Design Education in India

Educating Designers in the Land of Saris and Nikes, Chai and Coke,
Curry and McDonald's

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*Photographs by
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Walking in downtown Bombay one evening, an Indian designer friend and I passed several businesses with American brand names and logos on their signs. His short cross-cultural lecture for the evening was this: these names and logos do not *translate* well to India. For example, if *Nike* is broken into its two syllables and then phonetically rendered into Hindi, the word will say *barbershop* to an Indian reader! My friend took issue with the idea of a brand name or logo as a promotional concept for the global market. His solution was more ephemeral; he said the brand must be conveyed without fixed physical form; only then do you have a global (read universal) brand.

This is just one example of the problems for twenty-first-century designers in India. How do they acknowledge the power and pervasiveness of the West along with the richness and beauty of their visual traditions? How do they design for their audiences at home and, sometimes, abroad? And how can design teachers prepare them for these tasks?

In the first four months of 2001, I had the opportunity to participate in design education in India through the Fulbright program. I was assigned to two schools but ended up (after re-arrangements due to the January earthquake) teaching at four very different institutions in four geographical locations. At each of these I taught a typography project adapted to the typographic experience of the students and the time available to me. The students were first-and second-year undergraduates as well as graduate students; their design experience ranged from quite rudimentary to advanced. We worked in English (the language of instruction in all of Indian higher education) and in Hindi and four other Indian languages (each with its own alphabet). I was surprised when the students told me they had never worked typographically in any language but English; certainly nothing in Hindi beyond letterform design and some short phrases; beyond Hindi, truly nothing.

While visiting each place I was able to observe part of the curriculum in action, to talk with students and faculty, and to do some research on the founding of each institution. What follows is based on this limited perspective and is offered as an introduction to the challenges of teaching twenty-first-century design in a developing country with a rich culture. Most of my observations will be based in graphic design or visual communication, though many can be extended to the teaching of industrial design and to other design disciplines at the schools.

While there are many Indian art schools that provide courses in graphic design or commercial art and whose graduates expect to work in advertising, there are only four college-level professional graphic design programs. Graduates expect to go into professional practice with commerce, large- and small-scale industry, the social sector, consulting, and teaching. At most, about fifty-five students graduate per year in a country of one billion (compared with more than 2,000 programs in the U.S., which graduate thousands for a population of about 250 million). The institutions (and where I taught) are the National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad), the Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati (Assam), the Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay, and Shristi School of Art, Design, and Technology (Bangalore). The first three are state-supported; the last is private. Only the Bombay program is graduate-level, with a two-year curriculum; the others are four- or five-year programs. The two university programs give degrees; the other two give certificates (more about this later).

Ahmedabad

Latitude	23° | 1 MIN | 5 SEC | NORTH
Longitude	72° | 35 MIN | 26 SEC | EAST
Population	4.7 million
State	Gujarat
Language	Hindi

National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad

The role of Charles and Ray Eames in NID's founding in the early 1960s has given it the widest international reputation of the four schools under discussion here. Since it came first, NID is the source for the curricula of the other schools, and its former faculty and graduates now populate the teaching ranks of newer programs. Whatever is exemplary or misguided in Ahmedabad shows up in other locations, and its precepts are only now starting to receive critical evaluation.

The Eameses produced *The India Report* in 1958 based on their explorations of India at the request of the government, which wanted a training program to aid small industries. The request followed a successful Indian tour of a Museum of Modern Art exhibition showing designed products from around the world. The exhibition triggered considerable interest and debate among manufacturers, government officials, and designers, which led the Indian government to consider establishing an institute of design. In the wake of the postindependence drive to create an industrial infrastructure for India, there was a strong movement among the artistic intelligentsia to find design

solutions for the future that would look to modern technology but would also be cognizant of the past.

The NID program of study was to be based on overlapping objectives: training through participation in research projects and service projects for commerce, industry, and government, plus exposure to specific disciplines. The results would benefit the Indian people through the improvement of goods and services and by a communication flow of exhibitions, films, and literature. The plan was a mixed success. Pat Kirkham has said, "… the Eameses failed to grasp the magnitude of the problems facing the vast majority of Indians during a period of massive upheaval, and underestimated the drive for profit and disregard for quality among some of India's manufacturers, the depth of divisions within Indian society, and the complexities involved in the supply of food and shelter (let alone the control of population growth)." [2] Current Indian design education must deal with this overwhelming complexity and with a long history of governmental protection and promotion of small-scale industry and craft, following Gandhian principles. Little attention has been paid to larger industrial development and the international markets. And this is where India finds itself today: caught between culture and tradition,

addressing poverty at home, yet needing to move ahead with infrastructure development to address global markets.

