



Typographic Dialogues: Local-Global

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Assimilation of Cultural Conscious Type Art and Type Design of India.

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Abstract: India is an amalgamation of various cultures which include different languages and customs. The visual landscape in India is filled with individualistic, expressive typography which can be intricately woven with the culture. There is a rising dominance of typography which can be observed across the globe and its usage has extended far beyond simply narrating information. Devanagari lipi is one of the most widely used and comprehended scripts for communication in India and has a more complex design. In India, some designers are working towards the globalisation of culturally infused Indian-ness in broadly two areas- type art and type design. Today, a few type foundries are trying to generate Indic scripts digitally for global purposes along with them are some artists who are continuing to work towards the “culture conscious type art/design”. Type art is referred to as the impact and aesthetic behind the particular visual art, unlike type design where the main concern is the structure and meaning of the type. This paper elucidates a few case studies conducted for assimilating visual cues of Indian Culture in typography on a local-global scenario by analysing certain work projects using the “Don Norman’s - Three levels of Design”. Based on this method I will be analysing various types of type artists and type designers who have made a mark and are an inspiration for upcoming typography aspirants. These case studies will assist in getting insightful information on the local-global typographic development in the context of the culture of India.

Key words: Typography, Calligraphy, Indian Culture, Devanagari, Visual Culture, Type Art, Type Design, Levels of Design, Globalisation, Localisation.

1. Introduction

This paper expands on a few case studies conducted for assimilating visual cues of Indian Culture (Indianness) in typography on a local-global scenario. I have always been fascinated by the way we get culturally influenced while we perform the smallest of our day to day activities, being born in a country with such a rich cultural heritage it has helped me get an in-depth understanding of how interconnected culture and communication is in terms of typography. Inspired by this, I chose to write a paper on how culture influences typography and to observe this relationship of being 'culture conscious' and celebrating the Indian-ness on a global scale in the field of typography. With the rising dominance of typography across the globe and with a wide range of media from print, digital to space design. Its usage has extended far beyond over just narrating information. The public domain of typography is carrying out numerous possibilities on a global level. Extending this observation and analysis with Indian context, experiments in making public domain typographic practice visually interesting and functional enough, is happening with mere possibilities.¹ Leading to our main topic which is - Typographic Dialogue: Local-Global in context of culture. Local is something that is related to a particular region/part whereas global is relating the whole world, therefore, we can draw that - Localisation is building through similarities and Globalisation is laying emphasis on variations/differences. Hence taking culture as a base to connect local development in typography i.e Devanagari in this context and further expanding it to the global growth of Devanagari. I will be referring to different types of work done in type art and type design by some of the people working towards the 'culture conscious typography' and are actively taking part in portraying the local Indian cultural through devanagari to the global audience through their respective fields of work in various methods. Expanding on how does Art differs from Design? (esp. in terms of type art and type design)

“Design is not Art. Design Has to Function”

Art is a great outlet for provoking thoughts, insights and emotions. Artists produce visually appealing visuals and are used for visual stimulation as decoration/storytelling.² Whereas design is a more methodological and data-driven process, where they produce images as a form of communication. Design solution helps in getting the design to fruition. Therefore, concluding the type art and type design are the two broad categories under which the explorations/work can be done. Art has more freedom than Design does. Therefore opening more windows to explore and experiment. It has been argued that the difference

between fine arts and graphic design is context and has more to do value judgements made about the work itself than any indisputable distinction between the two disciplines. These boundaries always keep changing and are constantly pushed. This debate, after all, is timeless.

2. Method

Don Norman proposes the interconnected levels of the emotional system which influences our experience of the world in a particular way. The three levels are visceral, behavioural, and reflective which can be associated with the understanding of the visual study. The visceral level is responsible for the ingrained, automatic and almost animalistic qualities of human emotion, which are almost entirely out of our control. The behavioural level refers to the controlled aspects of human action, where we unconsciously analyse a situation so as to develop goal-directed strategies most likely to prove effective in the shortest time, or with the fewest actions, possible. The reflective level is, as Don Norman states, "...the home of reflection, of conscious thought, of learning of new concepts and generalisations about the world".³

In addition to the above explanation, I would like to infer how these levels are also applicable in visual design study -

Visceral Design is about concerning itself with perceptible qualities i.e appearances. It deals with the visual appeal, intangibility aspect, aesthetics and impact which can be subjective in nature. The most commonly understood aspect of visual design is visceral things that make you look pretty.⁴ The visceral level works instinctively, and both our personality and cultural values can influence how we perceive something. Reactions to the visceral level of design are immediate and powerful.

