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Designing Monograms in Multi-lingual Scripts
Creating an India-centric designer brand Monograms fusing Latin and Indian fonts

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25**Abstract:** Ever since I started teaching design, I have always wondered why we don't really have an Indian Identity in terms of bi-lingual monograms as Designer Labels.. Most fashion labels and Designer labels have elegant monograms using primarily Latin alphabets and I set upon working with my design students upon designing bi-lingual monograms that could be used as tags / labels to distinguish their work, from that of their peers. This paper is on how I have been successfully inculcating design students to explore Bi-lingual Monograms with initials using Latin Fonts and that of the scripts of their mother tongues of the students and try to integrate the two into a new approach towards personal branding. The results have been interesting and could start a new trend in Design Identity and labeling. A few students have even done their initial collections with this on their tags or labels and graphic design students have developed and integrated it with the initial foray into the local design space, integrating these monograms with the names of their Design Studios, as the pictorial element.

Key words: Bilingual, Monograms, Personal Branding, Visual vs Phonetic, Indian Language Typefaces, Hand Lettering, Fashion Tags, Developing Indian Brand Identities, Exploring Brand tags and material exploration, Mother Tongue, Latin and Indian Type fonts, language script heritage.

Introduction

In the world of Fashion and Design communication, Designer logos for a long time in the post war era have been iconised by brands which are heralded with initials of designers, primarily through monograms using the Latin Alphabet and type forms.

But another curious incident had triggered another train of thought that had always intrigued me and now that I am into education, the art of possibility of exploring this avenue arose. The incident was – while interning at a design studio at Auroville as a student from NID; Amedabad, I was asked by the many European designers there as to why

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there wasn't yet a unique "INDIAN Design Visual Sensibility" considering the many languages, their accompanying scripts and typefaces and of course the enormously rich visual culture. The countries of the Far East too had come into their own with their own visual cultures and even contemporized it, then why were we Indians still so western in our approach to our visual culture.

They noted that when in Europe, you go to any of the countries and you could identify quite distinctly where you were based on the unique visual culture and approach to communication and graphic media. As students we were queried as to the possibility of creating our own unique Indian graphic identity, across graphic media. This was in 1984, around the time that computer as a tool had just about started to enter the Asian and world markets. The Apple Macintosh with its workable font library, colour monitor and the library of fine fonts and some in the Indian languages too had been launched.

That thought of creating that Unique Indian Identity that would be Indian in ethos as well as international in appeal stayed at the back of my ever since, waiting for an opportunity to apply in the right context.

Finding the Context for the Exploration

While studying in detail the Designer and Brand labels, I chanced upon some of the Contemporary Oriental logos which had a distinctive look regional yet international look.

Figure.1 LeEco Logo along side Chinese Picto-form typography

Figure.2 Jeanne Sun Photography Logo along side Chinese Picto-form typography

I was curious as to how the language and the usage of monograms as Designer icons first came into place. While researching on the same, I came upon the fact that artists, craftsman and printmakers from the 15 century onwards, during the Renaissance period has started with this practice, among the earliest being the woodcut print maker Albrecht Durer. I gathered than the practice got adapted by the designers in the postwar era, and it got popular to use initials of the designers names to create designer monograms that could be used for the brand publicity, and being compact could be used on lapels, cuffs, collars and other product usages that could in turn reinforce the designer's identity.

Being a Design educator who is constantly looking at new ways to co-create with students at looking at new personal and brand identity forms, with the ambit of type play and type based identity, I figured that creating a unique identity using the rich range of Indic language scripts in combination with the Latin alphabets could be a new way at looking at building a new Indian oriented Designer identity.

Here is a map that indicates the rich plethora of languages with the accompanying scripts within South Asia, each state being inscribed in the language script of that state.

Figure.3 South Asian Countries and States inscribed in the language written within that state

A Bi-Lingual and Tri-Lingual Environment : The Indian Language Identity

In India, with its 29 states and with 22 other languages with their scripts and typography recognized as official by the Indian Govt in the 8th Schedule, along with English and Hindi as the two main languages of communication pan India, language is very much part of every Indian individuals' identity.

