



## Beauty, Form and Function in Typography

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### The Moh Maya Project

An approach to Experimental Typography and Critical Thinking.

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to examine how typography maybe approached as an open-ended process. The intent is to explore the intersections and possibilities of type design, rather than reaching for a well-defined end point.

Two essential parts of this project can be listed as such:

- (I) To lead an enquiry into the philosophical concepts of 'Moh Maya', and bringing this concept into the form and communication of typography.
- (II) To explore typography through tangible substances within controlled and uncontrolled settings. Natural tendencies and characters of materials would direct the exploration of the script. This approach would, in turn, define the methodology through which the context, subtext and imagery may be embedded into the script.

**Key words:** *Experimental, Typography, Culture, Philosophy, Moh-Maya, Metaphorical, Interactive, Exploration, Critical thinking, Tangible, Form, Open-ended, Reactive, Transient, Reflective*

#### 1. Introduction

The experimental typographic project was just as much about developing a series of

explorations as it was about building a critical thought process and a narrative unique to the very meaning and concept of 'Moh-Maya'.

There were several layers to taking a universally known system of thought.

Primarily, it was about trying to grasp a dimension of existence and expressing it through tangible forms or to be able to bring that intensity into the creative process and at the same time, to highlight that typography is an essential act of interpretation (Bringhurst, 1992).

The aim was not only to design print media and visuals that would reflect the idea of 'Moh-Maya' but also to work with objects that would react with the environment and express the transient nature of our existences.

The idea was to follow an open-ended approach through the existing cultural ideologies, religious views and sentiments, societal values and so on, to be viewed through each individual's personal perspectives and then, reflected back onto and through typography.

### **1.1 The Concept Of 'Moh Maya'**

The concept of Moh Maya is rooted in the aspect of ascension of the soul or *moksh-prapti*. In Indian philosophy, Moh-Maya talks about the illusionary characteristic of the world and our tendency to form attachments, as the crucial misstep which prolongs the circle of rebirth.

In Sanskrit, 'moh' refers to the attachments that we form to worldly materials and/or social relations while 'maya' refers to the worldly illusion or an infatuation to the material world. Moh is associated to *kam* (desire, love) and *Lobh* (possessiveness) and on the other hand, to *ahankar* (ego and the sense of 'I').

In Sikhism, moh is often coupled with maia. *Maiajaal*, which is defined as the illusionary web of existence, is taken to be the root cause of what stops spiritual progression.

There are several folk and mythological stories that explain or interpret the concept through analogies which draw on the idea that material possessions, societal laws and relations and even our own identity is merely a form of attachment that is permeable and transient.

The meaning of 'Moh-Maya' has several variations specific to religion and their respective scriptures, however there are certain thoughts including the understanding of the duality of existence as well as the illusionary aspect of the world, which overlap.

## **2. Methodology**

The project was rooted in the research and study of people, culture, the mundane as well as the spirit of our daily lives.

A rough approach was to conduct several experiments which would focus on the various layers and aspects of 'Moh Maya'.

For such an open-ended approach, it was essential to define certain parameters:

(I) The materials selected needed to possess intrinsic qualities that would allow it to be bent, twisted, folded and manipulated into shapes. At the same time, it was important

that the objects/materials had characteristics or a metaphorical value in terms of cultural and/or religious contexts.

(II) The reaction of the tangible material to various stimuli was as important as the medium of expression, as such every step of the experiments were to be documented. The construction of context was as significant as the aesthetic and the technical aspects of the letterforms.

(IV) Articulation of the philosophy through legibility and visual definition was also a priority.

### **3. Explorations**

A brief description of a few of the experiments conducted are listed below.

Although the processes are explained and interpretations/explanations are provided, each set of exploration was led by intuition as much as they were directed by logic and the necessities of type development.

#### **3.1 Cane And Wicker Series**

The first set of experiments were undertaken to study the structure of alphabets in relationship with a reasonably commonplace and flexible material.