In 1961, three years after *The India Report* was published, the Institute of Design was established. It started at small scale, consciously training at home and abroad those who would be the new teachers. Many students of the first years have become the core faculty at NID and have gone on to found and teach in other programs. In the first years, prominent international designers taught; students were supported in their graduate education abroad. Many graphic designers went to Basel in the 1960s and 1970s; in other fields they went to Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. The Indian design world is very small and interconnected; graduates of these schools and those from the strong fine arts programs at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and Sir J. J. School in Bombay know each other professionally and socially. On a personal note, it was extraordinary to me how quickly and easily I was absorbed into this network as I moved around the country; it suggested a time about fifty years ago in American design. As currently constituted, NID has fifty faculty and 350 students in four areas (industrial design, textile/

apparel design, communication design, exhibition design). The teaching facilities are spacious compared with most American schools; there are machine and wood shops, looms and textile printing labs, film and animation labs, three small computer labs, a small library, along with dedicated studio spaces. The students start with a foundation course and then move into their concentration area. There are core courses and design electives. One unusual feature of NID's curriculum, copied by the other institutions, is the Environmental Perception course, a kind of craft documentation project where students spend about three weeks in a remote village observing, interviewing, and photographing the local skilled activities. The purpose is to connect each student with traditional crafts, with an eye toward possible assistance, development and promotion. Students also do industrial training, meaning an internship in a design office during a vacation. The final semester is taken up with a diploma project, independent work usually sponsored by industry. Students receive a graduate diploma after four years and may continue for a postgraduate diploma in several concentrations after 2½ years more.

Because the school is under the purview of the Ministry of Industry (as recommended by the Eameses), it cannot give a university-level degree and has, so far, successfully argued that its diploma is equivalent. I observed that the students receive a slight general education and little design history or theory. As a result, I would argue this diploma's value is deteriorating. Right now, NID's domestic reputation is supreme, but when students apply to western graduate programs they are sometimes at a disadvantage. And even in India, over time this educational program may be no match for the increasing complexity of the context for design. The IITs, discussed below, may be better equipped to address this.

Within their semesters of about twenty weeks, students study in concentrated modules of two to four weeks. During each unit they do a single form of graphic design; for example, when I taught for three weeks, students spent the full day with me (with chai and lunch breaks). Prior to my teaching I observed a two-week module in symbol design; again, that is all the students were pursuing. It may be argued that this concentration is beneficial; I found the singular focus tiring and less productive. No one can think about only one problem all the time; and for

designers it is a situation they will seldom encounter again. And worse, there appeared to be no attempt to relate the modules to each other by concept, scale, or development level; the students took symbol design, followed by video, followed by typography, etc. This is a series of dishes that do not easily add up to a meal. Assignments were limited to those suitable for the short time frame. There was no time for reflection during the creative phase, no time for experimentation and evaluation. Few faculty made the connections among the projects for students, and there was no chance for extended and complex projects. One small example: sixteen students worked in teams for two weeks on logo designs for a government agency, a religious university, a nonprofit social agency, and a state tourism agency. At the end, several solutions were presented to each client. The further educational and design process of applying the mark to stationery and other identity needs was not contemplated or accomplished. I would see this practice and pattern in the other schools.

However, this arrangement can benefit the teacher and institution. Because faculty are expected to consult with industry, they can

Bombay

Latitude	18° | 55 MIN | 20 SEC | NORTH
Longitude	72° | 49 MIN | 29 SEC | EAST
Population	18 million
State	Maharashtra
Language	Hindi, Marathi

Bangalore

Latitude	12° | 58 MIN | 5 SEC | NORTH
Longitude	77° | 35 MIN | 20 SEC | EAST
Population	5.4 million
State	Karanataka
Language	Kannada

take a two- to three-week module away from the classroom for work. The institute is able to hire out its faculty's expertise. It is also easier to fit a visiting teacher into the schedule, even at the last moment.

