Design by People within Culturally-rooted Idioms – the new 'cool' in a globalised world

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Introduction:

"When, as by a miracle, the lovely butterfly bursts from the chrysalis full-winged and perfect ... it has, for the most part, nothing to learn, because its little life flows from its organization like melody from a music box."

This rather poetic reference was made by Douglas Alexander Spalding in 1873 while observing young animals vis-à-vis the role played out by instinct. (*"Instinct: With original observations on young animals," Macmillan's magazine, vol 27, 1873*)

Traditional knowledge systems – a cumulative of the innate and the animal-like instincts in man: Spalding was enthralled at the idea that "the mind cannot learn unless it has the rudiments of innate knowledge" – an idea that came to be termed as *'nativism'* in the 1880's by William James in his 'Principles of Psychology'. William James was of the firm belief that human beings have more instincts than other animals, not fewer. Less than a century later in 1953, Noam Chomsky would argue in its very favour, this time in the context of children – that in order to learn the rules of language, the child must be equipped with a set of innate rules (to which the vocabulary of the language is then fitted). Devoid of this, the child cannot learn the language from an extraneous source such as through examples.

The point of our assertion here is simply that, experience that arises in conjunction with innate knowledge is different from experience that is received without it. When this *conjunction between the innate and the acquired* happens across the generations, the resulting knowledge becomes part of *a collective domain* and gets *culturally rooted*, to represent what has come to be recognized today as *traditional knowledge systems.*

It will be our endeavor today to expand on the scope of the traditional knowledge systems beyond their traditional economies to find meaningful connections

with modern marketised economies, and then explore the extent to which such repositioning could offer us practical working propositions for a post-industrial society.

2 **How do we do this?**

By recognizing the strength of what resides in the domain of innate knowledge amongst people, and recognizing the strength of people-participation in everyday acts of designing, where design is meant to mediate towards a better quality of life through its goods and services and its environment. And the recognition that such design necessarily resides almost intuitively at a cultural level and seldom taken notice of.

Needless to say, such innate knowledge can only be a cumulative of ideas that has blossomed across the centuries, one generation at a time, each generation integrating the highlights of its own times and experiences, and then passing this on as a legacy to its successive generations, until it becomes what New York Times recently termed as *"tribal knowledge"* – something that cannot be learnt quickly. The best that one do, therefore, is to recognize the origins and sources of these pursuits, and then leverage them within modern contexts to reap the benefit of such accumulated knowledge.

With respect to India, what is pretty much known by now is that our knowledge systems are a sum total of a wide range of pursuits, vastly differing convictions, widely divergent customs and languages, and a veritable feast of viewpoints. What is not always apparent, however, is how they have survived the ravages of outside invasions and of time. Amartya Sen in his most recent publication, 'The Argumentative Indian – writings on History, Culture and Identity' (2005) offers a perspective on this. According to him, these systems have survived not in spite of but because of the argumentative propensity of Indians that make thought processes robust and flexible and non-doctrinaire. It also makes for more open-ended systems that ask difficult questions and remain open to outside scrutiny.

The 'Rangoli': As promised, we now take this opportunity to present the case of an intrinsically Indian aesthetic – the 'rangoli' – as a template for how design may innovate and spread, not in the individual domain but in the collective domain.

We ask the question: ***Can we harness the workings of the 'rangoli', traditional as it happens to be, into a set of principles that will set an examplar of a driver of modern business conditions/practices?***

At its very basic, the 'rangoli' is a pattern that is generated as part of a folk ritual that enjoins upon the woman of a household to decorate the front porch in celebration of everyday living, but more specifically, to create these patterns as a mark of welcome to anyone who wishes to visit the household. Rangolis are usually always done as a collaborative act of creativity, with mother, daughter or other members of the household joining in, not because help is needed but because it is seen as an act of creativity and enjoyment.