It is common to see Bi-Lingual and Tri-lingual signage, shop signs and such state to state and that leads to a very rich typographic culture and does give each state in India its identity. But in the education system its common to have education either in the mother tongue, or the dominant language of the state along with English, which uses Latin typography.

Indian Designers have resorted to using English type fonts that have a "matra" stroke on top to denote an Indian fusion typographical look, but this has been done since the 1960's and now is a rather dated look.

Figure.4 English Latin Font with Indian script overtones

Even though there have been sporadic explorations with bi-lingual type play, as this example that showed up on Behance – the online designer portfolio platform by a young designer – Grishma Shah, where she has created an Indian fusion identity, using the counters of the Indian fonts and the Latin fonts to best advantage, to create a graphic identity for budding Indian photographers.

Figure.5 Bi-Lingual Logo for PhotoKatha

Not much else has been explored by way of personal branding or designer monograms. The basic context of this exercise was also the reinforce not only a pan- Indian identity, but the reasoning to fuse it with English Latin Alphabets was to see if we could develop a indo-global identity system that has its linguistic and typographical roots in India, and its rich linguistic and language script heritage.

The Classroom Exercises on Bi-lIngual Monograms: Batch 1

In 2009, when I had joined Pearl Academy of Fashion, Chennai I was given the task of conducting and mentoring the Foundation Level 0 students on Design Concepts. Part of the course was a two day input on typography. This was the opportunity I was waiting for. A short course input which could introduce type sensibilities, use existing Latin fonts used by the English language in combination with hand crafted language initials using the initials of the students name, in the script of their individual mother tongues.

The first briefing of the 1st batch of students that I worked with an overview lecture giving then examples of how popular and well known designer brands worldwide use the initials of the designers to build an unique identity for their labels. So as rookie designers to be, we were going to embark on a journey together to find a unique Indian identity through bilingual monograms.

The approach would be to pick the 1st letter of their names in English and that of their mother tongue, and look for suitable fonts online to see which font styles matched the look of the other. Sometimes the students would be advised to look for the fonts in early learner alphabet books of their mother tongues, if they did not find an appropriate reference on the web, by searching with search engines. The initial combinations of the graphemes of the initials with their overlaps to make an appropriate monogram would be done by hand. A lot of iterations and combinations of typw fusion and overlaps were tried

this way. While working with the initials in their mother tongues some the Phonemes of the initials meant something adverse, so the students worked on the arrange the initials differently as in the case shown below, where the devanagari font for "nah" and "lah" followed one after another would mean "null", which has a negative meaning in both Hindi and English. So even though the sequence wouldn't be in consecutive as in her name, the student tried her best to integrate the same without any negative connotations coming out for what was to be her personal branding for at least 3 semesters, if not throughout her academic course at Design college.

As this exercise was in its initial stages the integrating of the Latin initials with the Indian language script initials were very challenging, yet I must say the students were up to it and they came up with some very good ideations, especially so as it was only a 2 day input over 2 weeks. The students finished the hand crafted logos using Corel Draw, using vector tools to craft the same, in the parallel Computer skills classes.

The results were very encouraging, as you can see with some of the samples attached below.

Figure.6 Preethi Singaravelu Bi-Lingual Monogram

Figure.7 Palak Jain Bi-Lingual Monogram

Figure.8 Ruchi Jaipuria Bi-Lingual Monogram

The following year, after having learnt from the many interpretations of the 1st batch, the integrations were tried out without any overt graphic embellishments, patterns and texturing on the Latin and Indian language fonts as the earlier batch had done and so the emphasis was now on the use of monochrome or bi-colour effects to try to give it a new area of exploration and see how the students took up to this new challenge.

Here are some of the examples of way this batch of Foundation Design students at Pearl Academy took to integrating the Bi-lingual fonts to create identities of their own. As these were also to be used as tags to be attached to their work and their garments, the integration of their expanded full names were also tried out this time.

