

INNOVATION IN INDIA

Travel report by Caroline Nevejan, December 2003



The wave of ICT innovation, that started in the United States of America in the eighties, hitting Japan and Europe rather soon in the nineties, has found new territory to flood. India and China are preparing themselves to surf the waves, so many people and magazines tell us.

The Europe based Doors of Perception Conference, has been asking questions in the middle of these tumultuous movements "What is this stuff for?". By doing so, debates were triggered, many best practices shown, a powerful network evolved. A network in which business, design and underground meet, all being there not to miss the next ripple in the waters, all there to show and benchmark their own work, find new people and/or companies to work with. It has been driven by a social agenda, an agenda in which the ameliorating quality of life was in the center of attention. Always seeking the high ground in which public and commercial domain meets, in which design and serendipity exchange.

In December 2003 the Doors of Perception Conference organized for the second time its Indian edition, Doors East 2003 in Bangalore. Starting with a two day workshop in which over 40 people participated (25 from India, 15 from USA and EU) and resulting in a conference with 30 speakers and over 350 people participating. The workshops and conference took place in the National Institute for Fashion and Technology (NIFT), partner of the Dutch Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI). I was being invited as a speaker and workshop participant. After spending a week in Bangalore I spend a week in Delhi visiting a variety of new learning initiatives. Being in this overwhelming range of experiences made me realize that my impressions mostly reflect my 'limited' world and can only give a glimpse of Indian reality.

IN CONFRONTATION WITH INDIAN REALITY

India has 18 formal languages, and many more are spoken. The complexity of Indian society with its rich 6000 years of history, many religions, many geographical distinct areas and very fast entrance into the 21st century is very hard to grasp in such short time. The sensory experience of India with its colors, its smells, its tastes is impressive and changes perception of the world.

Bangalore, the India's Silicon Valley where the conference was held, is heavily polluted. CEO's of big companies run the city, up to the point that parks in town are taken care of by large companies. In return they can work by the law that says that if you can prove you need a certain piece of land for the development of industry, with or without houses on it or parks for example, it can be taken.

Bangalore is polluted, but even more so is Delhi. When the pollution of Delhi reached the unbearable point, all public utility vehicles (buses, taxis, rickshaws) were obliged to start running on gas. This sort of happened overnight, and the way gas is distributed is so

dangerous that people leave the bus or rickshaw outside the gas station when it is time to fill up. And still, one can't see the sun in Delhi because of the smog, although it is improving people assure me.

One third of India lives below the poverty line. According to Ravi Sundaram, urbanist at the school of architecture in Delhi, per year 60.000 new poor people move into Delhi, the city expands exponentially. Next to huge office buildings you will find people living in tents. They have to find ways of livelihood, somehow, to survive. It is raw capitalism in its worst form.

Women's participation in public life is everywhere, but hardly in power. Shree Venkatram (journalist) wrote a report¹ on women's presence in media in India over the last 50 years. She analyzed 18 English and Hindi newspapers and found this presence has been ameliorating with 1,3% per year. Today women's presence is 13%, mostly in the adds though, Indira Gandhi being the only woman who made it to the front page till today. Being a western woman travelling mostly with Indian friends, I was treated with pleasant respect. When on my own I was regularly addressed with the respectable and rather peculiar 'sir'.

BANGALORE, INDIA'S SILICON VALLEY

Bangalore in the South, has a very pleasant climate. It is the booming city of ICT. Many small and large companies are all present. You find yuppie life with trendy cafes and nightclubs, next to Bollywood cinemas and little old fashioned food places everywhere. Of course, there are poor neighborhoods with very poor people, but the city as a whole drives on industry and you can feel it everywhere.

THE DOOR EAST CONFERENCE

Focus of the Doors East conference was 'Mobility, Geography and Access'. The overall evolving theme for me though, was the realization and the endeavor to understand the development of service design and service economy. Service design, as we understood it, has different meanings in different areas of application. To develop content is different from developing technological infrastructure, to sell goods is different from selling services. In USA and EU the development of content is a constant area of concern. E-learning, my field, has many initiatives to make it flourish. But we yet have to find the workable service model that will be sustainable in the structural development of content as well as in the development of infrastructure that will deal with authorship and privacy in a convincing way.



