

25-27<sup>th</sup> feb, 2016  
Shrishti School of Art, Design and Technology  
Bangalore

## Typography and Education

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### “Where do I find ideas to design letterforms?”

An amateur type designers’ attempt to develop typefaces based on design primitive from a culturally diverse country - India with rich visual values, several beautiful languages and scripts.

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#### **Abstract:**

The paper describes a process aimed at pre-final year (B.F.A. Applied Art - Third year) lettering and typography class project.

The paper documents the task set with a primary objective of identifying, developing and applying a design primitive into designing an Indian language typeface (letterforms). The paper further discusses how the project explored, learned and stretched students’ creativity by merging Indian classical music and Indian Script. The project also made the students look beyond a typical set of graphic primitives and thus aimed at making them conceptually strong. The project intended at making an attempt to convert an audio mode of communication (music) into a visual one.

The paper hopes that this ‘teaching aid’ project serves as an inspiration to many contemporary educators of typography and future designers.

**Key words:** *Education, Teaching Aid, Design Primitives, Letterform, Experience, Interest, Indian languages, Indian Scripts, Indian Classical Music.*

#### **1. Introduction**

Typography is to text, what voice is to speech. The way in which one presents text is as important as what one has to say when it comes to effectively communicating ideas.

Typography, in essence, is the pictorial incarnation of language, the visible medium with which one absorbs meaning. Creative typography is the epitome of all information design.

Typography is a hybrid of type and graphics, which brings dull language alive and makes design shine on stage. Yet typography always stays at the last row - neglected and ignored (Viction:ary, 2007).

### **1.1 Education and Typography**

Teaching lettering and typography, perhaps is the most perplexing task any educator of design could face. Students everywhere, typically suffer from two extreme disorders: they either go font-crazy in choosing the most wild, neon, or most calligraphic choice possible, or they completely ignore fonts in defaulting to weak, incomprehensible, whatever-is-available-online. Either way, their designs end up difficult to deliver (Ellen Lupton, 2014).

Fonts are an important part of the messaging and design today. They are tools in media and convey a mood or a brand. With the immense popularity of typography blogs and Pinterest boards; type design, hand-lettering, logos and slogans have spread globally becoming the 'visual' of today's communication.

Moreover, in a curriculum increasingly crowded with subjects of technical nature, has left less time for learning from ancient inscriptions or studying formal characteristics of type design or lettering. Thus, educating or teaching the basics of Typography comes as a challenge for this techno savvy generation.

### **1.2 Education and Indian Scripts**

Education in Typography is a sensitive topic of concern in context to Indian Typography. With more Indian scripts as against the Latin script, teaching Indian letterform designing is a task for Typography Educators. A design educator, therefore, needs to constantly explore and implement innovative educational applications for Typography of Indian scripts. One needs to devise tasks that can help students experiment and explore during the entire process of learning Indian Typography. One has to explore and learn from the vast Indian cultural heritage, see and design letterforms from a completely different perspective.

## **2. Foundation**

Late Prof. R. K. Joshi, initiated the digitalization of Devanāgarī scripts; thus creating a domino effect to the Indian language globalization. Over years, Indian scripts like Bengali, Gujarati, Oriya, Kannada, Gurumukhi and others too, have found its position in the Digital world. With all the complexities of designing an Indian script, typeface designing is slowly gathering its pace. Calligraphers and type designers take inspirations from the ancient manuscripts, study and analyze letterforms on the basis of their visual features; and design letters with a variety of dimensions like - tools, inks, surfaces, grid, and primitives.

## **2.1 Academic Inspiration**

Letterforms are an important part of our lives. They direct, inform, persuade and give us pleasure (George Evans, 1999). Many thousands of lettering styles in different shapes and sizes, by various methods and material constantly beckon us to read. To design all such lettering styles require step by step instructions. There has to be a basic know-how about what a typeface is (the design of alphabet - the shape of letters that make up the type style), basic alpha construction, material, tool, surface, foundation, enthusiasm, patience and above all a design primitive.

And the inspiration for this project was - design primitives.

## **2.2 Design Primitives**

Every letterform has the basic line primitives - horizontal line, vertical line, right diagonal line, left diagonal line, semi-circle, and the snake line. But simply to create letterforms from these, a first time type design student has to learn to 'draw' a form that one sees than what one 'thinks' one sees. Finding design primitives from the unknown or less explored areas thus breaks the 'mind blocks' of these budding designers.