Our motivation behind the choice of the 'rangoli' are several. But amongst the most important ones would be (i) its primordial nature as a form of art going back to prehistoric Indian art and hence retaining an essentially 'tribal' quality to its rendition and character. And (ii) its innate modularity, with an amazing ability to scale up and down towards construction and reduction/deconstruction.

From the perspective of social organization and art form in India, it is crucial to remember the following about the above conditions. With respect to condition (i), the origins of the style of the 'rangoli' dating back to prehistoric Indian art, has remained *a part of a living tradition for seven thousand years.*

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This is exemplified by the neolithic tribal rock paintings of central India which bear a close resemblance to the 'dream-murals' of tribes located thousands of miles away into remote eastern coastal India, as well as to folk murals with which houses are commonly decorated in many regions today. This implies that systems of knowledge have accumulated and coexisted across a very large time period, one on top of the other, without any attempt at demolishing previous works of art or their styles – the only way in which traditional knowledge systems can possibly acquire body and weight over time.

It is now widely known that "the earliest paintings were executed as far back as the Mesolithic age and then figures and animals superimposed on or juxtaposed to these extremely ancient images during successive eras to within a century of our own time." Amazingly, "such remarkable continuity of tradition, as exemplified by these works of nomadic tribesmen and cattle herders, *is to be found in most of the rural culture of the subcontinent* – endorsing the claim that *Indians live in more centuries at the same time than most other peoples."*

With respect to condition (ii), the modularity of the 'rangoli' is typical not an exception in Indian art forms, such modularity going back to the ancient civilization of the Indus Valley where the basic modular component – the brick – remained the same shape and size. This *empirical ordering capacity* was originally inherited from the Near East from where these bricks were imported. Important for us here is our culture's *ability to sustain uniform and repetitive means of production and reproduction,* and implicit in this uniform repeatability its *high level of technical coordination.* Richard Lannoy, in his 'The Speaking Tree – A study of Indian Culture and Society' (1971) remarks that

"wherever such a level is reached it reveals a sense of relatedness, *an orchestration of all measurable factors in the interdependent unity: God, nature and man."*

3 Lessons from the present – globalisation and its implications for traditional knowledge systems:
Given the focus of this paper on traditional knowledge systems and people's propensity to participate in it quite effortlessly, our effort should now be to take it to the next step, viz., to integrate these existing knowledge systems with the emerging knowledge economy, especially standing as we are at the threshold of forces of a globalisation, and the opportunities that this could throw up for the traditional sectors. Thomas Friedman describes this moment of transition as a period "when the walls came down and the windows went up."

Talking of transition, it's worthwhile recalling what John Calhoun once said, that: "The interval between the decay of the old and the formation and establishment of the new constitutes a period of transition, which must always necessarily be one of uncertainty, confusion, error, wild and fierce fanaticism." Of the instances of innovations during a critical transitionary period in the history of design in the West, the one that seems particularly bold was Francis Meynell's attempt to "produce the finest possible printing for commerce" and an attempt to bridge traditional and contemporary aesthetics. This Meynell did in 1923 as proprietor of the Pelican Press and then declared to great satisfaction "With twenty-five soldiers of lead I have conquered the world." (Looking Closer – Classic Writings on Graphic Design', Vol 3, 1999)
Change is never easy. For a long time, almost until the recent rise of the emerging markets in the developing world of India, China, Brasil and the South East Asia, significantly since the 80's, our traditional knowledge

systems were often viewed as not much more than eastern splendors, and celebrated as such (sometimes as exotica). As we stand at the threshold of marketisation of the Indian economy (specifically since the privatization of television, telecom and the petroleum sector across the last ten years) and the phenomenal rise of information technology, we are to look outwards beyond our own shores. What we are about to see and experience in the years ahead is this so-called 'exotica' becoming a potential commercial force – a veritable 'factor of production' to boost industry and commerce.

Sectors that have taken advantage of a global market (diaspora or otherwise) are Indian cinema, the fashion industry, traditional/alternate healing systems, the herbal beauty industry, and the crafts sector.