The process of heating, bending and twisting the shapes to form the curvatures as well as finding an aesthetic balance between the nature of the material automatically gave an idea of the anatomy of the letterforms.

The next stage of the exploration was to document the process of its formation; this became a series on its own.

Since I wanted to look at the script in terms of its surroundings as well as the shadows it casted, placing the frame within different environments changed its context and expressed a range of intensities which varied from personal to cinematic.



Figure 1: Documentation of the 'Moh-Maya' script being crafted using cane and wicker.  
Venue: Ranchi, Jharkhand.



Figure 2: 'Moh-Maya' in Devanagiri script.  
The anatomy of the script is a function of the material.  
The shadow, however, is a function of time.

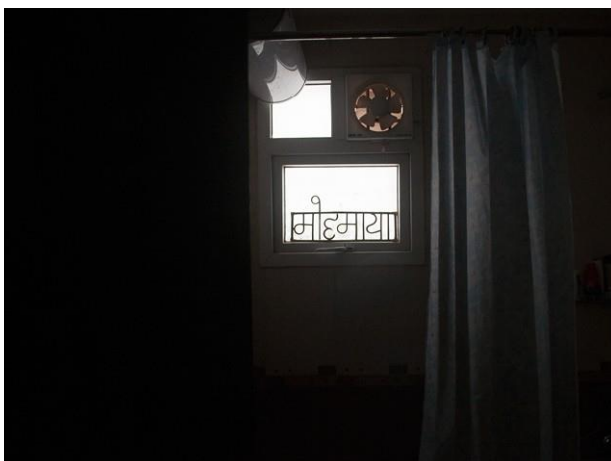


Figure 3: Explorations in image-making.  
Visual imagery allows for connoted meaning (Curtin, 2006).

### 3.2 The Possession Series

The key maybe seen as a representative of material possession while its counterpart, the lock; functions to protect, safe-keep and at times, hide. The unprepossessing jagged metal object signifies a link between the object and the owner.

Here lay the crux of our identity. A nature that we, as members of a society that thrives on purchase, completely depend upon. The lock on a temple door or closing the gate of an empty space narrates tales of sentiment, attachment and emotional connection to the tangible as well as the intangible.

Forming the script was significantly more complex with this object as compared to say, cane, simply due to its pre-defined shape and inflexibility.

After welding them into the script, several prints through stamping were taken to modify and develop the form further.

The tension between the structure/shape of the Devanagiri script and the readability of the characters became an interesting study of the push and pull between aesthetic, legibility and context. At the same time, this piece called for an active participation of the viewer.

Here, the elemental object, the key, became the context for the script and the script could be seen as text as well as image.



Figure 4: The key selected as a representation of the concept of ownership.

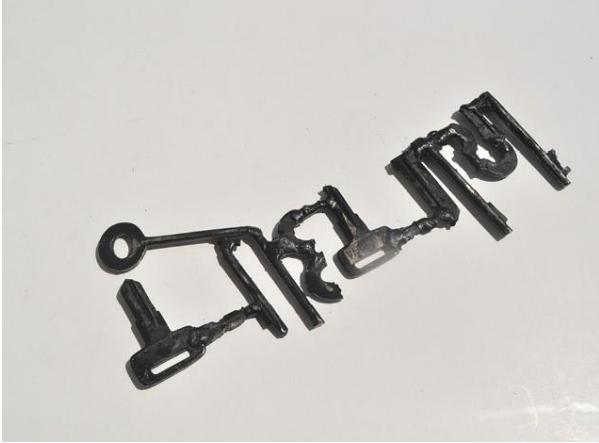


Figure 5: The 'Moh-Maya' script in Devanagiri, using keys.

