

Typography and Education

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Without the past, there can be no future

Subtitle: If applicable.

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Abstract: Script, much as language in general, can be defined as a medium of communication, an instrument for transmitting knowledge. It embodies accumulated knowledge of humanity, each script and language being a unique window of experience. In the case of India, script has also been one of the factors in the foundation of the federal system. With linguistic states forming a union, the idea must have been to preserve and improve the regional identity of the people. After prolonged laxity towards our native scripts, we have reached a stage when there is much needed appreciation and exposure towards their significance. However, awareness has come at a time when the attack on the “non-modern” cultures has become a threat to their survival. And when a script dies, along with it dies knowledge and wisdom of generations.

Broadly speaking, ‘the “value” of a script has been determined by its potential to fulfill specific social, and ideological functions’ (Bachner,2014). In the modern context, a lot of other factors also influence this value such as the number of people using the script, the ease of learning, the expanse of resources available, the liberty of communication, understanding and transliteration to name a few. Many a scripts have faced this trail,

some of them manage to rise through the turbulence and others lose importance and fade away.

This paper introduces us to a fairly younger script in the Indian landscape, Gurmukhi. It does not target the reinvention of script as such, but rather is an attempt at changing the way in which we visualize its medial form. Distancing the script from its prevalent imagery of aesthetic and emphasizing on its contemporary usage, it aims to illustrate a marriage of progress and tradition and demonstrate the potential of our scripts.

Key words: Type and Culture, Gurmukhi Typography, Post-colonial influence, Type Design, Calligraphy

1. Introduction

In 1943, a renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow defined the hierarchy of five fundamental human needs, one of them being the need for ‘belonging’. Belonging introduces the tribal trait of humans. Community helps fulfil this need for companionship and acceptance, as does involvement in social and cultural groups. It is this pursuit for sense of identity, we often categorize ourselves in terms of script, language and cultural groups. However, in recent times there have been increasing number of culturally ‘displaced’ people. Post-colonial Guyanese poet Grace Nicholas resonates her feelings of being ‘betwixt & between’ in ‘the Arrivants’:

To tell you de truth
I don't really know where I belong
Yes divided to the ocean
Divided to the bone
Wherever I hang my knickers- that's my home.

This obstacle of not relating to any culture often makes us ignorant towards them. As designers, it is fundamental for us to be sensitive towards the vernacular cultures with which we communicate. Culture, “a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the ordinary past”(Bhabha, 1991) is the core essence which defines and distinguishes us.

This paper attempts to elaborate the role of culture in the reception and creation of typography. It presents research, experiments and explorations with and for Gurmukhi.

2. Cultural Identity

The Oxford dictionary of Media and Communication defines cultural identity as “The definition of groups or individuals (by themselves or others) in terms of cultural or subcultural categories (including ethnicity, nationality, language, region, religion, and gender).” When a person identifies with their culture, they often embrace traditions that have been passed down for years. The cultural identity that relates to a person’s heritage helps them to identify with others who have the same traditions and basic belief system and hence evokes a sense of belonging and oneness.

“Script alone invokes national allegiances, religious affiliations and different histories. Such extra linguistic context powerfully differentiates the combination of linguistic elements used, even in what linguistics might describe as similar or identical languages” (Lo Bianco, Joseph, 2004).

In recent times, there has been a constant flow of people towards western culture and lifestyle, frequently shunning their native language in favor of English. What led to the negative appraisal and disregard towards our regional scripts?

This change is mostly traced to the British colonisation and dominion. On paper, colonialism ended with the formal political freedom, however its sources lie deep in the minds of the ruled. It is an indigenous process that inhabits the very foundation of the new society. This colonialism colonized minds in addition to bodies within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In this process it generalized the idea of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and minds.

However, that which begins in the minds of men must also end in the minds of men. The recent years have been optimistic for vernacular scripts. With the growth in multilingual branding and advertising, the cropping of regional type foundries and varied fonts in scripts apart from Latin, and the expansion of media to rural and far flung regions. It is crucial for designers and enthusiasts from various multilingual ecologies to act towards preserving and promoting the script, linguistic and cultural heritage.

In the case of Punjab, the conception of a cultural heritage and identity was a difficult process. The region of Punjab covers the regions of India and Pakistan, and because of its location it suffered numerous cultural, religious and ethnic attacks. Punjab became a region of mixed culture and beliefs, a region without a strong sense of identity. It was not until the beginning of 16th century when the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev shared his beliefs and attracted thousand of followers. Guru Angad, Guru Nanak's successor standardised the Gurmukhi script. The official language of the region, Punjabi language is mostly written with Gurmukhi script. The script slowly became an identity for the Sikh faith and that of the region of Punjab to an extent where it is often termed as Punjabi script causing the words to be synonyms for the regular natives. It gained an identity through a script which it certainly lacked in older times.



