

# **REFLECTION ON PRACTICE**

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## 0.1 PREFACE

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THE REFLECTION ON PRACTICE essay is a collation of experiences with type design while enrolled for the MA in Typeface Design at the University of Reading.

My aim before coming to Reading was largely to understand the context of typeface design in India. Vernacular type design in India appears to be diseased by various unskilled practices without necessary understanding of core design principles. This chronic affliction of poor design standards gives rise to innumerable challenges in terms of typography.

My first intentions of designing a type face was for Tamil. The choice was primarily due to my familiarity with reading and writing the script besides it being my native language. Early experimentation was driven towards offering a wider array of typographic choices for large vernacular print and publishing industry. It seemed that the current contemporary form of Tamil script evolved devoid of the typographic advancement that took place in the west, thus resulting in appalling visual anarchy. Simplification of form by reducing repetitive elements was my premise in achieving an enhanced readability. By pushing the envelope of established norms and aesthetics, the nuances of Indic scripts and the necessary balance required between experimentation and readability of the script came to light.

However, my initial radical attempts at changing the native form of the script were a failure in light of the revelation that people read best what they read the most. Legibility and readability were not so much of an issue on a macro level, nor is the form.

This essay is introspection of my journey into the vast yet focussed world of Typeface design.

## 0.2 THE BRIEF

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My first consideration was a type family suited for the official usage by the Government of Tamil Nadu for its print and web needs. The typeface has to bridge the gap of bilingual typography between Tamil and Latin. A type family for such a vast application spectrum was not a practical choice. I had to narrow down my scope of work to help me focus on specific design issues and gain the much needed confidence. Driven by pragmatism and the emerging landscape of vernacular press, I chose to design a newspaper type.

India is the second largest media market in the world after

<sup>1</sup>World Association of Newspapers (WAN)

<sup>2</sup>India's remarkable media growth story,  
by Tarun Basu for Indo-Asian News Service, 2008  
[www.indembassy.org.pe/news2008/features2.pdf](http://www.indembassy.org.pe/news2008/features2.pdf)

China<sup>1</sup>. The expansion and diversification of the Indian press - at a time when the western world is talking about the demise of the newspaper by 2030 - is in a large measure due to the country's growing population and sustained economic growth over the past decade. economic boom is leading to rising literacy levels and the explosion of the aspirational class estimated at 42% of the 1.2 billion overall population. Among the top newspapers, in terms of circulation, vernacular journalism clearly dominates. Hindi newspapers occupy the first four slots, five others are from regional languages, leaving only a single English newspaper in the top 10 list. India also boasts over 990 dailies, biweeklies, weeklies, fortnightlies and monthlies<sup>2</sup>. The trend reported here adds value to my choice, as there seems to be desperate need for good vernacular typeface options.

## 2.a Type Family Description

The Tranquebar type family is intended as a specific text typeface with support for Latin script along with Tamil. Latin and Tamil can be used in the same layout, but not within the same text as the current newspaper practices do not usually mix the scripts.

The Latin family supports default proportional old style numerals, and an optional tabular lining numerals. The family will also be adjusted to 3 grades in order to accommodate the difference in printers with 3 typefaces in each grade.

The regular versions supports opentype feature of small caps, and corresponding italics and bold without small caps or tabular lining numerals. The family aims at providing comfortable reading as against being self-conscious.

While Tranquebar Tamil was designed with the intention of achieving an even colour at small sizes in newspaper settings, as it does not adhere to the genre, it cannot be used for the same. Hence a different medium is required as against introducing this type for newspapers. I propose to fit the family for display on screens and test it with 'Tamil bloggers' to help collate more relevant research towards establishing an alternative model. I hope that such research will help in understanding the impact of reader's reception and cultural preferences on readability and legibility.

## 0.3 THE TRANQUEBAR LATIN FAMILY

The course kick-started in its very second week, by trying to think and design a typeface meant for screen display for the Apple Ipad. The impulse of creation to

eadbhnim  
clrujppqo

*Figure 1: Characters from the experiment to create a typeface for Apple Ipad or comfortable reading.*

abd hilmnp  
qru

Figure 2: Further experimentation in trying to balance the curves of a typeface during the Autumn term.

aoeckjlhi  
nmubpdq

Figure 3: First attempts of Tranquebar Regular lowercase.

ahlinmur  
kjofdbpq

Figure 4: First attempt of Tranquebar Italic that did not create the necessary difference in texture

such a brief was a semi serif to aid horizontal movement and squarish forms to help it sit on a pixel grid (fig 1).

### 3.a Form

In attempting to create the display typeface there arose many questions that required specific knowledge and the answers were a the learning of the past year. It is difficult to understand how shapes in a family synchronise and work together without actually attempting it many a times and learning from experimentation. It was imperative for me to apprehend the relationship between forms at a starting level. It is the interaction of the shapes and the spaces that surround the shapes which seemed like the essence of type face design. Trying to relate the curve of the n, m and h to the curves of the b,d,p and q were by themselves a time consuming learning (fig 2). If the curves seemed to match, then the width did not, and adjusting one altered the other.

