



# **Human Centred Design and ancient Hindu philosophy in the context of embracing diversity and building coherent working environments**

Priyanka Rajwade  
pikul85@gmail.com  
Mumbai  
Maharashtra, India

## **Abstract**

This is an on-going study which aims to explore the correlation between Human Centred Design (HCD) and Hindu philosophy and how it can be leveraged to create a more inclusive design practice by blending philosophy with contemporary design contexts and methodologies.

The social construct in India dictates that design that comes out of the West is a benchmark for excellence and I had followed this golden rule without realising that designs are meant for people and that their goals, emotions, challenges and aspirations change as per their contexts. As a designer, it is crucial to develop an understanding of how humans perceive the world, in what context and the relation between emotions and cognition, especially while designing for a larger world audience. The principles of HCD have a strong connection with learnings from ancient Hindu philosophy. This study intends to understand how we might take inspiration from ancient philosophy and embrace diversity to build coherent working environments.

Keywords: coherence, cultural diversity, design team building, Hindu philosophy, human centred design, inclusivity, thought diversity

## **Introduction**

A designer's work is influenced by a lot of factors, like who they are as a person, their upbringing, values, culture and language. I've been brought up in an Indian household where I was exposed to ancient philosophy since a young age.

'Hindu' philosophy gets its name from 'Hinduism' because the religion is the philosophy and vice versa which emphasises the need for practical realisation of oneself and the world around through lived experience and is not a system of dogmas (Vohra & Sarma, 2014). Every designer has unique qualities and should have a design practice based on their own experiences, which is devoid of following any design standard blindly. It is important to take pride in one's roots and bring one's personal touch to HCD. This contribution is an attempt to find practical ways to recognize, accept and include diversity in design teams and work towards a common goal while safeguarding unique identities. This way of working could lead to discovering different dimensions of the same problems and therefore create an original approach. The Design Council's Double Diamond framework for innovation has been chosen as a basis to explore some of the principles of Hindu philosophy to build congruous design teams, since it provides a robust structure for a narrative to put forth ideas.

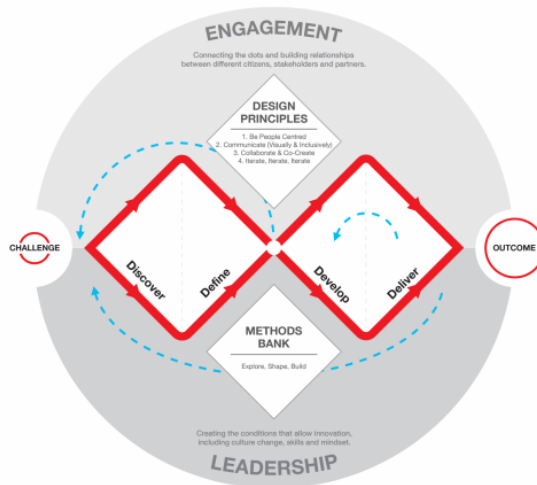


Figure 1: Design Council's framework for innovation

## Introspection of self - Discover

The discovery stage involves empathising with the people who will be impacted by the design and understanding the 'real' them through keen observations. A lived experience enhances this process for a designer.

The moral character of Hindu philosophy is introspective in attitude and in its approach to reality. Philosophers sought answers to questions by undertaking their search within themselves rather than outside. The result was that the understanding of the world became identical with the understanding of the inward nature of man himself. It is this simultaneous projection of thoughts both outwardly and inwardly that resulted in the realisation of the identity of the external world and the internal 'self'.

The *Mahāvākyas* ('The Great Sayings' of the Upanishads) mention the Sanskrit aphorism *Aham Brahmāsmi* (I am divine). Swami Vivekananda explained this concept in one of his lectures delivered in London, 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1896. The universe we see through the limited capacity of our senses is our own view of the Reality. The early thinkers discovered that the external world is far away from a common ground where mental, moral, intellectual planes of existence meet. To take up only one view, and find a solution of the whole is impossible. Therefore, we need to find a centre from which all the other planes of existence start. This centre lies within us and a 'human' itself is the common ground to find a common

solution (Sharma, 1987). This teaching explains that any solution starts and ends with humans and forms the basis of human centrality.

However, philosophy urges one to go beyond humans and states that an individual can look at oneself as an element of the whole universe while having a part of it within oneself and at the same time realise that the same divine element is present in other beings – animate or inanimate. This thought of the sense of oneness has been summed up in the Sanskrit concept '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (The world is one family). The statement is not just about world peace and harmony among people but about how we are a part of a fragile ecosystem that we are all dependent upon and responsible for. With every disservice to another being, we harm a part of ourselves.

