

# DESTINATION — INDIA PART I “The exhibition & struggles”

## Discovering the struggle for international quality recognition

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### THE ARRIVAL

It was a real blessing when the aircraft door swung open during the early hours of a very warm and very humid near monsoon-ending morning after a long sleepless trip from New York. Now greatly looking forward to a comfortable bed in a nice air-conditioned hotel room, I first had to wrestle with an army of wannabe porters all vying for my luggage and the never-ending cries of taxi sir, taxi sir, taxi sir! Once I clumsily found my way out of the terminal, I was suddenly but cheerfully greeted with traditional colourful garlands from the illustrious Devang Sheth, the popular publisher of the monthly Screen Print India magazine and my host to their Screen Print 2004 Exhibition, together with an excited delegation of officers from India’s screen printing association; SPAI—Screen Printing Association of India.

This was my initial welcome to Bombay, renamed Mumbai, the captivating commercial hub of India, a place that can be both fascinating and infuriating at every turn, containing a cross-section of India’s 15 million diverse population of 1 billion, seemingly millions of charming three-wheel rickshaws competing against boisterous undisciplined traffic jostling for any open space, a magnet to rich and poor alike, larger than life blockbuster Bollywood, a hotbed of prosperous hi-tech industries, home of the wealthy and glamorous, a landscape of the extreme—and all built on a collection of seven small islands and land reclamation surrounded on three sides by the Arabian Sea. Welcome to Mumbai, my temporary home in the world of screen printing for the next few weeks.



Photo 1. Keynote Address panel: l to r, Michel Caza, ex-President of FESPA; Michael Robertson, President SGIA; Madhukumar Doshi, President SPAI (India); Mike Young, Imagetek Consulting and Pei Guifan, Secretary ASGIA (Asia) & Vice Chairman CSGIA (China).

### GIVE MORE WHILE EXPECTING LESS

*My last visit to India was more than three years ago. During that trip, I knew India has some astonishing surprises in store because the host company I consulted routinely screen printed some of the most complex designs ever seen including numerous 12, 14 or more colour auto-decals, several requiring six or more halftone blends (vignettes) and ranging in density from 90 to 10 % with repeatable tolerances better than .004” (0.1 mm)!*

*What is more staggering to comprehend is the circumstances they were produced under are far from ideal, both from an environmental and technical support viewpoint. Of recent, we have seen a number of screen printed samples, including textiles, from India entering the SGIA’s Golden Image Awards—many taking top honours in their respective categories. Now that I have seen the conditions screen printers typically work under and the handicaps experienced, my perception has taken on a new meaning and appreciation regarding the fruits of their labour. I was originally prepped into thinking India were more than satisfied with medium quality but evidently, I soon found this was not true according to my experience.*

*There is also something else I should add here regarding the general screen printing community in India as a whole. Although slight is not intended, printers simply do not enjoy the same type and level of technical support/product awareness from their suppliers as they do, and become to expect, in the North American and European arenas. This fact was actually pointed out in my speech, following SGIA President Michael Robertson’s Keynote Address during the exhibition, entitled “Customer Relationship Building” (photo 1). I mentioned that the industry at large, particularly in India, is driven by suppliers and the need to develop stronger and healthier customer-relationships meant to demonstrate rather than sell; listen to problems rather than criticise; expedite rather than holdback; give more while expecting less; share the key to success rather than them working harder; develop closer understanding than distrust; adopt long-term relationships rather than short-term affairs and, perhaps most importantly, provide the tools to goals and expectations become achievable to all.*

Mumbai is truly a melting pot to all Indian creeds, cultures, industries and those with hope, containing a formidable linguistic minefield that unbelievably tolerates

some 18 official languages and hundreds of others shared by countless dialects nationwide. The metropolis is Maharashtra's state seat, one of obscure humble beginnings and, as with most large cities in the modern world today, it has its seamy side, its slums, its overcrowding and congestion, the foothills of poverty on which are built towering skyscrapers that has risen to such eminence to become India's most important and formidable commercial and industrial centre. And like all success stories, there have been chapters of intrigue, violence, happiness and calm, and the struggles of the pre-independence years, when Bombay became the political capital of national India. Also, India as a country, it enjoys one prominence the western world was never made aware of—their ability to produce some of the finest screen printed products seen anywhere. And that is the crux of the problem—the very reason why this article is penned in the first place.

