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THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE FURNITURE AND
JOINERY INDUSTRIES IN INDIA ^{1/}

by

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Modern furniture and decoration has come into usage through the same processes that were responsible, in other times, for the organisation of the other styles. To analyze these processes is to define those social, economic and emotional changes that were prevalent then and which distinguish one period and location from another. The description of a style demands detachment and perspective.

Contemporary furniture's acceptance is far from universal. The characteristics largely are those of personal schools either of designers or of the fashion promoters. As regards their sale, there are still certain well-defined tendencies, materials and techniques that may be accepted as the ingredients of the formula which brings about styles and these are reflected in both the contemporary and in the earlier approaches to the modern.

The impulse to design along other than historical lines appears to have originated in England in the middle of the 19th century when a rebellious group of young artists - including William Morris, Ruskin, Rossetti, Philip Webb, Burne Jones, Madox Brown, Faulkner and Marshall - set out to design and manufacture interior decorations and to revolt against dead classicism. In furniture, textiles, metal work and all other accessory arts they attempted to restore the theory of hand process and they designed accordingly. Fine craftsmanship always stands out above all the poetic obscurantism. This feeling, as expressed by the originators, spread to the continent and evoked radical thoughts in Holland, Germany, Austria, Scandinavia and France. The teaching of art, particularly of design and applied art, was transformed and various new movements followed to develop nationalistic trends. The English arts and crafts movement had its parallel in L'art Nouveau of France.

The first tangible expression of a modern approach to furniture occurred in the exhibition of 1894 in Brussels. Henri van de Velde emerged as the genius of L'art Nouveau and his 1895 Paris exhibition established the style. Design in Sweden has enjoyed the intelligent direction of an artists association and today it produces outstanding furniture.

The new furniture is more closely integrated with its architecture than heretofore. The architect decorator conceives his room not simply as planes of walls and ceilings, doors and windows, but in terms of the actual factors essential to human occupancy: artificial light and

ventilation, the functions of storage and seating, sleeping and eating. The relationship of these varied elements and functions is the true basis for the design of the component parts.

By about 1930 reticence, sobriety and taste became the main characteristics. Exhibition work as shown at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Chicago exposition and other displays indicated a clearer concept of an objective and mature approach to the rational furniture design. This furniture is characterized by simplicity, directness of purpose and material absence of applied decoration and an effort toward bulk eliminating projections, mouldings, deep shadows. In general low, and planned to give the impression of being one integral part of the room. This applies mainly to cabinets, bookcases, etc. Beds were reduced to the simplest terms - minor panels - and couches and chairs stress comfort. Tables were produced in a wide variety: extending resistant tops of synthetic materials such as Formica, Bakelite, Micarta, etc. with compounding materials of casein, phenol, urea-like synthetic resins, etc. Textile upholstery features synthetic yarn.

Now coming to the status in India, it was under the regime of Britain for more than a century and thus the designs, tools methods, etc. adopted in furniture were all as that in vogue or undergoing changes in their country. In India before the British came, i.e. in the middle ages when Mogul or Hindu kings were in power, furniture was not homogenous in style. It also exhibited classic designs, had religious motifs and symbols or animals and weapons. Once again, with and power being in the hands of kings of different small states, their palaces displayed a cosmopolitan secular style as they could patronize and employ men separately on this.

Since India is a vast country and its major livelihood agriculture, the people live mostly in rural areas and do not need such furniture. The furniture they had were some ornamental carved boxes, square stools and low benches. These were rough in appearance and can be called rustic furniture and come under the category of carpentry work. The sophisticated work of cabinet making and joinery was introduced by the British by opening training centres and thus training local men in the use of modern tools and the making of modern furniture.

Modern furniture only came into general use for the public during the latter half of the 20th century. It was used in schools and colleges, banks, offices, restaurants and places where the general public met and rested. This was followed by the machine age and shape and design underwent further change. Furniture became simpler to produce faster and for mass consumption. India's per capita consumption of furniture is far less than the average of European countries. The main reasons for this are the surroundings and geographical situation which do not warrant their general use and that it is not within the means of all. During the last decade in cosmopolitan cities and in big towns most of the public have started going in for furniture for different reasons, such as comfort, status, etc.

Because of the change in present day dress, habits and ways of living, etc. there are good prospects for furniture in India. The coming generation will need furniture for sitting, studying, dining, sleeping, etc. which are not now available in quantity, proper design and moderate price. The difficulty is that mass production using machinery has not caught on except in a few large concerns in big cities. Almost all the units in the country manufacturing furniture do so as carpentry work and not as joinery work, which is not so attractive for the price they charge. This needs training facilities for machine operation as well as for the joinery work.

Secondly, the woodworking machines presently available are very costly and are multi-purpose rather than single models. If the persons trained in machine operation are to go in for their own machines, then these must be within their financial reach. For this it is suggested that small special machines be made on a functional or product basis. This will enable mass production through quicker and more specialised jobs. For this a designing centre for small machines is to be set up with the help of UNIDO.