This concept is later also reflected in the Heidegger-influenced school of thought of object-oriented ontology that rejects the privileging of human existence over the existence of non-human objects.

Hindu philosophy challenges the plurality of 'self' but contrarily provides the flexibility that reality could be different for different beings and cannot be dismissed just because one fails to see it. It inspires and respects the diversity of thought rather than superficial differences.

There's a common tendency to brand people based on superficial appearances and this might even translate into using stereotypes while segmenting end users. But now the design community is opening up to not just accepting but also including people from all walks of life, even if they are so called non-conforming to standard ideologies.

Design teams with people from diverse cultures, genders and skill sets could be formed at the discovery stage of a challenge rather than waiting to account for diversity at a later stage. This would help bring out individual opinions and represent the end users more broadly. Participation from representatives of different departments would help bring in a technical viability and business feasibility angle to design early on. Forming complementary teams that fill one another's gaps rather than insisting on ideal employees would help us progress towards a common goal. This process of working would help understand the problems on a deeper level rather than making mere assumptions from individual perspectives.

## ***Jijñāsā* (Curiosity), the desire to know - Define**

Once the designer has formed a set of observations, the next stage is to define the design challenge into an actionable problem statement. The question that needs answering is why people face certain challenges and then these challenges need to be clustered into themes. Designers are expected to define the objective behind every decision they take by asking 'why'. The 'five why' technique developed by Sakichi Toyoda is a scientific approach that helps define the nature of the problem and takes this thought further.

The term from *Brahma-sūtra* (Verses on the summary of the *Upanishad*, 450 to 200 B.C.), '*Athāto brahma jijñāsā*' means 'now is the time to inquire about the absolute truth'. *Jijñāsā* or the desire to know, forms the very base of knowledge that leads to the understanding of the purpose of 'existence' through the removal of obstacles like ignorance, doubts and misconceptions, by asking the 'why' behind everything (Raja 1960). It is the beginning point of deeper knowledge (*aparoksha jñāna*). It asks to walk the path of self-reflection and analyse the phenomena around. It states that understanding the ultimate goal could be attained by legitimate logic and argument concerning cause and effect. In this quest, Indian philosophers wrote about ways to obtain cognition called '*Pramanas*'.

Modern-day thinking endorses mindfulness techniques to succeed as design leaders. One such meditative practice is a 'dyad'. A dyad is a pair-based meditation practice where one person needs to ask the same question repeatedly for a few minutes and must listen without judgement while the other gives different answers every single time. Intra-team dyads would help explore different dimensions to the same question: defining the 'what' and finding different solutions to the 'how'. Conducting a self-dyad would allow one to have a conversation with oneself as if one were another person, allowing objectivity. We often think of finding innovative solutions, but this process would help incorporate iterative questioning in practice.

A shift from asking 'why' to 'why not' could help a designer change their vantage point, thus building resilience towards failure, ambiguity and taking calculated risks. This would lead to broadening one's thinking process by asking contradicting questions to oneself.

Answering the 'why' and 'why not' behind every decision and encouraging repeated focus on the same question would help design teams find and frame innovative questions first and then come up with effective solutions.

## Means of cognition - Develop

In the development stage, designers think of ideas to solve the defined question. The goal is to generate a large number of ideas that potentially inspire newer, better ideas.

In order to understand the world, classical Hindu philosophy has defined six *Pramānas* which literally mean 'the instruments in the act of knowing'. They are:

- *Pratyaksha*: Direct perception (understood through the five senses) and things that fall out of the sphere of direct perception
- *Anumāna*: Mediate knowledge
- *Upamāna*: Metaphorical relation
- *Arthāpatti*: Presumption, implication and assumption
- *Anupalabdhi*: Awareness of the known and unknown
- *Sabda*: Subject matter expert's advice

The *Pramanas* are interconnected and are used at relevant times to seek knowledge. Things that come within the sphere of direct perception for one, may fall outside for others. In such cases, the former becomes 'the authority who passes dependable knowledge from the past' for the latter. Mediate knowledge is the process of reasoning when, by specifying the invariable relation between two things, a new type of knowledge is deduced. The metaphorical relation between a word and certain class of objects through the intermediary knowledge of similarity, dissimilarity or particular characteristics can be conveyed by a field expert. Presumption, postulation, supposition, implication and assumption is a process of assuming some unknown fact in order to account for a well-known fact which is otherwise inexplicable. It is critical to be aware of the absence of the object by means of non-perception or non-apprehension. It may seem absurd that the non-apprehension of a thing is the means to the acceptance of its non-existence but it helps in accounting for things in entirety.

