



COMMENCEMENT

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LAILA TYABJI

Hello everyone!

Having been a happy part of the SRISHTI audience the past two years I never expected to be on the dais! I am honoured and pleased – but also a little nervous...

It's a long time since I left art school (I was at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda and then in Japan)! I loved and learnt many things – both inside and outside the classroom. I confess I imagined that leaving College also meant the end of studying and exams. A bit of bad news I have to give you is that learning never stops, and every day has a test! Funnily enough, this is what actually makes life worth living....

Whether you are studying design or political science, a useful lesson in actually being part of hundreds of students, is learning to live with others. (Something very important in the India of today.) No one is always a hero or heroine, a genius or star, and some of us never will be. Names, community, and religion have very little to do with anything. All of us are sometimes sad or bad, useless at something, temporarily unpopular. People fail exams, are rejected in love, suffer from insecurity; girls with millionaire fathers can also have broken homes or indifferent parents. Coping with this in crowded classrooms where nothing is private and one is never alone, is an important part of college life and the process of growing.

School and University equipped me, in an unexpected way, for the quite varied, demanding, occasionally bizarre scenarios of my life – explaining the genetics of White tigers in Japanese to the future Emperor of Japan, being in the midst of communal riots in Gujarat trying to persuade mothers whose children had been burnt alive that they should remain non-violent, teaching sex workers in Sealdah Jail *kantha* embroidery, being thrown in a ditch by a BSF sergeant, working in Indian villages with communities as varied as burkha-clad *chikan* workers in Lucknow, tribals in Bihar, Rabari and Lambani gypsies, mustachioed MCP Rajasthani *regurs*, and running an organisation that works all over India.

I was lucky to grow up in an age and institutions that were completely secular and non-denominational. People's parents, beliefs, and their positions in life seemed quite irrelevant. The only caste system was moral integrity and excellence. Politics, religion, money, where you were born, the things that seem to dominate life afterwards, didn't concern us. We somehow absorbed from the freedoms as well as the disciplines: a balance, an ethical framework, a sense of what it meant to be contemporary and Indian. SRISHTI seems another such space – you are fortunate. *"Education frees the spirit of man"*, said Nehru.

Education is something all of us take for granted, even groan about – as a necessary but boring grind. But I spend my time with women who have no education at all. For them education is as unattainable as the moon. As a result they are deprived, marginalised and looked down upon; given the unpaid, back-breaking, beast of burden jobs. Even when battered, beaten, with multiple pregnancies, they have no recourse but to endure.

The village women I work with have found new horizons through their crafts. They have started their own bank accounts, lend money from their savings to the rest of the village, travel and market their products all over India. But what they really work for, invest in, and crave is good education for their children. All over India, women endure loveless marriages, break stones for a living, work an 18 hour day, just to give their children the opportunities all of you take for granted. You are extraordinarily privileged. And having been given that opportunity, you must use it.

The education we get is our gold credit card to the world. The key to our multiple choices. We should value it and use it with respect and care. Without being priggish or giving up the good things of life, we must be aware that we live in a country with 360 million people below the poverty line. People so poor that children start working when they are barely eight or nine. Most of them living in villages without light or drinking water when we moan about half an hour without an AC. Spending time with them, I realise how lucky I am. How little right I have to complain.

An amazing advantage that I share with you is that it's the 21st century. India has nuclear capability and the world's fastest growing IT industry, but we also have crafts and craftspeople! All over India we have these extraordinary skills – able to handcraft everything from a terracotta tumbler to a temple; a wicker basket to diamond jewellery. These are part of our aesthetic and culture, but they are also part of our economy. In my eyes, these skill sets and knowledge systems are a potential goldmine – an edge we have over the rest of the world.

However, there is so much discrimination in Indian society, with age-old prejudices of caste, community, & gender coexisting with newly coined ones born of education, wealth, power & privilege, even the colour of one's skin – all being expressed in openly aggressive new ways.

The craftspeople I work with suffer similar forms of discrimination. Seen at best as picturesque exhibits of an exotic but irrelevant India, rather than the skilled professionals they are. *"I have received many awards, but I still work on the footpath,"* said one. *"It's the grave pit, not the loom pit,"* says another; his grim words borne out by recurring headlines of starvation deaths of handloom weavers. When I ask our Lambani craftswomen why they prefer wearing horrid nylon mill-printed saris rather their own glorious mirrored and embroidered costumes, they say it is because as *"junglee"* tribals they are not allowed into temples or even coffee shops.

