

THE DESIGN PROFESSION AS A MEANS TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY: THE SPECIAL CASE OF INDIA

Katalin Máthé

University of Public Service Institute of Environmental Sustainability, Ludovika tér 2,
1083 Budapest, Hungary
mathe.katalin@uni-nke.hu

Since the introduction of concentrated energy resources into economies and the corresponding exponential growth in production brought about the Industrial Revolution, the parallel processes of the concentration of wealth and the emergence of extreme poverty have occurred. Under such circumstances, the major challenge for the healthy functioning of human and non-human ecologies is the fair allocation of tangible and intangible resources to meet everyone's needs. At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), in her famous speech (Gandhi, 1972), identified the eradication of poverty and satisfying other pressing human needs as a primary step to be taken towards sustainability.

This paper reasserts that historically, the invention of the design profession was one of the means to reinvigorating impoverished groups and locations. Indira Gandhi's address will be examined in detail to identify her take on environmentalism and its connection to the ideals of her time. Through highlighting the major factors that contributed to the birth of design education and profession in India it will be shown that although we tend to view design as an ornament of the market capitalist society, the original motives behind developing this discipline were charged with humanitarian ideals and was part of a joint effort to reducing social and economic disparities and thus to build stronger and more resilient communities.

1. Introduction

India's exquisite standards in crafts and manufacturing made it a major attraction for global trade over the centuries. Somewhat contradicting this, when it comes to India's heritage, it is its spirituality and religious diversity that first come to mind. This paper examines the philosophical roots and ideological precedents that led to the establishment of the design profession as an activity that furthers the realization of these ideals on the Indian subcontinent. The goal of this investigation is to demonstrate that design is not a superfluous addition to the production process, which can be eliminated in the name of resource optimization. Neither is design restricted to technology and manufacturing, so that sustainable design could be equated with the application of sustainable production processes.

1.1 A brief genealogy of Indira Gandhi's Stockholm address in the emerging environmental philosophy

While during the post-war decades when the industrially developed part of humanity was bathing in its successes of “the conquest of the Everest” or the “space conquest” – the arrogance of such phrasing being objected the Indira Gandhi – one of her opening statements about the goal of the Stockholm conference “this gathering represents man's earnest endeavour to understand his own condition and to prolong his tenancy of this planet” very accurately condensed the philosophy that India has contributed to environmentalism. Besides the Club of Rome's (1972) first report, “The Limits to Growth”, this very speech became the key consideration in Willy Brandt's report to the World Bank on the state of the environment, titled “North-South: A Program for Survival” (Brandt, 1980). Later, the arguments of this study were further developed during a several-year UN-commissioned research headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland (born in 1939), which was summed up in the sustainability manifesto “Our Common Future” (Brundtland, 1987), whose main chapters were drafted by the Indian economist and international civil servant Nitin Desai (1941).

1.2 The atmosphere of the Stockholm meeting and Indira Gandhi's stance

The divide between the developed and developing countries was widely voiced during the conference (Figure 1). The objections of the latter, headed by China, heavily criticized the United States foreign policy in Indochina. Indira Gandhi's statements were not explicitly anticolonial-nationalistic in nature; she provided a constructive analysis that aimed at identifying realistic long-term solutions. She did not intend to blame culprits when she described the varying roles each nation played in the industrialization and the resulting unprecedented welfare of the West: “Many of the advanced countries of today have reached their present affluence by their domination over other races and countries, the exploitation of their own natural resources. They got a head start through sheer ruthlessness, undisturbed by feelings of compassion or by abstract theories of freedom, equality, or justice”.

She emphasized that the Earth is important so that it remains habitable for each human society. Although she praised India's spiritual heritage and its inherent respect for all living united in Life, she also acknowledged that there were significant departures from this ideal even in her own homeland throughout history. The primary aim of environmentalism, in her view, was not to conserve nature from human exploitation. The battle had to be won within, through recognizing that beyond all exploitation lies an insatiable desire to demonstrate superiority and a complete lack of consideration for the other.



Figure 1: Indira Gandhi delivering her address at the UN Environmental Conference in 1972

1.3 Indira Gandhi on the use of technology and spirituality

India's former Prime Minister's approach to technology is an outcome of her admittedly anthropocentric view. According to Hinduism, human birth is a rare and invaluable grace of God, and preserving its dignity is of prime importance. As Indira Gandhi's several claims indicate, she has viewed scientific advancement and technology as greatly assisting this purpose. In her concluding remarks, she stated that embracing technology did not mean to abandon India's rich spiritual heritage; instead, the experience and tools with which science and technology have equipped humanity must be aligned "with higher levels of thinking."

