

Chapter 42

A Qualitative Study of Global Design Practices to Build Directions and Opportunities for Indian Social Design



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Abstract The design industry including design knowledge and practice is constantly evolving itself to fulfill the evolving needs of society in order to deliver a larger social impact. Social design is a field that stresses the positioning, responsibility and collective societal impact of designers and designed products. The underdeveloped and developing world can benefit largely from social design interventions. India is a developing country with social problems like poverty and poor health care—giving a large scope for social design work. However, major development of social design is limited to other countries. A qualitative study was conducted with 14 global design practitioners to understand the social design theory, knowledge and practice existing globally and identify directions and opportunities for the Indian context, by using a cultural lens. The study suggests creating open dialogue, simplifying vocabulary, bias-busting, fostering cross-cultural social design and encouraging mindfulness as the main opportunities. These opportunities can be applied both in social design practice and design education.

42.1 Introduction

Social design has gained rapid traction over the years and can be traced to writers like Victor Papanek [1] and Victor Margolin [2]. As design thinking has progressed, there has been a growth of socially centered designers tackling critical social issues like mental health and poverty [3]. These issues are associated with the social sector which is central to the overall socio-economic development of a country [4].

India is a country of over 1.2 billion people [5]. A large chunk of society is deprived of basic needs including education and health care. 67 million Indians comprise the poorest half of the population [6]. India is now at the low rank of 112 in terms of

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gender equality due to poor economic opportunities for women among many more reasons [7]. 25.6% of Indian population is illiterate [8] and India also faces social problems like fake news [9] and poor mental health [10]. Despite these social issues, social design in India is limited and a slowly developing practice. There is a lack of innovative reflection on the diverse perspectives emerging from this field, especially compared to other countries [11].

Current social impact work in India is dominated by social enterprises and NGOs who lack knowledge and skills of human-centered design [12]. There are 1.5 million NGOs in India, 21.3% work in the area of community and/or social service. About one in five NGOs work in education, 17.9% in sports and culture and 6.6% in the health sector [13]. They reflect social development work but not necessarily social design work.

In other countries, social design projects have emerged for similar problems, e.g., The Good Kitchen, a government kitchen service for the aging population in Denmark. The social problem is that 60% of Denmark's seniors in assisted living facilities or residential care units have poor nutrition, and 20% are malnourished. The result is health problems, a low quality of life and a greater economic burden on the government. Design firm Hatch & Bloom did rigorous ethnographic design research and created a solution which involved improving the working experience of kitchen staff, increasing interaction between the kitchen staff and the people they serve, redesigning the menu and changing the name from 'Hospitable Food Service' to The Good Kitchen. This saw a 500% increase in food orders in the first week itself [14].

Design methodologies, like participatory design, that are used in the process of social design have been primarily developed in the West [15] and have gained little attention in terms of being built for the culturally different developing world.

Culture plays an important role in design and has an influence on social behavior and hence social design [16]. Cross-cultural design gives designers a greater possibility to develop their own intentions and design languages, as well as more creative and relevant outputs—which are produced by observing seemingly 'hidden' dimensions of a particular societal culture [17]. There is a need to take a closer look into this topic and the globally emerging standards and design tools like citizen participation from a cultural lens [11].

Outside India, there is not only the development of social design-related theories and tools but also various social design education initiatives [18–20] against which there is only one full length Master in Social Design course in India (School of Design-Ambedkar University, Delhi) [21]. There is a need to blend design study with other domains like the social sciences [22]. As Meyer and Norman [23] have stated, tackling social issues through design requires a holistic design education.

It is clear that social design can play a critical role in solving social issues and in spite of having a large scope for such social design interventions in India, most of the interventions are being carried out by Non-Governmental Organizations/NGOs which lack skills and expertise in social design. There is a need for exploring new approaches, theories, conversations and concepts of social design from the lens of

Indian culture [11] keeping in mind the current nascent state of Indian social design and the simultaneous development of social design in other parts of the world.

Determined from the above, this study explores the following research question: Based on the social design knowledge and practices existing among designers globally, what are some theories and opportunities for development of social design in India, from a cultural lens?