In recent times, India is prominently known to manufacture an array of products and goods to world standards, both for domestic consumption and export, although very few outsiders are aware of this feat. To concur, it is reported that Mumbai, together with the nearby city of Pune (probably the only place-name accentuated in India), are homes to nearly 500 prestigious international businesses alone. Not including countless domestic giants, to satisfy their own billion consumers, or the American presence influencing soda drinks, fast food and main street fashion retailers (and yes, Wal-Mart soon to open their first in India), some of the blue-chip American, European and Japanese/Korean manufacturing companies that caught my eye were Carrier, Philips, Motorola, John Deere, Ford, General Electric, Hitachi, Volvo, Whirlpool, Daewoo, Canon, Hyundai, Cadbury (chocolates), Samsung, Fiat, Bausch & Lomb, Kawasaki, Hewlett Packard, Matsushita, Microsoft, Singer, Sharp and Honda although there were much more than I can possibly recall. That much is history. However, what outsiders do not widely know is the same can be similarly said for the quality level of the screen printing industry; be it textile, commercial graphics, electronics or industrial applications. We'll come back to this issue later.

**STATISTICS (if you believe in them)**

For the statisticians of this world, I found some interesting facts on about the size of the screen printing industry in India. However, figures given should be considered as a guide only because hard reliable numbers simply do not exist, compounded further by varying estimations according to whom you ask. India is home to about 25,000 fulltime screen printing business, possibly only ten percent considered major players, while over 40,000 companies have been mentioned as part-timers. It is reckoned there are about 150 main core (usually very large)

industrial printers and between 7,000–10,000 textile printers of all stripes. A normal day consists of 8 hours averaging 25 working days per month and perhaps as many as 1 million earning a living from screen printing (many companies typically staffed by only 3 or 4 people).

One supplier I spoke to boasts of 15,000 useful names in his databank. A further 1,500–1,800 companies of all types are thought to supply the industry; from squeegees to large format multicolour printers, while probably 30 are dominate in their field and accordingly serve nationwide. Value placed on the industry has never been professionally projected to anyone's knowledge—and I am not going to start now! Nevertheless, growth is considered to be very bright and bullish, thereby enjoying a predictable rate of 10–15%. Readership of India's premium screen magazine, Screen Print India, benefiting from good advertisers and top-line articles enjoys a following of 4,400 and is printed in English with a small section in Hindi.



Photo 2. Samples of Screen Print India 2004 Awards.

**THE EXHIBITION**

Indian's 6<sup>th</sup> bi-yearly screen print exhibition was held over three days at Mumbai's Nehru Centre during the second half of August, which attracted some 7,500 visitors with several from neighbouring countries and beyond. With 90 participating companies sharing 150 booths covering a total area of 20,600 sq. ft., the show was seemingly always busy from opening to close, with many negotiations and deals taking place in the aisles due to high traffic. Mindful of high domestic air travel cost, I met several visitors who thought nothing of spending 24 hours or more by train just to be at the expo.

As expected, every type of product, equipment and service imaginable was exhibited and displayed at its very best. An Open Forum session was held where visitors can ask questions and hear industry's experts tackling any problem thrown at them. Such proved to be so popular that people who could not make it to the show actually emailed their questions in. I understand the list grew to 150 questions

long! No doubt something else will be done in time for the next expo to make this program more accessible and productive.



Photo 3. Samples of Screen Print India 2004 Awards.

What was interesting from my perspective, Aditya Exposition—the exhibition organizers, held their own impressive and very prestigious award competition known as “Screen Print India Awards 2004” (photos 2, 3 & 4). Judged well before the exhibition centre opened its doors, it was refreshing to see winners’ representatives being photographed while claiming their “Awards” to a round of applause from a large audience. While the display was smaller than SGIA’s Golden Image offerings, it was unquestionably large on enthusiasm with over 900 pieces entered—probably more than 50% of SGIA’s total entries. What made these prints a little special, at least for me, was to realize the typical handicaps endured by many companies printing them; that is they lacked a full range of support and environmental comforts we have grown used to, expect and take literally for granted back home—opening sidebar candidly relates.

Despite the restrictions, it seemed printers painstakingly went out of their way to eagerly ‘show & tell’ the fruits of their labour, each seemingly with a passion; the desire to reach higher levels of integrity were clearly evident in their offerings. Having judged prints for the SGIA many times, without question, these samplings were of international standards in quality for sure—something I unreservedly confirmed later in a speech at an official event with many exhibitors and visitors (printers themselves) attending.

At this particular gathering during the exhibition, I was hastily requested by my host to take the podium and broadcast my thoughts regarding the quality level of visitors’ interests, Awards and opinions concerning the exhibition in general. It was obvious to me visitors were extremely eager for greater information, support, newer products and process knowledge, in order to be on the same footing as their counterparts across Europe and North America. In the short space of two days, I already felt that they had the proper

mindset to achieve the very best possible considering the circumstances they routinely work under. I then proceeded to share that when looking through the business cards I had collected up to this point, I noticed a very high rate of companies were ISO certified—something I found not only impressive but very usual. This was telling me something!

