

Moving with the Times in India Re-thinking the Foundation Course in Design

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Abstract ‘Design is a protean, open ended and versatile term, which, over the years, has gathered many dimensions and definitions within the folds of its discourse. The impetus to formulate a manifesto for a pluralistic discourse such as design, comes from the growing critical reflections on modern dominant paradigms of education as embodied in Indian institutions of technical education, vis-à-vis the demands of a larger developmental paradigm of the state. Leading institutions of technical education, while striving towards excellence in developing competencies in specialized fields of engineering and technology, are now increasingly concerned with augmenting opportunities for holistic education.....This, in turn, compels an interrogation and re-imagining of academic processes and structures, curriculum and pedagogy for enriching the existing design departments as well as the engineering, sciences, architecture, humanities and management streams.’ (The Design Manifesto by Ministry of Human Resource Development, India, 2013).

The social, cultural, economic, technological and ecological challenges facing us today requires a new discourse on how we define design. This includes the changing role of the designer in the future. The world is changing rapidly, and so too are designers who continually adapt to these changes to define new roles for themselves. What implication does this have for the future of design education? This in-progress research into design education, proposes that as designers continually expand the boundaries of the design discipline, adding new dimensions and adapting to the changing circumstances, so too must design education and more specifically, the Foundation Course for Design. The foundation year originated at the Bauhaus in 1919 as the Basic or Preliminary Course and evolved after 1945 at Ulm and Basel. In its emerging period, design was focused on individual products. Today, however, to be relevant to contemporary society, designers need to be able work on complex issues that are interdisciplinary and much broader in scope. 21st century design education needs to be able to apply design and develop strategies to solve real issues and not assume that all solutions should culminate as a ‘form’.

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Keywords Design education · Foundation course · 21st Century indian context

1 The ‘Basic Course’ or ‘Foundation Course’ in Design Education

The Bauhaus was a state sponsored initiative of an early model of a design school, which integrated the artist and the craftsman while bridging the gap between art and industry. All entering undergraduate students in design are required to take the Foundation Course in the first year. Basic design as it is offered in the ‘Basic’ or ‘Foundation’ Course has evolved from a need that was originally perceived and dealt with at Bauhaus and Ulm as a critical orientation to design thinking and action.

1.1 The ‘Vorkurs’ or the ‘Basic Course’ at the Bauhaus

The first Basic Course (Fig. 1) planned for one term in 1919, presented Johannes Itten with three tasks [3]:

1. To liberate the creative forces and thereby the artistic talent of the students. Their own experiences and perceptions were to result in genuine work. Gradually, the students were to rid themselves of all the dead wood of convention and acquire the courage to create their own work.
2. To make the students’ choice of career easier. Here exercises with materials and textures were a valuable aid. Each student quickly found the material with which he felt the closest affinity; it might have been wood, metal, glass, stone, clay or textiles that inspire him most to creative work. Unfortunately, at that

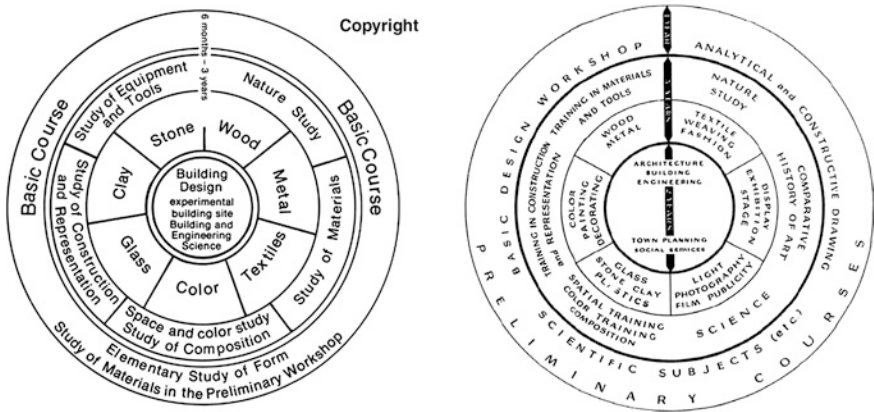


Fig. 1 Syllabus of the Weimar Bauhaus, 1923 and The New Bauhaus, Chicago, 1937

time the Basic Course did not have a workshop, where all the basic skills such as planning, filing, sawing, bending, gluing and soldering could be practiced.