The *Pramanas* could provide a framework for structured ideation – the one that helps the designer initiate ideas based on each of the *Pramanas*. Their inter-connectedness would help us look beyond the initial layers and dig deeper. HCD advocates the use of ethnographic-led methods, co-designing with people, undertaking them reflexively (Giacomin, 2014). A current-day research model based on a relevant interpretation of these methods would enhance a designer’s understanding of the different stakeholders and create a unique and original approach to HCD that champions an Indian worldview. Through the framework of *Pramanas*, ideation would be devoid of the influence of external factors since it would be largely self-initiated and dependent on one another for postulation. Formulating a theory of cognition would help avoid personal biases, make assumptions, validate them, understand the world through different lenses and thus expand vision. Designers would then transition from the execution to facilitation.

## **The role of emotions - Deliver**

Delivery involves testing out different solutions at small-scale, rejecting those that will not work and improving the ones that will (Design Council, 2004).

“Interaction Design is the creation of a physical and emotional dialogue between a person and a product, system or service manifested in the interplay between form, function, and technology as experienced over time” (Kolko, 2011).

Some social norms believe that cognitions derive their status as thoughts capable of rationality, because they have objects which represent the external world. By contrast, feelings are some of the non-representational and unstable attitudes one can have towards the objects of the representations of our thoughts. They regard emotions as an obstacle to rational thought because of their non-representational nature.

However, the *Shaivite* school of Indian philosophy talks deeply about putting value in emotions rather diminishing them as unstable. A chat with Sophie Gaur, Design Teacher, RMIT University, threw light on how one might create an emotionally and intellectually robust third space that addresses the more complex ideas around an aesthetic coherence in

cultural plurality. In Indian tradition, the works of *Bharathamuni* (5<sup>th</sup> century), have contributed greatly to the understanding of emotional experiences. There is a strong emphasis on the experiential aspect of emotions. The concept of *Rasa* (aesthetic relish) is central to this approach to understand *Anubhava* (affective experiences) as explained in *Bharathamuni's* treatise on drama and theatre, *Natyashastra* (11<sup>th</sup> century). It deals with all three components - physiology/behaviour, cognition and feelings - in detail. He describes eight *Bhavas* (aesthetic moods) corresponding to eight *Sthayibhava* (major emotions). Major emotions are innate and are considered as *Samskaras* (permanent mental traces). These, when accompanied with the object of emotion *Vyabharibhava* (transitory emotions) and experience, can give rise to emotion. Transitory emotions are not innate. They represent the day-to-day normal life and are experienced in changing situations. These theories are based on relishing the work of art by distancing oneself while experiencing or creating it and simultaneously staying true to the intrinsic permanent emotion or self. It is influenced by the *Vedantic* view (related to the end of *Vedas*, ancient texts that reflect a world view to leading an enriched life) - all experiences of pleasure and pain, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are due to the assertion of self. This system of aesthetic relish centres around staying in the process of creation and constant improvement by drawing a circle around things, rather than getting into specifics to obtain a multi-layered response as distinct from a singular one.

Accounting for emotions, of both the designers and users is vital because they govern the experience of a product or service. It is especially important for designers to view their ideas objectively in the testing phase to receive unbiased feedback and act on it. Emotional investment in one's work is natural but one should counter it with a sense of detachment to stay neutral. Several factors could affect morale, so, it's our responsibility to create safe working conditions for designers to discuss feelings and confront weaknesses.

This idea is further explained through phenomenology - the ability to look at a problem or journey in service design by zooming out and studying more contexts and the experiences of the people involved. This causes an overview effect, enabling one to see something in its entirety, working as a whole, creating a cognitive shift to help build vision for the future.



Designing 'for' a stereotypical audience would then shift towards designing 'with' a much larger diverse world group through methods like participatory design.

## Reflections through the lens of design

The nature of Hindu philosophy itself is iterative. The *Rigvedas* (Ancient Sanskrit text of hymns on how to lead life) encourage rational and logical discussions from any person who wishes to challenge their authority. A new design-leadership model that is based on The Double Diamond and ancient Hindu philosophy could be thought of while building teams that accept an unstable state of knowing while maintaining the stability of one's state of mind. The following principles based on a blend of Hindu philosophy and contemporary leadership models could help build coherent teams that embrace diversity:

- Discover:  
Challenge the plurality of 'self', but in contrast provide the flexibility that reality could be different for different people and cannot be dismissed just because one fails to see it
- Define:  
Practice objectivity to frame questions based on assumptions
- Develop:  
Contextual selection of team members - creating a space where teams work towards a common goal with the freedom to safeguard their unique identity
- Deliver:  
Expanse of time and agility - building teams that make quick shifts from learning from past mistakes, to build mini stages of momentary utopia in the present to create a sustainable future