Figure 1: Punjab region split by the partition between India and Pakistan

3. Gurmukhi, the script of the people: With the objective of permeating the Guru's word, Gurmukhi (from the word "Gurumukhi" meaning 'from the mouth of the Guru') was standardized by the second Sikh guru, Guru Angad Dev in the 16th century. It is mainly used for writing Punjabi language and also goes by the name 'painti-akhri' (ਪੈਂਤੀ ਅਖਰੀ) for the basic character set of 35. There are various speculations about the history and origin of the script. One of the more prominent works, *Gurmukhi Lipi da Janam te Vikas* by G.B. Singh states that the script evolved from Ardhnagari. Pritam Singh, in his article "Gurmukhi Lipi." in *Khoj Patrika* traced the origin of Gurmukhi from Siddha Matrika.

On the basis of the research done regarding the origins of the script, most routes take it to Sharda which was used in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh upto 13th century AD and was then replaced by Devasesa also famous as Takari.

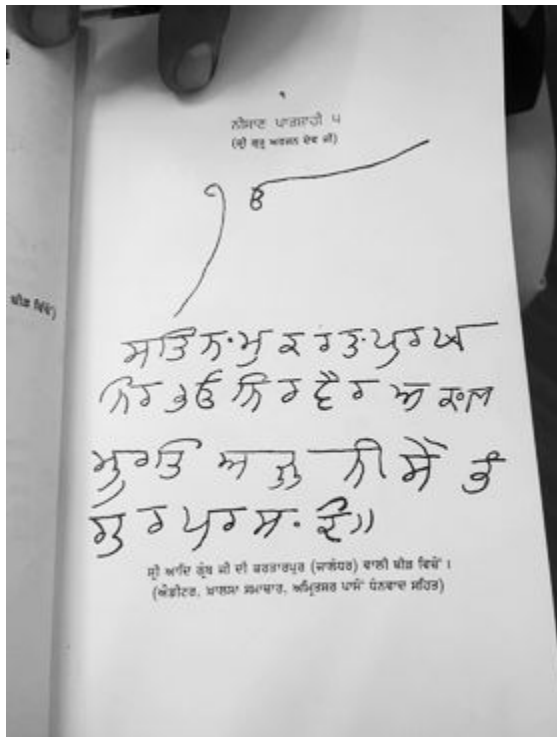


Figure 2: The first draft of Gurmukhi written by Guru Angad Dev Ji

Characters in Gurmukhi like the ka, ja, na, ya, la, va and ha have shown some peculiar developments but on the whole the ancient forms have been preserved. According to Grierson’s, Linguistic Survey of India, the true alphabet of Punjabi was Landa. However the Landa system did not have vowel symbols. Guru Angad found the Sikh hymns written in this form were liable to be misread. He accordingly borrowed signs from other prominent scripts, majorly Devanagari and polished letterforms, thus giving rise to Gurmukhi.

The purpose of the script was to render the precise sounds of the spoken language, making it possible to record the religious teachings of Guru Nanak. A peculiar characteristic of the script derived from the same purpose is the absence of conjuncts or the existence of only 3 half characters. When out of curiosity I asked various linguistics working on Punjabi about the same and the problems in transliteration, there answers were very simple and surprising. During a conversation with the linguistic head of Punjabi Department, Dr Suman Preet from Punjabi University in Patiala, I asked how would they write “सर्व” or “next

(ਨੇਕਸਟ)” in Gurmukhi, she replied assuredly saying the people historically never used to pronounce half forms, that is why the script did not provide half forms for most characters and that is what gives it the necessary ‘Punjabiness’, so it would simply be “ਸਰਵ” and “ਨੇਕਸਟ”. This elementary yet astounding revelation was beautiful.

