



Typography and Storytelling

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Typography as Cultural Storytelling: A Typeface Inspired by Assam's Indigenous Food Heritage

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Abstract: Every typeface tells a story, reflecting its origins, intent, and cultural significance. It communicates more than words, embodying identity and evoking emotions. Inspired by the vibrant culinary heritage of Assam, India, this study proposes a custom-designed typeface to promote the region's traditional food culture, which remains underrepresented despite its richness in nutrition and sustainability. Assam's indigenous food practices emphasize health and heritage, yet they lack global visibility. The proposed typeface visually encapsulates Assam's culinary essence, with each letter representing a unique food item or nutritional property. This transforms the alphabet into a narrative celebrating Assamese culture and fostering global appreciation. Beyond aesthetics, the typeface acts as a tool for cultural exchange and heritage preservation. Additionally, the study highlights its potential for branding, offering local producers a unique medium to promote their products. This initiative positions type design as a powerful bridge, connecting Assam's traditions with global audiences.

Key words: *Typeface design, Cultural identity, Assamese food culture, Food and typeface*

1. Introduction

Every typeface embodies a story that reflects its origin, encompassing the intent, purpose, and application that inspired its design. Typefaces can therefore convey more than just words; they carry cultural essence, express identity, and add depth to their subject, whether it's a culture, product, or personality. A well-crafted typeface can evoke emotions, connect with audiences, and communicate ideas in a uniquely powerful way, providing a visual representation of the story it tells.

How culture tells a story based on its food and cuisine may be an interesting connection that could be expressed through a typeface which resonates the essence of food we eat.

1.1 Food that is connected with culture of a society in the context of India

Food presents a way to understand everyday Indian culture as well as the complexities of identity and interaction with other parts of the world that are both veiled and visible (Asianstudies). Food in India is a dance of delicacy, a celebration of tastes, textures, and colours that are an integrated outcome of various regional and cultural influences. Each state, culture and religion in India has collectively made their unique cuisines a symbol of cohesion, generosity, acceptance, comfort, solidarity and most importantly hospitality.

Key points about food and culture in India:

Regional diversity: India's vast geographical landscape leads to diverse regional cuisines, with each region having its own signature dishes, spices, and cooking techniques, reflecting the local produce and cultural influences.

Religious influence: Religion plays a significant role in Indian food culture, with Hindus avoiding beef, Muslims abstaining from pork, and specific dishes associated with religious festivals.

Social gatherings and celebrations: Food is central to social gatherings and celebrations like weddings, festivals, and family meals, with special dishes prepared to mark these occasions.

Ayurvedic principles: Traditional Indian medicine, Ayurveda, also influences food choices, with emphasis on balancing "doshas" through specific food combinations.

Few examples:

South Indian cuisine: Known for its rice-based dishes like dosa, idli, and sambar, often considered lighter and with a focus on lentil-based curries.

North Indian cuisine: Characterized by flatbreads like roti, naan, and rich gravy-based curries, influenced by Mughal culinary traditions.

Bengali cuisine: Famous for its fish-based dishes, sweets like rasgulla, and a focus on mustard paste.

1.2 Assamese culture

Assam is the meeting ground of diverse cultures (Holidify). The people of the enchanting state of Assam are an intermixture of various racial stocks such as Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan. The Assamese culture is a rich and exotic tapestry of all

these races evolved through a long assimilative process. The natives of the state of Assam are known as "Asomiya" (Assamese), which is also the state language of Assam. The state has a large number of tribes, each unique in its tradition, culture, dress and exotic way of life.

The two important cultural and religious institutions that influence the cultural fabric of Assam: the "Satras", the site of religious and cultural practice which have been in existence for over 400 years and the "Naamghar", the house of prayers. The quintessential symbols are the Asomiya "Gamusa", "Jaapi", "Tamul Paan" and "Xorai". Traditional attire worn by women called the "Mekhela Chador" and Assamese jewelry also form an integral part of the Assamese culture. Assamese cuisine is the cuisine of the Indian state of Assam. It is a style of cooking that is a confluence of cooking habits of the hills that favor fermentation and drying as forms of preservation and those from the plains that provide extremely wide variety of fresh vegetables and greens, and an abundance of fish and meat. Both are centered on the main ingredient – rice. It is a mixture of different indigenous styles with considerable regional variations and some external influences. The traditional way of cooking and the cuisine of Assam is very similar to South-East Asian countries such as Thailand, Burma (Myanmar) and others.