42.2 Research Methodology

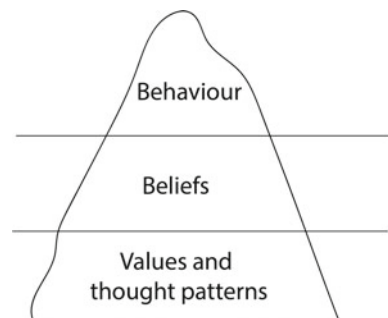
The research was conducted using a qualitative research methodology with semi-structured interviews applying a cultural lens. This methodology facilitated the understanding of global social design practices and knowledge from designers while contextualizing it to India with the cultural lens. This cultural lens was guided by an understanding of three widely recognized models, the Iceberg Model of Culture proposed by Hall [24]; the six dimensions model of national culture proposed by Hofstede [25] and the cultural dimensions proposed by Hall [26, 27]. These models supplement each other well [28].

42.2.1 Cultural Models

The Iceberg Model of Culture by Edward T. Hall (1976). Hall [24] proposes that in any culture, there are some parts that are visible (above the iceberg) but a larger portion is hidden (see Fig. 42.1).

The external or conscious part of culture is visible and includes beliefs and behaviors. The internal or subconscious part consists of values and thought patterns that underlie this behavior. He suggests that the only way to understand this hidden, internal part of any culture is by actively participating in that culture.

Fig. 42.1 Visual depiction of Hall's Iceberg Model of Culture



Six dimensions model of national culture by Hofstede. Cultural dimensions [25] are overarching independent characteristics that describe a culture's behaviors and preferences like the relation to authority, for example. These are used to understand cultures at a national level [29]. Hofstede's model proposes six cultural dimensions: power distance (to what extent people tolerate unequal distribution of power), masculinity (the extent to which personal achievement and material reward are valued), long-term orientation (ability to adapt to rapid innovative changes, i.e. creativity, curiosity and liberalism), uncertainty avoidance (tolerance to ambiguity), indulgence (extent to which people are optimistic and experience joy in simple things) and individualism (how society members identify themselves, i.e., 'I' versus 'We'). Hofstede defined this widely recognized model based on an extensive worldwide survey of employee values from 1967 to 1973 done by IBM.

Cultural dimensions by Edward T. Hall. Edward T. Hall proposes the cultural dimensions of space perception (comfortable physical distance) [26], context of communication (implicit and high context communication or explicit and low-context communication) [24] and time perception (preference to do one task at a time meaning monochronic cultures or more tasks at a time meaning polychronic cultures) [27]. This model supplements the model of Hofstede by giving directions to help understand communication and task management by different cultures.

42.2.2 *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using video calls individually with 14 designers who were geographically distributed (ranging from Australia and Europe to Asia and Africa) and all had work experience in India. Semi-structured interviews were an effective tool in the context of this study because they help gain in-depth data of samples' perspectives, experiences and stories [30] and enable better expression of interviewee viewpoints compared to other tools [31].

The samples were selected using the following criteria:

1. Experience working in social design in varied design domains (experience ranging from 2 to 10 years; domains ranging from service design, communication design and design research to product design, exhibition design and human-computer interaction).
2. Varied levels of experience in design (student to expert).
3. Experience in design education (experience ranging from 3 to 15 years).

14 samples were selected based on the above criteria. Guest et al. [32] reported that 12 is a good sample size for a relatively homogenous sample set. Before the interviews, the interviewees were familiarized with the cultural models since this enabled a more in-depth discussion about social design from the lens of Indian culture. Semi-structured interviews enabled open expression of the interviewees' narratives around the topics: what is social design, what processes and practices are

followed in social design, does working in different cultures affect these processes and what opportunities exist for social design development in India's cultural context.

The qualitative data obtained from these interviews was analyzed through a thematic analysis [33] wherein common themes were identified from topics and ideas that came up repeatedly. These themes led to a set of results which were used to answer the research question.

42.3 Results

Table 42.1 shows the themes that emerged and the number of interviewees who brought them up. The remaining interviewees who did not bring up a certain theme does not indicate disagreement, but simply that they did not bring up this theme during the interview. This quantification will help determine the priority and relevance of the themes in regards to the research question.

