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Indians don't like White Space
… and other ruminations from the margins of communication

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Abstract:
Swiss and European design principles continue to dominate typography and use of colour throughout the world, championing a reduced approach to typography, a strong grid and limited use of colour. As readers and designers of a visual language used by multiple nationalities, Indian designers have been habituated to the acquired taste of reductivism rather than our traditional inclination towards ornamentation and decoration. This paper resists this notion, recognizing that design along with other industries suffers from the vestiges of a Euro-centric approach. By studying the evolution of professional typographical practice in India and examining common threads with postmodern, deconstruction and other movements in the West, this paper hopes to contribute to discourse that can eventually develop and honour new design based on a historically-inherent sensibility.

Key Words: Postmodern, Typography Education, Popular, Vernacular

Introduction

As Indians we do not let white space be. We seem to be uncomfortable with the slightest gaps between people, cars or words, we rush to fill silences with a clutter of conversation – our ramblings and layered communication could be considered manic. The stereotype of not leaving the smallest gap in between personal spaces when we queue echoes how we treat our typographical layouts (Figures 1 & 2). Across India there is a synchronicity in the vernacular, popular typographic styles – on signboards in the streets, in our *panchang*

calendars and in traditional, calligraphic or hand drawn text – that ensures that every inch of visual real estate is used up.

Figure.1 Information boards on a street in Tamil Nadu
(Image: Author, 1988)

Figure.2 Queues in India display attitudes to personal space
(Image courtesy: http://imgur.com/gallery/NJvOWVd)

This paper is a preliminary attempt, the rather provocative title aside, to put together an account of professional typographical practice in India and a look at what *and whether* there is an Indian idiom in the field of typography and typography education. The search for an Indian way of thinking has been a persistent discourse in many disciplines (Ramanujan, 1989). Where do we come from? Where are we going? These questions have been raised across the arts. Other than a few sporadic and valiant efforts to initiate critical discourse,[1] typographical practice remains driven by historical convention, and subjective and *optimistic* intuition. A consistent theoretical engagement is rarely, if ever, sustained. While contemporary typographical design discourse especially in India is out of sync with what exists in other mainstream arts, such as architecture or art, this paper will attempt to look for common threads with what is referred to as the postmodern movement in the West – while remaining conscious that without any clear-cut rubric for modern design in India, it may be premature to talk about postmodern design.

This paper does not claim to be all encompassing or definitive; I can be accused of bringing my own preoccupations with prevalent attitudes in heritage and visual cultural studies – and addressing a general malaise about the profession's first responsibility to the corporation rather than to larger societal concerns. Without any existing literature in the field one has had to hazard many a guess and speculate on the arguments that have driven the evolution of typographic practice and education.

Notwithstanding its narrow specialization, typography as a discipline has remained an independent if obscure field of practice, holding its own in a world where the written word has had to compete against a proliferation of images. Proof of its hardiness exists not just in the diverse geographies represented in this seminar – but also in the way typography has entered ubiquitously into everyday life. On Facebook, T-shirts and whatsapp, one comes across typographic layouts in Helvetica or Baskerville depending on ones particular leanings, carefully aligned in more or less 100 characters, giving 'thought of the day' status messages; these renderings seem to function, in some instances, to provide a sort of moral compass to our otherwise rudderless everyday lives, or at others, as a code to demonstrate allegiance to a subgroup with specific political, intellectual or stylistic leanings. (Figures 3 & 4)
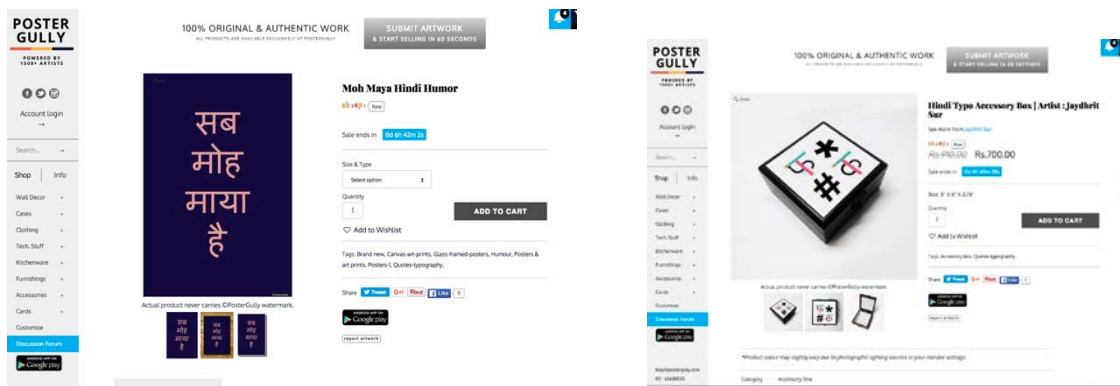
Figures.3 &4 Products inspired by typography that can be bought online. (Image : http://www.postergully.com/)