2. Literature study

2.1 Historical Context of Assamese Cuisine

Assamese cuisine is a delicious tapestry woven from centuries of history and cultural exchange (Mondal, S). The fertile Brahmaputra Valley, a melting pot of cultures, nurtured early agricultural practices from ancient period, establishing rice as a staple alongside pulses, fish, and seasonal vegetables. Indigenous rice varieties like Joha and Bora highlight both agricultural innovation and deep cultural significance, entwined with Assamese festivals and rituals. Ancient trade routes introduced Southeast Asian spices like turmeric and ginger, enriching flavours and aiding preservation. The Kachari community's unique fish dishes and bamboo shoot preparations became Assamese staples. Colonial influence brought tea cultivation, transforming the economy and fostering the beloved tradition of tea with snacks. This era also saw a blending of culinary traditions as communities interacted.

Post-independence, globalization and urbanization brought challenges, with fast food vying for attention. However, a resurgence of interest in traditional foods is blooming,

driven by younger generations reconnecting with their roots. Local markets promoting indigenous ingredients and recipes are gaining popularity. Assam's rich natural resources provide abundant fish and seasonal vegetables, fostering a culinary philosophy of sustainability and respect for nature. Traditional cooking methods like steaming and boiling emphasize health and nutrition. Food in Assam is more than sustenance; it's a social glue. Bihu festivals showcase communal cooking, reinforcing social ties and celebrating agricultural cycles. Sharing meals is a cultural practice that unites communities. Assamese cuisine, a dynamic blend of ancient practices, colonial impacts, and modern influences, reflects both local traditions and external inspirations. Preserving this culinary heritage, while navigating modern challenges, is crucial for maintaining cultural identity in a changing world.

2.2 Various types of Assamese food

The Assamese cuisine is characterized by very little use of spices, little cooking over fire and strong flavors mainly due to the use of locally available fruits and vegetables that are either fresh, dried or fermented (Wikipedia). Their staple diet is rice, fish, chicken, duck and pigeon and pork are widely eaten and quite popular. Fish curry is another favorite which is prepared as a sour dish called Masor tenga. Baked fish wrapped in leaves with white mustard paste is a popular delicacy called Patot diya mas where 'pat' means leaf in Assamese. Dried fish is a traditional tribal cuisine. Mutton, duck pigeon and fowl are many of the varieties of meat preparations. The variance of rice is produced and prepared like sira (*flattened rice*), akhoi (*parched paddy grain*), muri (*puffed rice*), pithaguri (*pound rice*), sandoh guri (*fried, pound rice*), kumol saul and bora saul. The presence of traditional 'detoxifying' appetizers like Khar is prepared by burning the stem of the banana tree. It has a specific flavour which is soothing for the tummy. People who have a weakness for sweet won't be disheartened one bit as the Assamese dish is incomplete without sweets and one of its specialties called pitha is made from rice. Til pitha (*moulded sticky rice cake with black sesame filling*), ghila pitha (*fried rice cakes*), sunga pitha (*rice cake baked inside whole bamboo pieces*), narikolor laaru (*sweet coconut balls*) and kol pitha (*banana pancakes*) are some of these delicacies of the Assamese cuisine.

2.3 Food and festival

Food in Assam is more than sustenance; it's a vital part of cultural expression. Bihu, the Assamese New Year, showcases this through communal food preparation and consumption. Traditional dishes like Pitha (*rice cakes*) and Masor Tenga (*sour fish curry*) connect generations and symbolize agricultural heritage. Cooking during festivals is a collective

activity, passing down culinary knowledge and traditions. Dishes often carry specific meanings; Pitha represents prosperity, while Masor Tenga highlights the connection with nature. Daily food practices in Assamese households also reflect cultural values. Traditional serving methods, like banana leaves or thalis, reinforce communal eating. However, urbanization and changing lifestyles threaten these practices. Fast food and convenience meals replace traditional cooking. Despite this, many urban dwellers maintain connections to their roots by celebrating festivals with traditional foods, demonstrating a resilience in preserving their culinary heritage.