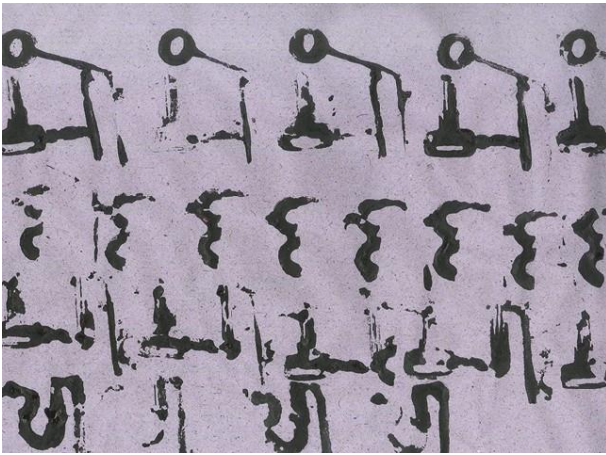


Figure 6: Stamping, in order to understand the visual impact of the form.



Figure 7: 'Moh-Maya' in Devanagiri.

### 3.3 Repetition And Absorption

After the first two set of explorations, there seemed to be a need for stronger forms in terms of readability, without foregoing the significance of the context.

Another aspect that was to be highlighted in this set of exploration was the textural quality of the script.

The continuous and repetitive movement, almost in a state of trance, resonated with the core idea of spirituality as well as the kind of concentration and uninterrupted exercise that is required to understand a philosophy.

The newsprint paper and the kitta, became an important tool for this approach. Legibility was a significant point in this stage, the textural quality as well as the slowly fading characters gave a unique perspective.

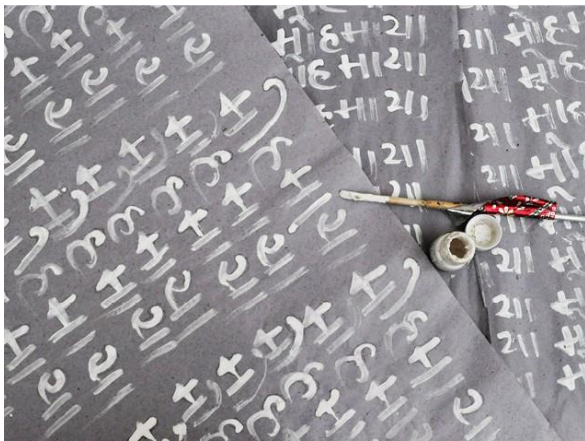


Figure 8: 'Moh-Maya' in Devanagiri script.

The textural quality was a function of the tools used:

Poster colour on newsprint paper, using a 'kitta'.

Legibility is explored through repetition as well as the 'absorbing' or 'fading' of the forms.

### 3.4 The Cocoon Objective

A sense of self, the ego, identity and attachments, all feed into one another to create a complex shell around any individual.

Sentiments, values and worldly possessions that become a part of the identity of a person becomes their own complex shell.

A silkworm cocoon seemed a befitting metaphor and an interesting object to work with.

The fibrous layers, which harden to shield the soft and vulnerable insect inside, has a unique texture to it. The metaphorical significance of the silkworm cocoon comes to play here and adds to the context.



Cutting, sculpting and hardening the shell using adhesive brought out its own distinctive features and aesthetic despite its seeming fragility.

Although sculpting the characters were somewhat feasible, the smell of the dead insect and the strange feel of the material was more powerful within the process and was difficult to be expressed graphically.



Figure 9: A silkworm cocoon, cut open.



Figure 10: 'Moh-Maya' in Roman script using silkworm cocoons.

### 3.5 Code Unfolding

Alphabets, letterforms and characters, before becoming readable entities are first and foremost, shapes to which we attach meanings and sounds.

More importantly, these shapes, as in the case with any shape or form, have the quality to be sensitive and expressive.

The twists, loops and the overall poetic nature of Devanagiri fonts maybe seen as codes (Potts, 1996), especially to those unfamiliar with the script.

The interaction towards these symbols/codes lean towards the process of unraveling, re-looking and decoding.

This approach is similar to the kind of critical thinking needed to understand the layers of any complex philosophy.

