

FLYOVERS OR PEDESTRIANS...GUARDING THE INTERSECTION

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Today citizens of Karachi have become deeply divided into those that are grateful for the extensive laying of flyovers that cut their journey time dramatically, and those who are dismayed as they try to cross over to the other side in an undignified dance of hesitation and fear, only to miss the bus that would not wait or be late for school or work.

I have chosen this image to symbolize my ambivalence towards "progress" in the context of Pakistan. It is also a word of caution in our hasty efforts to compete in an international forum from an unresolved position regarding the implications of modernity within a society that is struggling with its own ambitions.

Since the inception of Pakistan, all development has been aimed at creating a successful industrialized nation based on the "Catch-up theory". This is only possible if a country opts to instill the social conditions to allow it to adopt the technology of industrialization. Yet industrialization is not simply an economic policy. It is a lifestyle. I am not convinced society is fundamentally changed, even if it is acquiring 400 new cars a day in Karachi alone.

Pakistan exists in different time frames, which is usually interpreted as class or urban rural differences - the only terminology used to define societies today. Where the latest mobile phone technology or medical equipment can be found, there are also persistent traditional lifestyles and methods in use not just in rural areas but also in the city.

In order to understand this resistance to modernity, the context, historical and present needs to be addressed. We need to question the objectives of this conference.. are we proposing a flyover for the few or are we examining the dilemmas and needs of a larger community? Any solutions proposed can only be long lasting if they are integrated and meaningful within the community.

There is no doubt that the consumer world that beckons us is now based on off the shelf buying rather than bespoke design. Shampoo has replaced sikakai and aritha. Now the better packaged, better advertised shampoo will be taken to the till.

This conference is a think tank to which speakers representing the art and design colleges, professional designers, researchers, city governments and international stakeholders have gathered to propose a new image of Muslim countries of this region. I say Muslim because of the exclusion of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. The concept of the New Silk route is symbolic rather than literal.

You will hear a range of perspectives:

Teaching design for a global market
Integrating heritage and design
Socioeconomic factors in integrating design
Ethics, safety, environmental issues
Research methodology
The role of government

Design is a solution to the manufacture of an object that serves both the function of an object and is pleasing to the senses. At our juncture in history, at this end of 10,000 years of design, we swing between innovation or nostalgia, new materials or classic revivals.

Design is nevertheless more than function. It is emotion, identity, communication, philosophy and belonging. Behind its economic projection, design is also political as all aspects of life have become. Do we become J.L.Sadie's international middle class with a preferred taste for Macdonalds and Nike or do we resist the colourless homogeneity by guarding our own cultures, customs and values?

How did we come to this point where we are considering assistance in improving design, even teaching the value of design, trying to climb out of anonymity, introduce quality, marketability and use materials that will not pollute our environment.

Although India is not included in the participating countries, any historical account of Pakistan has to be placed in the Indian context. India was one of the richest countries in antiquity. It exported coveted spices, gems, textiles and many luxury goods to Europe, Africa and the East. "Not a year passed in which India did not take fifty million sesterces away from Rome", wrote the Roman writer Pliny in the 1st Century AD.

In the time of Darius, the Indus Valley became the richest satrapy of the Persian Empire giving a tribute of 360 talents of gold, at least a million sterling. The Indian sub-continent invariably carried a trade surplus, precious and semi-precious stones, or gold and silver from the international trade complemented internally mined supplies.

The East India Company was formed in 1600 to get trading rights for Indian chintz which became so popular that the import into England had to be banned in 1701 under pressure from British merchants. The carpets of the Mughal era, fine jewelry, carved rock crystal, coloured glassware, papier mache, and decorative pottery were equally renowned. Metallurgy was well in advance of Europe, even up until the early 20th century in the manufacture of high class steels and decorative copper and bronze objects. Zinc was manufactured and used from 1BC and shipbuilding was a large industry. In ancient times it is said Surat was then the most beautiful city of India. By one account, some of the streets of Surat were paved with porcelain (Auguste Toussaint in 'History of the Indian Ocean'.)

So what happened? How did this flourishing and rich region become, in 200 years of colonial rule, an impoverished unproductive set of socially, politically and economically dysfunctional countries? It was not simply conquest. This region has seen many conquerors and traders, each of which contributed to the enrichment of India. It was more the policies that were followed in the Raj, that led to the final disintegration. " Whereas earlier conquerors had taken full advantage of India's manufacturing skills and either steered them in different directions, or attempted to augment and refine them, for the British, India's manufacturing strengths were unnecessary competition, and were best snuffed out, or left to languish" from South Asian History Project

Lets go back to the times when it all worked beautifully.

Crafts were historically organized around well managed guilds and transmitted from father to son or mother to daughter. They were patronized by the various royal classes, in each of the many riyasats and kingdoms that made up the subcontinent. The Mughals, the Rajputs, the Deccani and Bengal Nawabs, Awadh and Kashmir developed the crafts to great heights. At a wider level, religious rituals and festivals, ceremonial occasions, marriages, and even daily life possessions were embellished.

However, it is at the level of state patronage that the arts and crafts found most support. Along with his duties of political expansion and defence, the ruler was also a patron of the arts; some more so than others. Artists and craftsmen were on the official payroll. This stipend would continue after retirement and continue to the next generation if they took up the craft of their fathers. The great Mughal Akbar was probably the most enthusiastic patron of the arts. His weekly inspections and commissions encouraged his karkhanas or workshops to excel. Influences and challenges from different traditions both local as well as those from other countries were encouraged.