3. To present the principles of creative composition to the students for their future careers as artists. The laws of form and colour opened up to them the world of objectivity. As the work progressed it became possible for the subjective and objective problems of form and colour to interact in many different ways.

The graduates of this Basic Course were expected to [8]:

1. To learn a craft in the workshops of the Bauhaus
2. Prepare for future cooperation with industry

Key design slogans of this era included:

(1) Truth to Materials; (2) The House—A Machine for Living; (3) Form Follows Function

When Bauhaus closed down in 1933, most of the master educators migrated to the United States of America, where the established professional institutes of higher learning absorbed them. While many Bauhaus ideas were integrated into the American culture, the reception of these ideas reduced a complex and multifaceted phenomenon to a simple formula [5]. Lerner claimed that the context, writing and teaching of the master educators of ‘Vorkurs’ were largely buried by time.

1.2 The ‘Grundkurs’ or ‘Basic Course’ at HfG, Ulm

After the World War 2, a new German design school, HfG, an initiative of The Scholl Foundation, was founded in Ulm, based on some of the tenets of the Bauhaus. The course of study at HfG lasted four years—one year of the Basic Course and three years of specialization and would end with a diploma in either Product Design, Visual Communication, Building and Information (Fig. 2). The teaching comprised one half of practical design work and the other half of lectures and seminars.

1. Products were meant to be as long-lived and functional as possible, acceptable with respect to social and ecological criteria and to take into account changing political condition and production technologies.
2. The school’s pedagogical concept, the so-called Ulm Model was characterized by a new system oriented design methodology and the encouragement of interdisciplinary teamwork.

Herbert Lindinger in his forward to the book “Ulm Design” tells us that the HfG Ulm had been through six phases of development. They had already developed a critical approach to design education and design theory that was well documented and disseminated by the Ulm magazine 1–21 from 1955 to 1968. He states:

The third phase, 1956-58, was dominated by the teaching of Otl Aicher, Maldonado, Gugelot and Vordemberge-Gildewart. These instructors tried to build a new and markedly closer relationship between design, science and technology. This was the first manifestation of the Ulmer Modell, the Ulm model

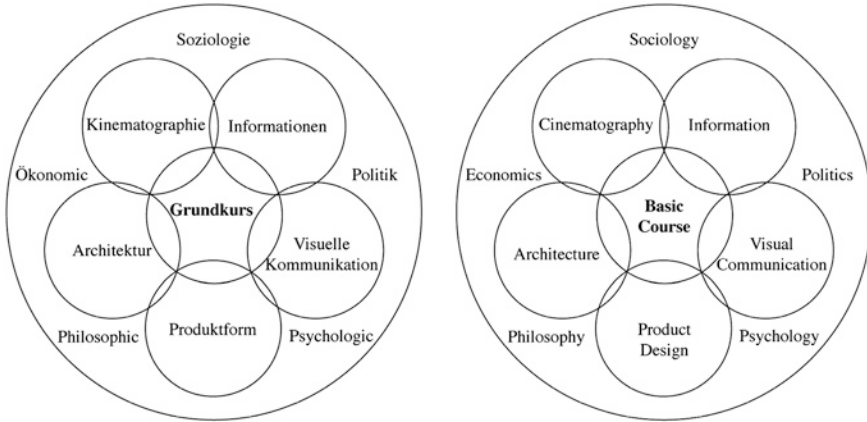


Fig. 2 Hochschule für Gestaltung curriculum (1951)

Under the guidance of Aicher and Maldonado a strong effort was made to create a new balance between theory and practice and between science and design. An attempt was made to reintegrate the departments by introducing interdisciplinary project themes and ideas. The HfG evolved a model of training that aimed to give designers a new, and rather more modest and cautious, understanding of their own role.