A frequently asked question in my pre-final year, B.F.A. Applied Art, lettering and typography class is, "Ma'am, where do I find primitives or ideas to design letterforms?", and the most often reply that I give is, "Look within. Search within your culture. Look within the rich Indian tradition. You will find many design primitives."

## **3. Purpose and Objective**

We see so much type that we sometimes stop looking (Erick Spiekerman). There is a need to explore more within Indian language contexts and this need led to planning a project based on interdisciplinary Indian art forms.

The basics of Indian script letterform designing were to be taught to the students.

The primary purpose of the project was to identify, develop and apply a design primitive into designing an Indian script (letterforms):

- a. Explore and learn from the vast Indian traditional inheritance including languages.
- b. Create interest by blending Indian-ness into teaching-learning environment.
- c. See and design letterforms from a different set of graphic primitives.
- d. Stretch one's creativity and formulate a better designer within.
- e. Prepare an interesting 'instruction' material.
- f. Blend two disciplines of arts - Music and Design.

#### 4. Project Design

Typography needs to be audible, to be felt, to be experienced. The project planned was an attempt to converting an audio format into a visual one. The planning process therefore involved studying on different levels -

- Indian Classical Music: a thorough data search based on different aspects of Music.
- Audio: listening to various forms (Carnatic as well as Hindustani).
- Going back to its (music styles) origin and learning from the history.

The task was set to adapt any one Indian language suitable to any one classical music form and design letterforms. The class of fourteen first time amateur typeface designers was asked to choose one form of classical music (rāgā, gharana, thāāt, instrument, renowned personality) from the list provided. They were given the liberty to make an attempt at designing letterforms from the available resources.

##### 4.1 Base from Devanāgarī

Indian scripts being specific to certain regions, every style has a different flavor and a different culture. There are a lot of complexities in Indian scripts. For example: the number of vowels and consonants in Devanāgarī as compared to the Latin script is more. Also, there more number of ligatures, conjoint and nasalization. With many permutation combinations, the script has over 25,000 alphabet structures to be designed. Since this was the first time students were attempting a vernacular script, many of these complexities were avoided. The effect or the impact of the script was maintained by designing the basic vowels and consonants only.

अ	आ	इ	ई	उ
ऊ	ऋ	ए	ऐ	ओ
	औ	अं	अः	
क	ख	ग	घ	ङ
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण
त	थ	द	ध	न
प	फ	ब	भ	म
य	र	ल	व	श
	ष	स	ह	ळ
	क्ष	त्र	ज्ञ	

Figure 1. Devanāgarī vowels and consonants.

A basic understanding of constructing Devanāgarī alphabets was communicated to the students. They were briefed about technicalities involved, including the horizontal top-line, vertical stem, counters (both open and closed), joineries of letters, curvilinear strokes (looped and un-looped), horizontal neck joins, knots (overlapping and crossover), terminals, matra proportions, contrast in letters, symmetry and rhythm in letters and also the novelty of hand lettering.

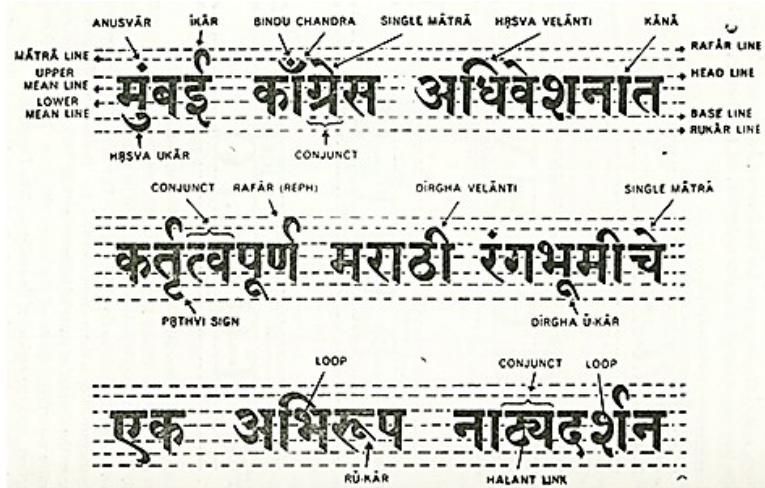


Figure 2. Anatomy of Devanāgarī alphabet. Typography of Devanāgarī (Vol. 1) by Bapurao S. Naik.

