THE FIRST MAHESH BUCH MEMORIAL LECTURE

Design as Tool for
Economic Development in India

by
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Mahesh Buch

(1934-2015)

Mr. Mahesh Buch, an alumni of Pembroke College, Cambridge University, was Parvin Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School of the Princeton University. He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1957.

Mr. Buch held several important portfolios in his career and took voluntary retirement from the government service, as the Principal Secretary of the Government of Madhya Pradesh, in 1984, and founded the National Centre for Human Settlements and Environment in Bhopal for which he served as the Chairman until his death on 6th June 2015.

Mr. Buch also held several important positions, such as Vice Chairman – Delhi Development Authority; Director General of the National Institute of Urban Affairs; Vice Chairman – National Commission of Urbanization; Chairman – Lutyens Bungalow Zone Committee of the Government of India; Chairman – Committee on the Heritage Zone of Mehrauli; Chairman of Empowered Committee for the New Vidhan Sabha building in Madhya Pradesh, Chairman – Board of Governors ABV – Indian Institute of Information Technology and Management, Gwalior. He was awarded with Padma Bhushan for his services to the nation.

Mr. Buch was an outstanding urban planner and considered by many as the architect of modern Bhopal. He was a prolific writer and his articles on various aspects of governance and environment were authored in various journals and newspapers. He also published a number of books on governance, planning and environment.

Design as Tool for Economic Development in India

It is a privilege to be here in Bhopal with Nirmalaji and so many who knew Mahesh Buch and shared his passion for this, his karmabhoomi. To transmit Bhopal to future generations as more liveable and more beautiful was both vision and mission for Mahesh. Bhopal linked much else that absorbed his life and career as a civil servant, leader, institution builder, thinker, writer and of course as a devoted family man for whom this city was not just a project but the space that embraced those dearest to him. On my first visit to his National Centre for Human Settlements & Environment, Mahesh took me straight from the railway station on a city tour. It had one focus: the green that he had helped bring back to this city. Every tree was his pride, reminding us today of the quality Mahesh wanted for his city, his state and his country. We are at a time when the whole world is being made aware of climate change as a threat to future generations. Mahesh understood that caring for the earth means caring for each other, and involving every aspect of human society. That ethic drove the life and work which we are here to remember and to honour. It is also the ethic that should drive design education, the subject of our reflection together this evening, wherever it is conducted.

The dream

I first knew Mahesh and his dear brother Girish in Delhi when we were in college together in the mid-1950s. The capital was then a heady place for young Indians. The ideals of the Freedom movement and the inspiration of its leaders dominated our thoughts. The tragedy of Partition was faced with courage and compassion. Power had not yet corrupted the

city, and hope was the very air we breathed. In later years, Mahesh Buch would represent through his commitments, career and service the idea of India which motivated a whole generation that came to adulthood after Freedom. Mahesh reflected the Nehruvian vision of an India proud of its past, confident of its future, celebrating its diversity, and fearlessly meeting the challenges of transition by combining heritage with contemporary knowledge. Mahesh lived this dream of a new India. It is the context in which to remember him as we reflect on design, a discipline with only one purpose: to lift the quality of human lives and of the environments which surround them.

Design education: its roots

This subcontinent is a civilization unique in its unbroken history of design, stretching back thousands of years. The evidence is there at Mohenjodaro and right next door at Sanchi, where sculptured walls and gateways carry a veritable directory of ancient design. Yet none of our many languages has a term that quite captures the profession introduced to India through the National Institute of Design in 1963. NID was founded through an act of faith, at a time when 'design' was confused with art or engineering, just as today it is so often misunderstood as fashion. While not any one of these, design encompasses them all and every other stream of knowledge. As a problem-solving approach, design links learning to actual experience, acting as a bridge between disciplines and experiences, as well as between the past and the future. As a profession, it is acknowledged worldwide as indispensable to economic growth and market survival. It is this awareness that brings design education to Madhya Pradesh through the proposal for a new NID here in Bhopal.