While discussing global social design, all the interviewees mentioned that social design is about the collective and is a complex process which should be simplified through use of simple and inclusive language. It is speculative and critical, but grounded in reality. It starts with education and is not necessarily tangible.

On how social design can be practiced in India, all of them focused on the constant flux and heterogeneity in India. They stated that due to this heterogeneity, cultural restraint, hierarchies [34], and high context, implicit communication [35], there's a need for modification of flat design processes like participatory design and even standard design research interviews which seem relatively simpler in other more

Table 42.1 Summary of themes that emerged and number of interviewees who brought them up

Theme	Number of interviewees who brought it up ($n = 14$)
Questioning and dialogue about the role, scope and point of entry of social design should be a part of Indian social design	13
Reexamine jargons and use simpler language	11
Informal education and dialogue with non-design communities about social design	10
Sensitize designers towards their own personal issues	9
Cross-cultural design work and partnerships with Indian firms who already have rapport with the target communities	8
In India, social design should not be used just for vulnerable/'poor' communities	6
Encourage open student dialogue and questioning in Indian design schools	5

homogenous and low-context countries. Co-creation sessions and interaction with the non-design community in India currently requires a long period for breaking the ice. To tackle this, lateral thinking and quick adaptation is needed.

There is a lack of beautiful solidarity in Indian slums. (interviewee, design anthropologist)

Before diving into the problem areas with existing design methods, time should be spent questioning what role design is playing here and why it is required in this context. Informal education and dialogue about social design among the non-design community in India was pointed out as an opportunity. Collaboration and two-way knowledge exchange are important for Indian social designers due to India's cultural diversity—which makes it harder to understand the larger social community that one is designing for, and the designer's positioning within the same. In this sense, the non-design community members should also be seen as a form of social designers.

No matter how well we think we know people, they know themselves better. (interviewee, service designer)

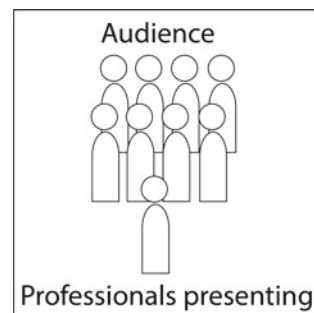
Professionals in environmental planning and urban development used design as a tool to protect the ecological systems of Guayaquil while managing an integrated provision of both housing and ecological infrastructure during the Designing Inclusion Summer School: Guayaquil, Ecuador [36]. It involved engagement with economically, environmentally and socially vulnerable people. We presented the designed strategies in the following manner to the target audience (see Fig. 42.2).

This manner of presentation failed due to miscommunication and translation errors. After doing some more iterations, we presented the concepts again in a poster format where the audience could engage 1 to 1 and discovered that this was very well received. (interviewee, urban designer)

Incubation time and handing the baton to the target audience are very important when working in new areas with new people who are unfamiliar with the design process. The word target audience should be used for designers as well, since the real social design activity and learnings are two-way.

Avoid design indigestion. One cannot swallow a hamburger whole; we must chew it slowly. (interviewee, urban designer)

Fig. 42.2 Visual depiction of the professionals presenting their designed outputs to a group of target audience from the local community



Many interviewees pointed out cross-cultural social design as an opportunity for developing social design in India. This can be done through partnership with Indian firms who already have a rapport and understanding of the target communities.

Students from different institutions in the West visited India for 2 weeks and immersed themselves in complex societal challenges in an interdisciplinary team during EPFL + ECAL Lab's India Switzerland Social Innovation Camp (INSSINC) [37]. This was done in partnership with SELCO, a for profit social enterprise based in Bangalore. It was intimidating at first, but SELCO trained us with workshops in Switzerland. Due to SELCO's familiarity with the context, we had no trouble in understanding their needs. Since we came from a different cultural context, we thought about unique solutions. We sometimes came with solutions that would not be possible in the Indian context and other solutions looked silly to us but were actually the best for the camp. Our occidental perspective along with SELCO's expertise led to a fruitful output. (interviewee, designer and researcher)

Traditional design jargons and vocabulary need to be simplified and contextualized to wipe out the communication barrier—this would make them inclusive.

