

Craft Episode 2

Reflections on 'Interface' of Bamboo Craft

Tamenglong 1 –TAMBAC Workshop-2003



You are literally in the clouds as you reach Tamenglong.

Tamenglong is one of the most picturesque places in India, but rather difficult to reach. One has to go by road on the slopes of hills by bus or vehicle from Imphal. Journey will be 5 to 6 hours if one is lucky and there are no landslides on that day blocking the road as it happens often. I went there twice! The first trip was with the INBAR team. Dr. Ramanuja Rao¹ (Rama) had invited me to give a talk in a seminar cum workshop 'TAMBAC PRODUCTS Tools and Technologies' organized by TAMBAC² an organization formed with INBAR initiative and support. He wanted me to show the toolkit we had developed under UNDP project and talk about it. I accepted the Invitation but expressed my difficulty in carrying the Toolkit with me. There were no direct flights from Bombay to Imphal at that time! Security checks were also stringent. Carrying a bag with 'knives' can lead to getting detained in Kolkata as I will have to change the flights. I requested him to get the toolkit from Delhi as they will be coming by direct flight. He readily agreed. On my suggestion, Rama also invited Sukumar Haobam, a NID trained, practicing designer in Imphal to participate in the workshop as a resource person.

I reached Imphal before INBAR team and met Sukumar. We went and received INBAR team at the airport. I was eager to check about the 'Tool kit' and asked Rama. He said 'yes' and turned to his colleague, a designer and enquired. She then asked the other person in the Team. To my dismay the 'musical chair' continued and after a while we came to know that they have not brought the tool kit. I was disheartened. It was like going to a wedding without a present to offer! Of course I was carrying my PPT which I had carefully prepared. But in these seminars you are never sure of the projection facilities and darkened rooms where everybody can see the picture clearly. Often, a talk with oratory skills of the speaker goes on for long periods and audience are waiting patiently for the snack or lunch which comes after the talk, for which they will be clapping with full vigour.

A lesson got registered deeply in my mind, make sure to send the gadgets like toolkits, samples, etc., before hand or carry it with you in spite of all the trouble! It has its dividends! I remember an incident which happened much later when I was introduced to KVIC chair-person Ms Kumudben Joshi, who was a Governor of a 'State' earlier. The officer said, "Madam, prof.Rao is the only person I have seen who carries the samples with him whenever he goes to meet the craft-persons in the villages. None of our KVIC officers would consider taking such trouble". Soon after, a generous person she was, Kumudben, affectionately, invited me to join her for a 'vegetarian lunch', a rare privilege, which I came to know later.

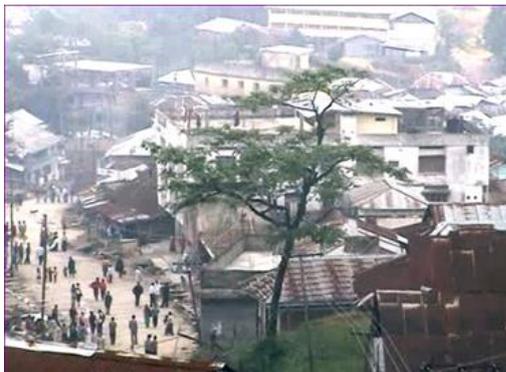
As we started our long road journey in the morning with a police vehicle escorting us in the front. All our troubles got swept away with the cool breeze and we were spell bound with the spectacular view of the valley. Tamenglong is at a high altitude in the border of Nagaland and Manipur. *The place is still considered as disputed area by Nagas. NSCN³ claims it as part of 'Greater Nagaland' though currently it is under Manipur state. Majority of population in the area seem to be Nagas.* The road journey on the slopes of hills is rather slow, but we reached Tamenglong well before it got dark.

Tamenglong Town

One can see the Tamenglong town from top as we approached our guest house.

In the morning we got a chance to visit the streets in the town.

First thing I saw was school kids bubbling with energy!



They wore school uniform very similar to what you see in Mumbai!

I suddenly realized how important this is!

British could never conquer Nagaland fully and NSCN still has an armed conflict (in spite of having a peaceful treaty) with mainland India. This 'Schooling which is same in Mumbai and in Tamenglong with (probably inappropriate) same syllabus, has a great significance! It seems to ensure *national integration*. A Naga or Manipuri is able to get into the

administrative structure of India if she or he gets into an IAS cadre, irrespective of the political party ruling at the Centre! In some ways “Indian Constitution” ensures that. One needs to appreciate this factor and Leaders like Pandit Nehru seemingly had an insight! One can see enough reasons why Gandhiji’s Naye taleem with all its virtues was not implementable in a large country with wide variance in culture, language and life style. Uniformity in this context has its advantage! Employability anywhere in the country in Govt. and private sector becomes possible!

No doubt challenge of transforming school education in the Country as a whole in the right direction still remains!

