

How Indian are our products

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Special project by Kavita Appachur Guide o Prof U.A.Athavankar

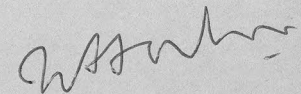
**How
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special project report
submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirement for the Master's Degree in
visual communication

by
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Indianness

Rapid strides in technology are changing our world. They are also changing our attitude towards things. The influence of the West pervades every walk of life, in almost every part of the world. One of the reasons may be the hi-tech package offered by the developed nations in the form of products. Are other underdeveloped nations losing their identity because of this invasion. What role does culture play in technology? Culture has a very significant role to play, because recent developments have brought technology and culture very close. Each governs the direction of the other.

This is apparent in our country too, where we a third world nation are trying hard to keep pace with the developed nations on all fronts. This manifests itself in our daily life too - in the kind of products we use, the way we use. There is a flood of products on the industrial, commercial, medical and domestic scene. Time saving gadgets, space saving devices, sensitive diagnosing equipment. Most of them a result of foreign collaborations and technology transfer.

It is true that a chair is to be sat on and a grinder grinds, be it in the West or in India. So where does Indianness come into all this? All these statements are justified at a very basic level. Indianness does play a very important role in determining the functions of a product to be used in our country. To find out the extent of this one has to delve

deeper into what Indianness is.

Indianness is an oft misquoted and misused term today and has come to have a number of connotations. Viewed in a holistic manner it is probably an outlook or attitude towards life reflected in the way we live, our activities and approach to things in day to day life. It is ingrained in our subconscious and inherent in our society. Imbibed down the ages it has its roots in the social, economic, cultural, religious and political environment that we have lived through down the ages.

History has a very significant role to play in Indianness. The changes down the ages as a result of trade with other nations, invasion and foreign rule, we have adopted and assimilated a number of alien traditions and customs such that they have come to take on an Indian flavour. The use of chairs and tables, high platforms for cooking even trousers and shirts we regard as our dress are all gifts of a foreign culture, accepted over a long period of conditioning.

In spite of these there are a number of attitudes, motions and beliefs that are unique to us. This is so because Indian culture has its roots in religion. Religion defined the social, cultural and even economic norms that are still prevalent in our society, though they have undergone a lot of transformation. The religious philosophy does not agree with the Western approach to life. From this basis stem a

number of differences in our way of life that are reflected in our needs and use of things, eg. we do not believe in disposing off things. Indian attitude cannot relate to products being disposed off and that is why objects once brought are the possession of a life time.

The geographical conditions also play a significant role in varying our needs from the West. A house has to be cleaned everyday in our country because of the dust whereas in the centrally heated houses of the West once a week is sufficient.

The economic environment too is very unlike the West-things regarded as a necessity in the West are a luxury in our country. A refrigerator once brought is a major investment for a life time and a change is rarely thought of. Our standard of living being lower means a different set of priorities for the products functions.

So the question arises whether it is fair to saddle the consumer with products he has little use for and cannot relate to. In order to be able to use them he has to adapt to them instead of it being the other way round. At times he adopts to them very well, in some cases rather slowly in others never because most of these products have been designed for the West and cater to their needs.

As a result of foreign collaborations and technology transfer they are introduced on the Indian scene by the manufacturer, very often a user cannot put it to optimum use - eg. a washing machine in our country should be suitable for cottons with adequate wringing, starching facilities. None of the ones existing in the market do so because they cater to the predominantly synthetic Western wardrobe. Thus if a product has to be useful for an Indian set up, their needs have to be primarily catered to which very often do not tally with the West.

One wonders if doing away with these products would be a solution to this problem. Doing away with some is feasible but a number of the time saving gadgets, if tailor made for Indian needs could go a long way in increasing efficiency. Times have changed, life goes on at a faster pace. Professionalism and competition have to gain an upper edge over one's competitor. Besides both husband and wife have started working and time saving is a top priority so doing away with these products will not get us anywhere to name a few like the typewriter, cars, mixers etc. It is true there are some unnecessary products and through a clever marketing, advertising strategy create a demand that does not exist - eg. tinned foods in a country where fresh foods are available aplenty. However that is a moral issue and a facet we are not touching upon in this project.

