

Prof. Gui Bonsiepe I know

a g rao*

It was early seventies when I first met Prof. Gui Bonsiepe (Bonsiepe), listened to his talk and saw his work in Chile under president Allende. It immediately captured my Imagination and created a 'Tacit bond' with him. At that time, Left-thinking prevailed among intellectually active, young faculty of IITBombay and 'Bonsiepe-talk' on 'Chile', addressed to all faculty members at IITBombay, was an instant hit.

Myself and Moniram Chattopadhyay, had joined IDC faculty after doing a post graduate diploma at National Institute of Design(NID). At that time, Industrial Design centre (IDC), was a small department, in IITBombay. It had only 4 full time faculty members headed by Prof. Sudhakar Nadkarni, (SN) an alumna of *Hfg-Ulm (Hochule fur Gestaltung-Ulm)*. My faculty friends from other departments looked at 'Industrial design' as a superficial discipline for India. Coming from USA, they had a 'styling image of Industrial design', in their minds. Suddenly, the 'Bonsiepe-talk' changed the 'positioning' of 'Industrial design' across the other disciplines at IIT. IDC gained a new importance!

At NID, we were quite exposed to *Hfg-Ulm* philosophy, but had not realized its political implications as such. My native place, Anantapuram (or Anantapur) in Andhra Pradesh, was well known for left leaders like Tarimala Nagi Reddy, who became an extremist in defence of tribals in Telangana in fifties and was popular among youngsters! Bonsiepe-talk gave me a direction to find a new meaning for 'Industrial Design', in India, where poverty still prevailed and consumerism had not yet been taken over. The challenge to 'design for disadvantaged', which got initiated at this time got further shaped with the significant document Bonsiepe produced in 1973 for UNIDO, 'Development through Design' (1). SN, as head of IDC was invited by UNIDO, for a meeting to discuss and give feedback on the report for adaptation. SN, myself and Uday Athavankar (Uday) had a thorough review of Bonsiepe-report and prepared a feedback. I was assigned to pen down our feedback to assist SN, to present it in the UNIDO meeting. Myself and Uday were involved in the drought relief work in rural areas of Maharashtra, in early seventies through FREA (2), which had given us many insights. We could connect them with Bonsiepe's report and respond with Indian examples of re-used packages, products made with local materials, etc. We also pointed out that concepts like planned re-use and design for self- construction of products with critical parts bought from Industry can become a part of design methodology.

The report and response we prepared, also led to many concrete actions at our end. We encouraged our students to take up design projects with unique local requirements. Products like a bird scarer, locally made fruit drier to be made with local materials, etc., were taken up by them. I, along with a faculty friend from Thermal Power Engineering, developed a smokeless Chula (coal stove) for domestic use. All these were brought out in a publication, IDC-Decade of Design Experience (3), later.

Prof. Bonsiepe's visit to IDC in 1982 as a UNESCO consultant, under UNDP programme was a boon to me. SN asked me to be Bonsiepe's counterpart faculty, to assist and plan his work during his stay from 19-10-82 to 21- 11-82. Bonsiepe was very systematic with his typical German precision. He gave a task to Mdes students to design a 'door hinge', a typical redesign problem. Most of the students were graduate engineers. They were not used to think in alternatives or imagine new solutions to problems which they had seen an answer in use.

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An initial briefing was done in the class. After a day, Bonsiepe and me, had an individual discussion with each student, one by one. What struck me was the way Bonsiepe was dealing with the students. Even as the dialogue was going on, he was making his own notes and sketches, when students were explaining their solutions. By the time we finished the discussions with all twelve students, his note book was full. This gave us an advantage to deal with the students when they came for 'a chat' again. *More than that, it stayed as a potential record to convert the material into a book on pedagogy!* This feature of recording has been totally missing in Indian pedagogic practice, where teachers love to talk in a conversational mode. But over a period, if one wants to write on the 'process of pedagogy', one is left with no record to refer to. As the design task proceeded, we found students were still stuck! That is the time, Bonsiepe brought in a surprise element into the task. He asked them to visualize the hinge 10times bigger and make quick 3D models. This jolted them and triggered their imagination (there was no 3D software at that time). Added to this, we got a model, 10times to the 'existing hinge', made in wood by our carpenter in the Studio! I quickly learnt the importance of a *surprise element* to take the students into an 'Imaginative Zone' of thinking. Much later I connected this to Alex Osborne's brain storming transformations, Magnify, minify, reverse, substitute, etc., which could be conveniently used as a 'tactical means' in basic design tasks as well. This 'tacit mentoring of Bonsiepe', helped me a great deal to teach graduate engineers who needed 'complexity' as a challenge to get engaged. I was able to take ahead this 'mediated learning in basic design' with series of cube tasks which were aimed at developing '3D-imagination' with complex configurations. Success of IDC students in Indian Industry in the initial years of IDC, can be attributed to their ability to tackle complex details and come out with 'design solutions' in Industry.

