



Beauty, Form and Function in Typography

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Scholar Extraordinary in Typography and Printing

Bapurao Naik

By Deepak Ghare

Bapurao Naik was one of the few administrators who worked in Government organisations but had the vision and ability to look beyond. Bapurao worked as a manager at the Government Central Press; was Deputy Director, Government Printing and Stationary, Mumbai and was Controller of the Text Book Bureau from its inception. He is largely known for his monumental work, 'Typography of Devanagari' in three volumes. He had also designed Devanagari type font for a photo composing machine. It is very difficult to put him in any specific category as a linguist, epigrapher, script analyst, type designer or a historian, but his multifaceted personality and administrative skills enabled him to cast a heavy spell and a lasting influence on the field of printing and graphic arts of the nineteen sixties and seventies.

It was a transitory period for the printing industry as well as a period of vigorous enthusiasm for the newly created state of Maharashtra on the social and cultural front. As far as typography was concerned, the hot metal process of movable types was on the way out with its transformation to mechanical composition such as Linotype and Monotype. The stage was set for photo typesetting and digital types were a decade or two away. Bapurao Naik was a catalyst who gathered information from his contemporaries like A. K. Priyolkar, L. S. Wakankar, other scholars and technical experts and moulded it into a

coherent history of script and typography which helped to develop the technology needed for Indian languages.

Apart from aesthetics a type designer needs to have the knowledge of other disciplines, more so in case of Indian language scripts. Bapurao Naik delved deeply into epigraphy, language and script reforms, mechanical hurdles and typography related other aspects such as paper, production, quality control and administration for large projects. Bapurao Naik, with his aesthetic sense deeply rooted in literature and theatre is a classic example of a scholarly approach to various aspects of typography.

‘The Typography of Devanagari’ was intended to be a monograph and a part of the committee report on standardisation of keyboards for typewriters and mechanical composing machines. As a member of the experts committee constituted by the Government of Maharashtra in 1963, Bapurao Naik with his scholarly approach turned this monograph into a research work going into the fundamentals of writing systems of Indian languages and the technological, political and cultural hurdles in implementing the technology of printing.

I would like to mention only two aspects he addressed in these volumes. First one was the common structural logic of Indian language scripts which evolved through consistent transformations of scripts in India. The second aspect was about the adaptation of scripts to the technology, designed mainly for western language systems. Script reformation was outcome of the efforts done to simplify the script structure and to satisfy the national or regional spirit. Bapurao Naik underlined the importance of studying the historical context of the scripts and its relevance to the technological progress in future.

Apart from the scholarly debate over the origin of the Indian language scripts from Mohenjo Daro and Vedic period to Devanagari, the mention of Walavalkar’s research proved to be the backbone of modern regional language typography. Pre Ashokan Brahmi, Maheshvari Sutras and Panini’s classification of alphabets or varnas according to speech organs are common to all Indian scripts and though the alphabets developed in character and appearance differently; the basic structure of scripts such as joining matra signs for vowels to the consonents, use of conjuncts and decorative elements such as Shirrekhas remains the same.

Bapurao Naik has given a chart showing the roots of Brahmi and its offshoots showing different Indian scripts. Though Bapurao concentrated mainly on Devanagari types his book has all the research material that was useful in inventing the logic of input and output on computers by L. S. Wakankar and Dr. Mudur at TIFR in 1977-78. Standardization of Indian

scripts and codes was done by Electronics Commission of India in 1980. The roots of this progress could be found in Bapurao's book.

Script reformation was another aspect which shaped for better or for worse, the overall structure of Devanagari alphabets. The movement was started in 1874 and lasted up to 1964. Bapurao was attracted to it in 1941. He provides minute details of the controversy. The aim was simplification and rationalization of the scripts especially reducing the number of characters to the minimum, constructing the conjuncts and arranging the vowels or Matra signs in a linear fashion. It was necessary to adjust Devanagari to the machines built for Roman scripts. Many compromises had to be made at the cost of the aesthetics of the type design. The results were disastrous especially on linotype. Script reformation is a part of history now, but it was an eye opener for future type designers and manufacturers.

It would be interesting to know how Bapurao Naik used this knowledge while designing a type font for Quadritek Second Generation Photo Typesetting Machine in 1980. He considered the limitations of the keyboard and the input-output system of the machine and designed 'Shariva' Devanagari Type. The conjuncts were set in half form, the consonants also were in half form, vertical bar for vowels was added every time to the consonant. Conjuncts were arranged in linear fashion. The type font lacked the grace to a certain extent; the positioning of anuswaras was not perfectly aligned. But it was a commendable attempt.

Bapurao's another major work was a book on paper. He covered the history of paper and its use in printing, the manufacturing process and different types of paper. He also wrote extensively about the physical and chemical properties of paper and its relation to quality of reproduction. It included the relation between the typography, ink and shade as well as quality of the paper.

Bapurao Naik was not only a good administrator but a visionary who could plan projects in detail and had the ability to execute them. Text Book Printing for Maharashtra State was a challenging task. Bapurao set up the entire system of planning, production and distribution of the text books as per the schedule setting up a new bench mark for good quality text books. In a published paper on 'The Publication Industry in India' he has explained the entire project covering all the aspects in detail. He takes a holistic approach of a noble person concerned with the sanctity of knowledge rather than of a mere Government Official implementing the orders.

Bapurao Naik writes about book publishing in a larger context. While discussing about the manual of style, typography, illustrations, printing processes, paper and format he has stated, 'The organisation of book printing through the composing, printing and binding sections with a view to produce a composite whole is a highly specialised task requiring patience and foresight and the expertise is required to be built up through years of hard work and contentious planning.' Apart from this Bapurao wrote many articles in journals, read papers on history of printing and print production. He was instrumental in publishing the poems of the famous poet Keshavsut in the original handwritten form and a diary of literary critic Va. La. Kulkarni in the writer's own handwriting. He took active part in cultural activities in theatre, literature and music. He had close associations with the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, various publishers and printers. He had great respect for Historian and scholar A. K. Priyolkar and the most influential visionary press owner V. P. Bhagwat of 'Mouj'. Bapurao Naik was a bibliophile himself like A. K. Priyolkar and upheld the values of social responsibility like V. P. Bhagwat, considered printing as a noble profession, a valid viewpoint which we rarely see in today's market driven society.

That's why we should remember Bapurao Naik's scholarly passion and dedication towards typography and printing, so that we can establish a vital link between the past and future.

Abstract

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