



# Whither Indian design identity?

Expert Gopika Nath writes on the new field of product designing that may be taking the designer far from his roots





Gopika Nath

Design is synonymous with society. It reflects choices that define what we think and who we are. Objects of everyday life are connected with the manners, customs, beliefs and practices of the people that use them. Design in India today is evolving and designers are beginning to make their presence felt but the emerging sensibility deviates considerably from the 'Indian' sense of aesthetics that has been recorded, preserved and handed down to us through centuries of time.

It is interesting to see the work being done in lifestyle accessories and products for this is indicative of our current predilections, which do in some sense predict the future of our culture as well. The fact is that India may have been a great and cultured civilization, but India today, is a far cry from this lofty ideal. Progress in development terms has come to mean a shift in terms of cultural sensibility because the Indian design sensibility for the most part, doesn't mean as much as does the economics of being produced in India, to meet export requirements. These products are just about surfacing in the domestic market and as Kunal Sehdev a graduate of NIFT says, his parents and their friends do not know nor understand much of what he designs.

Indians, by nature, are emotional people. The elaborate quality of decoration evident in the artefacts that have been preserved at the Sanskriti Museum of Everyday Art, on the outskirts of Delhi, is indicative of this facet of Indian culture. However, the designs we see in the market place that are becoming a part of our everyday life today, display none of this quality of embellishment. The lines are clean, minimal and uncluttered. I do not know if one can really claim that as a state of mind, as far as contemporary society in India is concerned, or to be able to make the correlation between design and society as being reflective of each other in terms of a state of being or even an aspiration of being, in any realistic way.

Today, when talking about infusing emotions in a product, one of the imperatives is its utilitarian aspect, says Kunal, who elaborates, that "a handle for a product should say 'hold me' and 'use me', and a tea kettle should make us feel that 'I am at your service'." He believes that if you can "make a person feel your product it means that you have succeeded



1. A Manisha Bhattacharya design; 2-4. Vibhor Sogani creations; 5. A Mukul Goyal design; 6. Ice-bucket and cocktail shaker, Kunal Sehdev; 7 & 8. Sogani products



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As Indian, but clearly it is influencing our lifestyles and our business decisions.

to a great extent.'

Mukul Goyal, an alumni of IIT Kanpur, NID and The Domus Academy in Milan, says that "the vendor selling pop toys at various road intersections does not debate the identity of what he sells, for he is doing things the only way he knows in the limited resources he has." Through this, Mukul gives us considerable insight into the circumstances that give impetus for the kind of designs one is beginning to see in the Indian market. And one fundamental criteria is limited resources. To belong yet stand apart is a paradox of life. Identities become relevant when we are being taken for granted, or overlooked, or we feel the need to stand apart, to say that we are different. Human beings do that. Designers are no different.

At this particular point in time, India is trying to belong to the global society and seeks to assert her

difference through cultural links of the past by using quaint ideas that are easily identifiable as India, like the snake charmer and the Taj Mahal. However, does the creative instinct in the designer today, not yearn to say something that is truly in his or her own voice? This choice it seems lies with the designer-entrepreneur who has the luxury to experiment. Mukul, who is one, says: "Today I am having (almost) the time of my life. I have my own little company with a physical infrastructure that can sustain itself through 'bread and butter work' but now, I have a choice. I can experiment, make things I like and not even care if somebody likes it or not." This has given him the opportunity to work with some traditional methods in metal and he has employed techniques used by the Dokra tribes of Orissa to give us contemporary serving utensils, which are very interesting in the combination of the rustic coiled technique with the high-tech polish of stainless steel. But the odd such product cannot seek to make any definitive statement in contemporary design practices.

Priti Paul runs a shipping business, is also an architect trained in London, with a degree in Design studies from Harvard and one in economics from MIT. Priti designs a range of products in steel which are intended to complement a "strong professional identity". She says she started to design things for herself. Then her friends started buying them from her for gifts for boyfriends and husbands, who later came to her as corporate clients. For her the medi-



um was a natural one to work in, as the family have a business interest in steel.

Vibhor Sogani also works in steel. His work is retailed through Vis-a-vis, who are also the marketing representative for Alessi and Flos, and frankly, as you browse in their showroom on the Mehrauli-Gurgaon road there is no discernible difference in the aesthetic statement made by Vibhor, who hails from a traditional Jain family of Rajasthan, or those made by the international designers of Alessi and Flos. Vibhor studied at NID and feels that the field of industrial design has a natural inclination towards a western sensibility because the student is taught via examples of what is being developed around the world. It is also probably true that the machines that make a lot of the products are also designed in the western world and this dictates certain criteria that fashion the product.