Eurocentric Modernism

Design springs from the applied arts, and India has a rich and sophisticated history of visual forms. Jain manuscripts, with richly calligraphed texts, use punctuation as decorative elements in carefully balanced but formally rigid layouts. Mughal miniatures are often bordered by panels of calligraphy and decorated with arabesque and geometric designs. At the other extreme, street typography is a celebration of styles cluttered together in gay abandon.

It is against this backdrop of densely layered text and thought that typography as a discipline was introduced into formal design education around the 1960s at the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad by faculty trained in Swiss modern principles. The early reformist, Roy, requested British colonial rulers that budget be reallocated, *"to employ European Gentlemen of talents and education to instruct the natives of India in … other useful sciences… rather than spend it on vernacular education"* (Roy, 1823); in a

similar vein the early patrons of design in India seem to have, with all good intentions, invited European and a few American gentlemen *and gentlewomen* of talent to help set up a national institute of design. Ranjan (2007) writes of how the Eames report emphasises the historically inherent Indian cultures of innovation, and puts out the question whether the need to nurture it in a changing world seems to have been lost along the way. One cannot help but wonder whether the design landscape in India would have been different today if there was an equal contribution from vernacular design and art practitioners in the early years of formal design education in India.

Over the years, a few generations of designers including me were taught the value of creating singular clean layouts with dynamic white space to direct the eye towards a cohesive block of text, balanced and positioned on a page so as to aide legibility. I do not think we ever questioned whether these objective layouts were an anachronism against existing vernacular norms in typography that celebrated the particular, the dense and the layered. We were introduced to international signage, which, driven by a need to be universal, incorporated pictograms or Isotypes for public spaces such as airports using 'an independent system of communication of abstract visual forms'. The term Isotype, (International System of Typographic Education), coined in the 1920s by Otto Neurath, was meant to inculcate an egalitarian culture arising out of an international program of visual education. A focus on form separated visual communication from verbal communication by describing visual experience as if it functions outside of culturally and historically determined systems of meaning. By its supposed universality, pictorial information was intended to dissolve cultural differences and meant to look neutral. While the myth of universal and objective design is best illustrated in the stereotyping and design of a pictogram for a squatting toilet using an image of a turbaned Indian in the Isotype style, research does reveal the universality of meanings, across cultures and epochs, behind certain basic shapes and forms (Frutiger, 1989).

As students and practitioners we habituated modern fonts that were devoid of any extraneous flourishes or swashes – the slightest hint of curlicues and other whimsical indulgences, seemed an anathema to our recently acquired modern sensibilities. In our colonization by Eurocentric aesthetic sensibilities, we framed our now post-colonial eyes to look upon vernacular conventions and traditions as 'the other'. If one did engage with calligraphic and vernacular text on manuscripts, magazine covers or wedding invitations with their flourishes, patterns and layers of storytelling and expression – they were looked upon as curiosities that were polar to the dominant and mainstream professional practice that we were now part of.

Vernacular refers to the language of the popular; it refers to the grassroots, to the natural groundswell of popular expression. Our *panchang* calendars whether in Gujarati or in Malayalam, with information on astrology and health are densely layered with a texture of text, colour and fonts – using a hidden hierarchy that requires an insider's knowledge to decipher and use. Besides the fact that most of these are in regional languages, they also have a specific symbolic language that is far from universal – and requires an understanding of an age-old set of cultural and visual codes.

