



Experimental Typography

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If Words Could Kill

Puneri Patya (signboards) and their sociocultural significance

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Abstract:

The following paper is based on a self-initiated documented project in the form of a book on the signboards of Pune 'If Words Could Kill -a collection of signboards'. *Pati* is a term which is used in Marathi for signboards or billboards specifically in Pune whereas *Patya* is the plural of *Pati*. The *Patya* outsmart the audacious, ruin the rule-breakers and demolish the defaulters.

That's their invincible power as they were once omnipresent wherever one chose to venture in- restaurants, shops, libraries, gardens and old ancestral homes of Pune-kars, known as 'Wadas'. No matter however curt or nasty, there is no denying their precision and directness. Though almost extinct now, these *Patya* have reached out to many enthusiasts through social media and still continue to amuse them through their inimitable wit and audacity. As the great Marathi writer P.L. Deshpande had put it, "*Puneri* Marathi is about maximizing insult in the minimum possible words." The paper will mainly focus on the socio-cultural and anthropological impact of the signs known as *Patya*, their dying existence and how experimental typography has influenced the culture of Pune.

Key words: *Signboards, billboards, sarcasm, pun, humour, boards, archiving, documentation, visual narratives, Pune, Puneri, Patya, Wadas, Peths.*

1. Introduction

After going through a number of 'Patya' (billboards / signboards), I inferred that this trend must have started when people stopped being sensitive and empathetic towards others and neglected their moral/ social responsibility about the society and people around them. That was the time when signages and billboards came into picture, to communicate the idea of sensitizing themselves to the surroundings and reacting accordingly. These signages or signboards were further improvised with a touch of humour or sarcasm by Pune-kars. So, what's the significance of these 'Patya' in the social life of Pune? When people don't abide by the rules while visiting shops or old places, these *Patya* act like a slap in the face.

Pune-kars feel that it's their moral responsibility to educate other people around them. They are very particular about their living and are keenly interested in knowing what is going in others' life and are very elaborate in expressing emotions. They are good at capturing the essence of the words in their elemental form and bring out the various shades of humour.



Fig.1 "Delivery boys and others are not allowed to bring their vehicles inside, or they will be punctured."



Fig.2 "Vehicles parked here will be punctured."



Fig.3 "Do not eat or stand here."



Fig.4 "Do not play any kind of sport in the garden."

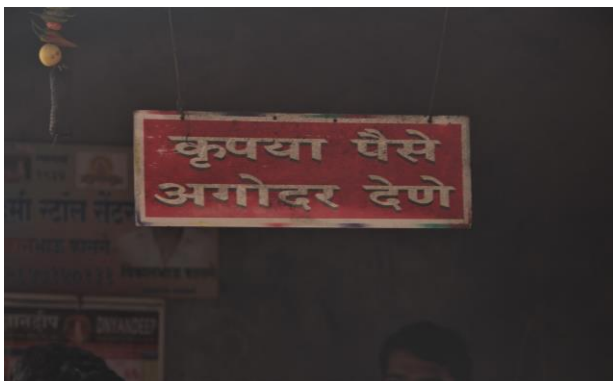


Fig.5 "Pay first."



Fig.5 “This is Sadashiv Peth. It’s a tradition to puncture the vehicle that blocks the gate.”

These signboards can be classified on the basis of their tone and their sites.

2. Peths

Peth is basically ‘a locality’ in Pune. In all, there are 17 *Peths* in Pune where these *Wadas* existed. People staying in a particular *Peth* have their own lifestyle and language specificity. The diminishing existence of these *Wadas* in Pune has really given a cultural shock to the city in terms of its socio-cultural existence. The tradition of these *Patya* might have started as a socio-cultural phenomenon when people used to directly communicate in few words, without thinking whether they would sound insolent or hurtful. That’s why it’s often said that Pune-kars have an ‘attitude’ problem but I would say that it’s their way of living which they don’t want others to violate. That’s precisely why *Puneri Patya* might have come into picture.

