

TEACH. ENABLE. EMPOWER: A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF A DESIGNER IN SKILL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN THE CRAFT SECTOR

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Abstract : Integrated product development in the crafts sector in India is a multi-functional approach that seeks customer inputs, comprehends traditional know-how and skill sets, indigenous knowledge, artisan and organizational capabilities, understands technical and competitive threats and opportunities, and considers a broadly defined set of stakeholders. The role of designer is the most crucial here- s/he is the backbone of any skill development program conducted for the artisans. The paper is an attempt to sketch the roles, attributes and characteristics of such a designer, as it stands imperative in the 21st century today.

Keywords: Perspective , Development Programs , Craft Sector , Multi-functional approach .

1 INTRODUCTION

Craft can be traced to the Ancient period through to the present day. The definition of crafts has grown from a mere vernacular status to more recent aesthetic appreciation of the craft product and strategic appreciation as a radical, innovative process, involving a variety of knowledge forms, including philosophy, aesthetics and technology. While in India, crafts have been emphasized as a product of “hand skills” with values and tradition imparted, in the western context, even computers and other technological tools are involved in the process of craftsmanship with ease. This clearly states that, crafts, in India, need to be addressed only in a regional and cultural context. Crafts are vessels of their own stories - of maker, community, material, process and place. That region can be a local cluster, a state or the country depending upon its relevance, marketability, and cultural background.

In this, the artisan becomes an important factor. An artisan, by performing valid and fruitful social functions for the community, earned for her/himself a certain status and a responsible position in the society. S/he was an heir to the people’s traditions and he wove them into his craft making it into an art. The bold local styles that the village artisans evolved operated as a great lever in the evolution of Indian art adding to the wealth and society of color and design.

Globalization has been able to link spaces, but has resulted in separating the past from the present. It is here that designers, and design as a professional activity, make appearance. In the context of India, designers bridge the gap between the market and the artisan, as today the artisan is geographically apart from his/her client, to be able to understand his/her aesthetic and socio-cultural needs. Designers help in finding the relevance of craft with respect to the artisan, the consumer and to the global market. Designers are thus an interface, between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, trying to match craft production to the needs of modern times and demands.

But it does evoke some new concerns, as to be it necessary for a traditional craft to find relevance in global market? With ritualistic crafts, that are no more prevalent in practice, the question of relevance becomes even more intense. How would a ritualistic craft find a place in a modern household and what will

be its function? If this goes through some changes, will it lose its identity as a craft? Along with considering everyone in mankind as a designer, it is also important to note the responsibility of the designer in such a case of intervention for reviving a dying craft or maintaining its existence. This also invites for importance given to a balance that needs to be created between designer and his inputs and the input of the artisan, in order to create a marketable product and yet sustain its identity.

21st century design emphasis cannot be solely on 'good form', but needs to develop strategies to solve actual issues. Various institutions, both government and non government, acknowledge the need to connect the design fraternity with the craftspeople, to provide them with holistic sustenance through their craft skills. Their programs aim at making India a major hub for creative processes for achieving a design-enabled innovative economy. One of the major issues that arise out of these programs is that the designers lack an understanding and sensibility of the ecosystems they work with. The process of imparting skills is very mechanical and discounts any human aspect. The urgent need is to understand that the artisans are not merely at the receiving end, but instead are a collection of stakeholders, and demand greater attention than ever before.

There are many drawbacks to these programs, as the design fraternity is well aware of. Rather than focusing attention on this, the paper attempts to define comprehensively the role and characteristics of a designer in skill development program in the crafts sector in India. It must be remembered that these are not clear cut benchmarks for the role of a designer. The role of the designer must be defined and explored regularly throughout each and every project, just as the other roles in skill development. Since design is an ongoing process, design roles evolve in relation to the ever changing project and group dynamics. Roles should be written down as much as they need to be regularly reviewed and reflected upon from the outset, both individually and collectively.

DESIGNER AS A GLOBAL CITIZEN:

Design has to continuously strive towards more socially inclusive, locally/ globally/ globally relevant solutions. It must progress from 'human-centric design' to 'life-centric design'. Craft designs display styles that are highly specific to regions. A well versed designer must know how to weave global demands into regional craft styles. While working with crafts and other traditional forms of expression, designers must be able to highlight the quality, look and feel of products and services that celebrate the most complex and rigorous application of traditional knowledge domains.

DESIGNER AS MARKETING PERSONNEL:

As crafts are utility based, and an economically viable product, they must respond to the demands of the markets, consumer needs, fashion trends and usage preferences. It is considered the role of the designer to interpret these changes accurately, and carrying out suitable implementations with thorough understanding and sensitized strategies. While doing this, the designer must consider the identity and relevance of the craft with the target market, and conduct the intervention accordingly. The target market should be able to decode the cultural values and semantics encoded in the product, which in turn will ensure the understanding of the craft in its true meaning. This can be made possible with a meaningful interaction between artisans and designers, to result in a proper development of craft, economically and aesthetically.