Separate from the world of 'professional ' designers exists a vibrant world of typography in vernacular languages. One of the most striking examples is Ray's book covers that follow the aesthetic molded at the Shanthiniketan art school (Figures ,6,7). If designs like the contemporary Tamil book cover can be used as evidence (Figure 5), vernacular typographic styles seem to have evolved unfettered by any impositions by modern design sensibilities.

Figure 5: Tamil book cover uses a paisley motif and palm leaf backdrop

Figures 6, 7: Satyajit Ray's Book cover designs.

Pastiches and parodies in postmodern leanings

India remains what Maine (1871,17) stated in his lecture more than a hundred years ago, *an assemblage of fragments of an ancient society.* Today these *fragments from ancient society* coexist alongside modern day fragments; a postmodern world of sorts where the traditional and the contemporary combine into a performed 'text' in a state of 'perpetual incompleteness and permanent unresolvedness'. If modernist typography, as represented by Isotype, found aesthetic value in utilitarianism and was meant to dissolve cultural differences, Postmodernism is all about the enjoyment of adornment, differences – and the embracing of high as well as low culture, the classical and popular kitsch.

It was only natural that a few designers soon abandoned the sameness and blandness of an imposed modernist style and looked at typographic and artistic conventions that were outside of the classroom – either attracted by the archaic appeal of classical manuscripts or the idiosyncratic charms of popular typography found on painted signboard painters, truck graphics and matchbox labels. However, the vernacular is what 'professional'

designers (distinct from applied artists), were not; when we did use the vernacular, the attitudes adopted were that of irony, nostalgia, connoisseurship and elitism. Popular music television channels and lifestyle products invoked the vernacular by using imagery from Indian cinema, printed matchbox labels and truck graphics and were often parodies with patronising attitudes – more often than not – a hodgepodge of styles. Some engagements lead to sustained collaborative enterprises and were pastiches, *unconvincing imitations of vernacular and styles of the past,* that would fetishize hand done and decorative type forms. In a bid to save these forms, some of these interventions have taken the vernacular out of their natural habitat, smoothened their rough edges and sanitized them to make them palatable and replicable. However well meaning the intention there is a concern that through these interventions, some traditions lose their organic and unexpected quality – and the original creators and the true essence of the forms undergo a slow death. What is reassuring is that the promoters of the hand-painted (Figures 8, 9) project are attempting to make the project sustainable by sharing fees with the original painters.

Figures 8,9,10: Latinisation of non Latin fonts and digitizing hand made fonts are pastiches that function not as style but as semiotic code.

Images Courtesy: Medicine Corner, Wellcome Trust www.handpaintedtype.com

Typographer as Auteur

When April Grieman's poster was put up in the mid 80s in the NID graphic studio, it created a bit of a rumble. The full-length portrait was provocative for us in more ways then one. It broke every rule we were taught in the classroom, and along with other computer-age inspirations harked the possibilities of freedom from the tyranny of the layer-less (and I also refer to the layering of content here), modern idiom. That was the pre-internet era with images not having the immediacy or fickleness of today, and so the