Behavioural Design deals with the pleasure and effectiveness of the visual. It is a little beyond the look and feel of the visual and is often seen in terms of its usability. Behavioural design needs to be understandable and usable. Again, in behavioural design: 'after function comes understanding'.

Reflective Design is considered as the rationalisation and intellectualisation of a visual. It deals with the meaning, interpretation and extensive reasoning. This design deals with the structure, hardcore and more objective type visual design. The behavioural level relates to how the product works, and the reflective level relates to the long-term impact of the design. Combining these three levels in the right way, you can make a design.

Appealing (Attention, Influence, Perception)

Effective (What they are looking for)

Pleasurable (Appreciation)

Memorable(Positive meaning)

Usability (How usable the design is)

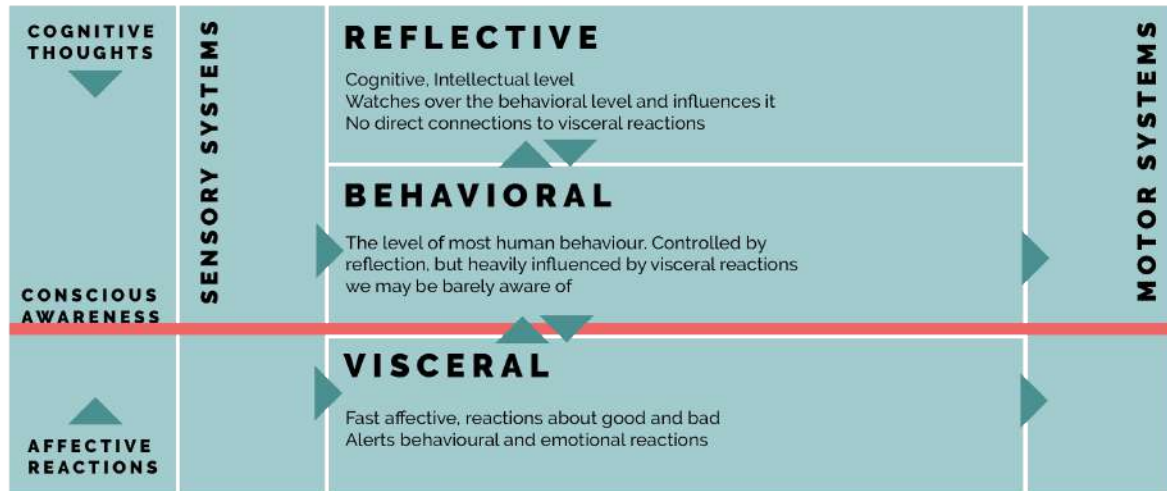


Figure 1 : Normans Three levels of Design

Every case study will be analysed through one of their bigger projects in which they have decided to preserve the culture through their research and work and then I will be drawing analysis from the same based on this method.



Figure 2 : Nikheel Aphale

3. Case Study 1 - Nikheel Aphale

“Devanagari is my muse. I am in love with its forms and I think they are unexplored as an art form. From birth, I was exposed to its sound and visuals and this has created a great comfort bond with my muse!”⁵ Nikheel was born in Mumbai and obtained his bachelor’s degree from LS School of Applied Arts, Bandra, Mumbai. He further wanted to explore visual communication and completed his post-graduation from National Institute of Design.

He primarily lays emphasis on the abstraction of letterforms, using multiple mediums which further gets translated to different paintings, logos, mediums, etc. He is very passionate about calligraphy and quit his job because he wanted to dedicate all his

time in expanding the gamut for exploration in calligraphy. He also started a new venture - "Leehkin". Leehkin's main motive was to collaborate with different areas of design - Furniture, lighting, ceramics, etc. Nikheel has been locally as well as globally known for preserving the Indian culture using calligraphy and lettering.