I, soon discovered, 'a jovial, friendly person', underneath the serious no non-sense design teacher, in Bonsiepe. He was very open minded when it came to trying out Indian cuisine, of course with the caution of a German mind. His everyday meal was arranged at IIT Guest House where all the menu items were prepared keeping 'foreign faculty' in mind, by the Cook. Consequently, food preparations turned out to be rather bland and did not carry the 'flavour of native recipes'. Bonsiepe soon got bored of eating similar, bland preparations at the IIT guest house every day. I found a small restaurant 3 kms away from IIT, where excellent 'Tandoori chicken' was served. I took Bonsiepe to that restaurant, once, for dinner. He liked the food so much that he got hooked to 'Indian Tandoori Chicken'. At the end of the class at 5 or 6pm at IDC, he would say, *'Rao, let us go and have 'Tandoori chicken', in your restaurant. But I am inviting you'*. We used to go there for dinner often, during his stay. Of course, he would never allow me to pay!

To make tandoori chicken, 'Marinated Chicken' is freshly roasted in a traditional Punjabi Oven, called 'Tandoor'. It carries an appetising 'aroma', when it is served to eat! Unlike other preparations in Indian Cuisine, it was not too spicy.

On one of the weekends, I accompanied Bonsiepe for a trip to Bombay(Mumbai) city centre to see few typical tourist spots. Visit to Khadi Village Bhandar(KVB) became significant. KVB is a government- run retail centre, to sell products made in villages with local technologies. Hand woven cloth made out of hand spun yarn, is called 'Khadi'. This cloth, popularised by Mahatma Gandhi during freedom movement, is sold in these

shops. Cotton threads spun with hand are uneven compared to yarn produced by machines in the mills. This makes Khadi cloth coarse in texture compared to mill cloth, but soft in 'structure' which makes it comfortable to wear. Apparel like 'kurtas' (typical Indian loose collarless shirts), made out of Khadi cloth, had become popular among young designers like us at that time. It carried an ideological tag to identify with 'Gandhian philosophy', that propelled a movement called 'swadeshi', during Indian Independence struggle. To produce with local resources and technologies to make country self-sufficient was the intention. We respected and liked the 'khadi

cloth'. Somehow, we had not noticed the 'aesthetic speciality' of the cloth. In the Khadi Bhandar, Bonsiepe, was touching, feeling and looking at the khadi cloth. Then he said, 'what a beauty of unevenness'! It jolted me and opened my mind! I thought, 'Oh goodness! How come I never looked at 'khadi cloth' from the aesthetic angle!' Surprisingly I never knew that Bonsiepe had a fine art back ground, till I read his 'dialogue with Maldonado, his mentor', only recently.

In 'Milan Lecture', Bonsiepe had said, "What characterizes the peripheral world is the lack of a design discourse. That is why these countries have not, so far, had a future—for the future is where design unfolds...." (4). In India, Bonsiepe had laid a foundation for such a discourse way back in 1982. During his visit under UNDP programme, with his consent, we planned an 'IDC-NID, 3day-workshop, on 'design pedagogy', in which faculty members from IDC and NID, presented what they were teaching in both the Institutes. Such intimate, friendly discussions between IDC and NID faculty had not taken place till then. Bonsiepe's presence, created a serious platform with an informal atmosphere, to reflect at the topics in depth. Issues like how to deal with Indian culture, symbolic expressions, etc., came into fore!

In 2008, I was invited to give a talk in Saupaolo, Brazil, and I was wearing a handmade 'Khadi Kurta'.

Soon after the talk I met the participants outside. To my pleasant surprise, many beautiful Brazilian women met me, touched my Kurta and appreciated its texture. They had not seen such a cloth being worn before. I was elated and suddenly remembered Prof. Bonsiepe who opened my eyes to the aesthetic side of uneven texture way back in 1982.

This beginning, led IDC to get into a culture of organizing 'National Seminars' later with few invited speakers from other countries, every year. Ulm and after, Arthaya were some of them and prof. Bonsiepe was a guest speaker in couple of them.

India is a large Country with many Institutions. To champion role of design across the Country, I planned and organized 3 'seminar cum workshops' with prof Bonsiepe as lead faculty.

1. One-day event at New Delhi, with State Trading Corporation (STC)
2. One-day Seminar at Chennai, organized by SISI (Small Industries Service Institute)
3. A week long course for CEDT (Centre for Electronic Design and Technology) faculty and a talk for Science and Technology faculty at IISc (Indian Institute of Science), Bengaluru.

