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MAGES COURTESY OF THE Indian Type Foundry

WRITING THE SCRIPT



Is the time right for a type renaissance in India?

Kohinoor Gujarati Bold,

a new typeface in development by the Indian Type Foundry, India's first modern, design-focused digital type foundry.

Five years ago in September, typeface designer Peter Bilak got a last-minute invitation to a new world. Would he speak, an email asked, at India's firstever design conference? He soon found himself wandering, dazed, through the streets of Goa, still empty in the last days of monsoon season. Inside the conference hall, though, an overflow crowd of hundreds of smart, critical designers peppered him with questions. Bilak recognized that he was witnessing the beginning of something significant.

All the same, when the conference's organizer, Rajesh Kejriwal, suggested that Bil'ak sell his fonts in India, he balked. "I was very reluctant," says Bilak, "but since I wanted to be polite I said I'd think about it." India had enormous potential: 1.1 billion people speaking and reading 400 languages, and an immense newspaper circulation that had quadrupled in the 1980s and 1990s. The top two Indian newspapers, both in Hindi, had circulations of 20 million each, compared with 2 million each for the top two newspapers in the United States.

But India's design landscape was relatively barren, with only a few professionally suitable typefaces for the nine major writing systems. To sell type in India, Bilak knew he would have to persuade a generation of publishers, designers, and readers that type could bring distinction, legibility, and beauty to their products. "There is little knowledge about typography, so we need to explain basic things," says Bilak. "Even graphic-design students don't really understand how typography is different from calligraphy."

Bilak might have dismissed such thoughts entirely had he not heard from Satya Rajpurohit, a young graduate of India's National Institute of Design. Rajpurohit had just returned to India after two years working in Europe, an unavoidable detour since India lacked any serious design apprenticeships.

Rajpurohit convinced Bilak to collaborate on a single typeface—a Devanagari, the Hindi script. Once they had finished, two years later, in 2009, Bilak and Rajpurohit decided it was time to launch

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RUPA UNDERWEAR

Information & System Design

Parking zone: cars ₹40, minibuses €2, motorcycles 50p, coaches £5.

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Basanti, Inn kutton ke samne mat nachna!

NAHIN! MEIN NACHUNGEE!!

This is dummy text. It is intended to be read but have no meaning. As a simulation of

DRÜCKEN

Welcome to the Boston University

Dummy settings which use other languages or even gibberish to text have the inherent disadvantage that they

Terminal **B6**

themselves! Simultext may

WENN ICH GROSS BIN, WILL

The raids yielded large quantities of substandard medicines and resulted in several arrests. This evidence of India's fake drug trade libes with what I've found in several surveus. In 2009, I looked at

International

The Kohinoor type family, in Devanagari and Latin.

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India's first modern, design-focused digital type foundry.

To succeed, they would have to overcome 30 years of inertia. Indian newspaper publishers—an important market—all used the same handful of fonts, most of them developed in the 1980s by Linotype's non-Latin drawing office, led by Fiona Ross. These were the first digital typefaces for Indian languages. "To Linotype's immense credit," says designer Daniel Rhatigan, "they not only honored the linguistic issues and best typographic traditions of each script, but also restored many of the features that had been compromised for metal and photo setting machines."

But in the years that followed, the difficulty and expense of designing complex Indian character sets, combined with rampant piracy and limited legal protections, deterred foreign type foundries from developing new Indian fonts. Fonts produced in India remained rudimentary, often sold side by side with mechanical equipment for the printing trade. Besides, English was everywhere.

"It is ironic that we are putting so much attention on Indic scripts at the moment when English is becoming so dominant in commerce, education, and even everyday life," says Bilak. "Many Indian friends tell me that their kids can speak Hindi but can't write it. But this means our work is all the more necessary for India to preserve its heritage."

The Indian Type Foundry, as Bilak and Rajpurohit call it, operates from a three-bedroom apartment in Ahmedabad, with Bilak working remotely from his foundry, Typotheque, in The Hague. Pinned to the walls are preliminary samples of ITF's Bengali and Gujarati. Major businesses are already using ITF's Devanagari and Tamil: the Bank of India, Rupert Murdoch's STAR TV, the Times of India. But to survive, ITF needs to find custom work. One of the foundry's first commissions is from the Bangalorebased newspaper Prajavani, one of six typographically indistinguishable dailies in the regional language, Kannada.

Bilak hopes that ITF's custom work will subsidize one of his great ambitions: to bring type to languages that have none at all. Of India's approximately 400 native living languages, 350 are dying. Many have outlived their writing systems

and are transliterated in borrowed alphabets: Tulu, for instance, which is spoken by 2 million people in southern India. ITF hopes to develop Tulu's first digital fonts. "This is an incredibly exciting prospect," says Bilak. "For many of those involved, it is a labor of love."

While type designers worldwide are beginning to see India as the next big thing, change may come slowly. "Within type-design circles there is a lot of hype about India," says Bruno Maag, head of the Dalton Maag foundry, "but I feel the market isn't ready yet. A market will exist once an understanding of the value of design and branding is established among graphics and type users." The key to speeding the transition, Bilak believes, is education. To this end, Bilak and Rajpurohit have been hosting type-design workshops and lectures for students and the public.

Back in the Netherlands, Biľak dazzles everyone with specimens of curly Indian scripts. "I was showing some samples to my students," says Biľak, "and they joked that they looked so beautiful that they could not imagine any curse words written in them."