She emphasized that spirituality and a state of relative physical comfort achievable through technology are not mutually exclusive, reminding us that the greatest philosophical developments occurred in the most affluent periods of Indian history. To underpin this point, she gave a definition of spirituality that could serve as guidelines for a sustainable interpretation of growth and development: "The doctrines of detachment from possessions were developed not as a rationalization of deprivation but to prevent comfort and ease from dulling the senses. Spirituality means the enrichment of the spirit, the strengthening of one's inner resources, and the stretching of one's range of experience".

1.4 The need for a new value system

With her speech, Indira Gandhi was the embodiment of a philosophy that did not promote values according to which only a select few may prove to make a useful contribution to humanity. She highlighted the relativity of the prevailing utilitarian ethics and its practical application, the efficiency movement, for being founded on the false assumption "that man's cardinal interest is acquisition". Those who do not align with the "efficient man" ideal are regarded as lesser breeds. Her main concern was whether "the growing awareness of 'one earth' and 'one environment' guide us to the concept of 'one humanity'?" and emphasised the need for universal cooperation: "There is no alternative to a cooperative approach on a global scale to the entire spectrum of our problems".

Her most important conclusions that highlight the ideals behind the promotion of both rural reconstruction work and design education are the following: "We hope that the renewed emphasis on self-reliance ... will also promote the search for new criteria of human satisfaction... We must re-evaluate the fundamentals on which our respective civic societies are based and the ideals by which they are sustained... We must concern ourselves not only with the kind of world we want but also with what kind of man should inhabit it. We want thinking people capable of spontaneous self-directed activity, people who are interested and interesting, and who are imbued with compassion and concern for others."

2. Rabindranath Tagore's legacy in education and rural reconstruction

2.1 Historical background

A very brief introduction to Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) age serves to highlight the cultural background in which not only Indira Gandhi's philosophy was grounded, but also in which the ideals of rural reconstruction and design education policies grew half a century later (Chatterjee and Khadpekar, 2018). The Nobel laureate poet was also an educator and a rural reformer who had personally known the soon-to-be first female Indian Prime Minister, while in the mid-1930s, Indira Nehru was a student at his reform

educational institution named Vishwa Bharati in Shantiniketan. While Rabindranath Tagore characterized the young Indira as “Priyadarshini,” meaning looking at everything with kindness, she remembered her student years as “it was the totality of the experience and what it helped you to become... I think what I learned most at Shantiniketan was the ability to live quietly, no matter what was happening outside. This has always helped me to survive” (Gupta, 2004).

This testimonial suggests that even though Tagore has experienced his life-long mission as a failure, in limited cases, he did succeed in achieving his goal: creating a new Indian personality. His disillusionment with the swadeshi movement, which for a short period he was ardently affiliated to, and his first-hand experience of the destituteness of the rural population contributed to his deep conviction in the reformatory power of education. In his own wording: “I believe that all human problems find their fundamental solution in education. I know that all the evils, almost without exception, from which my land suffers are solely owing to the utter lack of education of the people” (Gupta, 2004).

Although the swadeshi movement promoted self-reliance and self-respect through a revival of the cottage industry, what it lacked and eventually led to Tagore's break from this type of patriotism was its sectarianism, its failure to turn over every rock and leaving the major ills of Indian society – rural poverty, the caste system, the tension coming from the coexistence of multiple cultures – untouched. Tagore was determined to revive an Indian heritage that provided solutions for disaccords both locally and globally and emphasized that the ability to mold an integrated society while preserving the differences within may become India's unique contribution to humanity.

2.2 Tagore's radical pedagogy

Tagore's educational principles were closely linked to his social ideals. In his view, school was the training ground to become one's best self through which to serve society. But to him the perfectibility of man was not merely a matter of social action, education; he always noted the importance of both free will and divine intervention: “It is not enough to remove the wants; you can never remove them completely from outside. The far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants” and later added: “We have come to this world to accept it and not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence” (Gupta, 2004).