However, in India, there is a different kind of product designer, one who works with clay and moulds with hands. Here the mechanical limitations do not come into play. Manisha Bhattacharya, Anju Kalsi and Kriti Arora are three studio potters who were part of a recent exhibition in Delhi. While Anju has had an informal training in the field, Kriti has done her masters in ceramics from the USA, with a degree in Fine Arts from Baroda, and Manisha, who has many qualifications to her credit is also a Charles Wallace Trust Awardee, and Fulbright Fellow. Pottery in India dates back some 6000 years but these potters are part of the concept of studio pottery pioneered by Sardar Gurcharan Singh of Delhi Blue Pottery, which forms an important and integral element in the evolution of contemporary design and its sensibilities that reflect upon corresponding social norms. Kriti makes some



**Facing page, above and below:** Sogani products in steel  
**Bottom:** Mukul Goyal takes inspiration from tribal motifs





Concentric circles become the theme behind Sogani designs

attempt to draw inspiration from elements of her life that reflect the 'Indianness' of it. This, however, is still largely in an artistic mode and the utilitarian aspects are yet to develop. Manisha is still absorbed in her technical explorations of the Japanese Raku methodology and her forms reflect this. And Anju says she make pots and "things in general" and is inspired by "all sources and experiences received and expressed consciously and unconsciously", for which clay provides a means to that end. Together, they give us some insights into an evolving sensibility that is not 'hardcore' design, but still involved in creating and designing products that are made and sold in India.

P. R. Daroz, who was born in Hyderabad is a very senior and respected potter. He is an artist and a designer. Daroz works with ceramics and is inspired by the architectural forms of India from the Stupas of Sanchi to the Terracotta Temples of Vishnupur and Nino Carusa of Italy. His focus is on "form with modeled detailing as sculptural embellishment." He feels that there is an unnecessary focus on the distinction that is sometimes made between form and

function, "that often reduces the concept of function to a merely utilitarian narrowness". Daroz believes that a beautiful sculptural pot may or may not be used to 'hold' other things; its function lies in its aesthetic presence.

This idea seems to be evident in the minds of some people who have bought Vibhor's Blue Moon collection. Where "the concept revolves around the synthesis of functionality and attitude" and it seems that the "attitude" has determined its purchase as a sculptural piece, more than its functional intent.

Design then seems to be in a state of flux, the visual signs of its evolution have an attitude that lean towards a sense of aesthetics that is not rooted in what we recognise as Indian, but clearly one that is influencing our lifestyles, our business decisions and therefore our socio-economic development. Most of the designers I spoke to have had a good education in design, be it NID, NIIFT, University of Massachusetts, Harvard or The Domus Academy in Milan. They have been formally inducted into various schools of thought in design, from Loos and Sullivan who ordained that form should follow function and were disdainful of ornament, to the



Napkin rings, Sogani

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Bauhaus and the various Arts and Crafts movements that emerged in Europe and Russia from around the mid 19th century, to contemporary practices in America and Japan. These ideas would naturally influence their thinking and the evolution of their design sensibilities, but the young duo of Ruchie Mehta and Seema Kothari from Jaipur who started out as hobbyists and have met with considerable success, have virtually none of this baggage to carry.

They work in glass, are very pragmatic in their approach, about who is their target audience. What makes them an interesting study is that perhaps, because they are trained on the job, they are uninhibited in their creative experimentation which allowed them to drift "towards newer kinds of abstract design, shapes and forms". In essence, it seems that no matter what your grounding, the sensitive respond to the mood and the message of this mood seems to be as far removed from the traditional vocabulary of Indian artifacts of everyday use, as we are from the centuries they were produced in. The question is are we comfortable with this emerging identity that sees lost in the context of a world view? Is it time to stop, take stock, define and redefine what we have used, assimilated and benefited from, to forge an identity that is an amalgam of all these influences?

Kriti Arora and designers like Mukul are begin-

ning to set the mood, where there is raw quality to their work reflected in the pots and also in functional office accessories, but it would be interesting to see what would emerge if the research were to go deeper than the tribal kind of vocabulary that is popular today. I think it is time to reflect. It is also time to take the initiative to go beyond a very typical attitude that says '*ho jayega*'. Today India is teaching the world her wisdom in spiritual matters. The essence of all spirited thought is conscious living. In the present context, this would translate into evolving a design strategy/vocabulary with conscious thought to devise ideologies that can inspire and sustain creativity in design for future generations. To take inspiration from traditional forms and ideas, it is imperative to understand the link that existed between art, design and craft in ancient India. The kind of demarcations that have emerged make the designer far removed from the process of production. For an identity to evolve that is truly Indian, which considers the roots and as well as the elements that influence, the designer now also needs to don the role of an artist and do some deep and daring introspection. This if anything will reveal the identity that yet lies within. It is important to remember that what we have behind us in terms of our roots are too deep and too vibrant to become as irrelevant as they seem today.