### **THE STRUGGLES**

Unlike other places I travel to, I never heard once ‘price’ or ‘cost’ being a factor in their pursuit of more business. Whatever the subject matter under discussion, talk inescapably always came back to quality and how it could be improved upon. As alluded to earlier, the Indian screen printing community does not enjoy the same level of support from their suppliers as customary found in other countries. It is not that suppliers and distributors are bad, lazy or anything like that, on the contrary. The marketplace, together with its economical weaker structure industry-wise, is quite a bit different than those of similar market segments in developed countries. Other than with a few exceptions, generally in my opinion, regional suppliers and localized distributors could not ordinarily afford to invest in attracting more business simply because the existing marketplace is far from wealthy monetary-wise.

It is interesting to note that SGIA’s President, Mike Robertson, recently observed that in the western hemisphere, the screen printing community has been characterized as 20% doing 80% of the business then noting the figure for India is more likely to be 10% doing 90%! Such insight would seem to reinforce the notion why visitors at the show wanted to get on board with the latest technology, equipment, supplies and processing skills. More to the point, money is not seen as an obstacle per se, since they are willing to make all the necessary investments if it improves overall quality and lower production costs.

Another factor to consider in respect to capital equipment investments is the comparative cost of domestic labour in India, as opposed to those of other countries, which is usually the largest contributing factor with production



Photo 4. Samples of Screen Print India 2004 Awards.

costs and one that western companies most often use to evaluate payback time. While estimates varied, with a ballpark parity of at least 10:1 (for the US) in salary for experienced press operators in metro areas, it can be easily construed ROI (return on investment) will be considerably longer than their counterparts elsewhere—based on labour factor alone. Even accepting this differential as a normal everyday business occurrence, the ultimate prize in India is not cheapness but quality.

While on the subject of investigating, another interesting observation was made that deals with transferring manufacturing offshore to reduce costs. While this practice is carried out in abundance in the western world for a variety of reasons, it is not practiced, at least in any measurable numbers in India. Not being a business economist, I guess that has more to do with the country known a nation of ‘quality’ rather than of ‘quantity’. Again, this tends to reinforce my earlier remarks of them investing in their quest for quality—not mass production. I suspect India would openly welcome an influx of manufacturing in big numbers for export but, for now, they have at least put ‘quality’ foremost on the table first in my estimation.

Knowing major screen printing companies were simply not satisfied at reaching the plateau of nationalistic-type quality, but diligently desiring to go beyond status quo, all I could convey to the audience was to reconfirm my beliefs that they had triumphed in achieving international quality. However, all that said and done, there was one issue I grappled with; and that is no one outside India knew such a standard had been accomplished!

For whatever reason, they succeeded in doing a good job of concealing this information within the boundaries of their country. On the other hand, perhaps they did not recognize such a level had been achieved. Regardless, my way of thinking is if they have what it takes, then they deserve the right to flaunt it in abundance. If there is a problem, it is here. As a printing community, India has not done a sufficient job of promoting themselves as competing purveyors of fine screen printed products, ones that can stand up against the world’s best in the international arena. Bold statement, yes, but true in my estimation.



About the writer:

British-born Mike Young has been a specialist in high-definition graphic and industrial screen printing for more than 30 years. He is a SGIA Fellow, a member of the Academy of Screen Printing Technology, recipient of the prestigious Swormstedt Award for technical writing. He is also a frequent contributing writer to trade publications, SGIA Golden Imaging Award print judge, legal expert witness and a popular speaker at industry events. Mike is the creator of the internationally known **Troubleshooting Chart** and published several technical books on advance screen printing techniques, including **The Register Guide** about achieving print excellence. Mike operates Imagetek Consulting International, a Connecticut USA-based consulting firm, which trains and troubleshoots screen printing operations worldwide. He can be reached at: [www.imagetekconsulting.com](http://www.imagetekconsulting.com) or [mike@imgatekconsulting.com](mailto:mike@imgatekconsulting.com)

## SEMINAR PROGRAMME

The official reason for my presence in India had nothing to do with me as a person but, rather, to conduct a series of four separate technical seminars (photo 5), during the exhibition on varying aspects of quality printing, scheduled on average for 3 hours apiece with questions following. What is interesting to note that while presenting these programmes, despite the language barrier with some of the attendees, they all understood points being made since screen printing is universal, particularly when discussing common problems. On that bases, many questions were asked—even if others helped to translate them into clearer English.



Photo 5. Your writer resourcefully being presented at one of his technical seminar by Kalyan Varde, a well-traveled and truly dedicated master of his profession with over 40 years served in the industry.

As for the future of holding a series of seminar programs at such exhibitions, I believe the industry is grossly under served by not conducting more, and perhaps with greater frequency than present. One only needs to consider the 50 to 60 plus programs SGIA typically offers each year at their conventions, with many sessions breaking into three-figure attendance mark. No doubt there is a good lesson to learn here; knowledge should continuously be sought if you don’t want be left swimming with the alligators!

### Coming up next month

In PART II and the final part of the article, Mike continues by describing his visits to five companies in amusing colourful terms following the exhibition.