2.4 Characteristics of Assamese cuisine

Assamese cuisine is deeply rooted in its staple, rice, with varieties like Joha (*aromatic rice*) and Bora (*sticky rice*) playing a crucial role. The cuisine is characterized by minimal use of spices, relying instead on fresh ingredients and subtle seasoning. Fermented foods such as khar, axone (*fermented soybeans*), and fermented fish are commonly consumed, adding depth to the flavors. Mustard seeds, mustard oil, and mustard greens are extensively used, while freshwater fish from rivers and ponds remains a dietary staple, prepared in various ways, including curries, smoking, and drying. Black sesame is another notable ingredient, often used in sweets, chutneys, and fish curries. Rice-based sweets such as til pitha, narikol laru, etc., hold a special place in Assamese culinary traditions.

Assamese cuisine showcases a variety of traditional dishes, each with distinct shapes and textures. Pitha, a popular rice cake, appears in cylindrical forms like Til Pitha or as round, flat varieties such as Tel Pitha and Ghila Pitha. Xandoh, a rice flour-based snack, has an irregular, powdery mound shape, while Masor Tenga, a tangy fish curry, often features curved or elongated fish pieces. Betel nut (*Tamul*) is small and oval, whereas the betel leaf (*Paan*) has a distinct heart shape. Additionally, the diamond shape is quite common in Assamese snacks and sweets, particularly in crispy Nimki and soft, rich Barfi, adding to the visual diversity of the cuisine.

3. Aim and Objectives

3.1 Aim

An exploration on designing a typeface inspired by local Assamese food that can tell unique food stories which may represent Assamese culture.

3.2 Objectives

- a. Collecting local Assamese food in actual and with photographs.
- b. Derive traditional stories / myths revolve around those local foods.

- c. Illustration experiment of the names of the local foods inspired by the stories.
- d. Designing a decorative display typeface taking reference from the experimental illustration.

4. Methodology

4.1 Collecting local Assamese foods and their images

4.1.1 Food prepared during festivals

- Gomor laru: A type of sweet ball (*laru*) with a granulated, dry texture. This suggests a crumbly, melt-in-your-mouth consistency.
- Loskora: A sweet with a mix of soft and hard textures. This could imply a layered texture or a combination of ingredients with varying consistencies.
- Mah korai: Crunchy, fried snack. "Mah" likely refers to a type of lentil used in the preparation.
- Muri laru: Puffed rice (*muri*) balls, a common and popular snack. The description highlights their crunchy and sweet nature.
- Nimki: Crunchy, fried, and salty snack. Nimki is a common Indian snack, and the Assamese version is likely similar - salty and crunchy.
- Til pitha: Crunchy, long, and white pitha made with sesame seeds (*til*). The elongated shape and white color are distinctive.
- Tilor laru: Sesame seed (*til*) balls, usually round, hard, and granulated. Similar to Gomor Laru, but with sesame seeds as the main ingredient.

This list offers a glimpse into the diverse world of Assamese pithas and larus. These treats, with their varied textures, flavours, and preparation methods, are integral to Assamese culture and cuisine. They are enjoyed during festivals, special occasions, or as everyday snacks.

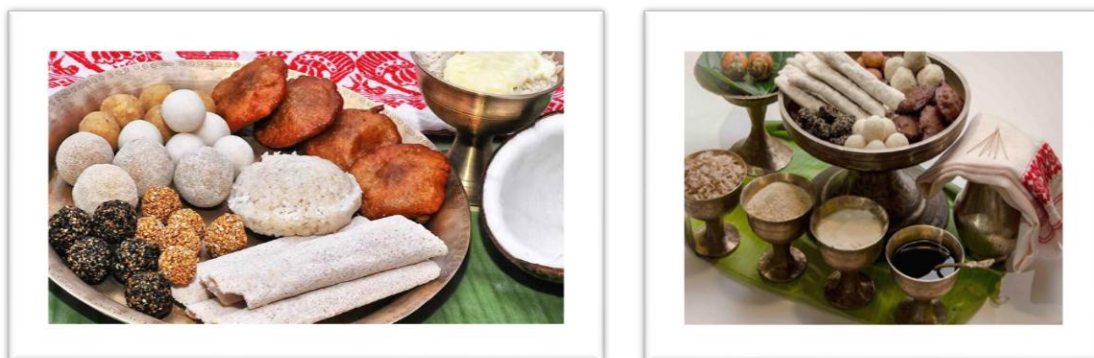


Figure 1. Images of Assamese 'Pitha, laru' and 'Jolpaan'