Careful attention was required for crafting lower case alphabets as they create the texture in most type settings. Parallely working with bold helps to get back to the regular with a different eye that could see further design issues that required immediate attention.

Initially attempting to merge the golden ration, or atleast scared geometry with some part of my design, the proportions between the ascenders and descenders were in the ratio of  $\sqrt{2}$ . As newspaper type face have to be economical in the space they consume, besides having narrow proportions, the ascender and descenders had to be reduced as a means to fit more lines into the column (fig 3).

### 3.b Extending the Family

While working with the lowercase and experimenting with bold and italics, helps to see the family in a holistic method. Since all the changes made on the regular has to reflect on the bold, it served as an experience to gain, and helped to look at the regular with a different eye. On the other hand the approach to italics was extremely different. It had to be flowing, yet typographic and create a texture different to the regular weight.

The first 3 attempts at italics were failures in harmonising as a family and create the necessary textural difference as they seemed more like a slanted regular rather than having its own spirit (fig 4).

Experimentations with different a different model - the Chancery that was predominantly used for serious texts did not give the sufficient textural difference. Resorting to reduce the weight was by part a substandard tactic that did not demonstrate a comfortable level of dealing with

*abcdefghijklmnop  
 qrstuvw  
 xyz*

Figure 5: Lowercase of the lighter Chancery styled Italics.

*n m m*

Figure 6: Lack of sufficient width difference between the n and m. The m being a shape replicated by two 'n's.

## Gaza activists 'Ship sabotaged in Greece'

Figure 7: Inconsistencies in the width and the weight of the bold. The Uppercase G is visibly narrower than the lowercase o and various such difference is highlighted on examining the text.

form and it was necessary to push design standards much further (fig 5).

The final attempt of the Italics was a combination of the two approaches shown above, and it seemed to create the necessary texture difference and has varying angles to combat the push and pull effects contributing to a better rhythm than the earlier attempts. Varying the angles of different characters of the italics was in part a learning by itself in understanding the dynamics of dealing with italics.

### 3.c Criticism

While all the experimentation helped to understand some basic relationships between the curves and the lack of them between some other, looking back at the current state of the Tranquebar Lain Family, there are way too many discrepancies that has not been given the required attention.

For instance, in the Regular weight, the relationship between n and m (fig 6) and the v and w could be pushed much more to optically compensate for width issues.

In trying to design a condensed typeface the uppercase widths are not inaccurate (fig 7) and are more than visible at large settings, and consideration has to be paid to it .

The italics also suffer from a similar lack of pushing the design and the inter-relation of shapes and weight of letters when printed also require another thought.

The approach to designing the bold should have started independently rather than thickening the forms and achieving weight. The uppercase and the lowercase of the bold do not blend well at the moment and require careful re-examining. The bold, has only served as another model for learning, while it has the textural difference purely due to the weight, the rhythm of the letters in relationship to each other is not in harmony.

Re-looking at these specific issues and simultaneously addressing issues while refining the type will help the family to start coherently functioning together.

### 0.4 TRANQUEBAR TAMIL

Tranquebar Tamil is an experimental type exploring how the shapes are formed if the language is written with a different tool, apart from the one that it evolved on, with a continuous movement of the as against a constructed movement. Tamil evolved by writing on palm leaf using a metal stylus. Since the writing with a metal stylus posed

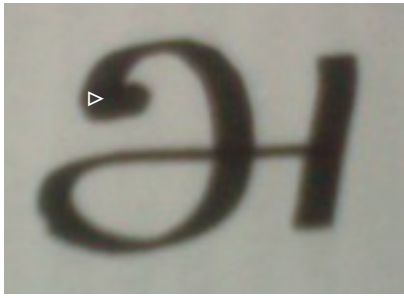


Figure 8: Loss of the counter form on the bowl of the alphabet.

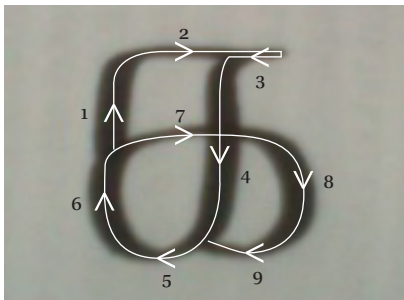


Figure 9: Form created by a single hand movement.



Figure 10: Translation of the pen-based alphabets to typographic forms.



Figure 11: Synchronising curves to help them to appear integrated as a family.

the risk of ripping the leaf, the letters are made up mainly of curved strokes which didn't rip the leaves.

#### 4.a The Pen-Based Model

While historically the script evolved on the palm leaf manuscript, it has been an obsolete practice in the past couple of centuries. The Tamil script is also dynamic and with each century there has been some change in the form of the alphabets.

Deciding to experiment on creating a type to loose some of the repetitive curly forms that seem to create a glare in small sizes by changing the approach towards Tamil type-design, and also to base it on a single hand movement rather than a constructed form, radical shapes different from the existing norm were created (fig 8, 9 & 10).

