

Social and Service Design: the challenges for contemporary India

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Abstract: Globalization and market economy are impacting Indian society in an unprecedented manner. The impact is visible on India's socio-economic policies as well. Today India, like many other nations is in the race of achieving higher rate of economic growth to bring development, prosperity and happiness to its people. However, it's not clear whether economic well-being is proportionately related to the happiness quotient which is simultaneously affected by several other socio-economic-psychological factors. For a long time, the Gandhian model worked as an inspiration behind the socio-economic policies in India. Gandhi's philosophy made clear distinction between the need and greed at a subtle psychological level so as to avoid conflict, maintain social harmony and ensure sustainability. However, the new socio-economic policies follow different mandate. In the light of the twin complimentary Gandhian concept of antyodaya and sarvodaya this paper discusses how social and service design in the contemporary context can help create a more sustainable future by striking a balance between economic development and social well-being at large.

Keywords: Gandhi, social design, service design, system design, systems thinking, sarvodaya, antyodaya

1. Introduction

Although Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation was not a trained economist, but his socio-economic thoughts and programmes are so fundamental to the much talked about notion of sustainable development that we can only ignore them at our peril. Great minds of the modern era like John Ruskin, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Kropotkin shaped his socio-economic and political thoughts besides the traditional Indian saints like Tulsi, Meera, Nanak among others. Ruskin's empathy for the marginalized which he discussed in his *Unto this Last* – a book which Gandhi had read, looks not very different from Gandhi's own concept of antyodaya in spirit. Gandhi didn't write any socio-economic treaties as Marx and others did but he inspired the whole generation of his times and even later with his thoughts and actions and encouraged all to design a system which could serve the rich and poor alike. Gandhi stressed that attention paid to the poorest will lead to antyodaya (rise of the last) and in turn lead to sarvodaya (rise of all). Though nowhere explicitly stated, but at the conceptual level Gandhi appears to be a social designer who

first discovered the existing maladies in the Indian society and then envisioned systems and programmes of social reconstruction and redesign through antyodaya and sarvodaya - a win-win situation for the rich and the poor alike.

In the larger interest of India's social design, Gandhian views showed noticeable disagreement with the established axioms of economics such as desires being insatiable, attainment of high standard of life being an objective of economic activities, more consumption for faster economic growth, perfect mobility of labour and so on. Gandhi never endorsed insatiable desire because he believed the goal of life is to control desires and transform them through self-righteousness. He also held quality of life above attainment of high standard of life. To him more consumption also led to more problems which now reflect in social, ecological, environmental degradation of sorts. With regard to perfect mobility of labour Gandhi believed that family and community stability are of far greater importance for socio-economic sustainability. His ideas emanated from his understanding of the larger social design in the context of the philosophy of life.

However, it's Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship which brings

together the practical and the ideal in the service of society and mankind - a doctrine that underscores the need to understand the nature and requirements of social design to meet the challenges of the real world. Gandhi wrote in Harizan:

“Trusteeship provides a means of transforming the present capitalist order of society into an egalitarian one. It gives no quarter to capitalism, but gives the present owning class a chance of reforming itself. It is based on the faith that human nature is never beyond redemption. It does not recognize any right of private ownership of property except so far as it may be permitted by society for its own welfare. It does not exclude legislative regulation of the ownership and use of wealth. Thus under State-regulated trusteeship, an individual will not be free to hold or use his wealth for selfish satisfaction or in disregard of the interests of society.” (Pyarelal) [1]

His philosophy seeks ensuring economic equality through non-violent social change. And in this course the doctrine of trusteeship works as a process to realize such a change. He held that removal of economic inequalities in a harmonious way is only possible when the rich, after having satisfied their reasonable needs, hold their surplus wealth in trust for society. This could also be a conscious social design to ensure that while the rich man is not dispossessed of his surplus wealth, he uses it in the broader interest of the community, and not in his personal interest alone. The doctrine of trusteeship also looks like a divine doctrine as it draws from the traditional belief that everything one possesses is a gift of God, and thus belongs to it. As such, whatever belongs to God belongs to all in equal measure and not just to few individuals. Consequently, if an individual enjoys more share than he deserves, that makes him a trustee of that surplus amount for the people of God.

No doubt, Gandhi was trying to address the issue of perennial socio-economic inequality in a moral and ethical manner rather than in a manner of political assertion. His idea of trusteeship in a way is a reminder of service design at a system level whereby the surplus resources of the rich are to be made available and effectively reallocated to the service of the deprived. Gandhian socio-economic and political philosophy remained rooted in the concern of the man unto the last. Though Gandhi didn't suggest the mechanism or working model to operationalize trusteeship, however, he gave a social philosophy which can become the cardinal principle for social and service design in India and elsewhere.

