

Craft, Culture and Challenges for Creativity in Design

This paper was presented in a seminar in Brazil at Bahia in 2009. Later the organisers published an edited version in the seminar proceedings. The left out images are added at the end of the article in the

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Traditional Crafts have been 'Carriers' of Culture. Legends, beliefs and myths of a culture get encoded in the artifacts produced and used in that Culture. Such products and practices acquire an anthropological dimension which needs to be decoded. Onslaught of Industrialized Globalization not only weakened but also erased many craft practices around the world. Repositioning of these crafts is a challenge to the Design Community looking for creation of meaningful objects and environments. Some attempts made in Bamboo Crafts are examined for possible directions.

Culture is often referred to the past. Robert Phelbs says "Culture is the honey in the live, not all, but some of the best and most original products of our spirit which we have to pass on: The poems and stories, building and music, painting and personal examples which people may remember in two hundred years as we now remember". But when we look at countries like India products

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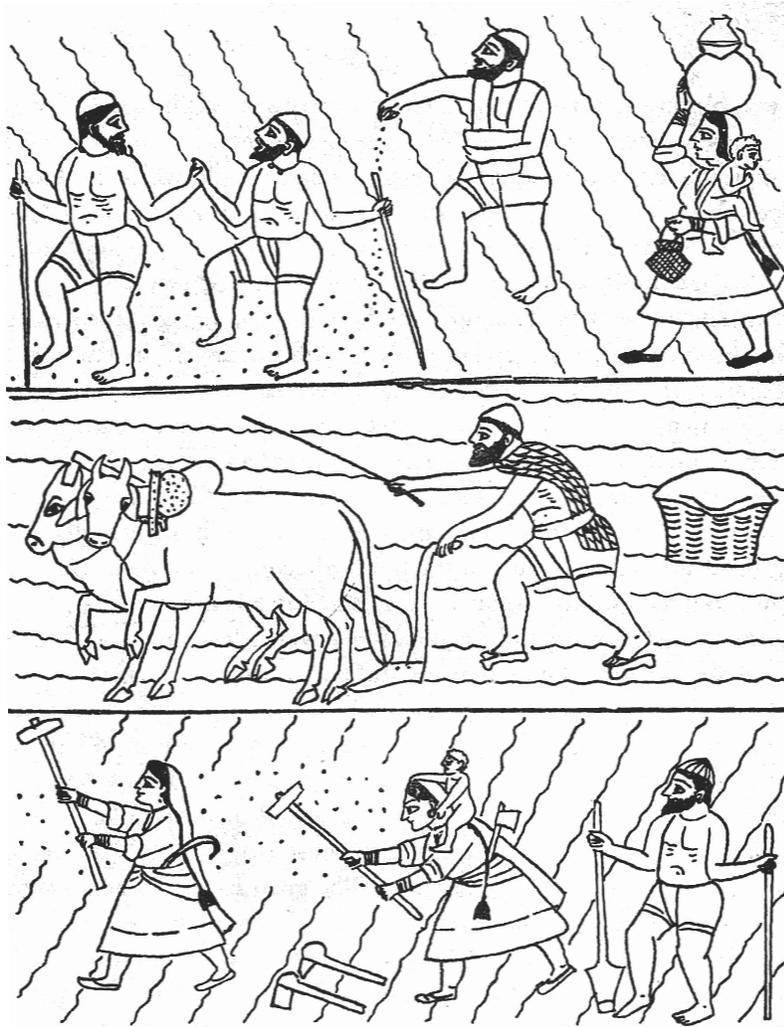


Figure 1. Cultivation 19th Century Persian MS

and practices before two thousand years continue to be used and practiced today. Picture from a nineteenth century Persian Manuscript (Figure 1) shows the rice sowing practice in the 19th Century which prevails even today in India.

Several practices and beliefs evolved for centuries get encoded in the Culture manifesting into visual and physical forms. Thus we see in the artifacts, decorations, ritual, religious and traditional practices encoded messages often unknown to the current generations. We need to probe and discover the meanings of such cultural forms to appreciate the richness of a culture. On the cursory we could observe few manifestations these encoded cultural forms have taken: 1. Metaphors and symbols (often abstracted as geometric forms); 2. Patterns as a result of orderly physical actions involved in creating them; 3. Images evolved out of tools, techniques and materials used in depicting these messages. The nature of these manifestations can be further probed with examples.

Metaphors and symbols

A typical symbol of goodwill made out of rice seeds along with stems is hung in front or on the walls in states of Jharkhand and Bengal in India even today ! The decoration is called “Lakhi-dhan”, (Fig.2) Lakhi referring to goddess of wealth Lakshmi and dhan refers to ‘Rice’ as well as money.

The beautiful weave continues as the villagers learn to weave as they grow from childhood. The symbolic significance of the shape as geometric figures is seldom analyzed.