poster remained in our consciousness for longer than similar landmark pieces do today (Figure 11).
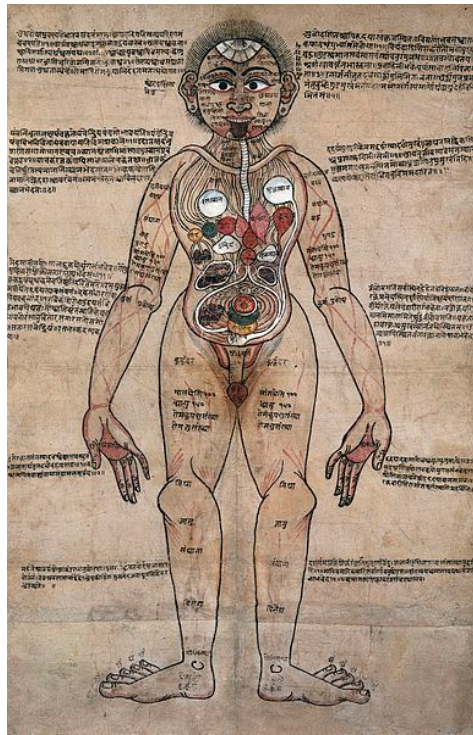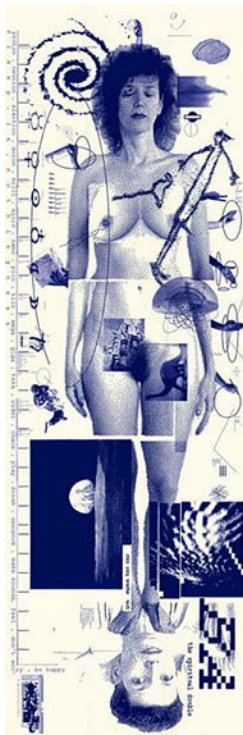

Figure 11: April Grieman's iconic deconstructed poster. http://aprilgreiman.com/

Figure 12: The image of the Ayurveda man combines text with image is reflective of the coexistence of binaries in Indian ways of representation. (Image Courtesy: Wellcome Images)

As a reaction to the overly objective demanded of the modernist style, and with the relaxation of regimens in newer design schools, the typographer with agency and intent changed from a passive facilitator of content, beyond just formatting and styling, to a creator of meaning. Form was no longer merely following function – form was adding additional layers of meaning, understanding and emotional connections. Design and typography began to stoke content with the creative use of hierarchy, weights, positioning and layering – from hovering in the margins of communication, design began to share center stage. The designer became an auteur.

Cleland speaks of how this path of an auteur has to be tread upon with caution. When it is driven by the fear of not being original, the danger is that it can distract the mind and energies of students from acquiring necessary technical skills – or understanding the basics of technicalities or finish – and it could in more mature stages tempt the would-be artist into vulgar mannerisms and formulas which he will call his 'style'. These words from a paper appropriately titled Harsh words may be true, but who amongst us, at some points in our careers, have not gone to extravagant lengths to escape the pains imposed by a standard? (Cleland,1942).

Sometimes In the rush to create revolutionary novelties, we take on the role of overly eager art typographers and reduce perfectly readable text into a mass of illegibility. Page after page of an over-designed book becomes an onslaught on the senses and the reader who searches for the comfort and rhythm of balanced and predictable text layouts becomes stressed as every page demands attention and a new way of navigation (Huxley, 1928). What Barthes (1967) said of writing – the can be said of typography also: the true locus of typography is in being deciphered and read – and one must be wary of our birth as artist-typographers ransoming the death of the writer, and question who is the master, if at all.

> When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all. (Caroll, 1872).

Deconstructivism and Inconsistency

While engaging communication is concerned with not just what is said but how it is said – what is true of rhetoric in speech – is true of the over use of rhetoric in typography. Too much bluster on the surface can lead one to suspect that there is little or nothing beneath.

This opposition between what is on the surface and beneath – what is represented and what is 'real' is referred to as 'binaries' in western thought (Lupton, 2009). Derrida's (1992) deconstruction theory questions the binary that exists between the external representation of things and their internal essence. Cranbrook designers worked towards merging what is within and what is without, at connecting the external representation of things with their inner essence or meaning using typography. They recognized the hypertextuality of a communication piece and encouraged readers to participate and contribute to the construction of meaning rather than delivering it as an absolute singular message through their designs.

It has been said that Derrida was not concerned with anything *beyond an hour's jet flight east of Paris* (Bharati, 1992), nevertheless, one can find consonance in deconstruction theories (and the Cranbrook approach) with what is called the multiplicity in Indian thinking – the multiplicity that is also often unkindly – though possibly accurately – called inconsistency. This multiplicity separates text from absolute meaning, emphasizes dispersion over completeness and shares metaphysical underpinnings with Foucault's ideas of postmodernism.

