

Shape of things to come: Predicting future designs



ANIL GUPTA

The author is a professor at IIM-A

What kind of furniture will be designed in future? Whether cycle will remain frozen in its form and features as it has been for last six to seven decades, or acquire new features and functions? Will design, engineering and management schools add one more choice to an existing customer of mobile phone or transport sector, or start addressing the needs of those who still use hundred if not thousand-year-old technologies or service models?

Recently, while being interviewed by a European foresight group trying to predict the nature of innovations in future, I realised how disconnected the world of imagination among many Eurocentric institutions was with the Asian way, as I see, unfolding in future. Let me explain.

Furniture: among a whole range of designs that I saw, none required people to sit on the ground. Chair has occupied the imagination of the mind completely, but millions of people still eat food in Asia and Africa sitting on the ground. And that is a very good posture. Tea is served in Japan on low-height tables with rituals requiring sitting on ground.

Gandhiji wrote on a desk sitting on ground or even a bed. Should our designers not offer the ergonomic and health advantages of such furniture. Of course, this will require modification in sartorial options as well, but



why not. How long will we clothe, furnish and present ourselves in formations not suitable for our climate, culture and community spirit.

Yesterday, when design students were presenting their reports on possible solution to reducing drudgery of tea leaf picker women (a problem I assigned to them) at Gmund, Germany (more on it next week), the audience was sitting on the ground in the hall. May be, once Europeans start doing it, we will also do it, colonised as our minds are.

Large number of people in Europe use cycle for their work though they can afford cars. Cycle is considered healthy and green. In our country, the moment we land, we start using car to cover even short distances, forgetting the use of cycles. Once rich people start using cycles, cycle paths will emerge, municipalities will not design urban infrastructure of this kind for poor of course.

But let me shift the focus a bit.

How long will we clothe, furnish and present ourselves in formations not suitable for our climate, culture and community spirit

What about designing cycles with new features? Many readers have read about cycle-based washing machine. But, cycles have been used for cutting vegetables, making salad, juice, as a workshop for drilling holes or cutting things, shaving sheep or horses, pumping water, if you live at third floor, water doesn't come up due to low pressure, use cycle to pump it; cycle to exercise of course and do fifty other things.

We need to rethink multi-functionality, frugality, diversity and resilience, the four features of nature which also can and should mimic in future designs for development, and diversity.

MINDS ON THE MARGIN