- First workshop was attended by senior government officials as they wanted to listen to an international expert like prof. Bonsiepe. I followed his main talk with slide

presentation of Indian case studies. I had also involved Mr. L.K.Das, a designer, from IIT Delhi, who made a brief presentation. The workshop led to STC assigning some design consultation work, later to IIT Delhi.

- The second 'Seminar' at Chennai, organized by SISI (Small Industries Service Institute) had a large attendance from local entrepreneurs. Prof.Sathique, director of Madras Institute of Technology gave an introductory talk. The event helped Mr. Achyuta Rao, an IDC alumnus who was working as a designer, at SISI to take up many 'design projects'.
- Week-long programme at Indian Institute of Science(IISc) was Unique. For the first time a design course was organized for faculty of CEDT (Centre for Electronic Design and Technology) at this premier Institute. Prof. Bonsiepe was the lead faculty. IDC-team: Myself, SN, Kirti Trivedi and Kishore Munshi conducted the sessions. When the Director of IISc came to know about presence of Bonsiepe, he immediately sent him an Invitation, with a request to give a talk to all Science and Engineering Faculty of the Institute. IISc had an international standing with reputed scientists like Sir C.V. Raman, a noble laureate, being in the faculty, earlier. Bonsiepe readily agreed to give the 'Talk'. But this unscheduled session in our programme happened to be on a 'Monday'. We had planned the week end trip to a historic place with ancient temples nearby, called 'Belur Halebeedu'! We were keen on Bonsiepe accompanying us and to enjoy the outing. But, he politely declined to join us, as he wanted to prepare a 'special talk', apt for scientists and engineers at IISc. He was ready to miss the 'Fun'. This left a deep impression on me.

I realized that 'Design' is a serious commitment for this Hfg-Ulm legend. This value got rubbed on me in my life-long engagement with design.

Bonsiepe was able to see importance of design for India with its 'traditional, local productions' and 'isolation of academics from practice'! His frank, critical comments were constant reminders for us. He was very sceptic about taking graduate engineers for training in design in the beginning. I, myself entering into design programme at NID after my engineering graduation, knew the tough task at IDC. I took it as a challenge and devoted several years in creating a suitable pedagogic frame work as well as innovative tasks for training engineers as designers.

A memorable discussion in Ahmedabad, over coffee, during an international event was a turning point for IDC. Myself, prof.Bonsiepe and RK(late prof.R.K. Joshi,a well-known calligrapher and type designer), had a long deliberation on 'future of design'. RK raised a question, whether it was possible to re-create a 'Bauhaus like Movement' in India. After a long reflection, Bonsiepe said, 'You see, RK, Bauhaus was not just one or two prominent persons. It collected a group of ideologues, which led to a 'Collective Vision'. Inspired by such a discussion, RK soon joined IDC, as full time professor, and played a decisive role in building a name for IDC, in Calligraphy and Type Design!

Informal discussions of IDC faculty with Bonsiepe on role of Design for economic development during his visit were an 'Inspiration' for us to prepare a report subsequently to Ministry, titled, 'Design as a strategy for Developing Economy' (1989). (5)

I felt honored when prof. Bonsiepe asked me to write a review of the book, 'Disobedience of Design Gui- Bonsiepe', for Indian audience! I took the opportunity to elucidate the influence of Hfg-Ulm to Indian Design in general and Prof.Bonsiepe's contribution in particular, in my write-up (6).

Bonsiepe has been a rare theoretician and researcher of 'design', bridging Practice and Theory. Only recently I grappled the full significance of his work on 'Interface', where he has taken 'design' from hardware and communication to 'Human Action'. I was able to connect the concept to my work on Bamboo craft which took 'design' beyond hardware Zone. We created new formats to train bamboo craft persons in using new tools and small technologies as well as including women. I initiated a private company called AGBS (AG Bambu Style) under SINE (Society for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, IITBombay), to manufacture Mini tool kits which can be used by village craft persons. I also initiated an elective called CCPM (Craft, Creativity and Post Modernism) for M.Des, where Bamboo craft is looked through a prism of 'Post Modernism'(7). Unique Bambu studio at IDC, supports the elective as well as outreach programmes in bamboo craft. In effect, all these extensions fit into Bonsiepe's concept of 'Interface' in Hardware zone. Bonsiepe has made significant connections of Design to Language, Cognitive Metabolism, Knowledge production and Presentation. His work has greatly inspired me to refine my own thoughts on language, order and holistic thinking in articulating a new frame work for 'Form and Design' based on 'Arupa-the Implicate Order'. (8)

Indian Design Community feels honoured to celebrate his 90th birthday along with our colleagues in South America and rest of the World!

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