A few examples of his work :



Figure 3 : "Kar Kari Kora Kar"

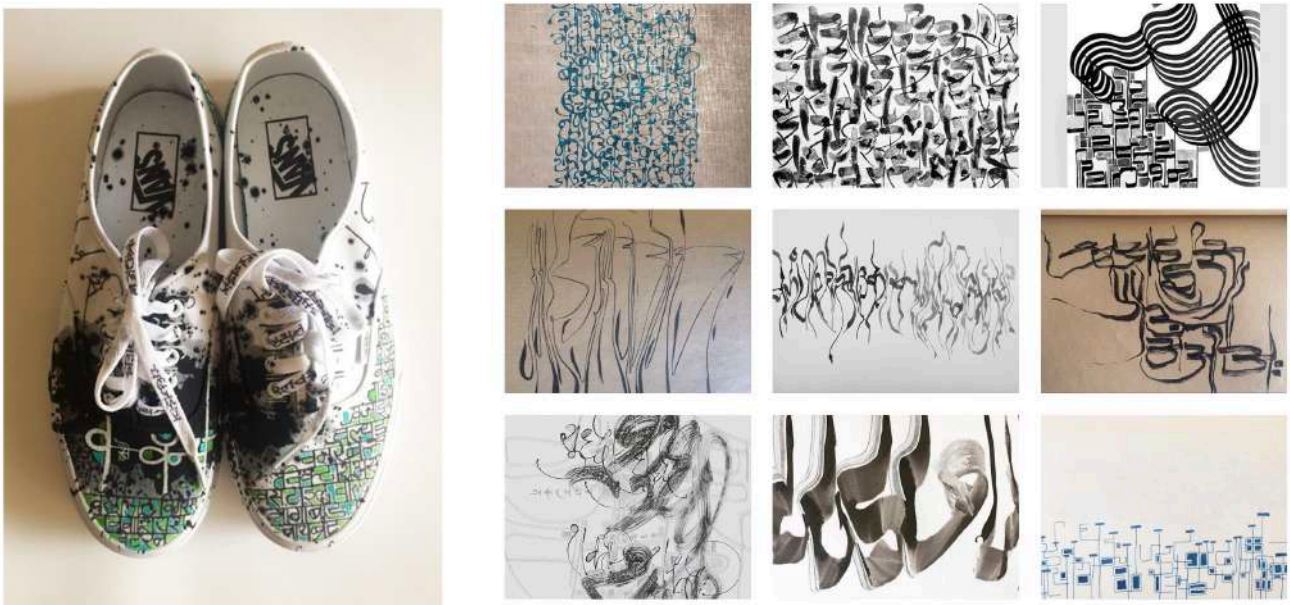


Figure 4,5 : Nikheel Aphale - Other artworks

3.1 Analysis



Nikheel's work speaks volumes of the Indian culture he grew up in. He has tried to draw inspiration from the culture around him - "I keep observing, grasping, mentally documenting the beauty of the forms of ancient scripts, manuscripts - also there is a lot to learn from trucks, shop signs and road signs; they are black books of Indian vernacular typography." His work varies from type art to lettering and logo design, especially in devanagari. His work is highly aesthetic and has a unique style. He is expanding his knowledge of type art and is translating it to the global nations by experimenting with different mediums and various fields.



Leekhin worked on a project called - "Kar Kari Kora Kaar" This artwork is an abstract interpretation of weavers' relation with their work. In Hindi, Kar means Hand, Kari means Craftsmanship, Kaar means Craftsmen and Kora means Raw cloth - they all come together and create magic.⁶

Figure 6 : Nikheel Aphale - "Kar Kari Kora Kar"

Visceral Aspect - The work is highly appealing and catches immediate attention. The white on white's subtle

variations define the very fine and soft connection between the weavers and their work. The lettering has comparatively less contrast which indicates an intricate relation. The different textures created by tufting describe the versatility of the craftsmen.

Behavioural Aspect - The artwork has an experiential aspect attached to it, where one can actually feel the textures created and interpret them. Since it is partly handmade you can experience the craftsman's finesse and love for his work.

Reflective Aspect - The lettering done is creatively handcrafted for this particular artwork which is easily readable and is expressing the right emotion through the visceral aspect of it.