DESIGNER AS FACILITATOR AND ENABLER:

Craftsmen are also proud designers themselves. A centralized and universal educational or design assistance approach may only lead to crafts losing their regional flavor. Over emphasis on design as a "professional activity" has resulted in the underestimation of the value of an artisan, i.e. a non-professional designer in this case. If we consider an artisan as a non-professional designer, we can clearly see the context of the statement in relevance to craftsmen and their skills. While an artist is born or created when nurtured, a designer must be constantly able to examine, evaluate and be fueled by imagination, alive to context, driven by the delivery of increased robustness, dedicated to natural and social ecology, propelled by a gain-sharing approach, and must be obsessed with reaching out.

DESIGNER AS A MOTIVATOR:

A designer, while conducting the skill development workshops, must not stop at imparting technical or design skills; he must be able to find the positive and/ or relevant attributes (not just professional skills but entrepreneurial or administrative or human skills) in each artisan in the group, and

make an effort to hone them, for the larger good of the artisans and the community. He must also make an effort at resolving inter-personal conflicts, through discussion and communication in the group. Reflections upon various processes, through exercises such as role- swapping, can be extremely valuable in refining the service concept and developing future steps.

DESIGNER AS A COLLABORATOR IN LEARNING PROCESS:

The task of a designer is not to impart skills training; s/ he also learns in the process. A designer's learnings are in the form of understanding traditional knowledges, indigenous ways of thinking and newer ways of handling material. As each discipline brings its own knowledge to the collaboration, the role of a designer is also to understand each discipline as much as possible to use it to its best advantage. Awareness of alternate knowledge systems can also enhance his/ her own personality and ways of thinking. The aim here should be to entice further discussion, facilitating co-creation, so that the end products cater to the target markets.

DESIGNER AS AN ANTHROPOLOGIST:

Design can never happen in isolation; India being one of the best examples of this statement. As designers work for—and with—a wide range of people around the world, the knowledge and skills of anthropology can be seen as increasingly relevant to a situated and adaptable practice. A successful application of anthropological knowledge systems might help create products and services that respond to human values, interests, and experiences; thereby discovering valuable ways of engaging and innovating through well-informed design by drawing upon social theory, technological development, and design. In concerning themselves with how people engage with and negotiate ongoing continuity while encountering various systems of control, designers should be able to find interesting juxtapositions between two strands of knowledge- one stemming from techno-science discourse leading to diminishing interpretative flexibility, the other belonging to local practices characterized by a diversity of meanings.

DESIGNER AS A COMMUNICATOR:

A designer, while engaging with the artisan, is actually engaging in a two-way communication process. On the one hand, he is communicating the requirements and imperatives of the outside world to the artisan, so as to influence his creation of products; on the other hand, he is telling the world the story of that artisan, his life, his values, his skills and methods, etc. When the designer understands this role, he will be able to better justice to both the artisan and his product. Thus, he will be able to translate ideas and views into the media best suited to converse with the artisans and the eventual users of the service.

DESIGNER AS DISSEMINATOR OF NEW MEDIA:

We have never been so dependent on new media, such as the internet, than before. When the designer uses mobile apps such as Whatsapp, or Facebook or Pinterest, in order to discuss ideas, forms, methods and techniques of design, s/he is not only using new media as a medium of imparting training, s/he is actually asking the artisans to acquaint themselves and become adept in the use of the same. When such newer forms of communications are established, their association need not restrict to the formal setting; it can become a long lasting relation, which can benefit both parties.

DESIGNER AS A STORYTELLER:

When a designer works with an artisan to create a new product, it can be a worthwhile exercise to create a narrative on that product. In an era when products are not sold as products but as narratives and stories, they have the capacity to uncover and embed meaning in the designed product. When narratives are provided to showcase the journey of design of that product, the role of the designer is extended to that of storyteller – and design and design process then becomes an adventure- an adventure in which both the designer and the artisan are equal protagonists. Storytelling also helps create compelling experiences that build human connections. Thus the end user can create a personalized experience for her/himself. The whole process becomes more of an emotional experience, also affecting them more on a personal level in how they relate to the product. This might also create a niche market, and might infuse individual identity for the consumer in an age of mass production.

Thus a designer has to be an all-rounder, who knows about science and technology, about people

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and society, political issues and business methods, operations, and marketing. Those institutions hiring designers for skill development must also look out for the above mentioned attributes in a designer, as it will bridge the gap between the crafts and market demands of the country in the truest sense of the word. As Kamala Chattopadhyay wrote once, “What we seek today is not a repetition of the old pattern, be it Indian or colonial, but a positive contribution to strengthening the quality of current life.”