The first ecological themes were starting to appear and the conception of the Basic Course underwent an enormous change. In the realm of theory, the first steps were taken toward design analysis. There was a new profession to be defined and the instructors in the Product Design department exerted considerable influence by formulating job definition and outlining a framework for professional training (as per original, pg 5, Lindinger 1991).

As design was now to concern itself with more complex things than chairs and lamps, the designer could no longer regard himself, within the industrial and aesthetic process in which he operated, as an artist, a superior being. He must now aim to work as part of a team, involving scientists, research departments, sales people, and technicians, in order to realize his own vision of a socially responsible shaping—Gestaltung—of the environment. Under Maldonado, “a new Basic Course came into being, which broke away more and more clearly from Bauhaus concepts and absorbed the lessons of perceptual theory and semiotics [6].”

1.3 The National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad (NID)

It was this Basic Course that Kumar Vyas understood deeply at Ulm and introduced to the new batch of Product Design students when the Postgraduate course was offered to graduate engineers in 1967 at NID. Early examples of the Basic Design assignments as well as the early projects and the methods used in these

projects that echo the Ulm paradigm as well as the muted shades of grey and colours that were a hallmark of the HfG Ulm way.

An extensive photo-documentation of students of the Foundation Course from five design schools in India over a few years was conducted as data collection for a rich description of the current Foundation Course. The data demonstrates a universality that exists in design schools today. This partial inert state could well be attributed to the pedagogy borrowed, repeated and replicated over decades.

2 The Story of Design Moving with the Times in Post Independent India

Design as an activity in India is as ancient as its civilization. India has had rich and immense traditional and extremely skilled craftspeople whose skills have been passed on from one generation to another through several centuries. India has such a depth of handcrafted skills, techniques and artifacts. For centuries, handicraft items that combined beauty and utility were crafted in a sustainable way serving the needs of the local markets without any apparent damage to the environment. During the independence movement, the ideals of simple living and right thinking was advocated along with the rejection of British made goods, the promotion of Swadeshi and the spinning and weaving of the Khadi. Post independence, the government proceeded to look for means to make available a source of income to huge population. Acute power shortages, forced an effort to revive the handloom and handicrafts industries [1].

2.1 Craft Sector and Caste Factor

Kamaladevi Chattorpadhya and later, Pupul Jayakar took up the challenge to revive the craft traditions and in making them competitive in local and export markets. Because of their herculean efforts, many traditions of textile and crafts were saved from becoming extinct and many traditions and techniques were revived. A rich heritage in crafts especially with craftspeople with generations of indigenous knowledge and skills, may well have naturally transformed them into modern designers. But this did not happen in India because the traditional craftsman was not given access to the kind of education that would have enabled this transition.

....educated castes and communities condemned those who laboured as stupid and unworthy of being treated as human beings. They were treated as people not worthy of education; not worthy of becoming writers, manager, engineer, doctors or accountants. The priestly community supported the attitude of treating hardworking people as bad people. Thus, the practice of humiliating the labouring communities received the sanctity of religion. [2, p. 93].

Caste barriers secluded artisans from moving upwards into professions dominated by superior castes. The situation with regards to art was similar. Hundreds of styles and schools of art flourished in the Indian subcontinent from the third century onwards. British rule had a significant impact on art in India. Under the British rule, art schools were set up which distinguished for the first time, between fine art and craft. With fine art in the British mold, acquired a high status. Thus the students of modern art schools became artists while traditional Indian artists who had learnt their art from family and community were called craftsmen. Postcolonial artists, trained in the British style, continued this appreciation of identity with contemporary artist, mostly coming from the educated elite while craftsmen continued to be from less affluent classes and lower castes. Thus it happened that the first generation of postcolonial designers, were drawn from the educated elite rather than artisanal backgrounds.

2.2 Modern Design Education in Post Independent India

In 1947, after independence from British colonial rule, India's leaders, particularly the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, worked towards revitalizing the nation in all spheres. Almost every aspect written on the Nehru's vision of independent India, and nation building, focused on his stress on introducing western science and technology and modernizing agriculture. Naturally, this required the establishment of institutions of higher education in the natural sciences, technology and management. An equally important position of Nehru's nation building ideas was the rebuilding of small, rural and cottage industries as well as handicrafts. As part of the initiatives taken in this direction, was the move to introduce institutions for design education [7].