Learning through experience – which included painful ones as well – and anchoring theory into practice were two of the factors that fuelled his own relentlessness and were made the guiding principles for his educational experiments. Although he has always longed for a life dedicated solely to poetry, when he encountered the deprivation of the locals while working as the intendant on the family's rural estates, he felt compelled “to come out of the seclusion of my literary career and take part in the world of practical activities”. He extended the spiritual retreat Shantiniketan – “abode of peace” in Sanskrit – established by his father earlier into an experimental educational institution with the aim of bringing the urban elite, the rural population, and the international intelligentsia together with the hope to achieve what he called “the spiritual unity of man”. He argued for the indispensability of this interrelatedness as follows: “the villages are the cradles of life, and if we do not give them what is due to them, then we commit suicide. Modern civilization is depriving the villages of life-stuff and draining away everything from the villages to the pampered towns. To counteract this is the idea which I have in mind in my school” (Gupta, 2004). He

built the school with the conviction that man could become truly human by responding creatively and sympathetically to his environment.

2.3 Western culture in an independent India

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was a more popular figure than Rabindranath Tagore in leading the population of the Indian subcontinent to an equitable future. Their mutual appreciation (Figure 2) towards each other manifested in how they addressed each other – the poet was the first to call Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi 'Mahatma' (great soul) while Gandhi applied the title 'Gurudev' (divine teacher) to Tagore. Gandhi's praise of Tagore aptly summed up the quality of their relationship: "You have been to me a true friend because you have been a candid friend often thinking your thoughts aloud" (Gupta, 2004).

They both aimed to uplift the largest, and at the same time most overlooked class of India, peasantry, but their methods were different, stemming from their varied take on to what extent India should break from Western rule and its culture. Tagore objected to Gandhi's spinning movement that encouraged every Indian to burn their Western-style clothing and to return to the wear of khadi, which they spun for themselves. The movement was launched with the intent to strengthen economic self-reliance and social unity, but as Tagore has pointed out, it was rather a nationalistic recruitment strategy that turned a blind eye to real social problems and was also a 'great menace' to the ideal of universal harmony.

Corresponding to this political act disguised as cottage industry revival, their other point of disaccord has developed around the use of science and technology. Tagore was against any ideal with an outcome of division of any sort, and in his lecture "Sikshar Milan" (The Union of Cultures) (Tagore, 1921), he asserted: "Secular knowledge was in the possession of the European thinkers and scientists, and we in the East who need to seek their help... If we are biased against Western science only because it belongs to the West, we shall not only deprive ourselves of the principles it has to teach but pull down our own eastern spirituality" (Gupta, 2004). He stressed the need for the establishment of educational institutions where the unity of spiritual and scientific knowledge would be cultivated.



Figure 2: Mahatma Gandhi with Rabindranath Tagore

3. A brief history of design education in India

3.1 Shantiniketan and the Bauhaus

After being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, Tagore gained not only international recognition but financial means that allowed him to invite leading researchers from all over the world into his school at Shantiniketan. Among them was the Austrian-born art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993), who, after Tagore's visit to Weimar in 1921, organized a joint exhibition (Kulturstiftung des Bundes, 2025) of Indian artists and those of the Bauhaus as early as the end of 1922 in India. It would be hard to tell which educational institution was more radical in its pedagogies – the Bauhaus, although under the guidance of as charismatic a personality as Walter Gropius (1883-1969), did not possess such an uncompromising ideology and corresponding educational principles as those of Shantikatan. Thus, besides the ever-conservative political climate, the clashing approaches of its Masters eventually led to the demise and the eventual closure of the Bauhaus.

Neither did the original spirit of Shantiniketan survive the passing of its founder, although Tagore has repeatedly asked Mahatma Gandhi to preserve the school's unique approach for posterity. His educational strategies, in his own words: "my idea, my dream, has been to create free human beings who should be surrounded by an environment of creative work" (Gupta, 2004) were integrated into design pedagogies that were formulated after India became independent and governed itself free from British rule.

3.2 The Eamses in India and the birth of the National Institute of Design (NID)

After the Second World War, the emerging supremacy of the United States made it an attractive partner both economically and culturally (Grober, 2012). North America became a prime target for India, where it sought opportunities to introduce its potential and to seek expertise that could assist its development. During the preparation of an exhibition on Indian crafts in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the prominent American designer couple, Charles Eames (1907-1978) and Ray Eames (1912-1988), were invited to India by the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), with the support of the Ford Foundation. During their 3-month stay (Mathur, 2011), the Eameses extensively traveled in India, after which they drafted up their conclusions in a concise report (Eames and Eames, 1997). In this document, they outlined a pathway for the integration of India's rich craft culture into a uniquely Indian design discipline, which they deemed to be a considerable driving force of the country's economic development.