4.1.2 Food cooked on a regular basis

- Aloo pitika: A staple, mashed potatoes seasoned simply, likely with mustard oil, onions, and chilies.
- Bamboo shoot: Fermented bamboo shoot is a pungent ingredient used in various Assamese dishes.
- Bhapot dia maas: Fish steamed with herbs and spices.
- Dhekia xaak: Fiddlehead fern, likely cooked as a vegetable dish, known for its slightly slimy texture.
- Gahori lai xaak: Pork cooked with lai xaak (mustard greens).
- Khar: A unique alkaline dish made with raw papaya, lentils, and dried banana peel, known for its distinctive flavour.
- Masor tenga: A light and tangy fish curry, a quintessential Assamese dish.

This list provides a glimpse into the diverse and flavourful world of Assamese cuisine. The combination of familiar and unique ingredients, along with distinct cooking methods, makes it a cuisine worth exploring.



Figure 2. Assamese thali, Til chicken and Masor tenga

4.2 Cultural storytelling through food heritage

Each dish in Assam tells a tale, reflecting the region's rich cultural diversity and deep connection to nature (Friedeye).

*'lao kha, bengena kha, bosore bosore barhi ja
maar'o xoru, baper'ou xoru, toi hobi bor goru'*

This lyrical couplet sung on the first day of Bohag or Springtime Bihu of Assam reflects how significant and necessary the ideas of food, growth and nourishment are to life and existence in general. Sung while giving cows and buffaloes a wash, farmers and peasants wish for growth and sustenance of their cattle.

Myths revolved around the Assamese food culture include the belief that not eating 'mah karai' during Magh Bihu will transform a person into a pig, a myth also associated with 'mua aloo' and 'kath aloo'. Black sesame is believed to promote better gut health. Consuming 101 types of greens ('xak') during Bohag Bihu is thought to keep diseases away. Eating curd rice ('doi bhat') during Bohag Bihu is believed to help maintain a bearable body temperature during the summer heat. Feeding 'payokh' to young children is considered a virtuous act. Banana stem ('posola') is believed to be beneficial for uric acid. 'Aaroi chawl', a type of rice eaten with various fruits during Bihu, is thought to aid digestion. Lastly, 'poita bhat' is believed to keep the body cool.

5. Methodology

5.1 Experimental illustration of the names of the local foods inspired from their stories

Following the exploration of Assamese cuisine and its potential to inspire a unique typeface, the next step in this project involves the creation of experimental illustrations. These illustrations visually depict the names of local foods, drawing inspiration from their stories and characteristics. This visual exploration will serve as a bridge between the culinary experience and the typographic representation.

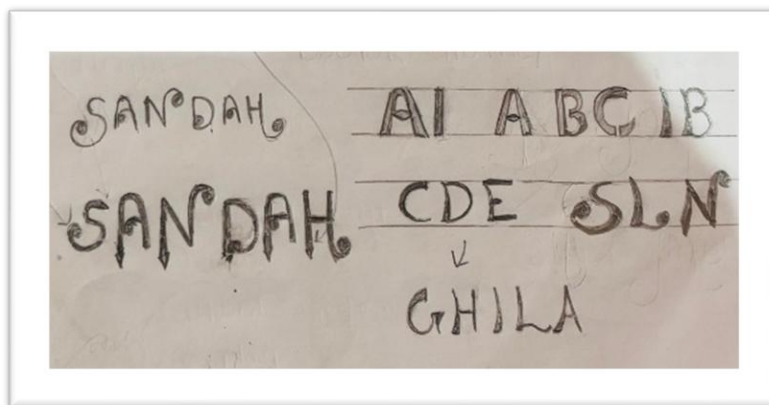


Figure 3. Exploration of the uppercase alphabets using the silhouette of Kothiya and spheres.



Figure 4. Exploration of the uppercase alphabets using shapes of laru, pepa and nimki.

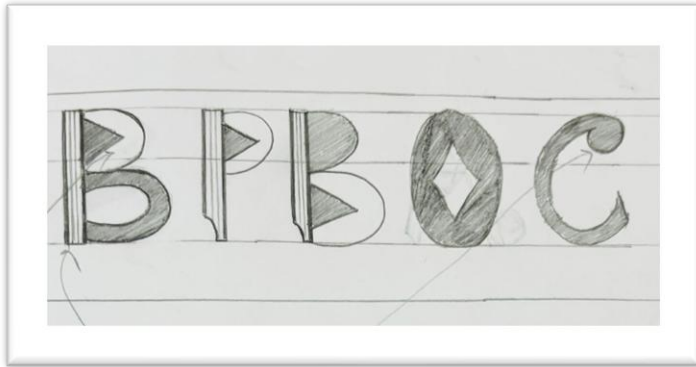


Figure 5. Exploration of the uppercase alphabets using the shapes of nimki, and Gamusa.