I participated in two of these industrial consultancies by working with one faculty member; for the second one I was paid just like an NID teacher. The first was as visiting critic to a short course in basic design and typography, conducted twice a week at a local business school. The second one was potentially more influential. The colleague and I traveled to the southern Indian state of Kerala. We were hired by the largest publisher of newspapers and magazines (the local language newspaper enjoys a subscription rate of nine million) to run a four-day magazine workshop for twenty editors and designers of their seven magazines. Most of these were in the local language, Malayalam, but two were in English; one is a very good imitation of *Time* and *Newsweek*, called *The Week*. None of the men working in magazine design had any design education; they came from illustration and cartooning and had learned on the job. We took them through some re-design exercises and group critiques.

NID is justly proud of its reputation, but I think the institution has plateaued in its educational development and breadth of social/economic benefit. It will be a difficult next decade as its original core faculty is retiring. This will provide the opportunity for new blood and possibly new approaches to design and design education. Last year a new executive director was hired; the faculty is mixed about the direction he has indicated, which is more toward global marketing and large-scale industry. Younger faculty will step up and new teachers will be hired. Nonetheless, many of the younger faculty are NID products and may see little value in new or different ideas.

It might be worth noting here in relation to faculty development that the Indian system provides the equivalent of tenure after one year of employment to public employees, ranging from faculty to government clerks. Given the few design schools and early tenure, there is little movement of faculty. However, many take short teaching assignments at other schools (a module here and there).

Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay
The two-year graduate program at IIT-Bombay was the second design program; it was established in 1969. At first, industrial design at the Industrial Design Center (IDC) was offered; visual communication (VC) was added in 1984. The setting of design within a research and technological university is important; faculty are expected to divide their time among teaching, consultancy, and research. The VC emphasis is on communication problems in social, instructional, educational, and information fields. In addition to NID, the main curricular influence was the Ulm School (which has had much less influence in the U.S. than elsewhere). Though many current faculty are NID or early IDC products, most have also studied in Europe and Japan. The students come from programs in architecture, engineering, and art.

Projects during the early years were more likely to be directed toward the lowest market and simplest manufacture; recently, there has started to be a mix including products for more prosperous markets, electronic as well as mechanical devices, all requiring complex manufacture. Exhibition design was present from the start, but with the introduction of VC, this area has

increased along with more public information and educational products and games. Special constituencies such as the disabled are frequently addressed. The IDC (as well as NID) is the site of regular design workshops, seminars, and conferences relating to industry and management and attracting an international audience.

The facilities are housed in a separate building on campus, newly renovated. They comprise a small design library; small computer lab; metal, wood, and ceramic workshops; studios; an auditorium; two seminar rooms; and private faculty offices (which include some research space). There are currently around sixty students (gender balanced) and a full-time faculty of thirteen (all male; the only female instructor was part-time).

During my visit, the faculty were obviously involved in many research and consulting projects; much of the instruction seemed more one-on-one and related to independent student work or consulting work than organized in more formal classroom instruction. The students I met, admittedly only one class (or batch, as they call it), were evenly divided in their previous study between architecture/engineering and art. Independent of this past, about half were heading in the direction of animation, film-making, and computer art, rather than more

traditional (and print-based) visual communication problem-solving that is the basis for the program. Only half of my batch were truly engaged by the typographical problem I assigned.

One reason that students may not be drawn to more traditional media is the lack of professional opportunities. There is obviously a large publications market in many languages, but this is almost wholly in newspapers and magazines. There is very little book publishing worth designers' interest. Trade-book- publishing still follows earlier British traditions and provides little scope for the designer. Trade publishing for children has only recently recognized the value of design and good illustration; this may be directly related to the development of the Indian middle class and its purchasing power. And the largest area of lost design opportunity is in textbook design and illustration. Textbooks emerge from printers (I cannot call them publishers) who have a government monopoly, have not changed their ideas about educational materials in fifty years, and have never employed a designer or typographer. The best publications come from cultural and philanthropic institutions that do appreciate design and can pay for it.

Shristi School of Art, Design, and Technology, Bangalore
Shristi was founded in 1996 in response to the need for art and design education in southern India. Bangalore and Hyderabad (about 375 miles away in Andhra Pradesh) are the two "Silicon Valley" cities of India—centers of software and electronic product and service development, attracting huge numbers of educated Indians. The school is private, with about 100 students, and is part of a larger (K–12) international school based on holistic and progressive educational philosophy. The art/design school offers professional diploma courses in fine arts, furniture design, fashion design, textile design, and graphic design, all starting with a foundation year. The graphic design department—the largest, with fifteen in each batch—graduated its first students in 2002.