In India, modern design education began in the late nineteenth century with the opening of schools in architecture and art (fine and commercial art). On the request of the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Charles and Ray Eames' 'India Report' initiated Industrial Design practice and education in the post independence period. Charles Eames who had drafted the guidelines based on which the National Institute of Design (NID) was founded, had spent some time at HfG Ulm. In spite of the focus on Eames' report on Indian design tradition and sensibilities, the design education programs in India, like in many other countries, actually borrowed its pedagogy and thinking from Bauhaus as well as HfG Ulm school tradition especially the Foundation Course.

2.3 Changing Circumstances from 1950s to 1990s in Independent India

During the 1950s and 1960s the economic policy in India was based on Swadeshi or self-reliance. Companies were focused on building a potential domestic market. Foreign direct investments were limited. Exports were discouraged and imports

were restricted. During this period, considerable government support was given to the textiles and the craft sectors. The advent of textile mills with power looms, did not affect handlooms and it continued to hold its share of the market because there was already a huge population of people engaged in it and of course it had government support. As India began to rapidly industrialise, Indians dreamt of machines and the idea of modernity. There began a trend to move away from tradition and embraced the language of modern economy.

From 1966 to 1984, during Indira Gandhi's tenure as the Prime Minister, the state continued to be the chief patron of design. In tune with the socialist agenda, Mrs Gandhi nationalized all commercial banks, airlines, hotels, industries and certain other sectors including oils, mines and minerals, textiles and insurance. All prime sector industries were placed under strict regulatory control. This period was discouraging for design and innovation in India with a very low growth rate and a per capita income growing at a sluggish pace. In the automobile sector, Indians had two cars to choose from—the Ambassador and the Fiat and both had long waiting periods. The need to improve design was never felt by the manufacturers.

Finally, in the early 1980s Indian design, was displayed majestically by the government at the Festivals of India in London, Paris and America. These festivals conceived by Pupul Jayakar showcased India's 2000-year cultural heritage on a massive scale. Most design activities at the time were within the public sector. The fresh design graduate was armed with idealism rearing to contribute to the progress of the young nation.

In 1991, during P V Narasimha's tenure as the Prime Minister, India liberalized its previously protected economy, opening its doors to the outside world. This historic change radically altered the playing field of design. The Indian markets slowly saw the inflow of foreign made material and products, which were of better quality. For the first time in the history of independent India was there an access to better designs than what people had been accustomed to and consumers had a choice and could reasonably expect a superior quality from the products they bought. During the same time, Indian companies too could venture out to the world and find new markets for their products and services. Forced to compete with international products and brands Indian companies started to recognize that design could no longer be ignored. This was a big opportunity for designers to apply their learning and practice their profession [4].

2.4 Turn of the Century and the Emerging Economy in Independent India

At the turn of the century, the quality of Indian products improved remarkably, both in terms of manufacture and design. Trade fairs and the advent of the Internet aided manufactures understand the importance of creating brands out of their products. People's expectation went up. Retailing format staring changing

from down market grocery stores to clean brightly lit supermarkets and departmental stores where customers browsed through merchandise at leisure. Besides products, packaging of products and branding took on a new physical appearance. Everything needed to be designed and there were not enough designers to get it done. It soon became obvious that there is a severe shortage of qualified designers in India. For the first time people started seeing the value of design.

In the early 1990s, in a developing country like India, price was the main buying factor. As the economy improved, people turned into consumers and as consumers turned more affluent, they started looking for quality and were willing to pay more for it. Today, in an emerging economy, besides quality and price, customers are willing to pay for design. Their expectation included both function and aesthetics.

Towards the turn of the century, liberalization in India brought about several changes in India. The image of the middle class evolved experiencing the change of aesthetic preference from hand crafted adorned style of products to machine made western style of simple forms. A general consensus of ‘whatever originates from the west must be the best’ crept into the middleclass mindset. McDonalds, Levis and Coca-Cola were eagerly embraced. In keeping of Nehru’s vision for a modern nation based on western influences, design too continued, treading the same path.