Some interviewees questioned the stereotype that social design in India should only help tackle topics like poverty and waste. Social design can also include designing a restaurant's system to increase employee happiness, reduce plastic waste and chances of food contamination. Frugal innovation is already being practiced by many Indians who are not formally trained designers. The positioning of the same must be identified during any social design activity.

Are poor people really genuinely unhappy? If yes, then why? And what can we, as social designers, really do for them, if anything? Jugaad or frugal innovation is very common in India. How are people practicing it? And is there a need for any more intervention? We must ask these questions. (interviewee, service designer).

Lack of dialogue and presence of stereotypes was traced by the interviewees to a lack of open dialogue, debate and questioning in Indian design schools. Some interviewees mentioned that this is due to the hierarchical Indian culture.

When I taught at an Indian design school, I set up conversation spaces with the students for moments of reflection and questioning. This was very new to them but it enabled a critical approach necessary for social design. (interviewee, urban designer and design educator)

I noticed that students who have suffered from depression are intrinsically motivated to design for the social issue of mental health. (interviewee, communication designer and design educator)

Making students aware of themselves can help to naturally and informally create a more socially oriented pedagogy in Indian design schools.

Despite the varying professional level of the interviewees, there was a repetition and clear pattern of insights received and this shows a common line of thought among the design audience regarding context-sensitive social design in India. The results already clearly indicate directions for developing theory and action and have been discussed in the next section.

42.4 Discussion

In an Indian social design context, the themes of the results can be put into two broad categories.

Under **social design methodology**: conversation and questioning as a formal social design methodology; re-examining vocabulary and replacing jargons with simpler language; using social design for all communities; cross-cultural work and partnership with local bodies.

Under **design education**: encouraging open student dialogue and questioning in Indian design schools; sensitizing people toward their personal (social) issues and scaling design education informally to non-design communities.

The study findings are discussed below in light of the research question.

42.4.1 Based on the Social Design Knowledge and Practices Existing Among Designers Globally, What Are Some Theories and Opportunities for Development of Social Design in India, from a Cultural Lens?

The opportunities have been arranged in order of priority, based on the number of interviewees who brought up the connecting themes (refer to Results section Table 42.1). Since this is an exploratory design research, each opportunity ends with a how might we statement to spark possible future research and design activity toward implementation.

Embed dialogue in the social design process. The social design process in India must have dialogue woven into it. India has a high context culture, meaning there is a lack of open dialogue and direct conversation compared to some Western cultures [35]. However, this open dialogue needs to be built up bit by bit in Indian social design practice. Prasad [11] has mentioned the need for conversation and dialogue among diverse actors for the advancement of social design and innovation in India. The findings of this study add on to Prasad, by stating that this dialogue needs to be imbibed in the definition of social design itself. This dialogue should be among design teams, between designers and the non-design community, among the non-design community and between the designer and themselves. Mindful dialogue of the designer with themselves is an integral part of social design because understanding ourselves helps us understand others better [38]. The non-design community can also be seen as a form of social designers. This is complemented by a large presence of frugal design in India which, as stated by Khan [39], has a practical contribution towards pressing social needs.

How might we facilitate conversation and dialogue throughout the social design process?

Simplify vocabulary. Design jargons like co-creation, democratic design and empathy are used widely by designers. These words and their meanings are important, but over the years, have we retained their true meaning in the context of varying design activities? India has high context communication [35] and a plethora of languages [40]. When engaging in social design, we not only deal with this but also with diverse communities who have diverse literacy backgrounds [8]. Hence, going back to the design vocabulary and understand the real meanings of jargons in a particular context should be a formal activity of the Indian social design process.

How might we simplify the design vocabulary we use in our daily practice to make it easy to understand in varying contexts during social design work?