Presentations of the western participants dealt a lot with how to move the private, public and commercial domains forward in cohesion: how to develop strategy, how to create support, how to design innovation in schools and design new schools. It were all questions we are familiar with overhere. Nevertheless it is interesting to hear how other

¹ Women in print, www.unifem.org

people and institutions go about things. I realized again that the way we deal with things at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam is pretty impressive. I enjoyed presentations of some of the new interaction designers exploring for example, the body as interface for information, fluid time interfaces to monitor the going bad of milk - instead of just a date that is never correct anyway, elaborate time banking and car sharing designs as a service for mobile phone companies. My presentation raised questions derived from the experience of the 10 year innovation of the Hogeschool van Amsterdam and the experience of being part of the Digital University of the Netherlands. (see www.doorseast.com).

The Indian presentations did not talk strategy, they talked business, but on issues we usually talk strategy. The given complexity of Indian society demands from any initiative to be extremely simple to be able to survive. What really cracked my brain was that I found in India, that a service economy is very much in place (one does not iron ones own clothes, it gives someone the opportunity to earn some money, etc). Also, the development of content and integration of ICT is realized in apparently economically sustainable service models. Since Indian society is a complex one, simplicity of the ideas is actually very impressive and attractive. The buzzwords of the conference were corporate citizenship and social entrepreneurship.

CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP

In the workshop a variety of new Indian best practices was presented. Being a European participant, it struck me the very first day how socially driven projects were financed and organized in commercial ways. And in the conference this insight became even deeper when the Indian labs of the 4 of the big companies (Philips, Siemens, Nokia and Hewlett Packard) presented details on how they have been doing deep research into the lifestyles the poorest sections of society. They did not only talk about their research but also about their difficulties in communicating with the mother companies about the results they find and designs they develop.

This trend started about two years ago. Realizing that the markets of the wealthy parts of this world are more and more saturated with technological devices, facing the burst of the ICT bubble and facing world recession, companies have become aware that the majority of the people on our planet are poor. And this is a huge potential, provided one changes the models of doing business. Poor people do not have the money to purchase tech-gadgets. Nevertheless, the services that are facilitated via those gadgets can be sold for millions time a few rupi's. This will make a huge market in the end, so the companies argue.

The business models that they are exploring are inspired by a new Indian tradition of innovation that I first heard of in the Doors of Perception conference 4 in 1996 when Sam Pitroda (well known Indian businessman) talked about his plan to make sure a public phone system would be available in every village all over India. Pitroda gathered over 300 students one summer and made a complete roll out plan for putting wires in the ground to make sure every village would have this public phone. He assumed that once there was a public phone in every village, all villages would have a chance to participate much better in the market place (making deals, finding out about market prices, communicate about transport and huge amount of personal communication that also helps to develop rural areas in unforeseen ways). He also assumed this huge scheme would be profitable, since in every village one person would be the service deliverer of this public phone service. This person will find a living and the people from the village only have to pay a few rupees for the call they make. STD (Standard Trunk Dial) as it is called today, is indeed found all over India, in rural areas and also all the cities. It is a model that builds upon the already existing service infrastructure that is part of communities

It took some years, but then in the Indian models of innovation it is remarkable that one does calculate at least 5 to 6 years before profit will happen. A very different timeframe than the figures that were shouted at the time of the hype in ICT in USA and EU, where investors and banks were going down to 6 months time to market and another 6 to make sure you were successful. Even Nokia, well known for its really short time-to-market which their modular building nearly developed into an art form, is now looking for ways to connect to this new scheme of innovation. You do not sell your goods, you design a framework in which other people will deliver services, the goods being the carrier of the service to be delivered.

We are used to the fact by now here in the west, that when we order a hamburger it will consist of meat from Argentina, pineapple from Israel, flour made of wheat from Russia, sauces made in Italy and wrapped in paper produced in China. We also know the coca cola model, the Amazon model of internet business, and the American callcenters based in India. We have not seen these service networks evolving on a scale like the present. Strangely enough, they have a social agenda we only knew from NGO's and charitable bodies. Now the social reality is the driver of new economic models, since in India everybody is convinced of the fact that sustainability in social terms can only be achieved when it is based on solid economic business structures. In education for example the innovation is financed with venture capital and the government hardly participates.