What then is the answer to these problems ? A very plausible solution is to develop and manufacture these products indigenously so that they would be designed with our needs in mind and be ideally suited to our demands. They would have our set of priorities in function. We do have the potential and resources as has been proved in the fields of atomic energy and space exploration.

The objective of this project is to make the manufacturer aware of the fact that products manufactured by technology transfer are not the right choice for the Indian user. A fact he could already have realised but does not feel it is his initiative that could change this trend. An eye opener for the user who many a times reconciles himself to using the products offered to him without expressing his dissatisfaction at their unsuitability to his needs. Many a times we do not realise something better is possible. Only when it comes our way does the fact strike home. When the first transistor was introduced in the fifties it was a sell out, though viewed against today's models it seems obsolete.

Thus Indianness for the purpose of the project may be defined as the characteristics and attitudes that are essentially prevalent in our country only and go a long way in determining our use of and for a product.

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Products in the Indian Context

Everywhere we go we are surrounded by images of new products introduced into the Indian market. They haunt the newspapers, magazines, television hardings and are constant reminders that they are begining to play an important role in our life. If we compare a product being advertised by various manufacturers the differences are minor and all of them have come our way from some multinational in the West so a specific function that is only an Indian requirement is unlikely to be performed by that product.

They are just dropped into our lap without any change at all, some fail, many survive. One can classify these products - the ones got through technology transfer into three broad categories.

Failure	Ones that were introduced and did not work because they were unsuited to our needs.
Poor adaptations	Products that were introduced but are not very useful, the way they are because it is more effective on carpets and what the Indian home needs is a floor cleaner.
Good adaptations	Products that are adapted well and are successful the steel almirah originally an office product to stock files, in the West adapted into the household as an answer to the insecurity of the Indians sturd y spacious and tough. Hence it is

very successful.

To analyse the products on the above basis they have to be viewed in a

- a) Social context
- b) Economic context
- c) Political context

a) Social The social context ^{is} in the first aspect one relates to when analysing a product. It concerns everybody in some way or the other because, products are an inseperable part of man's existence. He can relate to them and there is a sense of belonging. Thus he is in a position to assess the ones he uses to a large extent. Product evaluation includes a study of the formal and functional aspects of a product.

Formal : It would cover the aesthetics of the product. Its form, colour, texture and other detailing.

Functional: The performance of the product. Its utility and effectiveness, aspects that are function, technology related

Primary function

Secondary function -

Ergonomic - Human factor

Socio economic

Environment - suitability of the product to the environment in which it operates
The technological aspects would involve

working principle

Structure

The Products can be categorised as

- a) Personal
- b) Family
- c) Community .

One usually finds people in a position to make a judgement on personal products because they are used more often by the owner, there is more interaction and a sense of belonging. This results in a pretty clear idea of what he is looking for in a particular product and what the shortcomings are.

In the case of family products it is not so easy for a person to pin point what is lacking or what he is looking for evaluating a utility of community products is impossible. Ask a man the kind of letter box he wants and he will not be able to say anything but the kind of car he wants gets a quick reply - Evaluation and improvement of community products remains the job of experts who gauge the public demand and suggest changes.

To evaluate Indianness in a social context one takes the middle income group as a sample because

- a) they form the majority of buyers
- b) Are still 'Indian' in their outlook and have not adapted to Western habits like the upper income group.

For the purpose of this project products form various categories were identified (list on next page) Data collected from users, shopkeepers alongwith existing data was analysed. Apart from these, comments of experts and designers were also taken into consideration when evaluating true Indianness.