In smaller kingdoms there was a more modest but successful symbiosis between the rulers and the artisans. The weavers, eg., would live off their lands during the rainy season, and when they had used up their supplies, would move to the local landlord and in return for board and lodging would weave the years requirements of woven cloth. (Arif Hasan)

The artisan had a valued place in society. Even Timur lang, who razed whole cities during his many invasions would spare the artisans, who would be transported back home to decorate his city.

Initially the East India Company, like many had previously done, set up their own karkhanas where, European style furniture with exotic carvings and inlay and decorative objects inspired from local

styles would be manufactured to cater to European markets. The production centres were in Sindh, Gujrat and the Deccan, Ahmedabad, Surat and Cambay.

However when India became the jewel in the crown of the Empire, court support for craftsmen was withdrawn and artists were left to fend for themselves in smaller kingdoms. The infamous Doctrine of Lapse wrested lands from those who had no deeds or who had no male heir, destroying in the process the social ecology of the land. Local kingdoms no longer collected revenues and taxes and became unable to support artisans.

The free trade of the past was replaced by monopolization of external trade. The Empire was far greater than India. For example, a three-way system came into existence whereby cotton was grown in the American South, up until the Independence of America, then sent to the textile mills in England and the manufactured goods were sold in India and other colonies. Resistance to this including the Khadi movement could not withstand the change. Stories of muslin weavers losing their thumbs for violating the ban on weaving spread. The stagnation of the crafts was inevitable.

The only place they survived on a modest scale was in villages. Craft became a low paid functional activity. The Mahajan who monitored quality and workmanship and regulated supplies became a figure of the past.

The elite always follows the "court", and soon acquired western lifestyles and a taste for imported goods. Local artists were engaged by the stationed Britishers to paint tourist style paintings to send back home, and the great success of the Great exhibitions of 1824, 25 38, instigated the setting up of Industrial Colleges in Madras, Bombay, Lahore and Calcutta, who were to provide crafted works and architectural ornamentation for exhibitions and Museums in Europe and for Raj buildings and to cater to the growing taste for the exotic in Victorian England. This is now documented and published by National College of Arts Lahore, or Mayo School of Industrial Arts as it was known under the British Raj.

Of course this venture was doomed to failure and the Industrial colleges soon became art colleges, following European art curricula.

Why doomed to failure? Because it completely ignored the local system of craft production that had been in place for thousands of years, which was family based and located in communities rather than individual enterprise. In a system in which all from grandparent to grandchild contribute to the family income, it was not possible to send a son to study Art in the city. This resistance continues today, and no attempt at outreach training has been made.

Even today family businesses thrive, skills are handed down to children who are usually apprenticed at an early age. Education in the crafts lasted many years more than an art school graduate of today, starting as a young child, just hanging around the workshop. This has not really died out. In many areas it continues, whether amongst the ajrak makers or the cinema poster painters.

The system of markets is also as it was in the old days of the market fairs. The wood markets, metal markets, jewelry markets, fabric bazaars, electronic or computer markets are grouped together in one street or locality. There is little or no touting for customers, no competitiveness is visible. This may be a legacy of the old system whereby, the mahajan ensured that if there was little work to go around, it would be shared and no one would be allowed to work overtime.

The idea in those days was "not to amass wealth but to have a full granary, be rewarded with praise, or be given a piece of land." (Coomerswamy) Even today, during my work with truck and bus decorators, along with the financial settlements, time and again, the promise of appreciation, recognition, makes them cut into their profit and even go into loss.

This is at odds with the capitalist spirit of often cut throat competition. Where it is applied in the aggressive advertising by large companies, it creates a new anomaly of consumer desire that is at variance in a society of such great economic polarities. Nevertheless it is a growing trend.

Telesales, advertising, shopping malls have become part of urban life.

The majority is facing a new natural selection, in which only a few confident and capable people can compete and the rest are less and less able to raise their heads let alone thrive. They face a debasing of inherited values, an inability to access rapidly changing markets, and either try to compromise on quality in order to keep up, or else give up.

What we have lost in the process is the love of creation, the satisfaction of a beautifully crafted object, which takes time, and the love of ones craft. Art schools are the few places left where some of this still is guarded.

What is needed is for this love to be rekindled, acknowledged and encouraged. It should begin within society. Of course, the export market is important, but that is best kept as a long term goal where the crafts are concerned. We must first look within. Pay attention to the raising of the standard of living of people living here in the achievement of which, good design plays an important part by raising expectations of quality, and thus pressurizing producers to maintain standards.

There are many pitfalls in placing primary stress on international markets. Japan and Italy, the two countries that have most successfully exported design designed for their own needs first. They had an advantage when it came to export, because both naturally tended towards the Bauhaus aesthetic, which has never really taken root in Pakistan. Pakistani aesthetics gives significance to embellishment to enhance the value of any object. Clothing, accessories, jewelry, wedding halls, shrines, vehicle decoration and now even the neo-miniaturist painters, are all indicators of home grown design. This puts Pakistan at odds with the larger global markets.

However there are positive stirrings of which perhaps the New Silk route is a part, to encourage the vernacular in language, literature, and cultural values. While the long term goals remain economic empowerment, it must not be at the cost of cultural values and sound traditional practices. One hopes that the premise of Capitalism, that if industry does not create wealth, it is futile, can be resisted. I hope we do not reach the point so well expressed by William Blake:

"When countries grows old, the art grows cold and commerce sits on every tree."

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