Off the record in the conference a lot of stories were shared about changes in companies from within. How do boards change opinion, how can one be effective, how and when to seek confrontation. It gave me a feeling of hope that maybe we are entering a new paradigm in doing business, when so many people are actually concerned and want to make a difference and are willing to work hard to find new forms.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

As a result of this new market strategy of the big companies providing technological service infrastructure, smaller initiatives are evolving, calling themselves social entrepreneurs. Jiva and N-Logue, two Delhi based companies, were part of the workshop and later I visited them in Delhi. They have attracted serious venture capital to develop e-learning and e-health services to poor people mostly living in rural areas.

Jiva (www.jiva.org) 8 years old now was founded by Indian expatriates who came home to make a difference in their country. Jiva does three things: health, learning and social entrepreneurship. In 1995, Jiva first started exploring the health market and they were making money rather soon with providing an ayurvedic (traditional Indian medical and lifestyle system) internet shop. They then took it further with the ambition to provide cheap and effective health-care to rural villages. In December 2003 they won the World Summit Award (at the World summit on the Information Society held in Geneva 10-12 December 2003) with their 'Teledoc' project.



Teledoc provides a mobile phone interface for doctors and health workers to diagnose people who are ill and who are elsewhere. The doctor sits behind a computer anywhere, and the local health worker (the one who runs the service), talks to the patient and fills in standard forms that the doctor sees on his screen. If necessary a man on a scooter will bring medication to the village (creating another job..). First aid and simple advice can be delivered efficiently at low cost. Health workers are trained by Jiva, establishing a relationship of trust between villagers and the health worker, between the health worker and the doctor. Creating this trust is the most critical success factor in this service model. Having developed this model together with 10 villages and Nokia, they are now preparing to 'roll out', as one of Jiva's founders, told me.

Jiva created a similar long term innovation scenario with their schooling department. Inspired by the development life long learning and the rise of the information society, Jiva has developed a learning to learn methodology for India. In 1999 Jiva started a school in an outskirt of Delhi and with a team of 10 designers and copywriters all the time present in the school and working with the teachers for over 6 years. Today they publish books, have internet sites and train teachers (IRL and online). Since one and a half year they are now rolling out: today 500 village schools work with this methodology and it takes 54 hours to train teachers to change from the old way of trespassing curriculum to the new learning to learn strategies of learning. They plan to intensify the rolling out. The design team will stay in place, only working harder to unfold new parts of the curriculum to transform. And also here, Jiva is starting to earn money with their publications and with the training of teachers, with the continuous back up service they provide for teachers.

While Jiva specializes in development of content services, N-Logue focuses on creating small entrepreneurs in villages who deliver internet services including web cam connections via the already existing STD telephone infrastructure. They roll out a standard technology set (PC, printer, web cam), including training for the service deliverer, for a fixed start up price for which they take the risk for success. Their service includes agricultural college, online clinics, marketing data, financial services (incl. microcredits, banking) and travel services. Over 8500 villages have been connected in the last two years as was presented in the doors east conference. The person running the service knows how to operate the machine. When my goat has an injury I go to the phone booth, connect with a doctor on a Web cam, show the wound to the doctor, who is then able to diagnose and prescribe a solution. It costs only a few Rupees, nothing in comparison to loosing the goat or travelling all the way over to the doctor. (link n-logue)

Seeing the film that N-logue presented in the conference I remembered the old Apple movies from the early nineties, where students in the rainforest connect to their teacher at home asking advice and then the teacher consults with another teacher in the other side of the country. It all looks really simple in films like that. The underlying network of people appears to be the crucial factor in the end anyway.

CREATIVE RESOURCE

The creative aspect of service design in India is very much dominated by pragmatism and standard procedures. Nevertheless there are many design schools in India, and some really good designers. Being very well educated theoretically and being aware of western and Indian traditions, most designers I met look for ways of integrating these old and new cultures. There is a tremendous respect for the Indian heritage and big concern that it will evaporate with the evolving media-society.

