

Understanding Design
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Module – 01
Start of Section 2
Lecture – 02
The many notions of design

Ankit: A son waves a cheque before his father and commands him to sign; people hound ministers, asking them to resign. But what's most surprising is how just about anyone tells anyone else to "design" something. Because it turns out that nobody seems to understand what exactly this thing called "design" may be.

Mehndis, rangolis, ghaghras and cholis -- you name the object, and it needs to be designed! But design is not something to merely put on display. Design is in fact a magical world, a spell of sorts. When it is present, design is often invisible, and when it is shown off, it is often absent.

This magical thing called design has two main pillars. The first is the user. All users know is what they want. And yet, it is far from simple to understand what they really want. The second pillar is the designer, accompanied by the engineer, armed with all his tantalizing machines. Together, the designer and the engineer create everything from roads to codes, and apps to maps.

The story goes that there lived a king whose kingdom happened to be beside a river. Once the king's prime minister suggested, "My Lord, if you go to the river for a bath, your people would have another occasion to rejoice, and the whole kingdom would celebrate". The king liked his prime minister's suggestion very much indeed. The next day, the king set out for a bath in the river, and the atmosphere turned festive with celebration. "Long live the king", rang out the cry everywhere.

But lo! As soon as the king stepped out of the river, he found that his feet were covered in mud. The innocent king thought that he had forgotten to wash his feet during his bath. He returned back to the river to scrub his feet clean. But no sooner had he stepped out than his feet were muddy again! Only after he had gone back to the river and forth to the banks several times did it dawn on him that the mud on the ground was dirtying his feet. He immediately ordered his minister to find a suitable solution to the problem. At the behest of the minister, all the king's subjects started sweeping the streets. Even then, as soon as the king stepped on the ground, his feet were covered with mud yet again.

A second minister was now given the responsibility to find a remedy to this nagging problem. After thoroughly surveying the situation, he realized that it was the dust rising up from everywhere that was dirtying the king's feet. Tall awnings were forthwith erected on either side of the king's path. But alas, the mud refused to part ways with the king's feet. At last, the prime minister came up with a new solution. He suggested that the entire kingdom's earth be covered with leather.

Right then, an old village woman stepped ahead: "Good folks, if you cover the ground in the whole village with leather, where will plants and trees grow, from whence will we get food? And what will human beings and animals in the kingdom eat?" Turning to the king she said, "My lord, pray come here." When the king approached her, the old woman picked up a piece of leather lying on the ground, measured it to the size of the king's foot, stitched it into shape and draped it around the foot. It was thus that the very first pair of shoes came into being.

Now, dear audience, you may consider who the user may be, and who the designer may be. Everything from those first little objects -- the king's pair of shoes -- to each aspect of the world around us has been "designed". As Saadat Hasan Manto says, "You should not aim to make the world understand you, but rather to understand the world yourself."

A story by Ankit Chadha

Translated in English by Saroja Ganapathy

Nina: Kya baat hai!

Before we explain things to people, we should try to understand them ourselves.