Figure 7 : Sujata Bajaj

4. Case Study 2 - Sujata Bajaj

"There is an influence of both French and Indian art in my work. I use a lot of vibrant colours, but balance the colours with the texture."

Sujata was born in Jaipur, after schooling in her native place, she moved to Pune and joined the SNTD College for post-graduation in Fine Arts and Painting. She held her first show at the BalGandharva Art Gallery, Pune, in 1978. At one of her exhibitions somewhere in the mid-1980s, Sujata met painter S H Raza, who describes her as, "one of the best young talents around, someone who is very clear about her concepts in art." She further studied at Ecole Des Beaux (Paris) and is now settled between in France, Dubai and India. Most of her paintings are with different mediums, materials and methods along with variations and modifications of printmaking. Sujata always carried India with her and over the years, developed her style as "finding the balance between Indian aesthetics and modern painting". The surface elements for most of her work are handmade paper, cloth, strings woven together through lines and typically bold streaks, circles, triangles and text from Sanskrit scriptures and meditative signs as Om. "Each of her frames acts as a variation on the past, the ancestral inheritance: in the ochre yellow and red palette, we are recalled into the ritual circle of sacrifice; a hero-stone, a tribal totem, a lost goddess of fertility is suggested by certain motifs; and in the elegant calligraphy of the sacred texts, the hymns repeated until the pitch of perfection has been achieved".⁷ She incorporated text from Sanskrit documents such as Bhagavad Gita (भगवद्गीता, undated), the Vedas (वेद, 1500 - 1000BCE) and the Mahabharata (महाभारत, 800 - 700 BCE).



Figure 8,9,10 : Sujata Bajaj Artworks



Figure 11,12 : Sujata Bajaj Artworks

4.1 Analysis

Sujata carries India wherever she goes. Her colour palette speaks for itself, along with the colours she adds some small texts which add up to the whole aesthetic value of the art. She uses Sanskrit texts and as her calligraphic expression and positions them as if it were a collage. She is inspired by Indian culture and relates with it through spirituality. She had created a series of paintings with numbers. She thought this concept was interesting because our lives are made up of numbers. How old are you? How much do you earn? What time is your meeting?. Sujata has made many different series and they all have strong meanings, strong messages which are drawn from life.

Visceral aspect - The work is strong, bold and grabs attention. The strokes, calligraphic writing and colours together all stand for India. In India red is associated with marriage, therefore it carries all the meaning of life. She offsets the colours with bold black lines.

Behavioural aspect - There is not really a behavioural aspect to it because it is essentially a 2D artwork which has good movement and fluidity very well mixed with bold lines but other than the look and feel of this series there is no further usability.

Reflective aspect - The calligraphy is not legible, it is leaning more towards the abstraction of the calligraphy art. The fearless use of bold colours over the bold strokes are combining to have a greater impact on the viewer. Some of the paintings have cut out portions of text written in Sanskrit from various religious texts where they are superimposed on the contrasting colour palette



Figure 13 : Rathna Ramanathan

5. Case Study 3 - Rathna Ramanathan

Rathna is a graphic designer, researcher and educator known for her expertise in intercultural communication, typography and alternative publishing practices. She runs a design studio based in Chennai and London focused on research-led, intercultural, multi-platform graphic communication.

A key aspect of her work is an interest in how graphic communication and typographic practice can be used to break down existing hierarchies (rich and poor, urban and rural, analogue and

digital) to foster new approaches and give voice to the marginalised.⁸ One of her ongoing projects - Conceived by Rohan Murty and planned and published by Harvard University Press, the Murty Classical Library of India is a bold project to revive Indian classical literature and make it widely available and accessible. The goal is to publish more than 500 books of classical Indian literature over the next 100 years!