I am 70 and I've spent half my life abroad and half in India and one thing is absolutely clear to me – what makes us interesting as a nation is the differences not the imitative similarities.

Our history, economics and colonialism meant that we are trying to catch up with the West in almost every aspect of industrialisation and development. So, if we want to capture the world we have to do it on the basis of our strengths not our weaknesses. And one of our strengths is our distinctive aesthetic & knowledge systems. Not just the materials, motifs, and techniques, but the unique way traditional communities look at things and problem-solve, use waste, take from the environment and give back to it.

We are fortunate in India to have both craftspeople with extraordinary and distinctive skill traditions, as well as scientists, designers, and technocrats capable of sending satellites into space. Both sectors have some of the liveliest minds and talents. Alas, the two seldom meet.

Japan is a brilliant example for us – the ability of Japanese designers to integrate the elements of their own uniquely Japanese style and mindset into their stunningly contemporary design – be it architecture, high fashion, or electronics. We too should use our rich and varied design and process base to create a new contemporary relevant aesthetic – the world is ready for it.

The dilemma today is that rural craftspeople are distanced from their end users in ways that were never the case before. Therefore they find it difficult to keep up with the pace of change. And urban designers are similarly distanced from the craft tradition. A divide that both IT and an urban designer can bridge.

Similarly the choice is not an either/or of technology or traditional skill. Each has its place and purpose, and a linking of both would create an exciting and necessary dynamic.

Rather than dismiss our Indian hand traditions, and with them the countless amazing techniques that machines can never replicate in such variety, lets apply innovation, design, technology, and all your brilliant young minds to working on the structure and processes, to see in what ways they can be made more relevant and less labour-intensive, while retaining their inherent strengths.

Tradition and innovation are not two separate, mutually exclusive processes.

A weaver in Kanchipuram just won an award for adapting his loom to operate it singlehandedly rather than needing additional trained apprentices. I can think of dozens of other craft techniques – from *dhokra* metal casting to lac bangle making – where a little ergonomic design would ease the lives of these fantastic creative artists, and give them the space to innovate and explore. This goes from upgrading raw material to developing appropriate packaging for the finished product. And obviously, this includes streamlining the process itself. An artisan need not sit on the floor whittling with a piece of broken stone, in order to qualify as a craftsman!

Design today is a global force that impacts us all; but also divides societies and cultures – creating its own caste-system. I am therefore keen to get "design" out of this rather "precious" box we have put it into – a sacred subject that can be understood only by the English language initiated. With the rural craftspeople I work with, there is actually a knee-jerk superior and inferior typecasting between them and the professional designer, even though the craftspeople are the ones who have been practising traditions going back hundreds of years! As one craftsman sardonically said, *"Not all designers are craftspeople, but every craftsman is a designer"*.

Those of us who have gone through a formal art or design education have been taught to realise our own creative imagination to the full, and given the technical expertise to do so. Working with craftspeople, there is a conflict both of function and responsibility. Whose creativity are you to express, your own or the craftsman's?

The issue can become terribly emotive – given that motif, form, and usage are still so linked in India with tradition, culture, community, region... To change or not to change – and who dictates those changes?

One has to dampen one's own creative flame in order to light the craftsman's fire. One must push, not pull.... One needs to inspire craftspeople to do their own further innovation, not stun them into passive replication. The people you work with must be taught to use their minds and imagination as well as their hands. And you must treat them as equals not inanimate machines.

Tradition shouldn't become a static cage, just as contemporizing should not be purely imitative of the West. In the process we should not lose this heritage of unique craft techniques, motifs, shapes and designs that is our strength and signature. Rather, we should use the past as a spring board to go forward. Reach back to the Vedas for inspiration by all means, but also use the expertise and insights we have acquired since. Working in an Indian craft technique does not have to look like Bajirao Mastani or the Taj Mahal! National Identity should not become ethnic kitsch. "Become modern, but return to the sources."