3. Typographical analysis

Basically, the *Patya* in their elemental format are written by the people who are skilled with Devanagari brush lettering and who take care of the pace and quality of the letter forms. Those are not artists or skilled calligraphers, nor typographers either. The Devanagari script in which the alphabets are painted on the plate is quite simple with a unique blend of readability, composition and efficiency of space. Most tend towards italics as a slant is more conducive for fast lettering. Fast because, they did not wish to invest too much of their business time in it; just enough to get their point across. Most of the *Patya* are written with conventional oil paints while some simply use a chalk and black board. The words are so impactful and direct in themselves that they actually do not require any sort of typographical nuance or treatment. When a *Pati* is painted, it’s not for any academic purpose where it will be interpreted on the basis of type. It’s rather only to

convey the meaning and not to dilute the message. The power of *Pati* is its message and a strong humor which becomes the most valuable and effective tool for communication.

Most of the designers, typographers and artists who work at a commercial platform get a brief of their work and start interpreting about the prototype in their own way whereas the artists who write *Patya* may not be systematically trained in typography. This leads to an unintentional calligraphic and typographical expression of the words which adds meaning to the way it is inscribed hence beautifying the local script in few cases. In my project, the main focus is on recreating these *Patya* in a simple way of representing the inscriptions with the support of calligraphic expressions with simple illustrations as the background to give it a form of visual narrative. An attempt is also made to create the ambience of every *Pati* in order to establish a context.

These are few of the prototypes of how I went about recreating every *Pati* in a simple conducive style of calligraphy with a unique blend of illustrations to create the environment and the mood for that *Pati*.



Fig.7 "Learn to wait after you ring the doorbell. For the inhabitants are people. Not Spiderman!"



Fig.8 “We sell the Chuna (quicklime) that’s applied on Paan (betel leaf), not the Chuna that’s applied on people.”



Fig.9 “Don’t whistle at any beautiful girl stepping outside this parlor, for who knows, she could be your granny! (A board outside a beauty parlour)”

4. Social Awareness

The written words hold immense power. They spread awareness. These *Patya* are just simple words but serve the purpose of spreading social awareness as they are coated with so many layers of wit, pun, humour, sarcasm, and anything you call it to enter right into the mind of their readers without even a second thought.

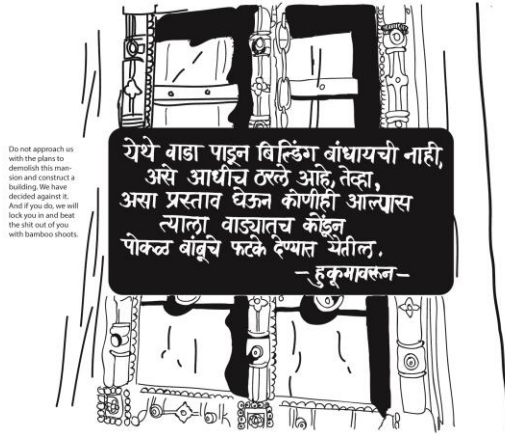


Fig.9 “Do not approach us with the plans to demolish this mansion and construct a building. We have decided against it. And if you do, we will lock you in and beat you with bamboo shoots.”

This Pati has a hidden agenda of making people socially aware and make them preserve the old and traditional mansion called ‘Wada’ with impactful words and a sense of humour. They might be perceived as negative but then, it’s the negative that penetrates the mind. Written words make people think and influence their behaviour.



Fig.10 “If you finish all your food, you will get 20% discount.”



Fig.11 “I am cultured and that's the reason why I don't smoke and have tea in front of other's shops.”



Fig.12 “Remove your ego and footwear here.”

So, these *Patya* are written with a purpose to codify the behaviour and give the readers an opportunity to reflect upon that and push them towards the desired response.