How and why?

At the cost of sounding clichéd, this sudden turn of events may be attributed to globalisation – defined simply as a freer flow of labor and capital across political and physical boundaries (as in the EU). The operative concern in globalisation is the idea of ***straddling multiple boundaries.***

Difficult as it is to comprehend the rootlessness arising out of straddling and moving across physical distances and political lines, the real complexities begin to arise when the exchanges (of ideas and commerce) have to negotiate across cultural boundaries. It is this aspect of globalisation – ***the transcultural*** rather than the narrower idea of the transnational – that interests us. And forms the platform on which we have positioned the proposed models of how traditional knowledge systems may be used to meaningfully connect with modern industrial systems, as a viable factor of production.

A historical perspective of globalisation in India: It is worthwhile mentioning here, that by this very definition of global flows of labor and capital, globalisation ceases to be such a contemporary phenomenon in the context of India. From very early on, since at least the 5th century AD, India had experienced an inflow as well as an outflow beyond its national boundaries, of labor, capital and goods. With its changing contours of trade determined only by the internationally changing sources of demand and supply for these goods and labor and services. Persians, Syrians, the East African and Arab countries, the Chinese, Central Asian and Caribbean countries, the
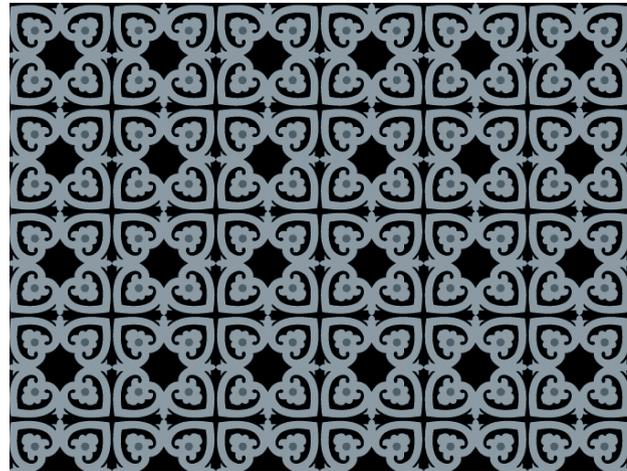
Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British being just some of the trading partners with India across the centuries. (I dare say, V.S. Naipaul remains an example of one of the most famous exports from India via his Indian indentured-labor forefathers migrating to Fiji).

The new globalisation: While globalisation itself is not new, what is new is the speed and the borderlessness of the transactions characterizing the present cache of

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globalisation, made possible in large measure by the networking technologies, and in part by the object of such transactions, viz., information and knowledge, and the ensuing new economy. As already stated, the operative factor here remains the **transaction of knowledge and information as a key driver of the economic transactions** – making it a **knowledge economy.** Not surprisingly, the crux of a knowledge economy, as a Wall Street Journal advertisement would have us believe is that, "the secret of business success is not who you know. It's what you know". On a more sober note, the Bhagavad Gita says: "The raft of knowledge ferries the worst sinner
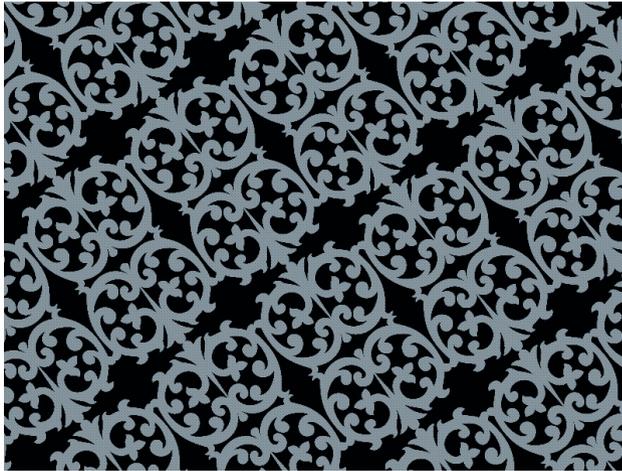
to safety" and noted writer and analyst Gurcharan Das ('India Unbound') sees the Vedic adage "Knowledge is Wealth" as summing up the Indian opportunity in the new century. The emergence of a knowledge economy underscores two sets of conditions for us:
(i) Just as countries have found transformation from poverty to prosperity **powered by a leading sector as an engine of economic growth** (textiles for Britain, railways for the USA, timber and timber products for Sweden's