Even as we walked into the streets I realized how different Tamenglong is, from other parts of the Country! Positive influence of Christian Missionaries could be seen when you see boards like the one below in many public places!



And one only has to peep into the small market to observe the amazing uses of bamboo!



Live Chicken tied in bamboo weave and fish being carried by an old man in an attractive bamboo package capture your attention. Bamboo and cane storage cum carry baskets, well-made personal bags could be seen all around! It is simply a bamboo land!





When it comes to usage of bamboo the 'Interface' part is still not fully understood by the decision makers in the Country. 'Quick fix glue' with its powerful advertisements might have left a deep scar in our consciousness.

Recently a proposal came to an NGO, whether they can give bamboo box in place of card board box used for sweets! The Govt. organization was ready to pay 4 to5 times the cost of the thin card board disposable pack!

Here comes the hitch and a 'Design dilemma' with a demand for deeper understanding of sustainability, industrial development and 'form'! The problem is similar to the expectation of a young, enthusiastic marketing manager for 'cubical eggs', because it is easy to pack, can save cost of transportation and reduces breakage!

Products made by Industrial processes are rooted in simple geometric *forms*. Aesthetics got invented based on modern art movement that made the 'shape' of rectangular box or container an obvious *'form'*.

A box made of paper or card board is easily made out of a sheet. The very sheet of paper is produced by crushing, pulping, from wood or bamboo destroying its earlier 'physical form'. This is the nature of Industrial process and machine production. Its efficiency comes out of the whole Industrial revolution and organization. The social structure, energy consumed, chemical waste it generates which goes into environment in such conversion into a uniform material is generally not noticed or accounted for. Only now, with planet warming, we have started to look at these factors.

There is a hurry and demand for quick solutions with the mind set of digital mode. Solutions evolved over a long period, embedded in the very way of living needs to be studied and understood in their entirety, before we respond to these traditional objects.

This is the challenge of 'Interface'!

Let us examine the fish package in Tamenglong.



Here is a beautiful package sustainable in local living conditions at this time (2001). Its 'form' is embedded in all its socio economic, cultural conditions.

The product has many features.

- Simple to make
- Local knowledge how to make
- Negligible material cost
- Disposable, goes back to Nature, with no additional processing
- Given free as fish would cover its cost

There can be three 'design' responses

1. Initiate 'Innovation' with a good funding: take that beautiful 'form' and incorporate it in a package with paper or new 3D printed bio-degradable plastic.
2. Use that 'form' for a hand bag or mobile pouch, etc., which can be marketed in cities or exported.
3. Leave it alone! It will survive as long as it can as we are unable to predict socio, cultural changes.

At that time, I was wondering what we could do in Tamenglong effectively.

*We responded with concern and tools of 'designerly thinking' in which we have been trained and practicing!
Now, in 2022, reflection and a fresh look makes me see the need for generalized frameworks to understand the very 'INTERFACE' the product is embedded in. As Bonsiepe⁴ points out 'design research' is required in this direction.
Over a period, after doing 50+ workshops one wonders whether we got a right boat to sail in this stream.*

Or

Have we been clutching to some branches or small logs thrown at us, with fragmented perceptions of those in 'Power' and limited frameworks we have in the present structures to sail through? Perhaps 'learnings gained' in our intuitive approach with concern, can be examined as 'design discourse' and generalized to be useful to others working in this field!

**Tambac seminar/workshop:
3day event from 15th to -17th, May2003**



Mr.Nehemia, director of TAMBAC and coordinator of the workshop, introduced others on dais. Rama and Rebecca are on stage starting from left side. Rama was a good strategist and was behind creation of CIBART. Rama conceived a competition at TAMBAC event. It became the most exciting thing of the seminar/workshop as it could draw-in enthusiastic local participation. Locals were asked to make craft objects out of bamboo and submit for a prize and exhibition. Best entry would get the award! The participation was amazing! As the day went by people started bringing small baskets in cane(rattan) and Bamboo with intricate weavings. It looked like every person in Tamenglong district knew how to weave and make a basket or a mug or a furniture item. It was a skill they had like cycling, swimming or cooking. There were almost hundred items.

I was thinking, 'Oh God, there is so much to learn from these people about bamboo craft here'.



The detailing was exquisite. They had a carving skill which we don't see in mainland craft communities like buruds or mahadev kolis who are essentially basket weavers. Bamboo varieties like Kako, Giganteus being easily accessible, in these high altitudes, is probably another reason.



The joining of handle with container is unique and robust.



Similar aesthetic sensitivity we can see in the joining detail of a mug below.



In the handle of the mug, '*form*' has been extracted from natural bamboo, creatively by cutting it, in a unique way.

It reminded me of a 'handle for Godrej cup board' designed by me in a 'redesign task' given to us, by Prof. Arnold Vottler⁵, when I was a student at NID. One realizes, here, in these communities there are unrecognized designers with advanced '*form thinking*'.