- b) Economic At the economic level there are a number of facts and arguments that can be put forth. These would involve a detailed survey and analysis of the consumer, manufacturer view point eg. the cost of developing a mould vis-a-vis buying one from abroad, especially of an older model. Is it justified to give the Indian consumer a discard of the West? The manufacturer has his argument the consumer his own and time constraints do not permit me to go deeply into this aspect.

Product Classification & Product Categories

Industrial

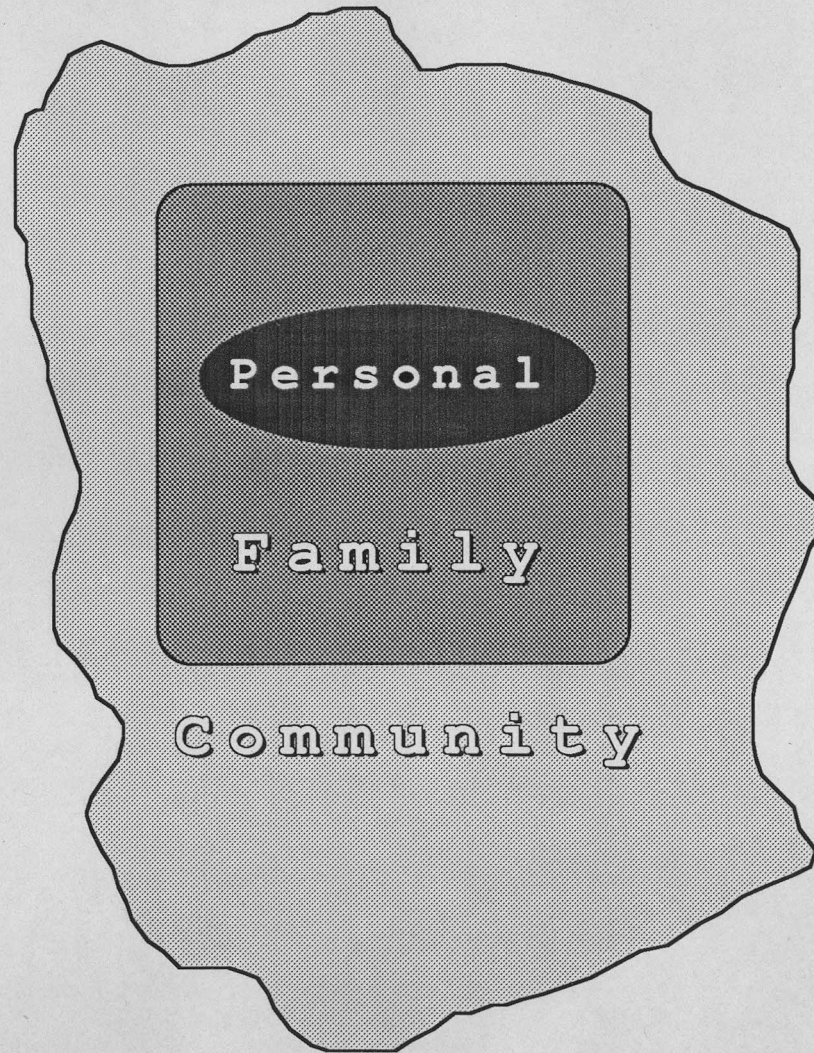
Drills
Helmets
Sanding machine
Milling machine

Means of transport

Cycles
Two wheelers
Auto rickshaw
Cars
Bus, Trucks
Trains

Commercial

Typewriter
Cash register
Telephones



Household

(Consumer Durables)
Washing machine
Vaccum cleaner
Mixer
Grinder
Coking range, stove
Oven
Tiffin carrier
Melamine ware
Cook & serve
(Furniture & Fittings)
Chairs
Taps
Toilets

Indigenous

Sleeping bags
Shoes

Political The political atmosphere of the country would certainly be in favour of foreign collaborations but there are two schools of thought amongst the policy makers too and to delve into this is not within the scope of the project.