The concept and beautiful design of the books were done by Rathna Ramanathan. A range of new Indian types was specially commissioned from Fiona Ross and John Hudson of Tiro Typeworks. The guiding principle of the Murthy book - “To exemplify the best of the scripts but at the same time being relevant to the needs of the larger series” - Rathna. The series will provide modern English translations of classical works, many for the first time, across a vast array of Indian languages, including Bangla, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Pali, Panjabi,

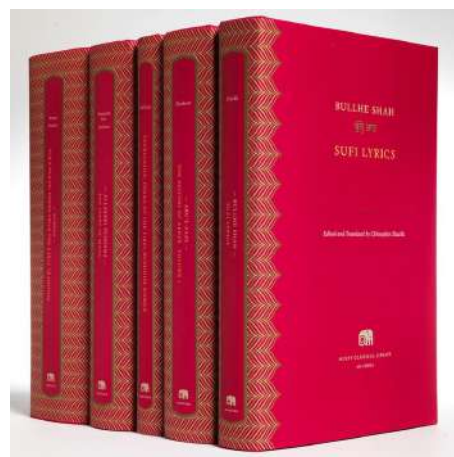


Figure 14, 15 : Murthy Classical Library published books

The peaceful land of Punctuation
is filled with tension overnight

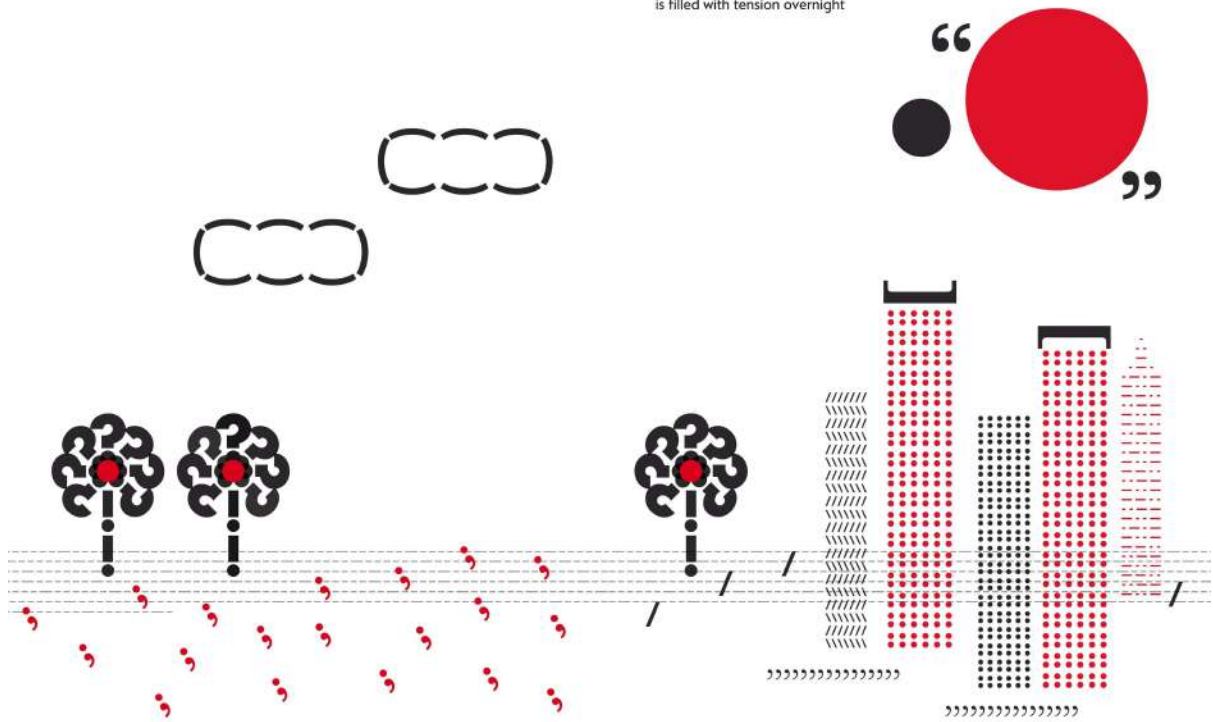


Figure 16 : Rathna Ramanathan Artwork for Tara Books

Persian, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The text in the appropriate regional script will appear alongside the translation. ⁹

5.1 Analysis

Rantha has always carried India with her, her love for books and Indian scripts has drawn her to this Murthy Library Project. This analysis will be a little different from the rest as she is working towards the multilingual translations of Indian literature and taking the culture to the global stage.