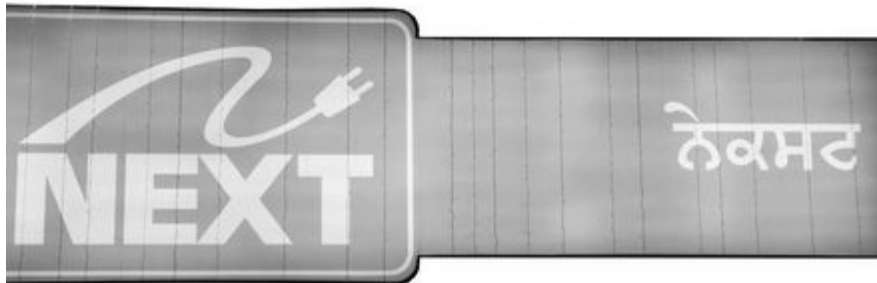


Figure 2: Example of transliteration from a sign board in Patiala, Punjab

3.1 Manuscripts: During the research of the script, manuscripts from various regions in Punjab were referred. I got the opportunity to confer with calligraphers, hand lettering artists and linguists and lookup manuscript as old as the 17th-18th century at the Sikh Reference Library in Amritsar, personal collection of Sardar Hardeep Singh and Manuscript Section in the library of Punjabi University, Patiala. The manuscripts vary immensely in size, format and style with few of them being extremely decorative and elaborate. A wide variety of hands were also visible with two prominent ones: one being a loosely written cursive hand showcasing a sense of flow and speed, the other one being a more formal version with defined forms and proportions shows more control, care, high density of color and a heavy overall texture. The handwritten manuscripts had clear entry and exit strokes, a feature that is often not visible in the printed Gurmukhi characters.

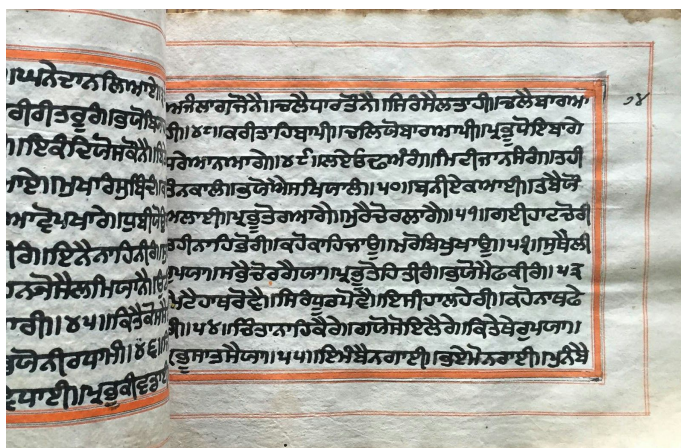


Figure 3(top): Gurmukhi Manuscripts in the formal calligraphic style and larrivar format from Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab



Figure 4(right): Page from the B40 Janamsakhi Manuscript, ca 1733, British Library, Oriental and Indian Office Collection

The manuscripts also show influence of style in terms of the elaborate borders and patterns which have been a characteristic feature of Persian writing. However, the floral patterns in Gurmukhi were softer in contrast to the sharper and crisper Persian counterparts.

3.2 Tools: There have been many speculations regarding the tools used to write Gurmukhi but there is not strong evidence to support any of them. Tools have been sometimes specified for other Indian script. The reed pen for Devanagari is mentioned numerous times along with the directions to prepare and use it. But there have been no publication regarding the pen used for writing Gurmukhi traditionally. However, the process for the preparation of the ink has been described in detail in a 18th century manuscript of Guru Granth Sahib.

ਸਿਆਹੀ ਕੀ ਬਿਧਿ ॥

ੴ ਸਿਰ ਸਾਹੀ ਕਜਲੁ ਵਜਨਾ ॥੧॥ ਬੋਲੁ ॥੨॥ ਗੂਦੁ ਕਿਕਰਿ ਕਾ ॥ ਇਕ ਰਤੀ ਲਾਜ
ਵਰ ॥ ਇਕ ਰਤੀ ਸੁਇਨਾ ॥ ਬਿਸੇਸਾਰ ਕਾ ਪਾਈ ॥ ਤਾਮੇ ਕਾ ਭਾਡਾ ॥ ਨਿੰਮੁ ਕੀ ਲਕੜੀ ॥
ਦੂਰ ਕਾ ਕਜਲੁ ॥ ਦਿਨਿ ਵੀਹ ਘਸਈ ॥ ਰਵਾਲ ਰਖਈ ॥

Technique to Make Ink

Grind one head of kajjal (black antimony sulphide). 1. Utter. 2. Gum of Acacia tree. One ratti (small measurement=0.12 grams) purple colour.

One ratti (0.12 grams) gold. Water of tumeric. In a copper pot. Bark of Nim tree (Melia azadirachta).

Black sulphide of antimony from afar. Grind for 20 days. Keep in a tight box.