2. Social Design

Thesaurus provides us several semantic variations of the word 'design' which cover a wide yet somewhat interconnected range of meanings conveying arrangement, constitution, composition to conceive, conceptualize, create and innovate amidst many more. When used as a suffix, design refers to the existing composition of the entity (prefix) on the one hand and the possibility of innovation in it on the other. As such, social design may be interpreted from the social science as well as design perspective. From

the social science perspective design appears to be an arrangement of various elements of the society which have developed through an evolutionary process and possess the capacity to shape its nature and form. Therefore, in the context of social science we can interpret design in terms of material and non-material culture, traditions, religion, politics, hierarchy, administration among others and then examine what happens to the communities and societies when these elements interact. Jong (2006) looks at social design as a “normative, descriptive and critical strategy. He observes: “social design is a critical approach, emphasizing the consciousness of the administrators, who are responsible for developing processes and intention, for facilitating dialogue among participants, and for learning from unintended consequences”.(Jun.) [2].

Nevertheless, a large part of the discussion on social design actually emanates from realm of design itself. It's largely held that the term social design in words and spirit refers to design for social needs. In other words, social design may also refer to the strategies, ideas and concepts required for creating an equitable society by integrating those sectors of human needs which are overlooked by the market-centric design endeavours. According to Margolin & Margolin [3] “The primary purpose of design for the market is creating products for sale. Conversely, the foremost intent of social design is the satisfaction of human need.”

The design community world over is increasingly asserting for a larger goal in socio-economic development by aligning itself with public policies. It doesn't want to remain confined to niche and communities and cater to their vagaries alone. The conviction that social change can come through design and positively impact the lives of the deprived, needy, underprivileged is the driving factor. The vision transcends the boundary of the local and aspires to become universal. Design thinkers like Victor Papnek have been acutely aware of the role and need of design for the 'real world' and equally critical too of the manner in which design has been put to use as an item of consumption. In his seminal book *Design for the Real World*, Papnek at the outset highlights some inconvenient truths about design which questions its social responsibility. Papnek says:

“There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second. Never before in history have grown men sat down and seriously designed electric hairbrushes, rhinestone-covered file boxes, and mink carpeting for bathrooms, and then drawn up elaborate plans to make and sell these gadgets to millions of people. Before (in the 'good old days'), if a person liked killing people, he had to become a general, purchase a coal-mine, or else study nuclear physics. Today, industrial design has put murder on a mass-production basis. By designing criminally unsafe

automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed. And the skills needed in these activities are taught carefully to young people.” (Papnek) [4]

Papnek believes that the ultimate purpose of design is to transform man’s environment, tools and eventually man himself. However, what is important here is to understand that the transformation itself is often creating more problems than solutions for the human society. It’s because the basic philosophy of design has largely remained obsessed with finding solutions in terms of products and in all these years. As against that, solution of many problems lay at the systems level which requires the understanding of the society and the systems governing it. For example, in a heterogeneous society like India having a varied socio-economic spectrum and demography, the issues of healthcare or public transport system need more efficient human interface than technodriven design interface. Similarly, rapid urbanization for instance affects the existing social system. Therefore, rehabilitation of the affected marginalized section requires not only designing alternative good looking pucca (brick and mortar) houses instead of shanties, but also a whole model for their socio-economic sustenance. As such, design is imperative not only for the insatiable desires and aspirations but also for the needs of the real world which struggles with age, impoverishment, disability, sanitation, housing, healthcare, education, unemployment and so on which constitute large part of our social sector. This would require a complete reorientation towards the role of design and training the design professionals in a manner to so that they recognize the real issues facing the humanity in the realm of social and service design. Papnek rightly observes this priority deficit in our system as he writes:

“Designs will be needed when man establishes himself on our ocean floors and on planets circling distant suns. But man’s leap to the stars and his life beneath the seas is heavily conditioned by the environment we create here and now. There is something wrong when young people are less familiar with life on a southern Appalachian farm than with the construction of a gambling casino on Mars. They are taught a lie when they find themselves more familiar with atmospheric pressures in the Mindanao Deep than with atmospheric pollution over Detroit.” (Papnek) [5]