5. Hidden anecdotes

Every *Pati* holds an anecdote in itself and these anecdotes are very much present and tangible in the lives of *Punekars*. The *Patya* have done the job of bonding generations together. These *Patya* have evoked and sensitized people across ages. They are like the soul of the city. Urbanization led to more and more shrunken spaces which led Pune to lose its soul. These *Patya* go beyond the socio-stereotypical barriers of caste, class and gender and are always accepted by the people. These got lost over a period and now need documentation and reflection for the tradition to prevail. As a present generation graphic designer from Pune, interrogating one’s traditional representations led me to start researching on the *Patya*. I strongly felt the need for archiving and documenting this not only graphic but literary form as its existence is almost becoming extinct in the present times; I thought this whole exercise would help me take it to the present generation.

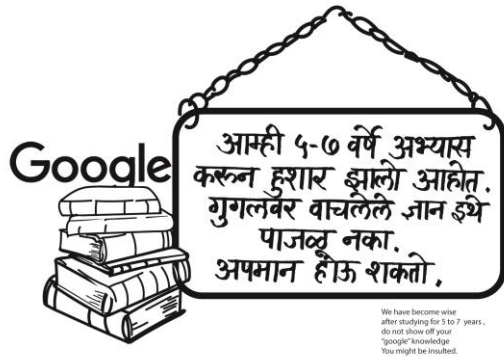


Fig.13 “We have become wise after studying for 4 to 5 years, don’t show off your ‘Google knowledge’; you might be insulted.”

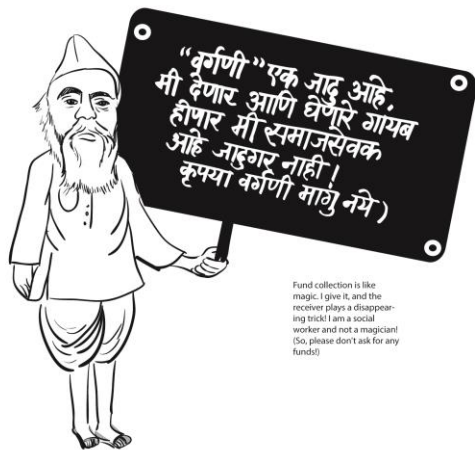


Fig.14 “Fund collection is like magic. I give it, and the receiver plays the disappearing trick! I am a social worker and not a magician! (So, please don’t ask for any funds!)”

6. Humour

Now let’s look at the humorous aspect of these *Patya*.

Humour is a valuable and effective tool for communicating just about anything because it breaks down barriers. Carefully disguised as fun, humour can smuggle new ideas into people’s hearts. Humour is one language that everyone can understand. If you can share a laugh with someone, you’ve connected with that person. The *Patya* thus, connect to people through humour more often than not verging on sarcasm; while making the ‘instructions’ a bit palatable.



Fig.15 “A board in a mental hospital: Though this hospital is for the insane; those who work here are quite sane.”



Fig.16 “We don't have any children working with us. Why, those we have don't work too!”



Fig.17 “Some people struggle throughout life to become all-rounder and some are born in Pune.”



Fig.18 “Our dog has bitten 99 people so far. If you happen to enter without being on your guard, he may complete his century. Please note that the expenses of your injections and dressings will not be borne by us.”



Fig.19 “This is an office. There is nothing worth a look inside. So, don't enter!”

6. Language

Language is the fundamental pillar of tradition, which always acts like a backbone to the society. Thus, retaining the literary part of the *Patya* has also been a challenge.

Recreating each *Pati* in the form of calligraphic expressions with a standard style of doing it has been retained throughout my work.

7. Conclusions

Primary data has been collected after conversing with people of the previous generation, senior residents (of the *Wadas* of the *Peth* regions of Pune) who have vivid memory of the origin of these *Patya*. Secondary sources consist of references collected through photographs, websites et al. So far there is hardly any existing documented evidence of collection of *Patya* and my work would try to address this gap. I intend to take the reach

of the book beyond its given readers and disseminate the collection to a larger audience through exhibitions and installations based on the same.

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