It is often assumed that the traditional tool for writing was the reed pen, yet the nib must have been cut straight-across or at the blunt angle as there is significant difference in the stroke contrast between Devanagari and Gurmukhi characters. Also, a lot of manuscripts show variety in terms of the angle. There have been sightings of both left-canted and right-canted angle for writing because of cultural influences from Devanagari(right-canted) and Persian(left-canted) script. The cultural influence on Punjab has been beautifully translated in the look of the script as well. However, with time, Gurmukhi has become more distinct and has developed characteristics of its own.

It has been important to investigate Gurmukhi's traditional form to decipher the features of the script to further explore and experiment with its contemporary form.

4. Exploring Mediality: To our imagination, writing doesn't exist as an abstraction, but in the form of fonts, typographies, calligraphy styles and their material carriers: books, manuscripts, scrolls, murals, or computer screens. To understand mediality is also of prime importance to develop an understanding of the script. Since Marshall McLuhan has clearly put, "Medium is the Message", it is hard to ignore the connections between the content and the carrier.

Holding on to the knowledge and revelations from old scriptures, wood and metal cut type, and the current digital typefaces, Gurmukhi was explored in different forms of type.

4.1 Calligraphy: Starting with the reason for the script's inception, first undertaking was Gurbani Calligraphy. Gurbani calligraphy, or the art of writing Gurbani was once revered as something of high value by members of Sikh community. Followers of the faith took it upon themselves to write their own granthis, gutkas and pothis. The art of calligraphy was considered to be a spiritual journey and was followed with great dedication and care. The following verse from Guru Granth Sahib narrates truly how blessed one is who not only signs and listens, but also scribes Gurbani.

ਕਹਤੇ ਪਵਿਤ੍ਰ ਸੁਣਤੇ ਸਭਿ ਪੰਨੁ ਲਿਖਤੀ ਕੁਲੁ ਤਾਰਿਆ ਜੀਉ ॥

Those who chant are sanctified. All those who listen are blessed, and those who write save their ancestors.

Traditionally, Gurmukhi was written using the Larrivar format. It was only after the introduction of printing press that the words in Guru Granth Sahib were separated. The "pad-ched" or separation was also done to make reading easier as the new generations were not able to correctly follow up text in the old format. The art of calligraphy in Gurmukhi was considered to be an important part of the culture and tradition. Followers of the faith who could not write their own scriptures used to commission scribes and some scribes used to write them without taking payment as a form of a religious offering.

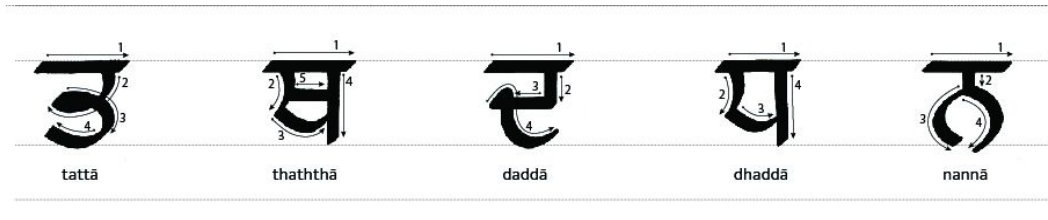


Figure 5: Consonants from Gurmukhi Calligraphy Manual

The formal Gurmukhi calligraphy inspired by the manuscripts was undertaken to create a basic calligraphic manual by Aksharaya.

Three versions of manual were done to revise it over and over. It was challenging to get away from the Devanagari eyes and appreciate the Gurmukhi proportions. Also selecting the tool was crucial due to lack of information regarding the tool used. The dense texture of Gurmukhi manuscripts and the character flow was difficult to replicate in the calligraphy. A variety of tools were explored including the Left-canted and Right-canted fountain pen, the round nib, straight nib and chisel marker to analyze the look and feel of the script.

The manual was then taken to Punjab for feedback from calligraphers and linguists and changes were incorporated accordingly. The latest draft was then created on the basis of the feedback with a right canted tip at an angle of 40° - 45°.

The manual serves as a medium to help enthusiasts learn the basic formal Gurmukhi calligraphy with simple steps. It also gives the information regarding stroke order, the tool and nomenclature of Gurmukhi characters and symbols.

4.2 Lettering Exploration: Once the individuality of each character is appreciated, more prospects start getting into sight. Lettering, being a tool to enunciate the love for letters was executed along the way. It gave an insight to how fine the script could look, if worked upon with utmost love and passion.