Social design is mandated to engage with the needs and requirements of the underprivileged class, elderly population, low-cost medicare, and education, energy, transportation, environmental design, revitalizing and empowering communities and so on. As far as India is concerned, its social sector remains crucial and challenging for its development because there is a marked development deficit in this sector and thus, demands concerted efforts and attention. However, if insufficiency and disparity in investment continues, it will adversely impact India’s human capital formation on the one hand and long term socio-

economic growth on the other. The concern is nevertheless, not only about enhancing expenditure on the social sector, but also of integrating associated systems to the larger issues of social design so that the throughput of planning and expenditure also reaches those who need it the most. Investment in the social sector must trickle down to the last person to fulfil Gandhi’s dream of antyodaya. Subramanian writes in Business Standard that:

“for its level of economic development, India’s achievements in the social sector are not unambiguously deficient. They are average in some areas (life expectancy), terrible in others (child malnutrition), and not so bad in yet others (inequality). And the growth years after 1991 do not seem to have been especially damaging or uplifting for India’s social achievements. Neither doom-mongering nor triumphalism seems warranted. Or, perhaps, both are. In the famous words attributed to Joan Robinson, in India, “everything and its opposite is true”. [6]

In India the social sector broadly includes rural development, water and sanitation, urban and rural housing and poverty alleviation programmes, woman and child welfare, nutrition schemes, employment generation, among others. According to the Economic Survey of India 2011-12, Government of India’s support for social programmes continues to expand in various forms. This is despite the fact that many social sectors actually fall within the purview of the states. Government has increased the expenditure on social services. "As a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), its share increased from 5.57 percent in 2006-7 to 6.76 percent, 6.91 percent and 7.34 percent in 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 respectively, helping India face the global economic crisis without much adverse impact on the social sector," the report adds. (Economic Survey of India 2011-12). Inclusive development is the key to overall social development and also central to the objective of social design. The report further observes that:

“A large part of the population, particularly segments like landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), and other backward classes (OBCs), continue to suffer social and financial exclusion. Accordingly, the government’s policies are directed towards economic and social upliftment of these segments so as to enable everyone to reap the benefits of growth and bring marginalized sections of the society into the mainstream. This is also reflected in social-sector expenditure by the government.” (Economic Survey of India) [7]

The new age design flying on the wings of technology has no doubt solved several problems mainly in terms of speed, accuracy, mass production, mobility, networking among others. But it has also transformed the methods of production (from customized to mass), patterns of consumption (from need based to aspirational), channels of distribution (market being a mouse-click away). Together they have changed the human society.

French Sociologist Bourdieu [8] talks of three types of capital apart from economic capital. They are: human capital, based on skills and knowledge; social capital, based on our connections and relationship and finally, the cultural capital, based on our capacity to participate in cultural activities so that we can have our own identity. Social design requires the integration of these capitals in a more harmonious manner. The argument is not to give a clarion call against whatever is produced out of technology and innovation but to use them for the larger interest of the society as Thackara [9] has rightly said: “a transition is already under way from innovation driven by science fiction to innovation inspired by social fiction.”

Thus, social design is about dealing with the moral and ethical questions of our times – what kind of a society we want, how much we care for our fellow beings and vice versa, do we look for comfort and solace in our society, do we want to lead a social life based on empathy and finally, do we want to seek comfort through impersonal technology and innovations or through a well-designed social system which values our existence as human beings? Social design may be utopian in nature nevertheless, important for making life a fulfilling experience.

Twentieth century saw design not only turning into a vast industry satisfying the enormous needs of consumer products, industrial system and business set ups. The back end processes were overwhelmed by rise of numerous service sectors, prominent among which was advertising which fuelled both people’s imagination and aspiration. Human creativity and innovation was harnessed to sustain a society which had become subservient to unrestrained market forces. But now we are into the twenty-first century which is also known as the post-industrial society. Service sectors are producing more wealth than manufacturing and therefore human capital is far more important today than ever before. In such a situation we also need to ask ourselves the question which Jones [10] has asked: “Can we start leading our prospects toward the innovation of social opportunities and serve to enhance our clients’ awareness of long-term possibilities? Can we lead effectively without being ‘thought leaders’ and acknowledged iconoclasts?” Surely, design in the post-industrial milieu will have to address the needs of the sectors beyond the purview of economic interest as well. It will have to engage itself with alternative design opportunities which it has overlooked so far and because of which has faced severe criticisms.

3. Service Design

Service design may be considered as a kind of activity which deals with planning and organization of various components of the service sector from human resource to infrastructure, quality enhancement to delivery of service as well as improvement of the interface between the service provider and user. The post-industrial era is characterised by the rise in service sector. Even as the back-end support to the industrial activities it has become much bigger in proportion than the main activity itself. Product companies are

developing into solution companies by adding services to accompany their product.