Ancient philosophy should not be dismissed as arcane but blended with contemporary contexts to create a third space that includes cultural diversity. Hindu philosophy sets the stage for an enigmatic paradigm by teaching practical life skills to attain an ultimate state of peace and stability. It demands a blend of staying within worldly boundaries to understand what lies beyond our purview. It accepts ambiguity to accommodate variables. A paradoxical arrangement of attached detachment to the 'self' could help us integrate diversity of thought yet stay

true to who we are as designers. A designer thus needs to subtly oscillate between emotional experiences and logical explanations thereby creating a new dimension of working that includes the richness and variety of judgement.

In a speech about Hindu philosophy at the Parliament of the World's Religions, Chicago on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1893, Swami Vivekananda beautifully summed up the idea of coherence and wholeness. He began with the salutation, "Sisters and brothers of America!" His words resonated with the audience and he received a spontaneous standing ovation from a crowd of seven thousand, which lasted for two minutes. I believe coherence stems from the inherent quality of oneness - a sense of belonging, as vividly described by ancient Hindu philosophy. We all possess it and it transcends superficial differences thus helping us embrace, respect and value diversity to build coherent work places.

## **Bibliography**

The philosophical terms, concepts and teachings mentioned above are in Sanskrit and have been translated into English. I acknowledge that there are limitations to translations and they may not convey the exact meaning even if they are sourced from reliable places.

*Mahāvākyas*: The great sayings from the *Upanishads*, texts for searching answers to the internal spiritual quest

*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*: The world is one family

*Jijñāsā*: Curiosity or the desire to know

*Brahma-sūtra*: Systematic summary of the Upanishads (450 BCE and 200 CE)

*Athāto brahma jijñāsā*: In order to get out of the bodily conception, one has to increase inquiry about truth

*Aparoksha jñāna*: Recognizing the non-duality of 'self'

*Pramanas*: Means of knowledge

*Pratyaksha*: Knowledge gained through direct experience

*Anumāna*: Inference through prior knowledge

*Upamāna*: Metaphorical explanation

*Arthāpatti*: The study of cause and effect

*Anupalabdhi*: Awareness of non-perception

*Sabda*: Words from the expert

*Paroksha*: Mysterious or something that falls out of direct perception

*Vyapti*: Knowledge of concomitance

*Sadhya*: Goal

*Sadhana*: Means of achieving the goal

*Abhava*: The quality of non-existence

*Rigveda*: Ancient Sanskrit text of hymns on how to lead life, rituals and ways to reach the ultimate

*Shaivite philosophy*: A dualistic philosophy that considers the grace of one power

*Bharathmuni*: Ancient Indian theatre and music expert who wrote *Natyashastra*

*Natyashastra*: Treatise on drama and theatre by *Bharathmuni*

*Rasas*: Moods/emotions influential in defining the nature of Indian art forms

*Bhavas*: The emotion or mood conveyed by a performer

<b>Rasas (aesthetic moods)</b>	<b>Bhavas (major emotions)</b>
<i>Sringara</i> (love)	<i>Rati</i> (erotic)
<i>Hasya</i> (comic)	<i>Hasa</i> (mirth)
<i>Karuna</i> (pathos)	<i>Soka</i> (sorrow)

<i>Raudra</i> (furious)	<i>Krodha</i> (anger)
<i>Vira</i> (heroic)	<i>Utsaha</i> (energy)
<i>Bhayanaka</i> (horror)	<i>Bhaya</i> (fear)
<i>Bibhasta</i> (odious)	<i>Jugupsa</i> (disgust)
<i>Adbhuta</i> (marvel)	<i>Vismaya</i> (astonishment)

*Sthayibhava*: Innate or permanent emotion

*Samskaras*: Permanent mental traces

*Vyabharibhava*: Transitory emotions that rise and return to the innate ones

*Anubhava*: Affective experience

*Vedantic*: Related to the end of *Vedas*, ancient texts that reflect a world view to leading an enriched life

## References

Kolko, J. (2007). *Thoughts on Interaction Design*. San Francisco CA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.

Giacomin, J. (December 2014). What Is Human Centred Design? *The Design Journal*, 17:4, 606-623, DOI: 10.2752/175630614X14056185480186

Raja, C.K. (c1960). *Some fundamental problems in Indian philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.

Sharma, G.R. (1987). *The Idealistic Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. New Delhi: Atlantic publishers.