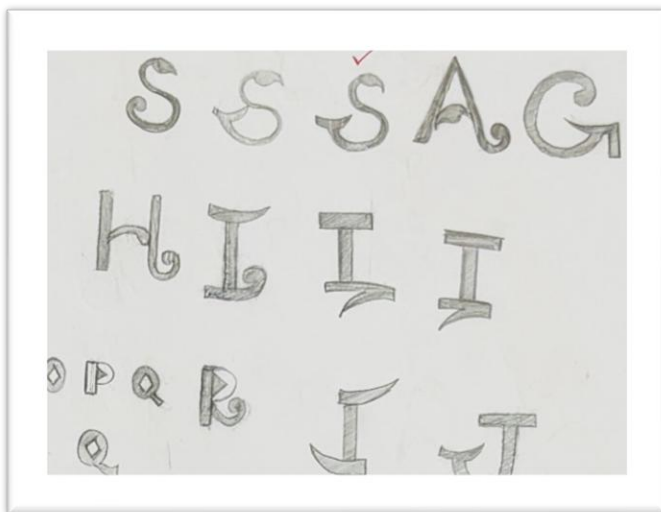


Figure 6. Exploration of the uppercase alphabets using the shape of fish tail and spheres.



Figure 7. Exploration of the uppercase alphabets using the shapes of Kothiya, nimki (diamond motif), spheres.

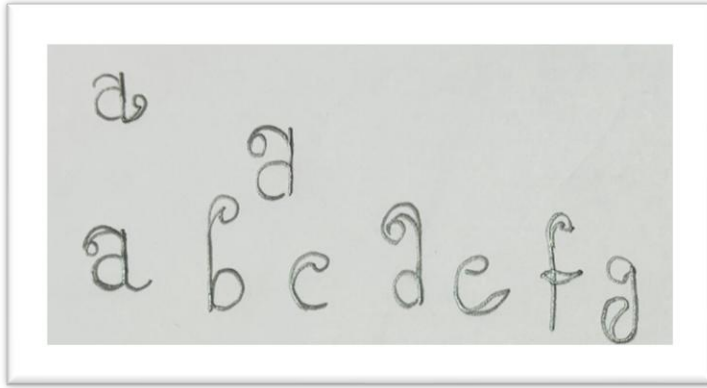


Figure 8. Exploration of the lowercase alphabets using the shapes of diamond and spheres.

5.2 Extracting illustrations of unique English alphabets from the collection of local food

Primarily taking the shape of Kothiya, the diamond shape (*a motif from Assamese cuisine*) and the spheres depicting the various Assamese larus and other food, the font is finalized and both the uppercase and lowercase alphabets are illustrated.

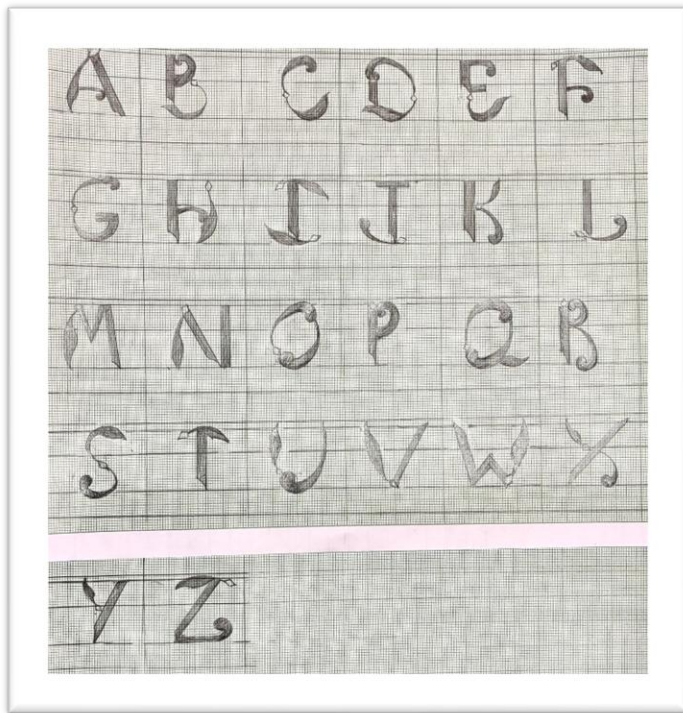


Figure 9. Illustration of the final selected font (uppercase)