Jane Carlson at Scandinavian Airlines said we don’t fly planes anymore – we fulfil the travel needs of our clients. The World Bank recognizes it too and acknowledges that service industries have increased their share of the world economy during the past two decades, while the relative share of agriculture and industry has shrunk in most developing regions. Globally service industry is estimated to contribute to 70 percent of the GDP. As far as India is concerned, according to the Economic Survey of India 2011-12 the service sector continues to be a star performer as its share in GDP has climbed from 58% in 2010-11 to 59% in 2011-12 with a growth rate of 9.4%.

Management Guru Kotler [11] defines service as: “any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything.” The service sector today is managed by both service marketing and service design. The areas of service marketing and service design may seem to be overlapping but there’s a marked difference in approach. From the marketing perspective service is a product too – product of an intangible nature, and therefore cannot fall outside the defined gamut of the four Ps namely: product, price, place, promotion constituting the marketing mix.

Service design on the other hand addresses the aspects of functionality (more than form as in product and communication design) and form of services from the user’s perspective. It seeks to ensure that the user interface is convenient and useful and satisfies the need of both the user and the service provider. Service design can bring innovation in the existing services by restructuring them and innovate new services too where none exist. It is important in the context of post-industrial society because it envisions, articulates, and devises solutions to such problems which may not necessarily exist today, but which may appear in due course of social evolution.

As such, service design observes and construes the emerging requirements and the changing behavioural patterns and makes an attempt to transform them into the likely services of the future. It uses time the tested methods of design which are explorative, generative, and evaluative. But service in itself, as Srinivasan [12] rightly points out is “an experience” too. And so is design in its ultimate analysis. Therefore, design’s intervention into service seems but natural.

Service marketing came into being as a subject of study as early as 1970s, however, service design was not in picture till the next two decades and the concept appeared only during 1990s. Service design is a truly multidisciplinary endeavour which improves, innovates and makes the existing services more user-friendly and desirable. As a holistic outlook towards the needs of the society, service design requires integration of inputs from diverse fields ranging from socio-cultural-economic and political domains to management, marketing, research and design. It has application to both industries and the social sectors. Service design owes a great deal to the British and American design consultancies on the one hand and also to the institutions like IDEO, UK Design Council and KISD in UK and Germany on the other. The society is also faced with the mounting problems of social,

economic and ecological sustainability while reconciling these mutually conflicting endeavours is a herculean task. Therefore, they require a multi-disciplinary approach. Saco and Goncalves [13] thus observe:

“Relying on a designer’s sensibility, it incorporates elements and tools from several domains to attain various and, at times, competing objectives: customer satisfaction or appreciation, designer satisfaction or sense of accomplishment, problem resolution, economic and environmental sustainability, and practical beauty (“beauty that works”).”

UK Design Council explains service design as an endeavour which is about making the service one delivers useful, usable, efficient, effective and desirable. As such, the endeavour of service design according to the Design Council is a strategic project wherein established design techniques such as thorough client research, collaborative ideas generation, prototyping, testing etc. are built around the actual needs of clients so as to simplify their complex problems and deliver solutions that are future focused and cost conscious. Service industry is ever expanding and accommodating the diverse needs of the people. Every stage requires design as a strategic input to innovate new methods for solving problems of the economy and society. Economy itself is not only about creation of wealth, more than that it’s about ensuring material well-being of the people at large.

In today’s competitive business environment, products cannot remain competitive without efficient back end service support. Therefore, service becomes essential for the competitive advantage of any business. This realization is sinking in but it must sink even deeper. Hollins [14] rightly observes: “One of the big challenges is to get people in the service industry to realise that they are involved in design and to get help to improve it.”

But apart from business, can service design also cater to the need of the vast social sector in India which exists outside the established domain of organized business? Perhaps the efficacy and social relevance of design cannot be proved better on any other turf than the social sector. It’s also concerned with the social priority of design as against the consumer led approach of design. Between the abundance of desire and the abundance of need what we select defines our priority both professional and national. In India, where systems are still largely disorganized the prime intervention of design in the social sector such as healthcare, education, empowerment among other can be better managed through the process of integrating them. The views of Verma et al. [15] also endorse that service design can make its contribution to the social sector by:

“planning and organising people, infrastructure, communication and the material components of a service, in order to improve its quality, the interaction between service provider and customers and the customer’s experience. The increasing relevance of the service sector, both in terms of the people employed and its economic importance, requires services to be accurately designed.”

Socio-economic deprivation, limited or complete lack of access to the basic facilities guaranteed by a democratic society to its citizens, marginalization of various communities due to the traditional and dynamic social forces

are the real challenges which service design in India needs to engage with. Changes in the Indian society have happened, but they seem to be more in terms of number than in kind. In other words, technology, product, design, communication, education, healthcare have though multiplied in terms of numbers, nevertheless, their benefit still remains out of the reach of a large section of society which survives much below \$1 per day.

