Where is it taking me? Where am I taking it? : A Conversation with Self on Changing Design of Process.

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About the author:

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Unprecedented situations lead to inescapable conditions. This can be widely referred to the state of affairs that the pandemic has caused. As the entire India moves into a complete lockdown, students face an unprecedented situation wherein academics has been brought to a halt. Does education truly halt? Is learning restricted to a space? These questions gained more pertinence than ever before. Globally, education moves online with considerable deterrence. It is undeniable that the sudden change of the medium of deliverance, what was once a more gradual and meticulously planned shift has taken a toll on the education and the educators; and without doubt the students. Dissent to change is a traditional process and a very relevant one. The biased benefactors of the sudden change in the education medium are noted and well represented in debates regarding the same. It is a personal belief that unless there is an opposing opinion, one cannot affirm, quantify, qualify or correct one's own opinion.

As disciplines navigate through these new constraints, to establish a suitable design environment in the virtual space; a new discourse emerges that tries to address the conflicts, inquiry and realisation in approaching design-based research projects. The paper seeks to throw light on the same. My experience with the shift in education space heavily influenced my perception of the project, and thus the process. The paper narrates this journey. Throughout, are questions which remain unanswered. Those questions are very pertinent to the journey as they reflect on my thoughts at every stage. It is the perspective of a research enthusiast and a third-year student aspiring to benefit from a system study project.

'*Handloom Policy implementation and its relevance in the state of Gujarat*'

To establish a relevant context to why this paper is being written, please note 'policy', 'implementation' and 'relevance' in the study brief heading. These words would help the reader to chart a possible course of actions that a student would take to indulge in this study. One would expect an elaborate giga map or a meticulously planned trajectory. But the primary strategy to this study was nothing that a layman wouldn't be able to decipher; What do you have? What do you want? Why do you want it? Go to the field and get it. These questions and the approach might seem blunt and to some, naïve for its sheer lack of 'intellectual fabrication', but these can be considered the foundations of a research approach. Any word one might want to add, would only dig its way to or from these questions.

The study tried to understand the policies, its stakeholders and the success rate in the implementation process of schemes through traditional methods. Upon mapping the implementation channels and the hierarchy in the functionaries, the idea was to list down the opportunities to enhance the system by identifying the voids and the flaws in the current one. Initially it was decided that each major cluster would be visited and surveyed about its functioning, grievances etc. A minimum response of 2-3 members of each category of stakeholders seemed a fair data set to work upon and get started with the project. Upon the announcement of the lockdown by the Union Government, the scenario changed completely.

How can one continue research which requires real time data to address the system? Is the collected primary data enough to make generalised statements or map issues at a macro-perspective level? How do we navigate further? What should be the desired outcome?

The desire to chart elaborate giga maps started to seem like a distant dream, let alone developing solutions. The quest of deliverance had to be pitted for the time being. Why wouldn't it be? Isn't the ethicality of the research as important as the outcome? Would my work be empathetic enough to make a difference?

Telephonic interviews were recommended to gather basic data. But the data stops making sense when it is brought out of context. In this case, the space. When a designer interviews, they are sensitised to notice the physical space and connect the visuals with the verbatim; the process enhances the qualitative aspect of the data further. Not just that, but the physical presence of a person to gather such data which requires the subject to reflect on their standing on public policies and socio-economic position creates a sense of trust. Given the cases of fraud that has plagued the digital space, it is unlikely for any common folk to blindly trust a voice and entertain such questions.

The question is in the given situation and the roadblocks in acquiring primary data; is it worth the gamble?

The most common solution given by my friends and fellow researchers has been to completely fall back on secondary data. It is an option which comes with its own set of constraints and criticisms. When we are required to rely heavily on secondary data, we investigate more critically the source of the data, the age of the data, the context and its credibility. One would argue that the aforementioned process is invariably followed irrespective of the data's representation in the research. But I would like to emphasise on the influence of the data on the design of the solution. Secondary data has primarily been an important tool to establish 'why do we need the research?' and highlight the opportunities; but there has always been primary research to fall back on upon when it comes to delivering an updated inference. This is of course only applicable in the field of research that requires relevant first-hand real-time data to position its discourse. The primary data is precious, and a researcher would naturally be drawn to represent it in their work. Even if it is represented, an enquiry must be made on how it is represented; How much of the inference is weighted over it? Is it countering the generalisation or asserting it? Is the data inclusive enough to make the assertions? Is the data set broad enough to be called inclusive?

Design itself is a discourse that needs real-time data to reiterate its standings and deliver the required. To challenge the present system, one requires the present day's truth. But how much data is enough data? Am I getting the truth? Is the truth objective or discursive?

Irrespective of our views on data types, its effectiveness or its discursivity, it was certain that the conduct could not be by physical presence anymore. Given the current trend in technology, many have moved online not just in terms of communicating with colleagues and mentors but also for data gathering. Google forms, WhatsApp, Fulcrum, Quora, etc. are what one would call the most modern ways of data collection, but also massively urban centric. Thus, the discourse of 'digital equity' emerges.

In modern times, handloom is synonymous to rural culture, or must I say, handloom 'production' is. Even though it has one the most niche markets, the makers do not enjoy the privileges that are considered to be bare necessitates by the buyers. With a majority of weaving families earning less than 5000 Rupees a month (Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019-20, 35), it is inhumane to assume that these people would have the same digital resources as we do. Though it is not necessary that one's digital capacity can be accurately judged by their socio-economic conditions, it is important to consider that digital awareness and functioning is diluted when it comes to rural sectors in India.

