Future Thinking in The Indian Context
Praveen Nahar

- What is the role of "future thinking" in the context of India

With its large population and enormous socio-cultural-economic-environmental diversity, India is seen as microcosm for the world. Most of the challenges that the world faces today are all present in India. People, racially, culturally, historically & habitually vary from region to region. India has a plethora of communities, each with their own origins, migratory routes, narratives, and opinions. Within unique regions too, we find differences in beliefs and perspectives.

India is rapidly adapting to latest technologies even in its most remote locations, coupled with migration towards urban areas; the scenarios that India is looking at are contextually unique; and the opportunities and issues arising out of these scenarios can be looked at and understood through future thinking as one of the ways.

While it is a connected and networked world, each society throws its own challenges and there are no precedents to understand from/follow for tackling these challenges. Therefore contextual future thinking becomes essential. Future thinking in the Indian context is relevant, to open up possibilities of several futures so that we can consciously move towards certain desirable futures, and therefore sidestepping certain undesirable ones.

Future thinking can be instrumental in unification of diverse perspectives for greater good, and creating a healthy tolerance for differently opined when amalgamation of differences is not possible.

- Within indian context, how do you see the use of speculations in design education and practice?

Design affects futures, often in unseen unprecedented ways. Use of every new technology and object has redefined the world, society and its interconnections. Therefore, designers need to not only find solutions for issues of today, but also need to be able to speculate how these solutions will affect society in future and the issues they will put forth. Speculative practices can be used to help push the boundaries into designing futures, whether it is at an institutional level, or at a professional one.

India being this complex a system, is an ideal ground for the practice of speculation. In the Indian context, there is great potential to harness eastern philosophies and while exploring futuristic speculations in order to move away from the stereotypical-fictional idea of the future we are headed towards.

- What do you think about the use of design as a tool for critical debate within India?

Historically, art has been able to address critical debate through various mediums. Designer's, through the use of objects and scenarios, make tangible notions that people cannot easily visualise. This strength of design, allows larger audiences to envisage and question the futures that they cannot themselves perceive, but can easily relate to.

Critical and speculative design allows for debates on possibilities that one may not keep in mind when designing for an immediate challenge. Because it is in the nature of critical design to look at eventualities located much further in the future and not cater just to the immediate, it allows debates on what kind of future are we heading towards and what kind of future we want to build.

Lately, a large portion of design practice in India is catering to the cycle of creating, selling and consuming, while much of design is aware that this cannot go on forever and needs to be challenged. At this juncture , design would have to transform and adapt to other means of sustenance. Interestingly, design itself could trigger a change in design practices. And that trigger could be critical design. Thus, critical design could act as a tool to deflect questionable design attitudes from taking root in India, since design as a profession is yet to mature in this context.

- What is the relation between cultural identity and design in India?

India has strong plural cultural identities. Historically our cultural identity was synonymous with our designs and aesthetics. Even in today's globalised scenario and with a strong modernist influence on designed goods; many designed objects, especially from material based disciplines, carry strong regional cultural identities.

The precedent of contemporising a culturally located craft technique and identity, has been seen in the work of designers in India. Such an amalgamation of culture and design has been practiced by indian designers over the years.