The trending Mecca of the Indian textile industry, Ahmedabad, was the chosen location for the design institution recommended by the Eameses. In the year of its foundation in 1961, the design pedagogies of the National Institute of Design began to formulate, following the creative tradition established by Tagore, who was also responsible for the very early introduction of the Bauhaus to India. During the 1960s, NID also hosted several collaborations and educational exchanges with leading Western experts. Among the invitees were graphic designer Adrian Frutiger (1928-2015) and the architects Frei Otto (1925-2015) and Louis Kahn (1901-1974), who all helped to elaborate the structure and the curriculum of the new school.

3.3 Rural reconstruction through design – a success story

Rabindranath Tagore's model school in Sriniketan, established in 1922 for the education of the rural population, did not bring any remarkable success. The strategy to assist impoverished groups of the countryside to organize themselves into self-reliant cooperatives through which they could supply for all their needs was revisited in the 1970s by the professors at the National Institute of Design. As a result, the collaboration of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (IIMA) and NID, the Jawaja Project (2022), was launched in 1975. Jawaja is a village in the Ajmer district of Rajasthan, a drought-prone region that comprises about 200 villages. The design-based revival scheme proved to be very resourceful in re-empowering its declining population.

Instead of an insistence on inventing drought-resistant farming methods, the participants of the project opted for reinvigorating the local traditional leather and weaving crafts. The focus was not only on the design and the educational aspects of the project but also on the financial and economic realities. As a result, a cottage industry-based cooperative, the Artisans' Alliance of Jawaja, was created. The associates of the alliance managed the entire lifecycle of the newly designed products, thus reaching wider markets and greater control over their procurements, finances, and sales. The thus established network is still operating today, not neglecting innovation, and keeping its products highly valued by its consumers. Another outcome of the project is that the study of Indian craft traditions became an integral part of the NID curriculum with an ever-growing archive of India's craft heritage.

3.4 The Ahmedabad Declaration and the Crafts Council of India (CCI)

The unique pedagogy of NID was recognized with several prestigious awards, and in 1979, the Institute gave home to an international convention on design. Several points of the manifesto (National Institute of Design, 1979) drafted by the representatives of 37 attending countries echo not only the thoughts of the giants on whose shoulders design education has developed, but also forestall several ideas of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals: "...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 [hu]mankind...".

An initiative that highlights the weight of these words is the Crafts Council of India, founded in 1964, which unites the efforts of those with the above aim, several of them professors at NID. The Crafts, Economics, and Impact Study undertaken by the CCI in 2011 (Crafts Council of India, 2011), however, introduces a harsher reality than the success of the Jawaja project would suggest. In the document, the handicraft sector is named as the second largest source of employment in India, involving 200 million people, of which over 50 % are women. Several aspects of the ill-management of this sector are presented, of which the overarching criticism is its rather utilitarian approach that disregards the key aspects of ecological thinking.

4 Conclusions

The paper has highlighted the ideals shared by sustainability philosophy and by the design profession through introducing the common ideological sources of India's first design institution, NID, and Indira Gandhi's 1972 Stockholm speech. It has been shown that via the radical pedagogies Rabindranath Tagore experimented with in his reform schools, key concepts of Hinduism were reinterpreted to perfect humans

towards the ideal citizen who is to inhabit a sustainable earth. Utilitarian values were questioned by each of the mentioned intellectuals, who emphasized the importance of a “cooperative approach” and a “creative work environment”. Thus, they took sides with the ecological version of efficiency, which, instead of eliminating the superfluous and finding the one best practice, aims at the optimal circulation of all resources available to a community. One of the manifestations of this principle is the prosperous functioning of village communities, a goal shared by India’s sustainable thinkers. Reinvigorating village communities via design is not unique to India, nor are the successes and failures of such projects. As per the ecological approach, the goal is not to distill the one best practice, which means that the existence of a few failures does not entail that the strategy is altogether ill-conceived. It has been a long time since merging craft activities with design as a means for rural development was last applied in Hungary. Although these efforts were put to a halt for various reasons and are little mentioned in present-day design discourse, they did mark our cultural heritage and thus are deserving of being revisited.

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