take-off, milk and dairy products for Denmark), for India it would have to be the knowledge sectors of the economy.

(ii) Knowledge transactions inevitably call for very intricate entanglements with the global. Why? Because knowledge is now required to transact across cultural boundaries, since the exchanges are necessarily between the emerging markets, such as India, China, Mexico, Brasil, on the one hand, and the mature Western markets such as the EU, Japan or the USA on the other, increasing thereby the incidences of cultural encounters. And ironically enough, in the process, unleashing a brand of globalisation that actually **heightens the cultural factor rather than flatten it out,** as Thomas Friedman will vouch for in his recent 'The World is Flat'.

(iii) Since the recent brand of globalisation predicates itself primarily on an exchange of knowledge and information, it suddenly throws open the opportunity to connect two parallel knowledge systems – the traditional ones (in the emerging markets) with the modern (in the mature markets) – in one continuous arc where parallel and seemingly irreconcilable knowledge systems could now converge to facilitate businesses worldwide.

Globalisation and business differentiators: Following this, it is well worth wondering how we can now move on into identifying business 'differentiators' to leverage our products and services in a globalised market. What capabilities should we be investing in to produce differentiated goods and services that create value for a demanding set of global consumers? Perhaps, taking a clue from the 'rangoli' model, it could mean that we need to tap into cultural contexts that make information meaningful in more ways than one. And then, within this framework, identify signifiers of design (such as the

'rangoli') that will throw up clues for integration with modern, more efficient systems of production. Needless to say, it is the specific condition of globalisation that finally presents us with an opportunity to forefront our design signifiers, which although existing, carried little meaning for the world outside of our closed markets, devoid of the focus that can only come in relation to their opposites/differentials.

Two definite qualifications with regard to adopting the 'rangoli' as a template for dissemination of knowledge that,
(a) it is not about showcasing design excellence. Rather, it is meant to offer clues into how to sustain useful, viable business practices that are based on modular expansion of ideas carried out collaboratively; and
(b) it is not about reviving traditional arts and crafts. Instead, the focus is on attempts at integrating existing skills into modern contexts. Can we reinvent a role for the craftsman – based on the recognition that if Bidri crafts, e.g., will not sell in its craft form, perhaps one should conceive of new products that leverage the core factors of the Bidri, viz., its finely crafted silver inlay on metal, with the silver meant to retain its sheen for at least a hundred years.

4 In conclusion:
Concluding this presentation with a quote from Maynard Keynes could be laced with a trifle irony. Keyenes as an economist had espoused a rabid form of globalisation that would have been sure to have protected the powerful and eroded the weak. However, there is merit in his assertion about traditional knowledge systems. His deep respect for such systems is reflected in the following observation he had made in the context of the Newton papers in 1942 in which he presents an entirely new view of 'history's most renowned and exalted scientist'.

He says:

"*Newton came to be thought of as the first and the greatest of the modern age scientists, a rationalist, one who taught us to think on the lines of cold and untinctured reason. I do not see him in this light. I do not think that anyone who has pored over the contents of that box which he packed up when he left Cambridge in 1696 and which, though partly dispersed, have come down to us, can see him like that. Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians, last of the Babylonians and Sumerians, the last great mind which looked out on the visible and intellectual world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago.*"

Credits for images: The images are courtesy Sheetal AIreja, Visual communication student of the 2004–2006 batch.

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