#### 4.b Form & Consistency

While the basic shape of the alphabet was derived from writing the script with a broad nibbed tool, the hand movements for each alphabet while writing is different, resulting in inconsistent stress. Therefore typographic harmony between shapes were compromised in initial attempts.

It was necessary to construct some of the alphabets based on others that were written and vectorised to achieve the harmony required for type face design (fig 11).

#### 4.c Width & Weight

The mixing of the Tamil script along with the Grantha, which is a bit more complicated and wider than Tamil, and the contrasting geometric shapes versus the rounded form made each alphabet look of varying width without consistency. Also trying to look at Tamil type design with a fresh eye and not willing to follow the conventions caused some of the alphabets to pull and push in different directions.

It was also essential to achieve an even texture for the alphabets too look uniform, and the interaction of shapes at such complex levels made some stems look heavier and some lighter. With scripts like Tamil, test documents are the prerogative bench marks to judge the texture. While the type tries to be true to its source, typographic conventions for contrast were followed.

### 0.5 QUINTESSENCE OF TYPE DESIGN

Breaking type design to its rudimentary and analysing the components that aids in focusing the thought and design process can help to create articulate work while enjoy the creation process.

### 5.a Typographic Genres

Genres of texts - fiction, dictionaries, catalogues, newspaper reports, are signalled by complex clues of typefaces, layouts etc. functioning both, individually and together. The essence of what printed text is about is signalled through typographic clues developed over centuries in a dialogue between the printer and the reader. These typographic clues communicate to readers what the content is about and how to interpret it. It is essential to know the genre that is being catered to in the brief and tailor the design to suit the specific need of communication.

By knowing the limitations of the genre and the areas where design can be pushed, it is only then possible to create coherent and meaningful additions to the field of type design as such. The Tamil design served as a model to understand the limitations of the genre and my lack as a designer to respect the boundaries.

### 5.b Romancing Form

Form not only refers to the visible elements of a piece, independent of their meaning, but also the interaction of how various elements are united. While careful attention has to be paid for a type family to be an ode to form, by carefully working the shapes and the space that surrounds the shapes to help them function with coherence.

### 5.c Detailing

Type design is the carrier of the tradition of reading, and intelligibly requires more attention to the permutations and combinations of possibilities that the work could be subjected to. It is a requisite to learn to see, think of the use case scenarios and address them.

Fitting and kerning issues, open type features, encoding files and gaining the ability to get Font Lab to function tailor made through scripting are areas that need a thought and a better understanding of technology. Also trying to deal with Indian languages, require to be able to work with Microsoft VOLT and Adobe FDK. Labour intensive, as it may be, they serve as valuable assets to be able to design a complete family.

## o.6 CONCLUSION

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Having practiced typography, which is essentially about working with texture rather than creating texture, typeface design was not so intuitive and the aesthetic balance the eye seeks, was just not sufficient to carry through with design decisions.

This MA program has assisted in grasping the nuances of type design and has given the confidence

**Tranquebar** {தரங்கம்பாடி / THARANGAMBADI} and in some European languages it is known as 'Trankebar', is a town in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, near the mouth of a distributary of the Cauvery River. The name means 'place of the singing waves'.

It was a Danish colony from 1620 to 1845. *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg & Heinrich Pluetschau* were the first Protestant missionaries in India from Germany. *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg* translated the Bible into Tamil, established a printing press in *Tranquebar* and the first editions of the TAMIL BIBLE were printed in 1712.

மொத்தம் 9.12 லட்சம் கணினிகளுக்கான ஒப்பந்தப்புள்ளிகள் கோரப்படுகின்றன. கடந்த வாரம் 2லக் அளவில் ஒப்பந்தப் புள்ளி அறிவிப்பு வெளியானது. இந்த வாரத்தில் வாங்கும் விலை குறித்து முடிவெடுக்கப்படும் என தகவலறிந்த வட்டாரங்கள் கூறுகின்றன. முதற்கட்டமாக 11 மற்றும் 12 ஆம் வகுப்பு மாணவர்களுக்கு இக் கணினிகள் வழங்கப்படவிருக்கிறது. பின்னர் அரசு பொறியியல் மற்றும் கலகைக் கல்லூரி, தவிரவும் பாஸிடெக்னிக் மாணவர்களுக்கும் அவை வழங்கப்படும். அடுத்த 5 ஆண்டுகளில் மொத்தம் 68 லட்சம் கணினிகள் வழங்கப்படும் இதற்காக 10,200 கோடி ரூபாய் செல்வாகும் எனக் கூறப்படுகிறது.

Figure 12: Text set with *Tranquebar* type family

through example to pursue type design. It has opened channels to appreciate the amount of work involved in creating a type family, critically analysing typography and typeface-design and appreciate the work involved.

While the time spend here was a study to handle shapes versus creating the most beautiful form, there is a life time to look ahead.

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The essay is set with Utopia STD, at 9.5 pt size on 12 pt leading and comprises of 2,753 words.

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