Introduction: Indian Design and Design Education

India in 2005, eight years beyond celebrating its half-century of independence, stands as the world's largest democracy (one billion citizens and counting). India is in a strategic geo-political position, with thousands of its citizens populating the high-tech corridors of the West and importing "Bollywood" movies to our neighborhood theaters, and other thousands boning up on baseball and football (soccer) to provide "authentic" English-speaking technical support from the Asian sub-continent to Western corporations. This is in addition to the thousands of Indians developing software while, in a cliché of juxtaposition that still is true, millions of their fellow citizens live without even basic sanitation and education. With cultures, languages, visual traditions, and craft traditions millennia old; with trade, commerce, and industrialization well-established; and with educational systems based on tradition, colonial-era models, and newer Western ones, India and her people work hard to develop and expand the rewards of democracy for all. Since 1947, Design has been part of the calculation, though some have argured that Gandhi employed the rhetoric of design much earlier.[1]

The papers in this special issue are the result of an open call; they have come from designers across India and elsewhere, at different stages of their design lives in practice and/or in teaching. Their papers present perspectives on the major issues of design and development in contemporary India, and provide historical and cultural context for the efforts of design schools and individuals. These authors reveal some answers to the questions involved in what India can and should be in the new century, and the role of design in that quest. Crafts, as early and continuing evidence of Indian ingenuity and skill, continue to play a part in Indian production—but what part and how large? Only implied in several articles is the use of computer technology. In some places, it has become a new craft skill, with better integration to come. Regrettably, there is no design voice from large-scale industry. The forces of globalization twist India in unique ways; the colonial language makes her an easy target and a useful partner for all manner of entrepreneurial schemes. Designers are faced with the need to develop strategies capable of responding to enormous audiences in a country in which culture provides familiar structure and shared values. One question that has been raised in this issue concerns what happens to cultural identity and social communities when the designers mix local practices and vernacular forms with elements imported from the increasingly pervasive culture of globalization.

1 See S. Balaram, "The Power of Representation, "*Design Issues* 5:2 (Spring 1989): 68–85.

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Ashoke Chatterjee, an active participant in early design education, provides historical background for governmental and industrial planning in relation to design, and marks points of progress, before setting out the current problems for design development. An integral part of past economic and industrial planning was the establishment of design schools to train the designers for industry. The American designers Charles and Ray Eames were part of that effort, and their work often is referenced by other authors.[2] Singanapalli Balaram, a teacher at the first school established, the National Institute of Design (NID), describes the traditional practices, the influence of colonial education, how current design education was integrated with these two conditions, and how it seeks to address contemporary problems, including craft practice, with fieldwork in local communities as one method.

From an outsider's perspective, Sherry Blankenship, an American design educator, gives her impressions of living in Ahmedabad as she describes her experience teaching at the National Institute of Design, where she proposed a project bridging Indian and Western cultures. The design projects explored the possible adaptation of some quintessential Indian products to a Western market, while maintaining their identity through vernacular forms and materials. The students' working methods involved more handwork than computers. Her interests and teaching approach led to difficulties with the host department, and illustrate some of the drawbacks to visiting faculty mentioned by Balaram.

Mahendra C. Patel, another founding teacher at NID, is concerned that the changes around him erode national and regional identities. The work of his typography students, from a variety of backgrounds, explores identity and new communication needs through language and its material form in alphabets and typefaces. Their work in regional languages and English proposes new hybrid forms[3] to address the Indian Diaspora and the diversity at home.

Underlying all creative practice are the cultural values shared by a majority of Indians. Lalit Kumar Das provides the reader with a short course in the structure and content of these values and theories: the cycles of life and the roles of humans within them; behaviors and relationships described in the mythical literature; and how products, systems, services, and environments are the expressions of these belief systems, with specific contemporary examples. Concentrating on one expressive form and practical product, the Kanchipuram sari (traditional women's garment), Aarti Kawlra describes the tightest form of integration of belief and production. She explains the social and cultural context that produces and maintains the auspiciousness of the exacting choice of colors and weaving of the fabric, the buying and gifting conditions, and the wearing of this particular "brand" of sari.

2 See a reprint of *The India Report* by Charles and Ray Eames in *Design Issues* 7:2 (1958): 65–73.

3 For a practical discussion of cross-cultural forms, see Steiner, Henry, and Ken Haas, *Cross Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

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Several authors discuss the ongoing cultural strengths of craft communities and the problems of making and keeping these craftspeople economically viable. Poonam Bir Kasturi, an educator experienced in consultation to craft practices, disputes some of the myths associated with "contemporizing" craft, and addresses the future through example: collaborations that include broad creativity training (reflection, critical thinking, and experimentation); bringing student groups to talk and work with craftspeople (another form of the fieldwork mentioned by Balaram); careful choices of new markets to maintain makers' identity and to avoid the social destabilization of craft communities.

In the face of welcome Western influences and those that are more involuntary, Indian designers struggle with a sense of identity as the familiar and vernacular forms that described their identity are under attack by more powerful forces. Kasturi's article treats the topic more generally, while Gaurav Mathur focuses on signboards in public streets and shows how traditional forms, materials, and processes have been pushed aside by Western corporate demands, and how different makers have coped with the new visual landscape. He suggests that this industry's response may be a model for other craft practices under similar pressure.

In her discussion of a totally modern creative form—film animation (an art and a craft)—Nina Sabnani relates the skewed perceptions of animation's worth and scope due to early government didactic use, and sees its future potential for creative and economic development as barely recognized but possible with expanded educational opportunities that add design to software training. In animation, Indian technical ability could be combined with storytelling traditions and talents to create new educational and entertainment forms. Here, too, Western companies have used Indian talent only for skilled production rather than initial creativity.

The impetus for this special issue on Indian design and design education comes from my experiences teaching and traveling in India in 2001. My colleagues and students introduced me to new ways of design thinking. I began to understand how the country's designers and educators saw their place in the great project of modern India, and how they were preparing their students for their roles. I extend my thanks to them for their openness and hospitality, and to the authors and other participants in the preparation of this issue.

Martha Scotford
Guest Editor

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