In those early days, free India reached out to every source of wisdom, from its past and from the world over, in the tradition of Tagore and Gandhi. This confidence and hope brought to India in the 1950s a design team distinguished in post-War USA: Charles and Ray Eames of Los Angeles. The official invitation to the Eames was to draw on design experience to

assist India's transition into an industrial economy. The First 5-Year Plan had articulated a concept of modernization in harmony with both past and contemporary experience, synergizing mechanized production and agriculture. The Industrial Policy Resolution 1956 was specific in its support to village and small industries, and to the relevance of heritage in a new India. To communicate this, the late Pupul Jayakar curated an exhibition of Indian craft and performing arts at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955. Its design was assisted by Charles and Ray Eames. Jayakar began an intense conversation with them on India's effort to define its own modernity. Reports of this interaction in distant New York encouraged Jawaharlal Nehru to invite the Eames to India. A year later their India Report 1958[1], with its tribute to the lota as a supreme example of industrial design, would inspire the founding of NID and become an enduring classic in design literature. The India Report offered lofty ideals for Indian design: like the lota, it was to be an expression of service, dignity and love. A new Indian profession, the designer, was thus located within the mammoth task of nation building, and given an ethic to help balance the past with the present as well as with the future.

NID and after

The Eames visit led to their mentoring of NID at Ahmedabad as the first institution of its kind in the developing world, drawing on design disciplines formalized in pre-War Europe through the great Bauhaus and Ulm schools and elsewhere in the West. These were studied, tested and then moulded for Indian need. After curricula, the next task was to build a cadre of Indian design teachers, drawing from several disciplines. The challenge followed to attract the first design students into what was in the 1960s and 1970s an unknown career. When the first batch emerged from NID in 1976, they had to prove themselves within a protected market unfamiliar with competition, the driving force for design professionalism elsewhere in the world. Critical too was the need to protect the philosophy of the Bauhaus movement, which had

demonstrated the power of 'learning by doing', just as Tagore had attempted at Visva-Bharati. At NID this meant a conscious rejection of prevailing university systems, innovating instead a rigour in which student work was judged by real-life clients and not by examinations. This approach was a huge risk at a time when 'official recognition' was the only benchmark. It paid off as industry welcomed these young professionals, not just as graduates but as designers tested through a body of professional work. An important chapter in higher education had been written.

The journey of design practice in India can be traced from 1976, when NID's first graduates began their careers. Over the years, design education spread out from Ahmedabad, first to the Industrial Design Centre established at IIT Powai. It then moved beyond, and today's design education map includes among others campuses in Bangalore, Pune, Delhi, Coimbatore, Jaipur, Baroda and Guwahati. Some 40 design teaching institutions are listed today, and Madhya Pradesh can draw on this pool of experience and learn from both the opportunities and concerns which they represent.

With design education spreading to every corner of the country in response to burgeoning demand, the challenge is one of evaluating over fifty years of effort in terms of past promise as well as current reality. What has design contributed to India's priority needs? Who have benefited most from design application, and who are still left behind? How will design address the needs of both deprivation among millions and the demands of consumerism in a market already larger than all of Europe? Within globalization, how will designers enhance a quality that is both Indian and world-class? How will Indian design remain at the forefront of technological change and future need? Within these is a challenge of integrity, of understanding and protecting core values, of being able to understand the difference between quality and quantity, while acknowledging both. Integrity of purpose and in action is what we most honour in remembering Mahesh. It is also the quality

embedded in the Eames legacy of design ideals --- service, dignity and love --- and in the Ahmedabad Declaration on Industrial Design for Development which further articulated these benchmarks when the world came to India in 1979 for the first-ever UN conference on design: "Designers in every part of the world must work to evolve a new value system which dissolves the disastrous divisions between the worlds of waste and want, preserves the identity of peoples, and attends the priority areas of need for the vast majority of humankind"[2]. In this year of global ratification of new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, these are words are an urgent reminder.

A watershed period for Indian design opened in the 1980s and 1990s with massive changes in economic policy. So-called liberalization and globalization transformed the economy, while the computer and IT changed the face of all education. The takeover by market forces underlined a new reality of harsh competition at home and overseas. The term designer moved from noun to adjective, with such overwhelming new influences as fashion and instant connectivity to trends imported from elsewhere. The explosion in the marketplace, reflecting expanding buyer aspirations, has continued ever since. Corporates, social entrepreneurs, governments, politicians, policy-makers all talk about design and yet interpret design in their own and often conflicting ways. Yet professional role models have emerged through successful practices and studios, along with design-driven brands such as Titan, Fabindia, the Tata Nano, Bajaj and Neemrana. Designers also contribute to economic and social activities that range from advertising and media to craft, human rights and the environment. Yet careers are concentrated in corporates, despite important demonstrations at the bottom of the pyramid, where attracting and holding talent is difficult.

