

Design-writing as a clue to informing a country's design paradigm and practice: the case of India

If design were to be counted as having evolved during modernism as a by-product of the industrial revolution, then we need to review the concept of design itself in a country such as India. This is because we stand on an existing tradition of writings that occur under the broad hubris of 'abhikalpa' (=design) often in the form of treatises that could sometimes date way back into the pre-industrial revolution period. Since this body of design-related writing does not treat objects as being suitable to the manufacturing process - in other words, the idiom of the industrial revolution - this throws up several crucial questions for us:

(1) In our broader search for whether design in India continues to remain in its pre-paradigmatic stage, are we not going to reference these writings simply because they do not adhere to the axiomatic notion of design that has now come to be attached to the way design has evolved in industrialized countries? In our opinion, any interpretation of the present state of design in India, in turn, must find its basis in the following major premise - that a certain abstraction of our historical, economic and political background as a pointer is essential towards an understanding of the fundamentals of the current design paradigm; an interpretation that is disengaged from its historical context can only rob one of an understanding of one's own design culture in its essential substance and legitimacy.

(2) And, what, therefore, are the bodies of design writings in India today that aid the way design as a concept finds modern practice in India? . We will highlight three existing categories of writings that, in our opinion, remain the suppliers of the major reference points in our search for a design paradigm. Have these writings inspired designers in training and in practice to understand India's imperatives for designing? Has there been any attempt to bridge earlier 'non-industrialized' design writings with the present 'industrialized' ones? Is there any effort at theorizing the concept of design in India - an effort usually arising out of painstaking abstractions of patterns that will then give us models and hypothesis to test out the pitfalls? And without which a discipline could continue to lack the rigour that it needs to find itself a place "at the table".

The first category of writings are generally erudite by nature emerging from the research efforts of art historians with broad focus on colonial and post-colonial idioms of our cultural identity - writers who remain essentially modernists at heart but are not 'designers' in the modern

sense of the term. The second broad category of writings that could be of use, come from practitioners and pedagogues of 'design' the way it has evolved as a discipline in India over the last two and a half decades. A third set of writings are external to us, originating in the industrialized countries outside of India, and consist of writings that have helped us place design in an international perspective of space and time. Through these we have allowed ourselves to comprehend western design historicity and practice.

It is our observation here that the suggested level of approximation (of discourse) that could allow us to trace the roots of our paradigm is inherently lacking in the second set of writings on design because this set of authors have the dual duty of having to first give shape to an incipient profession, only now beginning to get its bite, and then to record the movements and the contours of their profession. Therefore, while these writings are fairly informed in character, they are otherwise mostly preoccupied with highlighting specificities of concerns/issues, methodologies and practices surrounding the individual designer's realm of experience.

And further, given the fact that this progress curve has had to accommodate the demands of the ever-changing technology scene, to expect a full-bodied tradition of design writing would be akin to suffocating an adolescent with the piercing demands of the adult world. Nonetheless, the child must grow, and grow well. The problem for us takes on certain added intonations. Chief among them being the fact that there exists for us, a well-honed tradition of aesthetic writings dating back into the centuries. If design as a discipline and practice is said to have derived its locus from the felt-needs of everyday living, then the existing body of aesthetics-related writing passed down over the millennium must have an extraordinary level of design-related material embedded in them.

The question is: does modern design practice in India relate to this body of knowledge not as if these were fossilised remains from another era, but as a well of collective wisdom inherited from our forefathers? Just the way farmers in our country continue to bank on a similar set of collective wisdom related to their own area of practice. And the quality of such information considered epochal, not out of any dogmatic attachment towards them but because of their intrinsic connection with felt-needs. And which combined with modern methods, could turn out to be simply the best/invincible in terms of their interests.