All of the departments are in the process of developing their curricula and trying to hire permanent faculty. The design curriculum is supposed to be complemented with liberal arts studies, though I did not note many such course offerings while I was visiting. Those that existed were not rigorous. The curricula as described in promotional materials are based on the best that Indian and American programs have to offer; however, for graphic design the curriculum seems closer to the NID model than any

Guwahati

Latitude	26°	10 MIN	48 SEC	NORTH
Longitude	91°	44 MIN	05 SEC	EAST
Population	814,575
State	Assam
Language	Assamese

other. Young faculty have been attracted and there is a growing design community in Bangalore (lately helped by the New Economy there) that can be called upon for a few modules of teaching during the year. There were more women teaching here than at any of the other institutions.

The facilities are part of a beautiful new complex in a new part of the city. There are, besides studios and classrooms, a computer lab, wood workshops, a textile loom and dyeing rooms, and a small library, used by the whole institution. However, these spaces are small and are located a forty-five-minute bus ride from the city. In the next few years, the school plans to find a larger space closer to the city center to allow art/design students to use the facilities after 5 P.M.; it is a great frustration that they have to keep business hours.

I was able to meet with some designers in booming Bangalore—several NID students on their industrial training stints with media design companies and two women (both NID grads, one with a Yale MFA), who have established successful design practices. The younger woman does promotional work for many cultural groups and events; the more established designer has large and small corporate clients. Even with several dozen designers in the area, attempts to organize them have been largely unsuccessful beyond a monthly lunch meeting, though some would like a more formal venue for exchange.

Indian Institute of Design-Guwahati
The newest design institution is found at the newest Indian Institute of Technology, in Guwahati, Assam (a far northeastern state, just south of Bhutan and the Himalayas). IIT-G was started in 1994 as the sixth member of the elite university group in India; these are the premier technological and research institutions of the country. Their graduates are the most sought-after and most probably they are the Indians you know in the U.S. The campus, currently under construction with only 20 percent of the expected student body of 5,000 attending, is about a one-hour drive out of the capital of Guwahati. Consistent with Indian tradition, the campus will also house faculty and staff. What is extraordinary to realize is that the six IITs have only 30,000 students combined (the size of my own university campus) in a country of a billion. The nation needs thousands more educated people—designers included—and opportunities for them to work for economic development.

The campus currently has programs in engineering, physical sciences and mathematics, computer science, and design! The only university-level undergraduate design program in India graduates about twenty students a year in communication design and industrial design; it actually recruits students among those who expected to become computer scientists and engineers. Here is how this works: Excellent and ambitious Indian students take the joint entrance exam for all the IITs. Depending on their scores, they have more or less choice of campus. Bombay is the most popular; Guwahati (newest, least known, isolated geographically) is the least popular. Once the campus is selected, each student receives counseling to decide on a major. It is at this meeting that IIT-G students first discover they have design as a choice. They must take an aptitude test, but this only establishes that they know something about design and art, not whether they have any particular creative talent. The second-year students I taught were happy with their choice. But compare this to American programs that accept motivated students who have already self-selected for design study.

While the curriculum display and brochure description indicate a full design program, the reality does not yet match. The newness and isolation have made hiring of faculty difficult; competition for the few candidates comes from better-known programs. The library is very small; the design collection is disorganized and does not contain many of the books required for the courses described. Here, as at the other schools I visited, there appears to be very little reading expected of

students in association with design work. It is difficult to know which comes first: little assigned reading or poor library collections. And there is no expectation that students buy or own design texts.

Conclusion
Part of the mandate for the National Institute of Design, and emphasized by its position under the aegis of the Ministry of Industry, is for design to serve India through its positive relation with industrial production. While faculty at NID and at the IITs do extensive work for industry, as well as for national and regional governments and NGOs, they have only scratched the surface of these sectors. And while these institutions engage many of the appropriate players in seminars, conferences, and workshops; create national and regional exhibitions; and produce publications and CDs, there is not sufficient depth or breadth. But then, were the necessary demand created, there would not be enough designers to address it. The two parts must develop together: more industry and agencies understanding the utility of design, and more design programs to educate the designers.

There are also various interpretations of the original mandate and the issue of whether and how

to adapt or to very different political and social conditions forty years later. Each of the institutions is bound in different ways to this original conception. Some may want to stay or return to the small-scale focus. Others see the imperatives of globalization and may respond with educational projects that relate more to markets, especially international ones. Indian design educators are wrestling with this. The next few years will be significant.

Endnotes
1. Pat Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century* (Cambride: MIT Press, 1995), 279.

2. Ibid.

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