While design education now includes many institutions, it is pointed out that the number of applicants each year is now around 30,000, which is small when compared to other established professions. Design has also become a money-

making racket in which tuition shops attract young people with promises of glamour, riches and Green Cards. The late Prof I S Mathur of NID recently surveyed a large cross section of design stakeholders to understand current challenges[3]. His most important findings were a lack of patience, a demand for quick-fixes and the fact that even after 50 years, basic education in India is not in sync with what design education demands: independent thinking, working with hands, team capacities, and openness to interdisciplinary study rather than narrow specialization.   Students enter design education thinking in silos. The idealism with which design education began is dwindling. A culture of self-promotion defeats the humility that design service should demand. Mindless consumerism has taken over. Globalization is interpreted as dominating models from overseas. Like so much of education, design learning has become big business and design schools are in danger of becoming facility centers rather than spaces for value-based systems. There is a risk of design education being "hijacked by opportunity-led and profit-oriented private initiatives. Lack of thought leadership and paucity of committed faculty with experience and vision is evident in many graduates passing out of design education"[4], warns Jatin Bhatt, who leads design studies at Ambedkar University where his NID, NIFT and professional experience is guiding efforts toward design application beyond objects and products to areas of policy, public systems and areas of social relevance. These issues are engaging design educators, design students and above all the design professionals who have built the Indian profession over five decades. As Madhya Pradesh brings design education into 'the heart of India', it may be worth exploring what professionals are thinking and doing, and what their experiences might suggest to a state preparing its own design direction.

Professional voices on professional education

At about the same time as Prof Mathur's study, a group of design professionals came together in a Vision First initiative on creating competencies for tomorrow's needs. Their effort

was stimulated by official commitment to setting up four new NIDs, including one in Madhya Pradesh. Vision First[5] recommended that these new institutions should not replicate old models, but rather be bold and forward looking. They should be capable of integrated, radical new answers: repeatedly reframing problems, engaging with stakeholders, prototyping and testing solutions, exploring alternatives, visioning scenarios. This means building on what people know, and empowering them to become partners in shaping their design destinies. The emphasis on connecting local innovation and insights toward informed choices is echoed in NID Director Pradyumna Vyas' suggestion that a new design institute in Bhopal should begin with mapping MP's own design resources and needs, and then innovate a pattern of education that is specific to this location while drawing on expanding networks of experience and sharing. Vision First warned against building infrastructure based on pre-supposed forms of a design school based on stringent financial and architectural specifications, when a real need is for re-imagination.

Another cross-section of stakeholders participated in the preparation of this lecture: educators and designers I have known over decades of joint effort. Their analysis confirms these challenges and offers promising possibilities. Some urge radical change, estimating that design service today is reaching only 2% of India's millions. The shift from analytical capacities to acquiring a set of computer-aided skills represents a dilution, with young imaginations fueled by media paradigms of 'lifestyle' to which design must be subservient. Parents look for return on investment, making education a narrow pursuit of jobs. Suchitra Balasubramanyan (Ambedkar University, Delhi) points out that design education today is excessively oriented toward filling jobs rather than to creating new job opportunities.

Unlike Western experience, in the East culture should define and lead design, rather than design dictate or lead culture. This view is from Sudhir Sharma, who after graduating from