She has also worked with Tara Books on projects over the last twenty years. Here, she reflects on her experiences of collaborating with Tara Books in the context of sustainable modes of design and production, and alternative models of publishing. Her choice of typefaces is remarkable and has published multiple book covers in collaboration with Tara books

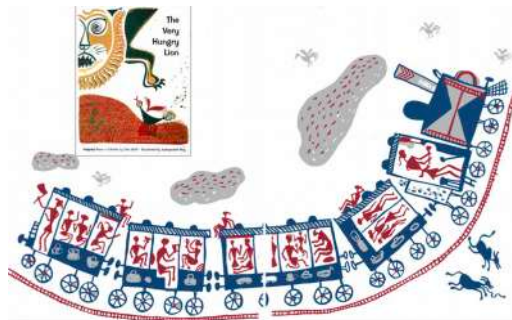
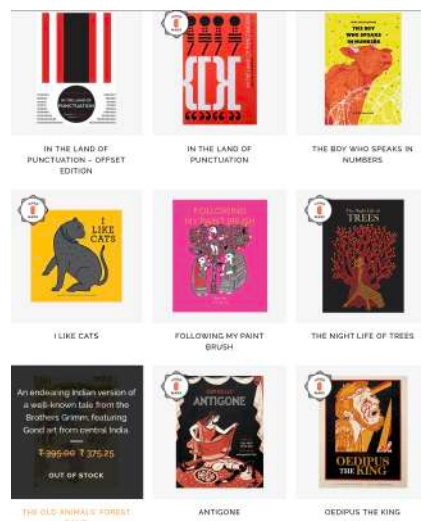


Figure 17, 18 : Rathna Ramanathan
Other work for Tara Books
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6. Case Study 4 - Sarang Kulkarni



Figure 19 : Sarang Kulkarni

An alumnus of Sir J. J. Institute of Applied Art, Sarang specialises in type design and calligraphy. In 2005, he founded 'WhiteCrow' - a type foundry and design studio based in Mumbai. With clients such as Vodafone, Virgin Mobile, Star Network, Coca Cola and Pidilite, his studio has steadily found its niche in multilingual branding, designing custom typefaces across Indian scripts and calligraphy.¹⁰ Sarang is also a part of 'Aksharaya', a group that channelises their collective efforts to document, promote, explore and create awareness about Indian scripts. He currently is the co-founder Ektype. Ektype design studio is based in

Mumbai, India that specialises in developing fonts across all Indian languages, many of which are multi-script. The most used and known font which I will be analysing is a devanagari font Modak which has been inspired from the form of modak.