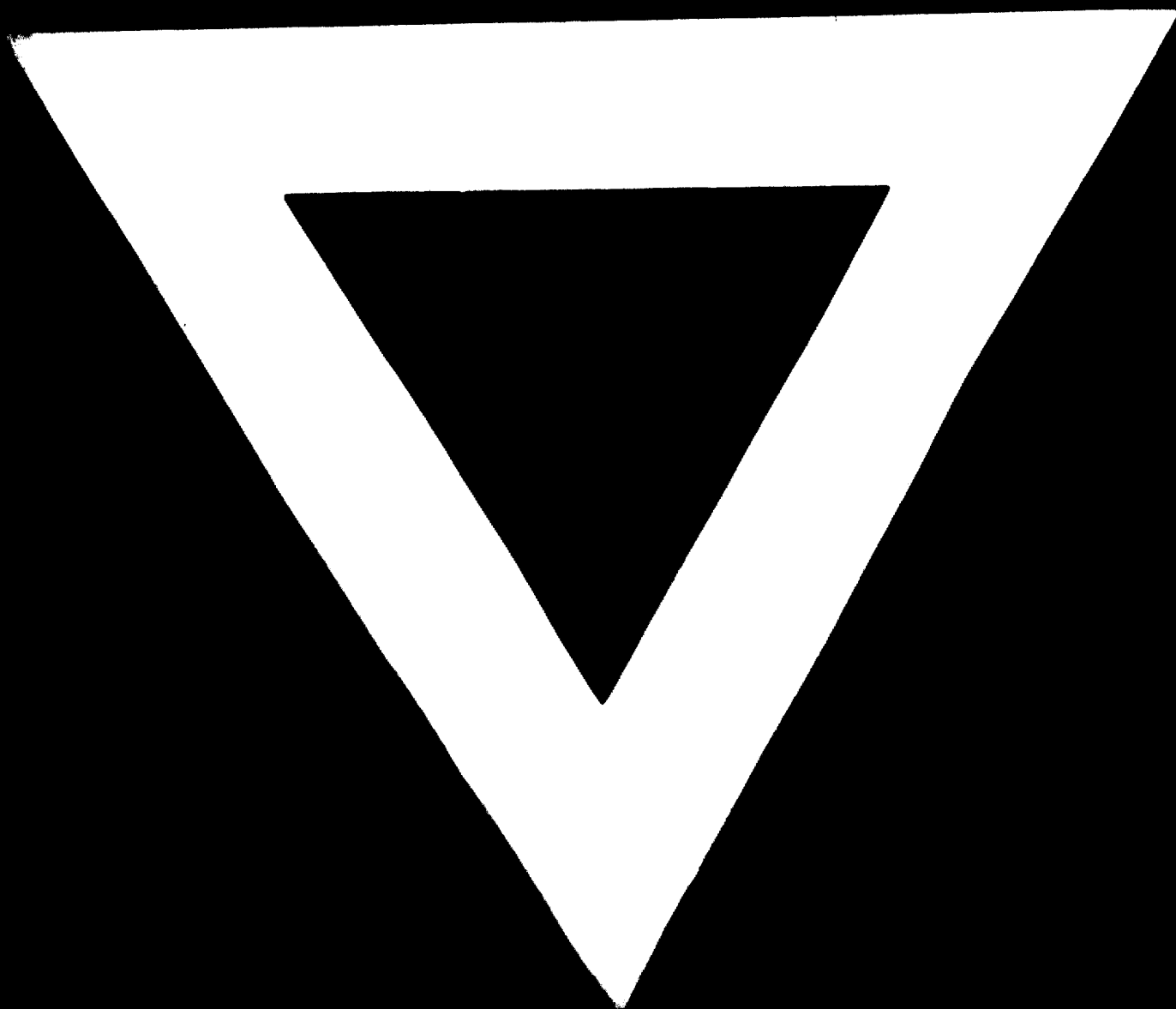
Another way in which UNIDO could help is in the setting up of a research centre for the study and designing of furniture on a scientific and comfort basis. Why is furniture made after all? It is to give comfort to the physical parts of the body in all activities. Height above the ground of chairs, desks, tables, stools, beds, etc., the backs and seats of chairs, arm-rests of chairs, knee gaps of tables, all these must be designed to suit the physical stature and contours of the people of a country to get the maximum benefit. There is no such centre in this country as exist in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

Many of our craftsmen are very good in preparing the woodwork portion of the job. They rely on giving the best finish required for marketing a product. Here guidance is required as to what ingredients should be used and how they are applied to the job. Since our country is spread over a great area and Government servants and others are being transferred frequently from place to place or to hilly places, the transportation of fixed and voluminous furniture and cabinets is very difficult. Thus there is large demand for break-down/folding type furniture so that handling is easy and breakage/damage is held to a minimum. Here too good designs and good designs of connectors are required, as they are to be dismantled and assembled again and again. This will not only help to cater for the internal market, but also aid export to nearby countries, since India has many of the rare and special varieties of timber not seen in other parts of the world. Guidance in this respect is also requested.

Lastly, India does not have literature on the science of cabinet making and joinery as well as furniture. Most of the specialised books are written by specialists of different European countries where furniture development was at a fast pace. To give their benefits to the craftsmen and organizations of this country, these books must be translated into English and also cheap editions must be brought out so that they are within the means of any technical man interested.

Furniture making is still a craft. Machines are tools and, if properly handled, can perform many operations better than hands. However they alone cannot make furniture. The ultimate perfection lies in the joinery, which is a hand process.





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