NID helped establish Pune as a design hub through one of India's most successful studios. It is echoed by textile scholar Noorjehan Bilgrami of the Indus Valley School of Design & Architecture in Karachi. She uses the example of Geoffrey Bawa, the Sri Lankan architect. His benchmarks of quality have "emerged from within and need no authentication from the outside world". She points out that an obsession with exports can lead to a domination of imported taste and fashion, rather than an Eastern ability to influence these through an alternative demonstration of modernity. For this, S Balaram suggests that teachers have to go back to inspiring, guiding, opening minds and eyes and not just providing knowledge. After a career at NID, this senior designer went on to establish the D J Academy of Design in Coimbatore. DJA is exploring new ways of responding to today's learners. This includes the case-study methodology, field trips, cross-disciplinary teamwork, use of the internet for sharing and discussion, shifting from past concepts of 'product design' to new understanding of 'service or experience design' (such as Flipkart and Uber), designing eco-systems, and stressing 'inclusive design' for those at the bottom rather than 'exclusive design' targeted at the top. NID alumnus Arvind Lodaya draws on his experience at the Srishti School of Design (Bangalore) to suggest that this huge and neglected market may need a business model different to a structured corporate model, leaning more toward a concept of co-creation through participatory research, planning and design. Co-design as a new ethos is endorsed by the Vision First effort as well as by Jatin Bhatt, who calls for the inclusion of critical sectors outside of organized markets and corporate reach. After her NID studies, Lakshmi Murthy conducted pioneering experiments in communication design for rural and marginalized communities in Rajasthan and elsewhere. Now at Srishti (Bangalore), she points to the work of film and animation graduates who have moved well beyond usual comfort zones to make important contributions. In her view, the design curriculum must now stress major components of field work to serve the marginalized: slums, small towns,

remote regions, the elderly and the differently able. Others suggest a reassessment of the pedagogy India imported from Europe, so as to respond to pressures for mass assembly-line education. The ones best equipped to do this are the professionals who have helped establish Indian standards that are globally respected.   What encouragement is now possible to move them into design education for re-vitalizing learning and service?

Experiments at curriculum innovation are already taking place. Nina Sabnani of the Industrial Design Centre (IDC) at IIT Powai draws attention to its proposal for an Open Design School under the National Design Innovation Network as a 'hybrid' that can use online and teaching centres countrywide. Ambedkar University (Delhi) offers a programme in Social Design with a focus on systems, services, community networks, policy development and governance interfaces.   To place designers in a market unfamiliar with such new capacities, AU proposes a Social Design Enterprise vehicle of support.   At NID, an entrepreneurship incubation facility is assisting social entrepreneurs such as Gaatha, an e-commerce facility for artisans that has just won recognition from US authorities.

Leadership for such change will have to come from teachers, and it is here that design education in India faces its most critical challenge. The credibility of early cohorts of professional designers reflected their apprenticeship under practicing designers who brought client service into classrooms and studios. Today's pressures dilute that strength, demanding that institutions rely increasingly on visiting faculty who cannot provide a round-the-clock interaction that once encouraged excellence. Abir Mullick (Navrachana University, Baroda) recalls that academic content rich with interdisciplinary teamwork was the hallmark spirit of NID's pioneering contribution, transforming intuitive designers into informed innovators capable of relating with India's diversity. India's most distinguished design educator, Prof H Kumar Vyas, pioneered product design

education at NID. He believes that in re-assessing educational patterns that were brought to India from European schools, one also needs to recall their irreplaceable strength in gradually erasing "the conventional distinction between 'student' and 'teacher' so that learners and mentors feel as partners in an exciting process of continuous exploration that leads to innovative thinking. This is the primary and most essential step in design as a problem-solving process. This sense of partnership that dissolves divisions between disciplines is the quality I would like to see endure in India's design education".

Design policy

Toward greater cohesion, the Government of India announced a National Design Policy in 2007, aimed at showcasing indigenous capabilities. An India Design Council was mandated to raise design education to global standards of excellence. Its thrust is toward upgrading and extending design institutes, encouraging design departments in colleges of engineering and architecture (significantly, art is not mentioned), upgrading the quality of design processes and introducing design in the K-12 education system as well as in vocational institutes. Enhancing design education engaged a workshop conducted by the Council in March 2014. It considered a Design Education Quality Mark that would draw on British experience in academic benchmarking "as an agreed point of reference for continuous enhancement, and for aspiring towards international best practice"[6]. It would assist students to choose from a wide range of programmes, help employers comprehend the standing of design institutes, and communicate issues of education quality to society at large. Yet there are reservations. While recognizing the need for critical platforms that determine education quality, Jatin Bhatt cautions against top-down accreditation models that work like the AICTE and restrict new imaginations that can re-define the discipline and the ways it can be taught. "Avoid recognition that infringes on academic autonomy so essential

for creative education" urges Prof Balaram. Recalling NID's experience, he reminds that "Real recognition comes for the real world", a truth reflected in the Institute's early battle for recognition which never compromised core values at the altar of UGC systems. Toward such confidence, educator M P Ranjan advocated the importance of design institutions unconditionally opening their resources for others to learn and use. His tragic passing a few weeks ago has removed a champion who practiced his passion for sharing, leaving behind a rich legacy of documentation and thought accumulated through long years at NID and at other efforts in design education[7].