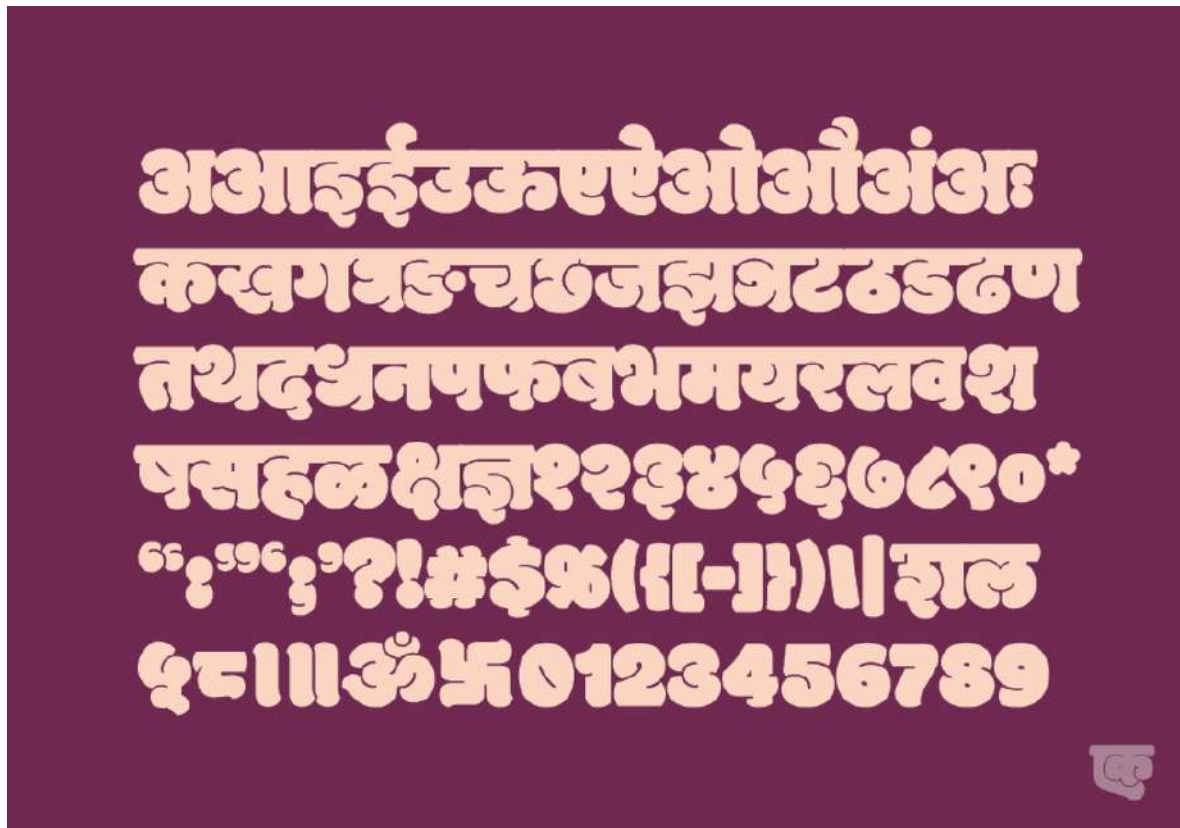


Figure 20 : Modak Font



असमन्जस
इंक्रिलाब जिन्दाबाद
एकस्ट्राटरेस्ट्रियल
ज्यादातर
श्रवणबेलगोला

Figure 21,22 : Usage of Modak Font

6.1 Analysis

The typeface couldn't be more aptly named. Modak, a traditional Indian sweet filled with coconut and jaggery, and the elephant-headed, pot-bellied Hindu god Ganesh. Taking inspiration from a modak, Ektype has showcased how involved they are in the globalisation of culturally infused devanagari typefaces, and hence modak being a multi-script font. Modak font is a heavyweight font limiting it to be used for body text, however, works best for display typeface, headline, book covers, etc.

Visceral Aspect - It is chubby and adorable, mostly called as cute. The roundness and heavyweight are giving out the essence of comfort and little playful behaviour. It is a complex font yet Ektype has managed to create it with utmost superiority implying to the type design rules. The characters were cute/round and not bulky/rigid.

Behavioural Aspect - The incisions in the design are more like marks made in the sand with one's fingers. They have added liveliness and movement to this very heavy typeface. Since it is directly connecting the audience with the sweet Modak they are easily accepting of the usage of the font in spite of it being such a bold font.

Reflective Aspect - Modak is so well created regardless of the challenge to fit a complex heavy font in such limited space. Since they have covered all the fundamentals the usability is great. The consonants and Matras were overlapping, instead of them being successive characters. In the conjuncts, the forms of the two letters are fused to get one form which is further established when the thin counter spaces come across all characters irrespective of the complexity and most importantly keeping it legible. In addition, more Matras were added that would match exactly with every character, leaving a thin counter space in between. Custom Ukars were designed according to each character.

7. Conclusions

After having seen both sides of a type visual we understand that the underlying motive is the same, the approach and media is different. Type art - Calligraphy, lettering is as equally important as Type design and font design. From the first two case studies, we infer how type art has more of a visceral impact than reflective because type art is more about aesthetics and the immediate impact on the audience since type art is being so direct it plays an important role in the context of culture and speaks faster to the audience. This is essentially because of the freedom that an artist holds. Type design is more about the indirect aspect, leaning more towards usability and structure of the design. It is talking about the impact of the design on mass which is translated in an indirect manner. Therefore we can conclude, from the following case studies we understand how some well-known designers and artists are working hard towards saving our rich heritage and culture through typography. These artists and designers have been chosen because of their work in the local cases which have been globally appreciated and are in the constant hunt on how can we share our culture with other nations and can possibly have blends of more cultures together. The more we become aware of the 'culture conscious type' we will involuntarily be a part of the local to global scenario.

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