## 4.2 Other Scripts

Apart from the Devanāgarī script, students were given the other Indian scripts to choose from like - Gujarati, Kannada, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Oriya, Gurumukhi and even Urdu.

The only restriction was that the script chosen had to relate to category (rāgā, gharana, etc.) already given. Thus, letterforms with the respective scripts had to be designed with a lot of experimentation and exploration in context to the music form selected and not from any existing visual graphic references.

## 5. Students Work

5.1 Devanāgarī was the chosen script for rāgā Yaman. Considered to be one of the most fundamental rāgās, Yaman is often one of the first rāgās taught to music students.

Romantic, yet soft, playful, graceful; a few characteristics of this rāgā like the shringaar, gambhir, viraha feelings; gave the letters its distinct look.

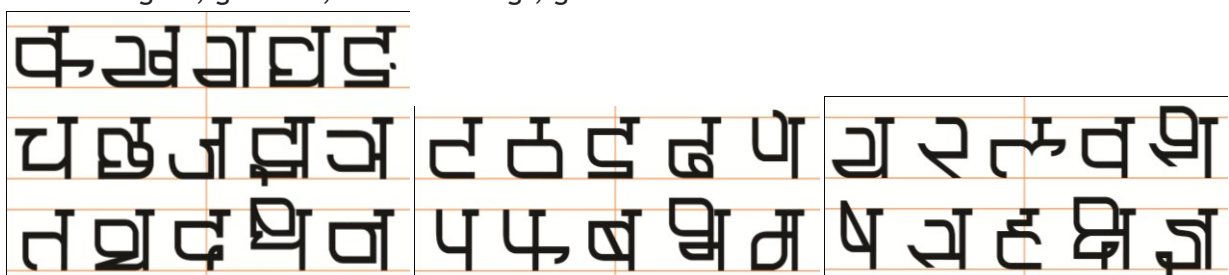


Figure 3. Devanāgarī alphabets based on moods of rāgā Yaman. Designed by: Ms. Namrata Bhagat.



5.2 **Kannada script** was chosen for Carnatic music. Carnatic music has its origin from the south, predominantly from the state of Karnataka. It is the base for many rāgās; and has been primarily played during classical dance performances. One of the traditional fabric art forms from Karnataka is ‘Kashida kaari’. The letterforms designed thus, were curvaceous like the music and were designed using the ‘Kashida kaari’ threadwork skills.

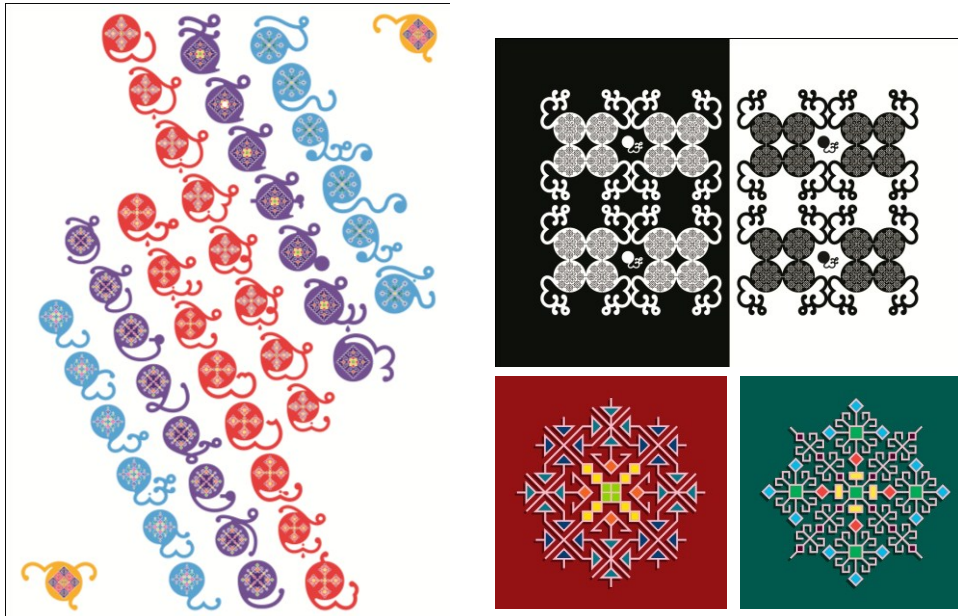


Figure 4. Kannada letterforms, patterns based on ‘Kashida kaari’. Designed by: Ms. Aneri Patel.