An example that reflects the coexistence of binaries in Indian thought and representation is the 'Ayurveda man' capturing what was understood then as physical anatomy alongside the metaphysical concept of chakras within a body – the mind–body connection. The textuality of Ayurveda validates it as an authenticated system of medicine as opposed to other oral healing traditions and in this image, *the Ayurvedic Man is willingly imprisoned in text* (Wujastyk, 2008), passively permitting the texts to speak for him (Figure 12).

Post Modernist and Deconstructivist ideas of dealing with the past are slightly different, while the first embraces it, the other choses to ignore it in search of a more radical language; what is common to both is the concept of authority residing with the reader. For both Barthes and Foucault (1967), the creator of a text is not the sole owner of a creation and the reader uses his or her own codes to negotiate the text.

Many Indian narrative traditions seem to use a dense layering of content where the external representations of things reveal their internal essence or meanings. One can see this in the narrative styles of folk traditions where audiences not only get to witness the creation of an art piece and an associated performance – but as participants are involved in the outcome of a performance. Traditional myths are decidedly non-singular and continuously weave in and out of a linear narrative, breaking off into tangential mini narratives before returning to the main thread and there is a comfort with this layering of content. While some vernacular and classical typographic renderings reflect this thought and representation, modern interpretations seem to have moved away from these inspirations, as the severity imposed by modernism and minimalist movements hasn't departed from professional practice.

If this paper appears to be stating that there is no place for minimalism – or of the sort that is imposed by the modernist movement – this is not entirely so. A spiritual or Spartan minimalism that is closer to our ethics or sensibilities can be encountered in village houses born of a necessary frugality. It can also be seen adopted in contemporary interiors that proclaim an allegiance to simplicity and a move away from excess, using rough, textured and handmade materials. If one were to look for a parallel in ideology and representation in typography, the covers for the journal Seminar are close and reflect the role of the journal to act as *a moral conscience to independent India* (Guha, 1999). The covers use stark typography, rough inexpensive paper stock and a closely bound set of semiotic codes. (Figure 13)

Figure 13: The *Seminar* covers over the years have remained resolutely typographical. They were initially letterpress printed on a rough inexpensive paper stock and were limited by the availability of typefaces. Today they continue to follow the type-only mandate while bringing digital and hand done fonts into the mix. (Image Courtesy Designer: Akila Seshasayee)

Figure 14: Typographic newspaper advertisements for the Congress campaign 1985 were used to swing literate, newspaper reading voters. The ads were mean to convey the hope for a progressive India. The campaign used a prominent visual for each ad, a strong copy line and a clean layout. It was the first time this strategy and visual language was used in elections campaigns in India.

If at one point it was progressive in India to use *white space* – to use singular, distilled, thought, it is now time to reconsider the value of layer and density – on paper, on the screen and around us in our environments (Figure 14). Designers across disciplines have become a bridge between the traditional, the modern and postmodern. Fusion styles abound in the culinary arts, interiors and fashion. For graphic designers, particularly typographers, traversing the analog and digital has become imperative. In a world that is, in the words of Foucault (1967), *a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein,* fragmentation has become the norm and cannot be shied away from. It is then necessary to continuously question the absolute and ask as Alice does, *if typographers can make words mean many different things.* When we do deal with tradition or 'what has been around' it is necessary to be cautious as Eco (1994) says:

> The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot readily be destroyed because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.

A blind imitation of the past, amputated of satire or parody, is a superficial, if innocent, engagement. Eco goes on to speak of the risk of irony being taken seriously, even if it is a

risk one must take. In the interest of escaping the tedium and ennui of global blandness, to ensure that we do not silence or destroy the past, in order to create the particular, the specific and the local – we do need to allude to the past *as well* as what is around and alive around us. We must recognize and engage with the classical, the popular, the kitsch and the vernacular, if we do so with laughter, satire and irony, we should ensure that our allusions steer clear of reductive tropes and hackneyed fantasies.

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Notes:

1. Links to a few blogs that archive images on Indian typography. Some of these blogs critically discuss design practice –http://www.handpaintedtype.com/ http://design-for-india.blogspot.in/2007/08/charles-and-ray-eames-legacy-of-durable.html