In India design is often confused with ornamentation. Design is used like an aerosol spray in a smelly bathroom. To pretend that obsolete, stale things are fresh! Its important to realise that design is not just about making things look good, but a way to examine, understand, and re-shape our lifestyles, our society and ourselves. A look out of our windows at the jumble of concrete, electric wires, tangled traffic and mutilated green spaces for instance, and the noise, confusion and angst of those who live in it, shows how bad contemporary India has been at designing its urban spaces, and safeguarding its environment and heritage.

Design doesn't just mean making a pretty patterns – it is about linking a need with a function. Finding solutions. Having learnt the methodology of design we have a responsibility to apply it to this earth and those who inhabit it.

A generally accepted truism in India is that 'Design' is the diametric opposite of Science - a rather frivolous fringe activity fit only for girls looking for husbands. Worried parents urging their sons to go into engineering, management or medicine shudder at the thought that he might opt to be that effete object - a designer. It escapes the average layman that every surgical instrument and bridgehead needs to be 'designed' in order to fulfil its function, and that engineering, management and design are inseparable siblings of each other. For the man in the street design means decoration. Wrong, wrong, wrong.... I think it was Steve Jobs who said, *"Design is not just what it looks like, and feels like. Design is how it works."*

A wonderful painting by the famous French painter, Paul Gauguin is entitled: **"Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?"** It's a question that reverberates in my head.

There is a growing separation between urban and rural India – in values, attitudes and aspirations. And the increasing marginalisation of traditional skill sets and knowledge. In the lemming rush to Western modernity and industrialisation, both traditional communities and the urban middle class are busy throwing out the baby with the bath water.

India's greatest advantage is that we have our feet in both East and West, and have not lost our cultural knowledge systems in the process of acquiring new aptitudes like English or Information Technology. This duality needs to be passed to the next generation. YOU are that next generation – and it is YOU who will decide what kind of world we live in.

Ananda Coomaraswamy, the philosopher historian, said a century ago, *"The most important thing that India can give to the rest of the world is simply its Indianness. If it were to substitute this for a cosmopolitan veneer, it would have to come before the world empty handed"*.

Both urban movers and shakers and rural craftspeople need to break out of the caste system of City vs Village, Literate vs Non-literate, new Western Technology vs Traditional Skills and take forward the unique knowledge systems and art forms that are our heritage,. Infusing them with our own professional expertise and using them as a stepping stone not a cage. If we can do it for Yoga and Ayurveda we can do it for craft!

For those of you worrying that working in the craft and development sector means being sidelined from the mainstream, slotted as *jhhola-wala* rather than executive, let me share the excitement and adventure of being the person catalysing change in a rural village rather than being stuck as a small cog in an anonymous corporate eco-system. Whenever someone comments on my wrinkle-free complexion, I tell them its the fun and fulfilment I've had in my 45 years working with craftspeople! Its a double whammy - you have the ability to create something uniquely yours, but also the delight of actually seeing its impact on that community. A woman burnt herself to death when I first went to work in Ranthambhore, from despair at how to support her family. Today her daughters are among the wealthiest women in the village, earning though the hand skills we taught them.

"Embracing complexity" is a phrase I heard describing SRISHTI yesterday; it is a mindset we need in order to capitalise on what we have inherited. Embrace, experience and enjoy this rich diversity, our ability to live in multiple worlds. We are so lucky to have it.

The American writer, Tennessee Williams, said *"Make journeys, attempt them. It's the only way..."* What India needs now is not only physical journeys but a voyage of inner and external discovery - a reaching out to new horizons of the mind and spirit. We should attempt more such bridgings - of design and of ourselves.

Growing up, I had the good fortune to have a father who told me, *"I don't care what you do in your life as long as you do it with passion and do it with pleasure."* I've carried that as a banner through my 70 years.

Today, as you go out on your own journey, not only to design things, or even your own life, but to reshape the jigsaw of this complex Incredible India, let me end with that same message to you: You should live life and each minute as if it is was your last. Life and education are too precious to waste - in being bored, being passive, missing opportunities, being second-rate, following peer pressure, sticking in your own narrow comfort zone....

As the painter Henri Matisse said, *"Creativity takes courage"*. I wish you that courage!

Thank you,
LAILA TYABJI

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