The marginalization of a sizeable section of society is a real matter of concern. The word ‘marginalized’ in the present context has gone beyond ‘castes’ and become more pervasive in the era of market economy. Today, it also includes marginalized ‘class’ which exists beyond the traditional hierarchy of caste in India. The policy of positive discrimination actualized in terms of caste based reservation benefitted the traditionally marginalized castes, but that couldn’t change the entire social design to the desired effect. Now economic marginalization of communities under the pressure of market economy is the emergent threat. In India, aspiration of social welfare creates the turf on which service design needs to prove its relevance for a developing society. Social priorities will define the collaborative process of design intervention for social development and much of the future will be shaped by social and service design. The whole developmental paradigm can be recast by the intervention of these two imperatives of design.

4. The Socio-Economic Imperative

Design thinkers like Papnek, Thackara and Whiteley among others have been critical of the manner in which design has got delinked from its social engagements and concerns. Market-centric and business-focussed approach has put design in such a tight spot that critics often believe design either lacks social concerns or is abysmally insensitive to the larger social needs. Not only that, even among the industry, design is largely used more as a tool of styling, surface ornamentation, aesthetic intervention to provide multiplicity of options and much less as a method of solving problems of our physical and social environment and providing creative solutions thereof. Whiteley [16] emphasises:

“The design profession needs to be both introspective and outward looking. It must look at its practices and values, and their implications: and it must look at the condition of society and the world. Designers can no longer take refuge from responsibility for their own actions and continually repackage the same old type of consumer goods at a time when the issues about consuming and its relationship to the world’s resources and energy need urgently to be acted upon.”

Socio-economic factors like globalization, imposed cultural homogenization, marketization etc. are influencing both contemporary design profession and its priorities. While these forces are being unleashed, need for socially and ecologically sustainable design is also being felt in equal proportion. India’s large social sector offers enormous opportunity of design intervention through social and service design. In a way, both are complimentary to each other. While social design may identify the needs and areas of design intervention, service design may help by strategizing

the process to reach out the desired service to the right people at right time. In India socio-economic development is central to all the development agenda. However, it's not bringing about the quantum of change which is expected particularly in the sectors which are at the core of social development as well as the development of India's vast human resource.

The policies of development are made keeping in mind the need to bring the deprived and the marginalized into the socio-economic mainstream so that they can lead a good life. Mid-day meal, MNREGA, Indira Awas Yojana, Rajiv Awas Yojana are some of the policies of socio-economic development meant for the marginalised and deprived section of society. However, the perception of a good life itself is often socio-culturally conditioned. Therefore, identification of what people contemplate to be important for a good life is essential. Eames [17] in the seminal India Report emphasised upon it as he said:

“there be a sober investigation into those values and those qualities that Indians hold important to a good life, that there be a close scrutiny of those elements that go to make up a “Standard of Living”.

Eames also clearly identified the immediate problems of the India society which according to them (Charles and Ray Eames) were easily defined as food, shelter, distribution and population. From the perspective of social and service design, they still remain major challenge for inclusive growth and development in India. The policy of inclusion both social and economic has no alternative in a country like India which is marked with huge socio-economic-cultural diversity and disparity. Otherwise, the nation may fall apart. So what is needed here is to synergise social and service design in order to ensure the fruits of change and development to the entire population.

5. Conclusion

Like any other social endeavour design also needs to re-evaluate and rearticulate itself with the changing times. However, the twentieth century Bauhaus design doctrine which brought human creativity in art, craft, architecture and other allied fields to converge and solve the problem of the modern industrial society through functional and well-formed products, still looms large and continues to influence the contemporary design philosophy. In the post-industrial era nevertheless, the real challenge facing human society is one of consolidation of design, technology, business and social well-being. Our response to the future needs now not only depends on even more innovation in product design but innovation in social and service design too. For example; the innovation to integrate communication technology with the sector of primary education to impart quality education in far flung areas, or to integrate information technology with the craft sector so that craftsman can identify their market, or to provide healthcare services to the rural poor by tele-medicine and so on. The innovation and integration in social and service design will take care of the ever changing social needs and help in making the society even just and equitable by fulfilling everybody's needs and adding to the dignity of

the underprivileged and deprived. The two can also be leveraged to make design innovations more socially inclusive so that the benefits can reach out to the last man. And that will be the real and fruitful intervention of design in society. We may call it social inclusion by design – perhaps a new euphemism for the Gandhian concept of *antyodaya* and *sarvodaya*.

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