

04

# DESIGN AND PLURALISM

**In the new global and  
geopolitical condition**

**there are at the very  
least multiple centres  
and peripheries.**

**Or taking it further,  
everywhere is both at the  
centre and the periphery  
at the same time.**

**Aric Chen**

## DESIGN AND PLURALISM

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It didn't escape me, when I first met Satyendra Pakhalé at his studio in Amsterdam in 2014, that anyone listening in on our conversation might have seen a tangled logic at work. As Pakhalé adamantly resisted being labelled an 'Indian designer', while showing me work that was full of Indian inferences, I was speaking on behalf of a Hong Kong-based museum that aimed to redefine 'global' in an Asian, yet not 'Asian', sense. The contradictions seemed all too rich. Except they weren't contradictions.

The burdens of history are never easy to offload, yet Pakhalé's work offers a way of rethinking how we construct design narratives. On a biographical level, Pakhalé – born and raised in India, educated there and in Europe, and now living and working from the Netherlands – is very much a product of globalization. In this sense, he is not alone.

However, Pakhalé stands out especially for his ability to navigate multiple identities as a designer – Indian, global, European, industrial, conceptual, craft-driven, whatnot – in a way that doesn't so much reconcile them as embrace their seemingly dissonant co-existences. Whether expanding design's cultural and interpretive possibilities, or discarding its disciplinary boundaries, he approaches the field with an equanimity that draws no hierarchical distinctions between hand-crafted tradition and emerging technologies, high-tech and low-tech, ceremonial and utilitarian – whether expressed in ritual offering vases<sup>①</sup> and concept cars<sup>②</sup>, or bell metal sculptures and speculative walking sticks for the moon<sup>③</sup>. To look within his body of work, and at his work in the broader landscape, is to see an argument for design as a more pluralistic enterprise.

### Network of Narratives

Pakhalé is emblematic of a discursive moment that has seen, in fits and starts, the undoing of binary logics – between East and West, functional and decorative, modern and traditional. At the same time, design and design history – long dominated by the largely Euro-American narratives at its centre, with most everything else at the periphery – has opened up to a new global and geopolitical condition, in which there are (at the very least) multiple



A



B



C



D

A Roll Carbon Ceramic Chair, ammann // gallery at Design Miami/ Basel, CH, 2007. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

B B.M. Objects III, ammann // gallery at Design Miami/ Basel, CH, 2018. Courtesy: Ammann Gallery, DE.

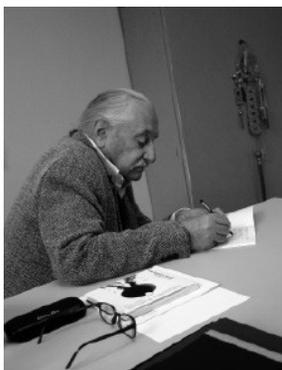
C Pangéa concept car at Geneva Motor Show, 1997. Courtesy: Philips Design, NL.

D Moonwākā, first hiking gauge for the Moon at the Moon Life Concept Store, Amsterdam, NL, 2011, Courtesy: Danny Hollander, NL.

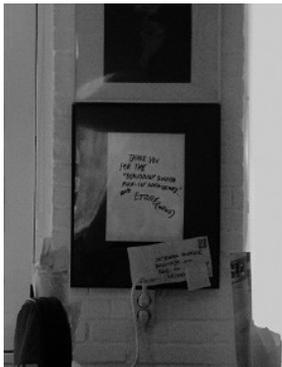
# To look within Satyendra Pakhalé's body of work

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F

centres and peripheries. Or taking it further, everywhere is both at the centre and the periphery at the same time.

In this context, Pakhalé was among the first designers we sought out as we began forming the permanent design and architecture collection of M+, the museum in Hong Kong. At the time, using a rather blunt, and knowingly problematic, shorthand we described M+ as ‘a global museum from an Asian perspective’. This was a way of emphasizing, in response to lingering assumptions to the contrary (within and also beyond Asia), that a museum could be simultaneously ‘Asian’ and ‘global’ at once.

Of course, ‘Asia’ is itself a troublesome term. But we used it not only out of convenience, but also with the idea that what we were describing was not some predefined notion of ‘Asianness’ or Asian identity or, for that matter, ‘Chineseness,’ ‘Hong Kongness,’ or ‘Indianness.’ Instead, we were referring to the complex mechanisms of cultural production that wend their way across time and geographies to create networks of narratives – of which cultural identities are a part – that densify based on where one is situated.

### Opposites Reconciled

Put simply, we were Asian because we were in Asia, and we were global because we were in the world, and the two are not in opposition. From this starting point, we saw a resonance with Pakhalé’s designs, which root themselves in specific contexts while also moving fluidly among them. While there was much throughout his work that attracted us, we homed in on his Roll Carbon Ceramic Chair, whose ceramic form, wrapped in carbon fibre, presented its didactic purpose all too well.

The chair’s technical challenges are not insubstantial. But it is the co-existence of its two seemingly diametrically opposed materials and making processes, sculpted into a form whose ritualistic nature supersedes any other ostensible function, that makes the point. While conflating high- and low-tech, the design bears a ceremonial aura that can certainly be traced to Pakhalé’s own work, research and background in India – but also tangential-ly to the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass Jr. (a great influence on Pakhalé), whose own debt to India, beginning with his visits there in the 1960s, is becoming more fully understood. In its singular way, the Roll Carbon Ceramic Chair contains multiple readings and narratives that move and intersect across geographies.

E Ettore Sottsass Jr. at Sottsass Associati, Milan, 2003. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

F Ettore Sottsass Jr. letter to Pakhalé, ‘Thank you for the beautiful rock-cut architecture’, 1996. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

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## Cultural Nomadism

Many non-Euro-American designers of Pakhalé's generation, and those before them, were often left to choose between being a designer in the broader sense and being an 'Indian', or 'Japanese', or *other*, designer.

Pakhalé is deeply aware of his own historicity. He is Indian, and he is a designer. However, he has always insisted that to read his work through some perception of what might be construed as 'Indian' would be limiting and inaccurate. As he puts it, he doesn't mind being called a 'designer with Indian origins' or a 'designer from India', but 'cultural nomad' covers it just as well.

Now, only five years after my first meeting with Pakhalé, the idea of a 'global Asian museum' is less difficult to explain – but, somewhat ironically, the world has meanwhile become more fragmented, divided and polarized. Considering this fact, if design is a means by which we articulate the human realm, and our interactions with it and each other, then it seems even more urgent to look at the work of Pakhalé and other like-minded designers through the world views - plural - that inform them.

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