

Emerging role of design in India

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Design as an organized activity or practice is nascent in India and several other emerging nations. The journey or evolution of profession of design in India is merely fifty odd years.

In 1957-58, Government of India invited industrial designer Charles & his wife Ray Eames to give their recommendations for setting up design training programmes to serve small industries. It was upon The Eames India Report that National Institute of Design was set up as an autonomous institution for design education in 1961. One of the most significant recommendations of the report was to look at design as an activity to solve the problems of our times with tremendous service, dignity & love. This was in keeping with the Indian culture & ideology.

Scope & intent of design intervention has evolved tremendously and we have moved from value addition to value creation by design.

In the sixties, design was defined as a means to add value in the context of industrialization as India started focusing on manufacturing goods for self-reliance in the sixties. Early design education in India was geared towards preparing professionals to keep the quality of manufactured goods competitive. There was also an attempt to sensitise designers towards traditional crafts so as to not lose out on developing & nurturing use of local materials & skills.

The next shift took place in the eighties when the government liberalised Indian economy and allowed for imports & exports to remain globally relevant. Quality was no more the benchmark of competitiveness as every business could access the same technology, materials & processes for manufacturing. At this point, the role of design in India changed from being at the periphery of development to utilising knowledge based on technology & markets for finding holistic solutions that worked towards affecting differentiation through design.

Information technology created the following wave of change in design panorama. As one of the rapidly advancing economies, India witnessed large socio-economic changes in the last decade. Businesses started witnessing the power of design-led distinction or profit by design. User-led insights were the prerogative of designers till this point. Digital revolution changed that, as more & more businesses started depending upon user interactions for their survival & growth. Designers assumed the role of creating collaborative, participatory and even co-creative opportunities between users & businesses.

Designers were no more needed to just design objects, services or identities. They proved themselves capable of designing processes & systems to make better sense out of any eco-system. Design thinking was getting accepted as a progressive way towards creating value.

Today, design is firmly rooted in empathy towards the user, the system and the environment. It has become a front-runner for achieving greater good in any socio-economic fabric.

Design is not directly focused on sales or conversions anymore as that is understood to be a short-term strategy. For creating lasting value, designers are finding newer ways to induce conversations between users & brands or businesses. They believe that to be the only way forward for large, orbit-shifting impact.

Early designers were craftsman who created desirable objects skillfully. As they focused towards industrial revolution, they became “functional” designers. On riding the wave of manufacturing, they started creating distinction through form, surface, colour & even words and they became “stylists”. Then came the age of innovation; of newer ways of doing things. The words design & innovation started being spoken in the same breath. Were all innovations design-led? Not really. But could all designers become innovative? Certainly; as that was the need of emerging technologies & global communities.

All these skills come together to give a new edge to today’s designer. But what is really unique about the designer now is the emotional quotient and her ability to evoke emotional responses through design.

What was once a self-expression by the designer has transformed into being the expression of the user today. In a seamless world, designers have empowered users to assume far greater responsibility of their future than the designer.

Designers were expected to solve one problem at a time. Today, they are not only solving multiple, complex problems in parallel, but also managing to interlink the solutions in a way that creates previously unknown ways of living.

Designers are aware of that the power of design is far greater when democratised. They are finding ways to impart design thinking to create design-aware societies that will take right decisions for the future of this planet.