What would be regarded as truly Indian product ? Evaluated against the background mentioned in this report. An Indian product is one that fulfils the Indian requirements irrespective of its origin. It should be designed to cater to the Indian consumer, without him having to adapt to the product. It should fit into the socio-economic set up and and be suited to one environment.

eg. a lantern regarded as an Indian product is actually of French origin, but it served its purpose very efficiently in the Indian household. There are some other products that are necessities but fall short of expectation in the Indian context.

Not so Indian : It is a poor adaptation and is not suited for our needs because it has been designed for a Western consumer and our requirements do not tally.

eg. The domestic mixer initially was a failure because our cooking requirements are unlike the West. A gradual change with the introduction of blades for tough, wet grinding - an Indian requirement, introduction of stainless steel jar, it is doing well.

A third category includes products where our priorities are absolutely different from the Western requirements.

Western : A misfit in our society. If designed properly it can increase efficiency because as of now they have been introduced without any effort to alter it to our requirements.

eg. The typewriter is a boon in any set up. One is not questioning the working principle but when it comes to Devanagari key board. Handling it is no mean task. Besides it does not do justice to the script. This is so because the norms here are very different from English language.

Thus we realise that sophisticated technology and an efficient working principle are not an end in itself. They have to be applied to optimise the performance of the product for functions that satisfy the needs of consumer very effectively.

Infact, most of the products got through foreign collaborations are technologically developed to an extreme degree of perfection, but fall short of expectations in the Indian context due to their functional applications designed with a different set of priorities. An ideal solution is a good mix of sophisticated technology and the capability to perform functions required of it in the Indian context.

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Approach and concepts

The objective of this project would define the approach to be adapted. Taking into consideration all the aspects discussed earlier it was decided to come up with a package to be introduced to the manufacturer as a primary target and the consumer as a secondary one. The output would be a video film to be presented in seminars.

The overall approach has to be subtle and not blatant or insinuating. These products do have their advantages and have been useful at a certain level but we have not been thoughtful in giving the consumer what he ideally needs. No doubt the manufacturer too realises this. The film is thought provoking making him feel guilty. The alternative to technology transfer is implied, not spelled out.

The consumer too is made aware of these shortcomings, such that he might question the utility of products and be able to specify his needs.

It was decided to take a few products from various categories listed in the previous chapter. The various devices used to project this point of view were thought of and concepts to structure the film were generated. Concepts that would be suited to the statement of the film.

- I Historical Perspective : - Presenting the products in a historical perspective, a light hearted approach highlighting the Indianness against this backdrop. It also traces the development of the product, the changes and modifications down the years emphasising the fact that needs are the deciding factor of a products functions. A difference in background means varying needs and it is our needs that are of primary importance.
- II Comparative Analysis:- Through a detailed comparative analysis of the three categories - truly Indian, poor adaptation and Western. The demands and functions of three are simultaneously portrayed. Facts speaking for themselves.
- III Satire on Advertising :- A spoof on advertising is used as a tool to project that there is a lot of difference in the claims and the actual functions that a product performs. Moreover advertising campaigns have a Western tilt. They portray situation that does not exist.
- IV Lifestyle :- A day in the life of x, in the course of which he uses various products. The advantages and disadvantages in each case would come through.

V Product point of view :- Presenting the contention one is making from the point of view of the product - a kind of autobiographical interrogative narration, giving it an interesting twist.

It was decided to use III and IV for the film, making it more interesting because projecting all products with the same approach would become very uninteresting. Besides each product has a varied background and deems a different treatment.

The structure of the film is very simple

- . Introducing products with advertisements
- . Contrasting the claim they make by visually depicting two products; through the activities of a housewife.
- . Highlighting the shortcomings through audio and stills.
- . Examples of good adaptation
- . Example of good indigenous products
- . Examples of poor adaptation
- . The alternative

Two products tap and gas stove are projected in detail, whereas some aspects of various products that are good adaptations, indigenously developed successful products and poor adaptations are also shown.

One hopes that the target audience would try and find a suitable alternative to this trend of technology transfer - namely designing and developing products indigenously specifically for Indian requirements.

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