Talking to people in Bangalore and later in Delhi, I realized that the infrastructure for creative development is very poor. The Bollywood industry has become a commercial culture that is appreciated highly. But for young musicians, writers, designers and

artists, there is very little space to develop new work. Visiting the Sarai medialab in Delhi was therefore very interesting.

Sarai is a medialab in Delhi that is connected to the Waag Society in Amsterdam. They do social research, innovate design practice, publish, organize events and concerts and run a medialab. Two years ago they started two other medialabs in some poor neighbourhoods of Delhi, to foster creative resources. The medialabs in these localities are called Cybermohallah's. In these creative spaces young people between 15 and 20 years old, spend 3 to 6 hours a day. These media labs are not a school, not a computertraining, nor a job creation facility. They provide a creative space where young people write and visualize and critic each others work and discuss the notions and perceptions that underlie their work. In one Cybermohallah 15 young people will participate.



When I went to visit together with Sveta, I was walking down the streets with children playing everywhere, lots of dirt and sounds, passing a woman doing her laundry in the street, we walk into a very small staircase, pass the living area of two families and then arrive into a bare room on the third floor. On the walls you see the writing, the schemes with which they develop their thinking, there are two computers to be shared. The space is well taken care of in a self organizational way.

People from Sarai - being the 'motherlab'- will visit once a week to have conversation, and take time for this conversation, as well as to tackle technical or design issues. As Jeebesh Bagchi (one of Sarai and Cybermohallah's founders) formulated it: paper, pencil, conversation and duration will make creativity flourish. And that is what we need. In another two years Sarai intends to start another 5 Cybermohallah's, creating in this way a new youth culture and influence the way people inside and outside the localities perceive of life in these localities. Building a creative resource and knowledge base eventually.

Two books have been published that are very impressive. Especially since the stories the young people write examine in detail experiences of day to day life in a very revealing way. The human experience in walking down the street, in realizing time passes by, in describing the fight-known-all-over-the-planet in a family negotiating what television program to watch.

The focus on creative resources is rather courageous in a country with so many people living below poverty lines. Why not make schools or jobs for those young people? Sarai takes the perspective that culture has always been this driving force in change and crisis, culture is an expression of wealth as it is of poverty. It is an expression of the

human condition. Whether one is rich or poor, stories and songs and drawings will help to transcend the day to day life. The raw capitalism in India does not take this into account, being very conservative. To see the results and the success of the Cybermohallah's, to read the work and meet young people, gave me great inspiration. And the realization that creative resource always needs fostering and space for self organization at the same time. The trust that Sarai puts in these young people, that no one considers to be good for anything else than work force, is more than worthwhile and already does and will pay off in the future in unforeseen ways today.

CONCLUSION: TRUST and LOCAL RESONANCE

The confrontation with raw capitalism is intense for everyone coming from social democracies in the west. To see though that out of this raw capitalism now has evolved a social agenda in unforeseen ways till now, was very provoking. We are aware of the big difference big companies like Shell can make in peacemaking process like in South Africa. This new trend though where big companies look for poor people markets is very worthwhile following.

Local resonance and transparency of models appears to be a requirement though. Local resonance being the basis for trust for any one person to be able to express and act upon this. Transparency requiring simplicity and at the same time facilitating different forms in different places. The local has to resonate in the global.

Talking to the Jiva people they emphasized how the building of a trust relation is crucial for their success. The issue of trust has been on the ICT agenda because of e-cash and electronic banking. But mostly it is a non issue in today's world. Trust is a two way thing, one can not build trust without listening. To create business models that actually take into account this local resonance's in the context of establishing trust relations was one of my deep insights in India.

Working in education for the last 4 years in the Netherlands I realized how strategic people in education, also the innovators, think. We do develop learning to learn methodologies, talk about question-based design of curricula, but we always define how other people will act. Taking the scale of higher education institutions in the Netherlands into account, it would be a challenge to analyze and design learning environments from the perspective of trust relations and from the perspective of an infrastructure that allows local resonance's to be distinct.

Possibly this change of capitalism from within will actually make a huge difference in the decades to come. Social equality, creative development, eco-awareness and more still have to be put on this new market's economic agenda though. And the question is whether this will be possible at all. But if this happens, India's wave of innovation will effect us all in ways we will inevitably learn to appreciate. Conferences like Doors East are the bridges that make this learning possible.