There were many models of houses with intricate construction details and good finish as seen below.



'Rim detail' in bamboo craft products make them rich in looks. Here the craft process has an edge over industrial process.

We adopted such rim detail in our design approach. Look at the rim binding done by Rudrapaul for bamboo lounge chair designed by Ravi Koka at IDC for his Mdes final project. It elevates the chair into an upend product with higher value!



← edge detail

As I got engaged with bamboo craft more and more, I started coming across the problem of 'Edge detailing' of woven bamboo surfaces.

Traditional detail is good in certain contexts, but to transform craft products into usable items like a small basket with tight fitting lid which can be used as a chocolate box, or a serving tray which needs frequent cleaning, you need to look at them in new ways.

'Form' with geometric simplification with its roots in industrialization, looked inevitable. Thus our journey started with developing small technologies for bamboo. Moulds and processes like sanding to get smooth surfaces got included!

After spending considerable time in designing and development we introduced coil technique which could be adopted for different items. Rims for trays with coil technique was one such input in our trainings.

It had the advantage of usability as it was easy to handle and clean. Compatibility with woven mats covered with a transparent sheet or a smooth surface with special technique brought in new flavor.

Here is an issue for design discourse even as the traditional rim detail challenges us!



It would be a mistake to compare this to the traditional rim weave we see next to it in the above picture. Both have their place. Like a 'Rose and a Lily' flower. Their manifestation into reality depends on particular skills of local group and the market strategy for 'positioning'. Traditional woven rim has high cultural content with its inconvenience of cleaning, may still get the admiration of exclusive clientele in 'Taj hotels'! The tray with a coil technique can fit into a general upend market.

A small eating place in Tamenglong

We use to visit a small local eating place run by a very hospitable young lady! One could speak with them in English or Hindi. But with Sukumar around with familiarity of 'Meitei', everybody became a friend in no time. The lady is married to a person from UP, who left her after 4to5 years and went back with no trace of his where abouts. He had come to Tamenglong on a contract work as technical person.

Food was cheap and warm service remain in your memory forever!





Sukumar Haobam

Interest in Tools

The seminar attracted about 30 people. Interestingly major feedback on the first day came from a senior craftsman who said, 'Design or making was not such an issue but the availability of new Tools was a problem'.



I was happy as I was not sure of, what we can contribute in 'the self-sustaining system in bamboo' which was there! My presentation was next day.

Most of the talks and presentations were in English and some in Hindi, which were little difficult to decipher when not supported with pictures. Though Rama was happy with his talk, I had a suspicion that people were not getting the full content of his talk. May be, it did not matter to a great extent as the event itself was seen as an important statement of concern for such a remote place!

I requested Sukumar to translate my talk into Maitei, even as I was showing pictures on the screen. I think it made a big difference. But, alas, the actual tools which they want to lay hands on were missing.

A deep decision got ingrained in me, somehow, I will come back to this place with the actual tools one day!

Tamenglong-2:

Workshop- KVIC 2004



Sukumar translating my ppt talk using Lap top

The Tambac workshop done in 2003, paved the way to include Tamenglong into KVIC- Mini Bamboo Cluster Project, we got from KVIC(Khadi Village Industries Commission) . Close dialogues with Mr.G.K.Ghosh, deputy CEO, culminated into a project covering 12–Mini Bamboo Clusters. 4 of them were in North East. TAMBAC with support from INBAR provided a good platform to work with. Sukumar Haobam was a consultant for us. Our team (Me, Gangamma, Rudra Paul, Krishna) was there with full preparations! A full report on the workshop done in 2004 can be seen on my website⁶.

Bonsiepe’s ‘Interface’ for hardware can be used as a framework for bamboo craft. In such an Interface, components like Organizational structures, Product development, Small technologies and Training can be seen in wider context assimilating our experience in other clusters. I will be writing on this further to understand the ‘Arupa’ the ‘*un-manifested form*’ of bamboo craft!

- 1 There were two key persons in INBAR, Rama and Dr.Cherla Sastri. Cherla, a Canadian citizen was in National Research Council of Canada, when he visualized INBAR. For many years Main Office of INBAR was in Delhi.But India had not joined the Network resulting its office moving to China. Rama, a specialist in Tissue culture was programme director.
- 2 TAMBAC (Tamenglong Bamboo and Cane Development Centre) was setup by CIBART(Centre for Indian Bamboo Resource and Technology).
3. NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland)
4. <http://www.agrao.in/images/Articles/BookReviewDODBonsiepe.pdf>
5. Prof. Arnold Vottler, a german furniture designer had come to NID, as visiting faculty for 3weeks to teach us in1968-69.
6. <http://www.agrao.in/images/BambooCraft/TambacWorkshop.pdf>