Condensing and adorning, an assorted range of explorations were rendered to increase the amplitude of ways in which one can foresee the script. Inspiration was taken from the contemporary and traditional designs as a part of the experimentation with the character structures.



Figure 6: (Left) Truck lettering artists from Patiala, Punjab (Right) Hand painter in Patiala, Punjab

To look at characters as not just shapes and forms, but as expressions in their own and to depict them in different styles and through different mediums.

4.3 Typeface Design:

‘...writing being the medium by which our letters have been evolved, the use of pen – essentially the letter making tool tool – gives a practical insight into the construction of letters attainable in no other way.’

Baloo Paaaji, the Gurmukhi fragment of the Baloo series by EkType foundry was the next experiment of medium. Designing a heavy display typeface and keeping the ‘Gurmukhiness’ intact was a demanding project. The calligraphic base helped in getting started with the typeface, but as the project advanced, other problems acquired attention. Exploring the ‘vector’ Gurmukhi on screen and discerning the beauty of the script revealed to plentiful possibilities and confidence in terms of the typefaces that can be designed in future.

ਸਤ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਪਾਜੀ!

Figure 5: Sat-Sri-Akal in Baloo Paaaji

Gurmukhi typefaces have been designed by various designers in the past, however, there has been limited play and exploration in comparison to various other scripts. Being a fairly younger script, Gurmukhi still hasn't sprouted and flourished to its capabilities. During an interview Dr Gurpreet Singh Lehal, director of the Advanced Centre for Technical Development of Punjabi Language Literature and Culture, raised concerns regarding the shortage of Unicode compliant fonts for Gurmukhi and a dire need of aesthetic fonts to sustain and popularize Gurmukhi in this digital age.

5. The Gurmukhi Challenge: Without the necessary knowledge of the script, one can be somewhat ignorant in assuming that many North Indian scripts look alike. But detailed analysis highlights their difference both in form and sound. Gurmukhi, often regarded as one of the “easier” Indic scripts had its own complexity and challenges.

The script is sometimes looked upon as a ‘devanagari-like’ script as there are existing forms with bear resemblance, if not identical, to those in Gurmukhi and due to the overlapping geographical location. Despite this both scripts are fairly different in several aspects of fundamental organisation. Even a description by *Monotype* which sits alongside their Gurmukhi digital fonts explains that ‘the shapes of its characters are heavily influenced by Devanagari; the resemblance even extends to the horizontal joining bar which typifies Devanagari’. Whereas, from the research and conversations with professors, Punjabi linguistic department and the Advanced Centre for Technical Development of Punjabi Language Literature and Culture and according to the Linguistic Survey of India by Grierson, it was discovered that Gurmukhi is influenced by Sharda script through Landa. Landa was used for writing Punjabi language before the existence of Gurmukhi.



Figure 7: Similarities between Gurmukhi and Devanagari scripts. From left to right, Row 1: Gurmukhi Pha, Tta, Ttha and Dha; Row 2: Devanagari Ddha, Tta, Ttha and Pa.

Designers often jumble the characteristics and script grammar of Gurmukhi and make it look like other scripts. Experimentation is much needed and appreciated, per contra, there is a lack of independent exploration and stylisation of the script. It was personally challenging to move from the Devanagari mindset and understand the script grammar of Gurmukhi. Although a lot of research has been done regarding the history of the script, explorations were scanty when it comes to the design and typefaces. In the simplicity lies the challenge of revitalising the script and opportunity to flourish.

6. Conclusions: Identity “is not a fixed essence.... It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return. Of course it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something*- not a mere trick of imagination.” (Hall, 1990) The objective of my work was to delve into that ‘something’, discover the issues and work towards providing solutions and contribute towards the development and the script in this digital age. It also, in many ways, involves connecting and collecting the knowledge and exquisiteness of the historic versions of Gurmukhi and preserve it for the upcoming designers, linguists, enthusiasts.

It took me a while to absorb and appreciate the eminence of regional script and its psychological and philosophical importance. The learning of Gurmukhi planted a feeling of being a part of something, a feeling that never existed. The paper has been a short journey activated by personal sentiments. A script once unacquainted to me, made me acquainted of the purpose that I was missing.

"What the eye is to the lover- the particular ordinary eye he or she is born with - language - whatever language history has made his or her mother tongue - is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures are dreamed" (Anderson, 1983)

The efforts towards Gurmukhi are just at the infant phase, but will only progress and proliferate. It is necessary to appreciate the old but equally imperative to explore and create new traditions. The objective of the work and the paper is to embark on a ‘tradition of reinterpretation of traditions to create new traditions’.

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