Scope of social design in India and bias-busting. Bias-busting should be a formal activity in the Indian social design process. Behavioral biases affect us all, especially while engaging with different cultural groups [41]. Saying that social design for India is involved with only helping poor people living in slums is a very biased and incorrect statement. These statements should be made only after doing research through conversation and understanding the people (as mentioned in one of the previous points). Social design can tackle the needs of other communities in India too. People all over India suffer from fake news [9] and mental health issues [10]. The social design example of The Good Kitchen in Denmark [14] tackles issues that exist in India too. Social design can be used to tackle systemic issues related to food service, aging population and alleviation of overall quality of life of Indian people. Social design can also be used to promote desired pro-social behavior implicitly in people. Behavior impacts social design and social design impacts behavior [42]. Biases have a direct relation to our quality of work as designers [43], more so here as social designers. These biases must be addressed as a part of design education curriculum as well as design practice.

How might we tackle our biases so that they do not interfere judgmentally into the social design process?

Cross-cultural social design as an opportunity. This means that designers from different cultures intervene in Indian social design. Lee and Bain [17] have stated that cross-cultural design practice leads to larger design discoveries. The findings of this study supplement this. In an Indian social design context, large design discoveries can be made through cross-cultural design, but this must be done in partnership with local bodies. Partnership with local bodies that are familiar with the subcultures can help warm up and begin conversation. People should be aware of cultural rules, stigmas, communication, etc. Social design practices should be moved from big cities to smaller towns [11] in partnership with local bodies to increase sensitivity and familiarity towards the subcultures in India.

How might we nurture cross-cultural collaboration and global exchange for social design projects in India?

Dialogue in design schools. Formally built safe, trustable conversation spaces where students can comfortably share and question concepts, projects and problems should be present in design schools. These conversation spaces should not be open only

to members of the design school but also to the non-design community and design professionals. Awareness of design students about themselves should be encouraged as well through encouraging mindfulness about one's emotions and the world around them. Making students aware of certain social problems they have personally experienced, like mental health issues or periods of debt and poverty could sensitize them to work on social problems for others. Following these cues can catalyze the social design pedagogy in Indian design schools without going through the rigid hierarchy and large time gaps which are caused due to high power distance in Indian culture [25].

How might we facilitate open conversation and mindfulness in Indian design schools?

The strength of this study lies in the wide geography and background of the samples. The study suggests that there is a common thread of thinking among this audience about the topic of social design in regards to Indian culture. This diversity of samples facilitates any designer curious about social design to utilize the directions provided and apply them within their own domains and contexts. The findings are not relevant only to design practice but can also aid Indian design education. They can catalyze the process of building more socially motivated Indian designers, which, in the big picture, can help in the growth of Indian society, economy and culture.

42.5 Limitations and Future Scope

Ideally, in-person interviews should have been conducted. However, since most of the interviewees were in varying geographies and there was time and resource limitation, interviews were conducted through video calls. Due to this, the study may have missed body language cues which could have given better insights. However, the use of video calling software in such situations is justifiable [44].

A topic brought up by one of the samples when discussing social design 'needs' was Maslow's hierarchy of needs [45] which proposes five sets of basic human needs arranged in a hierarchy—starting with physiological needs up to self-actualization needs. Future scope could involve going deeper into whether this hierarchy can be connected to Indian social design theory, and if yes, how?

Future research can involve testing the scope and validity of the proposed opportunities in different Indian subcultures and identifying what works where and when, and creating solutions that can be directly implemented in Indian social design practice and Indian design education based on the guidelines provided by this study.

42.6 Conclusion

The study enabled understanding of global social design knowledge and practices and helped build theories and opportunities for social design within the context of

India. A qualitative study was done with designers from varied backgrounds who have all worked on social design on social design in different geographies including India. Using a cultural lens contextualized the findings to India. Creating open dialogue, simplifying vocabulary, bias-busting, fostering cross-cultural social design and encouraging mindfulness emerged as the main opportunities. These opportunities can be applied both in social design practice and design education. Existing literature has mentioned the need for conversation but not gone in-depth about whom this conversation should be between and why. This study gives a clearer view of the same. The literature also stressed the need for developing theory and knowledge specific to Indian social design, considering the Indian socio-cultural phenomena. This study has taken a step forward to build this theory and created knowledge for present and future design studies and social design work.

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