Here are the results of this 2nd iteration of this exercise.

Figure.9 Khushboo Thadani Bi-Lingual Monogram

Figure.10 Shivangi Vashishtha Bi-Lingual Monogram

Figure.11 Gaurav Prajapati Bi-Lingual Monogram

The 3rd attempt of this exercise was tried out at the Sushant School of Design, Gurgaon, where I currently am. Here I was working with final year students of Graphic Design.

Here the brief was slightly different and perhaps evolved to another level of exploration. The brief given to these students was that in the crowded Indian / International marketplace where budding young talent abounds, how would they in the months to come build a personal studio and accompanying identity, and could they develop a bi-lingual monogram of their initials that could be incorporated and integrated with the names of their freelance studio identity. The possibility of using design elements to enhance the fusion of the fonts along with the studio name, presented its possibility.

As this work was very recent I can show the entire development cycle that two of a batch of 7 students explored, and how it was finally applied to the basic elements of their personal stationery.

Surbhi Kalra of 7th semester SSD VisComm, her exploration was how best she could integrate the Latin and Indic graphenes into a form that flowed. And that did not look stilted or jerky. They were allowed to integrate the graphenes of the two fonts in anyway that aided the visual integration and aesthetics. Her explorations were initially in black and white, but it's her final colour palette explorations that brought life to the logo.

Figure.12 Sourcing the elements, the initials of Surbhi Kalra
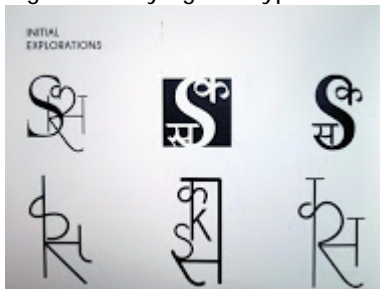

Figure.13 Trying out type forms

Figure.14 Integration of the Bi-lingual type forms of S & K

Figure.15 Final Integration, using layers

Figure.16 Semi- Final Colour Sampling

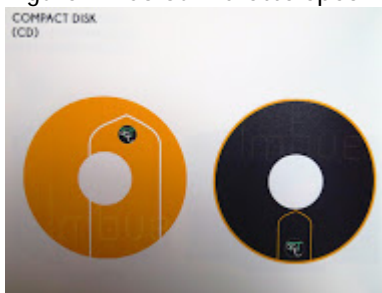Figure.17 Colour Palette Specifications and exploration with ground

Figure.18 Application on various surfaces of Portfolio

With Tanya Mittal, a student of the 7TH semester at SSD VisComm, the challenges were different. During her explorations she wanted to incorporate an element of paper-craft and paper folding into the overall look of the monogram, other than the fact that it integrated the graphenes from Latin Typefaces and Indic Typefaces – namely Devnagari. The triangular elements on top of her bi-lingual monogram were added later to give the crowning look to her personal studio brand name Tiana.

Figure.19 Final Ideation of Bi-Lingual Monogram of Taanya Mittal

Figure.20 Bi-Lingual Monogram of Taanya Mittal

Figure.21 Bi-Lingual Monogram of Taanya Mittal applied to stationery

Figure.22 Bi-Lingual Monogram of Taanya Mittal applied to stationery

While Surbhi Kalra chose to use her bi-lingual monogram as an element in her personal studio identity and stationery, Taanya Mittal chose to make it the prime element in hers.

These students of the VisComm course at Sushant School of Design had about 6 weeks to work and fine tune their bi-lingual monograms for their final portfolio and future studio look, and as you can see their explorations are far more in depth and evolved that that of the earlier batches of students.

Conclusions

These are still early days yet in this realm of exploring a new India International bi-lingual identity. I have not yet seen any similar work yet being explored in the academic course content anywhere else, but am sure am onto something worthwhile in creating a new Indian designer identity system. A new arena of type fusion and amalgamation at play.

I thought it would be appropriate to present this exploration to fellow practitioners and educators in this august audience, to stalwarts in the field of Typographic design education.

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