The product form is accepted as a good will sign. The meaning of that form in the cultural context remains “goodwill”, “Well being” etc. The object is hung in front of the house. A Similar practice, but to ward off evils spirits continues till to day in India. A Lemon is tied with three or four pepper (Mirchi in Hindi) and hung in front of vehicles to ward off Evil spirits. One can see young kids selling them everyday to the drivers of taxis and 3 wheelers on the roads of a modern city like Mumbai, India. Since it is of natural materials. It demands replacement thereby creating a value of belief. Interestingly few people have introduced the lemon and pepper made of plastic recently. Though the traditional persons get shocked in such an adaptation, the ‘form’ of the object continues to symbolically represent the ‘lemon and pepper’ which are supposed to ward off evil spirits.

Several such symbolic cultural forms encoded in the artifacts and visual decorations can be seen in India. It is important to see such symbols in the particular cultural context. A figure of swastika in the anti clockwise rotational symmetry is a symbol of goodwill in Hindu tradition and often marked on pots, houses etc. The mirror image of this “Swastika” (Figure 3), used by Hitler

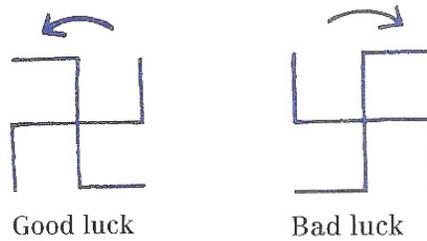


Figure 3. Swastika and its movements directions as aspects of good or bad luck

has become a symbol of terror and evil. As Frutiger points out “The name Swastika is derived from Sanskrit word meaning ‘well being’. In China it was the sign for ‘highest perfection’ and in Japan where it was called ‘manji’ signified both the number 10000 and the concept of infinite” .²

Patterns as a result of orderly physical actions

Kolam Designs are drawn with rice flour on floor in front of houses by housewives all over South India. A grid of dots is made first and designs are drawn with continuous movement of hand (Figure 4). The designs reflect the meditative peaceful minds of the housewife in the early morning hours inviting Gods and Guests. In Hindu tradition guest (athithi) is seen as God (devo bhava). Very body movements in drawing kolams form the basis of generation of these designs. Large Kolams (also called Rangolis) are also drawn

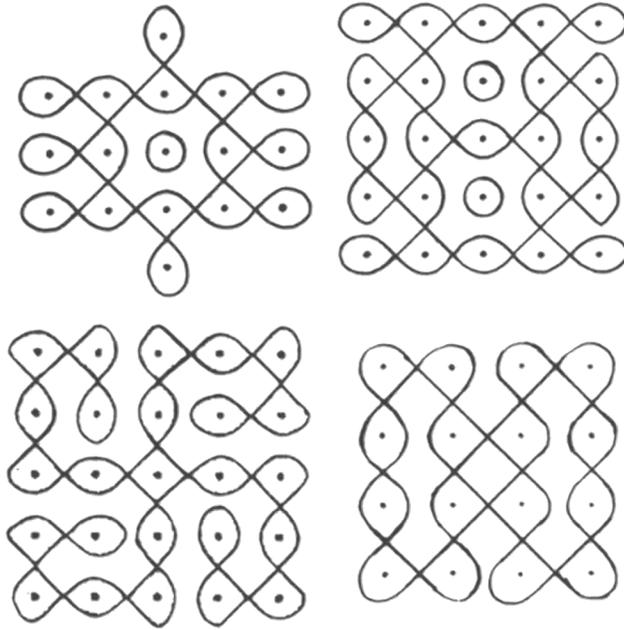


Figure 4. Kolam Designs are drawn with rice four on four in front of houses

in front of temples to represent the 'Mandala' as a manifestation of 'Universe' occupied by 'God'. Certain 'Cultural' forms get encoded based on the very tools and techniques used. Roman letters evolved with the chiseling of letters on the stone or wood. Compared to this the letter forms in Tamil (a south indian language) and Devanagari (Hindi script) have evolved out of strokes a pointed stylus on palm leaves (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Hindi script has evolved out of strokes
a pointed stylus on palm leaves

The traditions of hundreds of writing on palm leaf are preserved in India as studied in a PhD Thesis being carried out at IDC, IIT Bombay. There are interesting examples to see how the letters drawn with ink became a basis for engraving on copper plates. As mentioned by Dr. Kosambi the write up below (Figure 6) carries the signature of Buddhist emperor Harsha for a land grant to a Brahmin. The text was written with ink on a copper plate and engraved later. Devnagari (Hindi script)



Figure 6. The signature of Buddhist emperor Harsha
for a land grant to a Brahmin

In crafts like 'bamboo weaving' the material and process become the basis of form generation which continues for generations. A common basket which is used for carrying earth sold in a village market.

Crafts become major vehicles for cultural expressions. The encoded forms of craft in designs printed on fabrics have images which needs decoding to understand and appreciate. Design research in such cultural encodings can become sources for post modern expressions. Designs on bed sheets in a local market in West Bengal show the richness of design.