The nature of peeling is the mandatory mental function required to understand the concept of Moh Maya, as it is to understand the form and structure of codes. Within this system of re-looking and re-interpretation, symbols become symbolic. The very action of changing perspective to grasp the meaning of a form became a factor.



Figure 11: The unfolded shapes were continuous and required active participation to figure out the points of overlap.



Figure 12: The alphabet 'य' has been formed through a single strip of paper, looped along the stem.



Figure 13: The alphabets 'म' and maatra 'ो' are created similarly. The slight 'unevenness' that formed due to result of the participant's own exploration, added a visible dimension and created interesting visual overlaps.

### 3.6 The Meditative Engagement

This experimental piece is centred on the idea of Moh-Maya being a concept that needs to be practiced, analysed and meditated upon in order to grasp it's layered meaning.

Previous experiments became a stepping stone towards this interpretation with regards to form and structure.

Additionally, the installation, being Interactive in nature, welcomed the viewer to play, deconstruct and decode the pieces in their own ways. The shadows that formed when kept in the light also invited the individual to engage with the elements of the characters.

The previous experiment was a stepping stone towards the interpretation of the form and the decision to make this into an interactive, dynamic (Curtin, 2006) piece.

The individually laser-cut, acrylic pieces could be moved to and fro as well as rotated around to distort and de-construct the script as a whole.

The participants were allowed to form their own script and connect with the typography in their own space.



Figure 14: Acrylic sheets of 2mm thickness were laser cut to form shapes that could 'come-together' as pieces of puzzle to form 'Moh-Maya' in Devanagiri script. The anatomy of the letterforms was taken from the previous explorations.

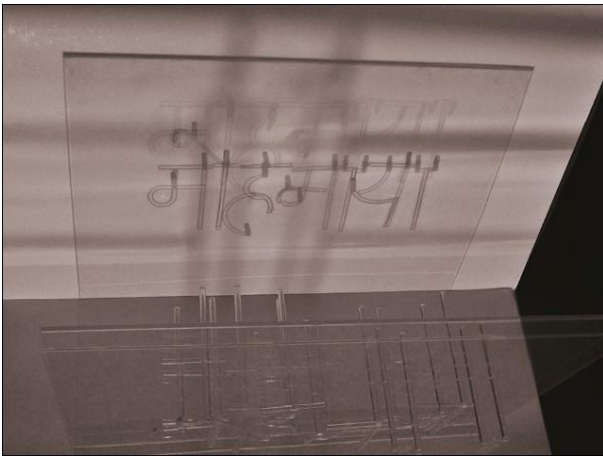


Figure 15: The dynamic typography called for active engagement of the participant. The shapes were mounted on an A2 sized acrylic sheet. The 'pieces' could be moved to-and-fro as well as rotated. This allowed for an engagement and examination of type. The shadow play was also a factor in this installation piece.

## 6. Conclusions

Through the mode of channeling a philosophy and a process-oriented approach, experience was given a significance which in turn became vital to the development, understanding and the evolution of type design within this project.

The research demonstrates that engaging with an experiment based methodology, as well as allowing space for audience participation to become active; alternate and critical perspectives are formed.

Exploring tangible substances allowed for organic, and at times, self-directing type evolution.

The type was often developed as a result of the tension between the natural characteristics of the material and the environment that they were exposed to.

Furthermore, by viewing typography through the lenses of cultural contexts, the resulting explorations had the ability to start nuanced discourses and engage in critical discussions which ranged from questions of self-identity, understanding ownership and ritualistic performances. The connection formed between the artist/participant and the tangible/graphical representation of the script became their own personal conversation and enabled them to have an exchange with the typographic pieces to various levels. Each interaction was distinctive, personal and inquisitive.

The experimental typographic project suggests that the philosophy of 'Moh-Maya' could be manifested through type design, consequently, this kind of open-ended, exploratory approach can be used to develop context and meaning within the realms of typography.

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