The liberalization of the Indian economy coincided with the global technology revolution led to the knowledge economy. The colossal growth of the IT (Information Technology) sector provided high quality design services to Indian companies ready to compete globally. The quantum jump in technology transformed the lives of ordinary people in India. The most amazing transformation happened when the mobile phones became accessible to millions of rural Indian. The mobile phones were their first brush with technology and their first connect with modern economy. India today has one of the largest mobile phone user base in the world. On the other hand access to the Internet has brought enormous amount of information and knowledge into the reach of millions of Indians. Meanwhile, the television surged from one channel to the opening up of networks that hundreds of the world’s television channels bringing the western influences to the villages. A highly social able culture, India has taken quickly to social media. Facebook, Twitter etc. has redefined the ways that people communicate. With much greater use of images and items that cut across geographic and linguistic boundaries—ideal in a country like India. It improved massive access to knowledge; access to networks; exposure to quality merchandise and materials etc.

On the product front, access to superior materials, machines and technology led to superior production standards of products. Designers spend minimal time, supervising vendor quality and can now use that time more productively. The methods of production of design virtually are made possible with software like 3D printing. With the surge of economy and technology, which in turn affected the social, cultural and environmental scenario, unfortunately shaded most people’s understanding of design, which is generally viewed as luxury or decoration.

2.5 The Current Context

Today, well into the 21st century, there seems to be less connects between good designers and real problems that need their intervention. India today needs radical and creative solutions to solve increasingly complex problems. In the next couple of decades more and more people will want to migrate to urban areas from the village. The overpopulated cities are already collapsing under the pressure of inadequacies in housing, water, sanitation, transport, waste disposal etc. Almost seven decades after becoming an independent, democratic nation, almost 300 million Indians are illiterate and almost half of the rural Indians do not have access to basic healthcare and toilets.

In the 1970s and 1980s, design activity was dominated by the public sector. Today it has significantly moved into the private sector. As a result, design in India has become slave to consumerism without designers paying enough attention to the consequences of their interventions. Designers, take decisions that may be successful in fulfilling market needs but unfortunately may have colossal unintended environmental consequences. The government, on the other hand has the most complex problems that need the most innovative solutions and the best design minds to solve them. Unfortunately, the government tendering systems evaluate the creative industries just as any other commodity and this includes the setting up of four new national design institutes [4].

3 Conclusion

Design pedagogy, having operated in the past in the shadow of art, craft and engineering education, has evolved as the field of design and continues growing. Having started as craft based training with rather narrow vocational aims, design education is developing into an interdisciplinary academic field emphasizing research and preparedness for the emerging future. Design has diversified itself into various subfields and different academic levels. The problems of the Indian people, both nationally and locally, within the mesh of cultural diversity with economic disparities, including health, transportation, housing, agricultural support, safe water provision etc., are areas which offer potential for the designer to make a contribution. It is important for designers to understand the complexity of issues at stake as well as being aware of “intangibles” like values, social responsibilities, empathy, humility, and local/global relevance.

In today’s context, design should cease to be perceived as a profession for star individuals but the result of collaborations of many minds coming together to arrive at solutions that offer the best possible outcomes. If design is to be useful, it must reach more to the real problems of our times. Its time to take advantage of an open economy and free society no longer look to the government or the structured institutions to provide top down frameworks that once determined initiatives. Improved connectivity, can allow collaborations and networks of small enterprises

to start forming ecosystems of innovations. To be able to work across sectors on a variety of issues designers could, to quote Charles Eames's India Report, "help generate that attitude that would appraise and solve problems of our time with service, dignity and love."

The research steadily attempts to establish that from the industrial production, with an emphasis on materiality, design has steadily developed into a wider, interdisciplinary discipline. The research attempts to understand how the Foundation Course in design responds to the current contexts. A chronological description of the social, economic, political, technological and environmental changes, in India since independence establishes that the current context warrants a re-look at the current learning process in the course. This in-progress research into design proposes that as designers continually expand the boundaries of the design discipline, adding new dimensions and adapting to the changing circumstances, so too must design education and more specifically, the Foundation Course for Design.

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