A re-interpretation of "Lakhin Dhan" made by a craftsman shows the richness of form and structure. An exceptional understanding of material is seen by a craftsman who is not schooled in design formally. Industrial Revolution and Modernism brought in new forms conducive for industrial production. Product forms were unable to take roots from traditional and cultural practices. Acceptance of these industrial forms lead to a new industrial paradigm supported by Modern Art movement. Simplicity in terms of least complexity and lack of decoration became the norms in design.

Design education was lead by schools like "Bauhaus" and later the Hochschule fur Gestaltung at Ulm, in West Germany. Thus the Industry dominated global culture of design has not only become monolithic but also has inhibited 'Modern educated designers'

in taking roots from their own Traditions and Cultures. Industrial Design Centre at IIT Bombay to its credit has a course in 'Indian Thought and Tradition' run by Prof. Kirti Trivedi who was inspired by the famous Japanese visual designer Sugiura Kohei.

The all dominating globalization has also manifested in view points lacking in depth and perception. Peter Dormer, in his book on the "Meanings of Design" ,³ comparing a Mexican chair made in natural materials says "The quasi traditional Mexican chair is however unsatisfactory because it wears the method of its construction and its anti-industrial aesthetic too fulsomely upon its sleeve". Such a view point does not seem to address the rich 'Forms' in traditional designs which can act as inspiration for new creative design.

Taking the example of recent designs introduced in India of a one rupee coin the influence of global design culture seem to have reached a country with rich Cultural heritage. A coin given in the book 'Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India', by D D Kosambi,(fig.7). That coin bears a pillar with capital composed of an elephant and a lion. From Hoshiarpur Punjab, 3rd Century AD., and shows the richness of the 'image' from which we can decode the culture with its beliefs and practices generations later. One of the good things is to compare the coins from Hoshiarpur Punjab with those shown in Figures 8 and 9.



Figure 8. Indian rupee 2004. Figure 9. Recently introduced rupee coin.

The latest coins seem to have lost the richness and opportunity to encode symbols, stories and beliefs of the time. Of course it does tell about the global influence eroding the local cultural expressions.

However today we have moved to a Post Modern situation, as it was argued in a paper “Craft as a Post Modern Venture — Experience in Bamboo Craft”, presented by A. G. Rao in the 8th Brazilian Conference on Design Research & Development (São Paulo, October, 2008). Crafts offer a new scope for individual creative expression of today’s designers due to following reasons: (i) Variety of designs can be produced with low investments; (ii) Select markets can be reached through internet marketing; (iii) A new participatory relationship between workers and owners can ensure a harmonious worker owner relationship. Yet positioning crafts in the Post Modern Framework structurally and semantically

is a challenging task. Bambu Studio at IDC which is an off shoot of 'Jagruti', a national seminar cum workshop held in 1963, and a UNDP project for developing tools and appropriate technologies in 2000, has been addressing this problem. India has a rich tradition of Bamboo craft. Several unique products can be seen in the regular markets through out the country. A fish package in Tamenglong, Manipur and a moda (stool) in Assam or a winnowing tray in Meghalaya stand out as refined evolved products.

In a village fair called "Masa" which takes place 100km from Mumbai on January 14 and 15th, every year 100 000 people participate. Villagers save money throughout the year to buy baskets, bulls etc. The festival called 'Sankrati' coincides with the unique Sun position. In India two calendars are used. On January 14th Sun and Moon calendars coincide. All the festivals are based on Moon calendar. Without any advertisement a tradition ensures the attendance of 100 000 people on these days.

In spite of such a live tradition, 1.3 million bamboo craft workers in the country earn as low as a US dollar a day. Children of the craft-persons getting education on global pattern do not want to practice bamboo craft due to low earnings. A study of one bamboo waving community revealed interesting beliefs and modern conflicts the community is facing. An integrated approach was taken to craft at Bambu Studio of IDC providing

new tools, techniques, small machines and training along with new designs. A new tool kit was developed moulds and product specific tools were introduced along with training.

Treatments for insects and natural dye coloring along with manuals were also introduced. Unique bamboo chair and bamboo storage baskets developed as student project use traditional weaves satisfying the modern demands of ergonomics and ease of production. A Lamp shade takes the inspiration from local fish traps made in bamboo. Frame based products offer rich bamboo weave with rectangular frames. A bar stool in bamboo and Rattan has a post Modern approach to structure. A social concern company AG Bambu Style has been formed under incubation at SINE (Society for Innovation and Entrepreneurship) of IIT Bombay.

To conclude, new design approaches need to be developed based on local crafts and cultures in a Post Modern framework. Design Research need to address the anthropological dimensions of the product for the creation of a new humanistic world with rich local cultural identities.

References

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2. Frutiger, Adrian. *Signs and symbols their design and meaning*. London: Studio, 1989, p. 276.
3. Dormer, Peter. *The meanings of modern design*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, p. 80.



Figure.2 Lakhi Dhan



Fig. 7 A silver coin of Vrishni tribe. The coin bears a pillar with capital composed of an elephant and a lion. From Hoshiarpur Punjab, 3rd Century AD.