of the school curriculum, primarily the skills of the lower castes, such as spinning, weaving, leatherwork, pottery, metalwork, basket-making, and book-binding. He realized the importance of such education from the Satyagraha movements he led. He advocated that the highest development of the mind and soul is possible through such skill education for sustainability. He wrote in Young India, 'I can imagine a school entirely self-supporting if it became, say, a spinning and weaving institution with perhaps a cotton field attached to it. Gandhi envisioned a holistic understanding of education of values and ethics, to preserve Indianess.

Design education rooted in the cultural practices of Indian life

Designers born in Indian soil are naturally gifted with access to the rich heritage treasure and cultural material equivalent to that of the whole world put together. But it has been perceived as rooted and local, hampered by a lack of innovation and development in modern times. The complexity created by western design education has sidelined the Indian philosophy of art and design. The corporate world has to cater to the global demand, which looks to the design forecast and theories of the developed countries. India has not been able to build upon its rich diversity of cultural material,

knowledge systems, identities, expressions, and natural resources. In today's time, Indian designers find their inspiration in the west and produce for the western market, ignorant of local needs. This is not a progressive design approach for a developing country like India with a population of 1.4 billion. The Indian consumer market is heavily loaded with Western values that have been naturally absorbed and adopted by the people. This has led to the erosion of knowledge, skills, languages, cultural practices, traditional patronage, and most importantly, sustainability of Indian life.

If a craft or skill dies, the language also dies with it. The Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh in Gujarat, founded by the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre (devoted to language research and preservation), has realized that when any form of traditional practice dies, some hundred words of the local language used in the execution of that practice also die. One may imagine how many such words of indigenous languages might have been wiped out permanently with the industrialization or extinction of various traditional skills.

Language is a product of civilization and a medium of sustainability. Right from the time when Homo sapiens invented speech to communicate to the present time of machine language, repositories of knowledge have helped in sustaining life on this planet. The growing environmental crisis has been caused because the knowledge of marginalized indigenous people has been side-lined by the politics of strong economies of a consumer-centric world. The ignorance of the time-tested knowledge of indigenous communities needs urgent attention from the world

before it vanishes from the planet. The code of environmental protection lies in the languages and practices of such communities that have faced direct challenges with nature. Their languages are now endangered, and some are critically endangered. Before the last speakers and knowledge bearers of these languages die, it is time to capture it and build a future upon it. Man needs to take inspiration from such time-tested knowledge systems and build upon them. Those would be real sustainable solutions and designs for mankind. The mushrooming design institutions need to look inward, then westward – into the great philosophies, cultures, religions, and practices that have evolved on this land. They need to cater to both the poor and the rich, the regional and the global, for today and the future; then only true sustainability will be a relevant subject of the design practice. India, with its historical strength, can really create a strong design pedagogy for the future world. If it has to stand out, it has to speak from its roots.

Challenges and Opportunities:

Promoting indigenous design education faces several challenges:

- **Lack of resources:** Integrating indigenous knowledge into design curricula may require additional resources, including funding for workshops, collaborations with local communities, and research projects.
- **Bridging the gap between traditional and modern:** Design education needs to find ways to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern design

practices, ensuring that students are equipped with both traditional skills and contemporary design tools.

- **Resistance to change:** There may be resistance to incorporating indigenous knowledge into design curricula from some faculty members or institutions.

However, there are also significant opportunities:

- **Growing interest in sustainable design:** The increasing global focus on sustainability creates a strong demand for design solutions that are informed by indigenous knowledge and practices.
- **Rising awareness of cultural heritage:** There is a growing awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage, creating a supportive environment for indigenous design education.
- **Potential for innovation:** Integrating indigenous knowledge with contemporary design practices can lead to innovative and unique design solutions.

Conclusion:

Indigenous design education in India offers a powerful way to preserve cultural identity, empower local communities, promote sustainable development, and create a unique Indian design identity. By integrating traditional crafts, indigenous knowledge systems, and local practices into design curricula, India can nurture a new generation of designers who are both globally relevant and culturally grounded. Overcoming the challenges and seizing the opportunities associated with indigenous design education is crucial for shaping a more

sustainable, inclusive, and culturally vibrant future for India.

References:

[1] Oxford Dictionary

[2] Balaram, S. 'Modern Indian Design: The Roots'. Thinking Design, Pg. 25. Ahmedabad: NID: Ahmedabad, 1998.

[3] 'Design' in terms of graphic quality of the drawings and planning the hunting strategy for survival.

[4] This doesn't refer to the issue of casteism and social hierarchy.

[5] With reference to the story of Raja Bharathari sung by the Jogis of North India and the episode of Gandharvasen (Vishnu's incarnation in the form of a foal) born in the family of a potter and his marriage with the princess Paande Bai of the regional king.

[6] The ancient Sanskrit text of Maha Upanishad, Chapter 6, Verses 71 to 73.

[7] It's a product of social importance and not merely of physical and utilitarian nature.

[8] Defined by a low Human Development Index (HDI), a poor literacy rate, and particularly through indigenous ways of living.

[9] Especially the tribal regions marked as Scheduled Areas under the Article 244.

[10] Starting from the medieval period.

[11] Also recognized as the Gharana system patronized by the royal states and nobles.

[12] Similarly, the initial design institutes in India are found to be under the influence of UK's Royal College of Art (RCA).

[13] Gandhi, M.K. 'New education to be rooted in the culture and life of the people', In Towards New Education, Pg. 30, Ahmedabad: Navjeevan Publishing House, 2022.

[14] Ibid, Pg. 31

[15] Young India, 11.07.1929

[16] Refer to the 'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger' published by UNESCO.

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