An inner substance, an Indian idiom

India's own real world has been the true space for its unique experience in design as a force for change. Recognition for a new profession has been hard won, yet its current popularity brings fresh challenges, explored at a "Reinterpreting Design" dialogue at NID[8]. The institution that brought the profession to India saw a major risk of "everyone interpreting design in their own way, as they deem fit, most often to serve their own purposes", Design is often misinterpreted as a "cosmetic, gimmick or at best experiential utility only", obsessed with outward appearances that lack inner substance. "Many are using the word 'design' as a new mantra or a panacea" reducing design to a buzz word till some new term is found. An Indian idiom is still needed that can showcase the true powers and abilities of design, and most especially its capacity to impact human lives and human dignity.

The story of India's tryst with design for development is thus one of achievements, failures and everything in-between. Above all, there has been the courage to try, and try again. The thoughts shared here today are examples of ferment within designers and design institutions seeking to serve an India in many ways unrecognizable from the one within which the India Report 1958 was articulated. Yet many of those core challenges are not only intact but even more intractable. In

this year of 2015, the global community is internalizing the vast implications of new Sustainable Development Goals. These bring to mind an utterance 50 years ago by Romesh Thapar: "There is now a deep contradiction between the value systems of established societies and the future to which we aspire. It is an explosive situation. The anarchism, nihilism, frustration and anger inherent in this situation can only be tackled by an alternative value system which has been carefully worked out, justifiable in humanistic terms, capable of providing the answers to the challenges posed by our massive entry into the era of science and technology"[9].

Mahesh Buch believed that creating this value system and demonstrating it in action is the greatest challenge of our time --- a challenge for the Indian profession of design as it celebrates its achievements and voices its aspirations, and for every one of us who believe in a just and equitable future. That was the dream to which Mahesh dedicated himself with such untiring zeal. May he live on as our example and inspiration.

1. India Report, National Institute of Design. 1958
2. UNIDO-ICSID-India 79: Design for Development. Ahmedabad Declaration.
3. I.S. Mathur, Design Education in India, NID 2014
4. Quotations and views expressed are from communications to the author.
5. www.visionfirst.in
6. Design Education Quality Mark, Program Reviewer Training Workshop, 25-26 March 2015. India Design Council/NID Ahmedabad
7. http://www.designforindia.com and archive at https://ahduni.academia.edu/RanjanMP
8. Design Dialogues: Reinterpreting Design. NID. October 2015
9. Romesh Thapar was a pioneering design thinker deeply involved with early efforts in Indian design education.

Ashoke Chatterjee

Ashoke Chatterjee was Executive Director of National Institute of Design (NID) from 1975 to 1985, Senior Faculty Advisor for Design Management & Communication from 1985 to 1995 and Distinguished Fellow at NID from 1995 until retirement in 2001. NID in Ahmadabad is internationally recognised as one of the foremost institutions in the field of design education, research and training.

His career has spanned engineering, marketing, international civil service, as well as India's public sector and its tourism industry before his appointment as the director of NID in 1975. After serving at NID for 25 years he now assists design education in India, Pakistan and the UK. A Development Communication Specialist and Volunteer, he focuses on drinking water, sanitation and other environmental priorities, education and needs of special children.

Ashoke Chatterjee became part of the Rural University team that worked with people of the Jawaja block, which included about 200 villages with a population of approximately 80,000 people in a draught prone district of Rajasthan a region of high poverty and no resources. The Jawaja project was an educational experiment–in–action based on the idea that development activities must be a vehicle for learning. Due to his efforts weaving and leatherwork became the basis for economic activities, and through the participation of designers, NID tested the relevancy of bringing design education in this rural context. Now Jawaja people are in a commandable position to participate in a competitive national and overseas markets. In the craft sector, Jawaja has become is symbol of the capacity of Indian artisans to carry their heritage into contemporary relevance.