5.3 **Gujarati script** was selected for Basant rāgā. Chirping of birds marks the onset of the Basant rutu (spring season), so the letterforms were designed using birds in various forms. As the rutu suggests, colors used were bright and plenty.



Figure 5. Gujarati alphabets depicting the rutu and rāgā Basant. Designed by: Ms. Sneha Matalia.

5.4 **Bengali script** was shortlisted for rāgā Kedar. A complex rāgā with twists and turns yet peaceful, playful and full of melody; Kedar has found inspiration in Bengali music and language too. Sung from late evening to midnight, rāgā Kedar is said to be named after Lord Shiva, thus giving the letterforms its design primitive.



Figure 6. Bengali letterforms depicting Lord Shiva. Designed by: Ms. Chinmayee Mukadam.

5.5 **Urdu** was attempted for rāgā Marwa. Known for its seductive mood, Marwa is a quiet, contemplative rāgā, representing subtle love. Expressed in many songs with Urdu dialect vocabulary, rāgā Marwa found itself expressed with a romantic smoky feel.



Figure 7. Urdu letterforms, patterns inspired by smoke. Designed by: Ms. Hridya Velandy.

## 6. Observations

There were certain advantages of planning the assignment in a pre-final year (third year) lettering and typography class.

A few observations made after completion of the project indicated:

6.1 Adapting from a 'Visual' primitive and referring to it for a new design is less complex as compared to adapting from an 'Audio' primitive. Shortlisting an Indian script and identifying a style for designing the letterforms was quite some tough challenge for all the fourteen students.

6.2 The restriction of designing letterforms for an Indian Script made the student learn (read, write, understand) a language other than their mother tongue. Through the course of project, a 'Gujarati ben' started writing the Kannada script, and a 'Malayali lady' wrote in Urdu!

- a. The amateur typeface designers attempted to design the 'Visual' form of the respective chosen Indian script.
- b. They explored the design of letterforms, understood the grid, construction, skeleton, flesh, negative-positive spacing and form composition.
- c. They attempted to design Indian scripts with their respective uniqueness and legibility.
- d. They have not mastered the language, neither the script. But most certainly, every amateur has thought 'out-of-the-box' without any existing graphic reference.

6.3 These Indian languages otherwise 'obsolete' in this next generation's lives became a friendly, civilized, comfortable language and script in the end. The project brought to light a fact to the students that - Indian script, language, art, culture, design is at par (at times above) on the global scenario.

6.4 With so many ready to use digital fonts in the Latin script, this project let the students explore their design perimeters in a musical manner and taught them to design their own letterforms with Indian references.

6.5 The project also removed the inhibitions many students have about doing 'hand work' as compared to digital work and made them play (literally) with the forms.

## 7. Conclusion

The process of learning with Indian scripts and typography, created a balance of theory and practical. The experimental results acquired were accidental at times, surprising many a times, but explorative all the times!



The project featured in the paper can serve as a good teaching aid and inspiration for amateur type designers as well as contemporary lettering and typography educators who are interested in exploring the Indian scripts.

The vagueness of selecting a design primitive from Indian context created interest in the entire studying process. Students today are more aware of the western culture and tend to overlook the abundant treasure called 'India'. By end of the project, the entire class (all fourteen students) was confidently talking about Indian languages, scripts and classical music. I am sure some of them continue to practice, design and even listen to it today!

### **Acknowledgement:**

I thank immensely, the entire batch of Third year lettering and typography class (2015-2016); especially Aneri Patel, Chinmayee Mukadam, Hridya Velandy, Namrata Bhagat and Sneha Matalia for having shared their projects with the paper.

I would like to thank the entire Management of my esteemed institute, Rachana Sansad; and the Principal - College of Applied Art and Craft, where I teach, for always motivating, encouraging and allowing educators like me to experiment and conduct such innovative projects in class.

I extend a special thank you to my guru, Prof. Vinay Saynekar, ex. Teacher at the Sir J. J. Institute of Applied Art, Mumbai; for always being to me a friend - philosopher - guide and above all a great motivator.

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