Moreover, even if my subjects have digital capability to cater to the study's needs, it is inhumane to assume that they would be in the right mental space to cooperate. In this pandemic it is not just education, but a large section of economic activity that came to a standstill. It is

very much for the economic security of my family that I'm able to afford the luxury of a personal workspace with a robust internet connection and writing this paper. Not understanding the psychological space of the subjects to selfishly pursue the study erases the empathy from the research.

At the same time basing an entire state's policy dynamics on a handful of clusters is a mix of Schrodinger's cat and the Freudian analysis; you do not know the consequence of your inference and you have a ridiculously small data set.

One may enquire, what has empathy to do with the primary data? It has a great impact on the building parameters for those data sets and influences the subject pool; but I would like to emphasise on the qualitative aspect of the data set. The empathy in the quality lies in the inclusivity of it. The well representation of the subjects makes a design stronger, especially when it deals with sensitive matters such as critiquing the public policy system. We are not journalists; we are also journalists as much as we are architects and academicians. It can be reiterated as we are not just journalists. Our education and profession demand solutions to the problems. If a designer critiques a system, they are generally expected to produce an alternative. However, cliched it may sound but we have pinned the tag of 'problem solver' on ourselves.

Keeping all debate aside, by now it is well acknowledged that such an unprecedented halt puts pressure on the outcome. In such a situation only two paths were visible; discard the data and find a new brief or scrap the traditional outcome and make the journey relevant? As obvious it may seem now, it wasn't such back then, but finally chose the latter.

The data pool wasn't just an individual venture but a collective one as our umbrella topic remained 'Handloom policy in Gujarat', post which we took our own paths. It was gathered by four students and mentored by 2 faculties. Post the lockdown announcement, the team was scattered through the country. It became an inside-joke that we represented true inclusivity, just like what we aimed on achieving in our data set. The mentors stayed in Gujarat (western India), one of us went to Tamil Nadu (southern India), two of the remaining went back to Delhi and Uttar Pradesh respectively (northern India) and I reached West Bengal (eastern India).

The wonders of the digital forum and the internet makes it seem like we never left each other. We can hear each other, see each other and as a matter of fact we could put sticky notes on the same wall (though digital) simultaneously! Softboard transformed into software and the faces of our fellow researchers seem to be stuck to the LED screen. As much as one would like to believe that problem is solved; I would like to emphasise on the question if the standard check list ever solved a crisis.

Design cannot be achieved in isolation. I prefer to interpret it beyond the context of the data set and relevance. I would like to expand it to the physical space as well. Design cannot be achieved in isolation and that is why we have the internet connecting us. But in a physical institutional premise, one was mentally disciplined to follow a strict timeline and work with and around people with similar endeavours. Moreover, the distractions were limited to the regular facilities; Whereas home is different, the humblest of the comfort is an anomaly to the traditional education scenario, moreover it is presumptuous of us to assume comfort being equivalent to home. Social, financial and physiological changes to one's self and surrounding was inevitable. In our diverse places, finding common time and mindset proved to be the most difficult part.

But there we were asking the same question all over again. What do we do now?

The pandemic changed the administrative function to a significant extent. Productivity and necessity were constantly being re-evaluated. Should the design focus on critiquing the implementation system or the policy itself? Pre-pandemic, we believed that policies are ever changing and can be updated with time and the channel needs to be carefully evaluated. But the personal experiences of the pandemic brought in a new perspective, what if the channel is appropriate and the policies aren't being inclusive or context sensitive enough? A mere disconnectivity during a meeting seems to have failed the system to include your situation; a meeting time is felt as overwhelming because of one's family situation. Data is important, and data needs to be in context. National policies are structured for a pan- India beneficiaries, but the socio-economic context of the benefactors is what makes it efficient.

The research went on to critique the strategies of digital presence. The study started enquiring about the digital capacity amongst its subjects to enjoy certain policies and provisions for ecommerce. The experiences of my fellow researchers and the plight of connectivity than we read on news every day, mandated us to change the course of action towards a more current direction. The project was started when covid-19 was still broadcasted as a distant storm. But should it lose relevance in changing time? The outcome is supposed to be an understanding of the system and if the current context sheds light on a previously unexplored area it must be completely used to one's advantage.

It is through this process that we arrived at critiquing the present official data which tend to either be the indicator or the foundational data for policy building. A system study for policy channels became a dedicated study of understanding data sets and how it influences policy building. The primary data which was previously deemed to be a part of the concrete inference transformed into a pilot survey and projecting the anomalies that the lawmakers and critics alike fail to recognise in their endeavour. The fancy giga map and restructuration system that we dreamed of as the outcome lapsed into a research proposal. A simple research proposal seemed stronger than any hypothetical system planning that could have been achieved irrespective of the covid constraints. The proposal suggested a detailed qualitative study of the stakeholders view on the handloom policies and its effects. The research would further map the other relevant capacities (e.g., digital capacity) that would help in a successful policy intervention.

The design pedagogy teaches us to navigate through constraints and create something meaningful. This experience during the pandemic consisted of revelations that would not have been possible under 'normal' circumstances. The excitement of going on-field and creating one's own data set was what I consider my source of adrenalin rush. This obsession made me completely disregard the hidden values that existing data might hold. Furthermore, the resource constraints and the uncertainty of the future somewhat blocked the vision of the desired outcome and helped me to completely focus on the design process. One feels heroic to navigate through unknown seas and I did not feel any less. But the empathy for data that grew in me was more than anything else. Today I'll come out of this little different, tomorrow I'll practise a little different, and that will make all the difference?

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