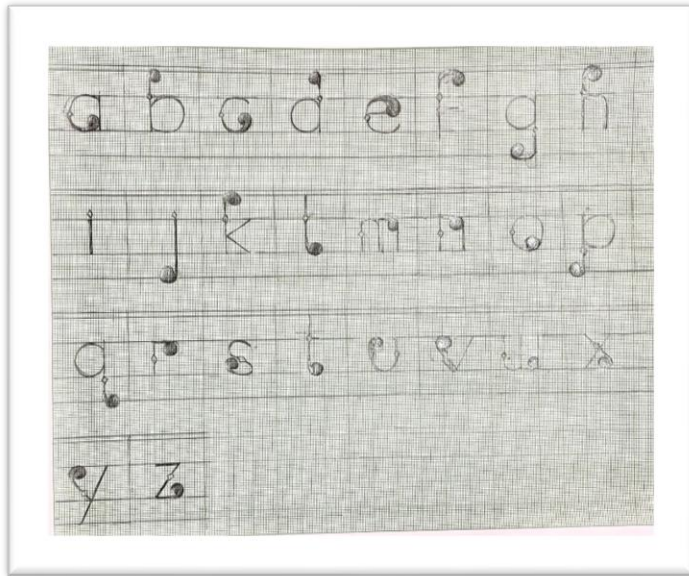


Figure 10. Illustration of the final selected font (lowercase)

5.3 Digitizing the alphabets for further experiment on font design

Following the exploration and documentation of Assamese “nimki” and “laru” and their characteristics, the next step involves digitizing these conceptual letterforms. This digitization process allows us for experimentation with font design, exploring how these culinary-inspired shapes can be translated into a functional and aesthetically compelling typeface.

The alphabets, both uppercase and lowercase, are digitized using Adobe Illustrator. The font is digitized using proper guidelines.



Figure 11. Digitization of the font (uppercase)



Figure 12. Digitization of the font (lowercase)

5.4 Designing a decorative display typeface

This step includes refining the individual letterforms and combine them into a cohesive and visually striking decorative display typeface. It also involves careful attention to proportions, and overall aesthetic balance to ensure the typeface is not only representative of Assamese culinary culture but also functional and impactful in its application.

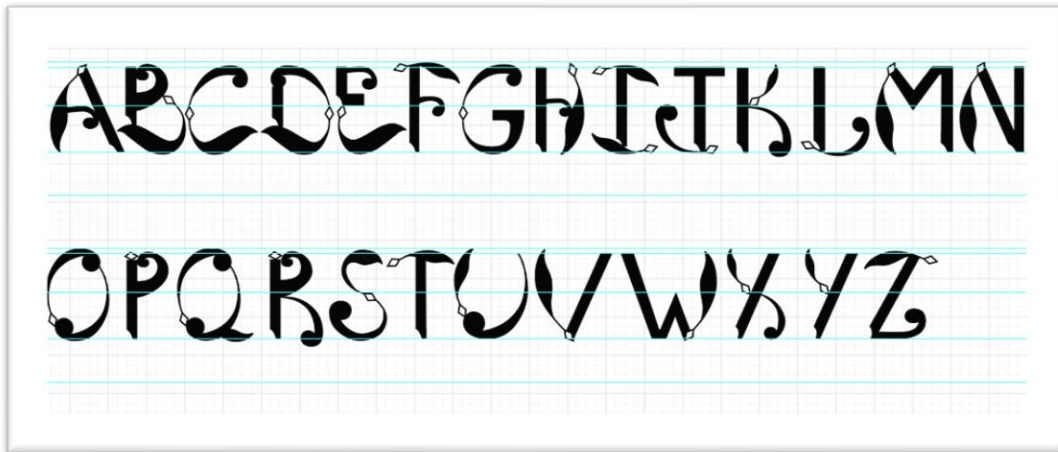


Figure 13. Final font (uppercase)

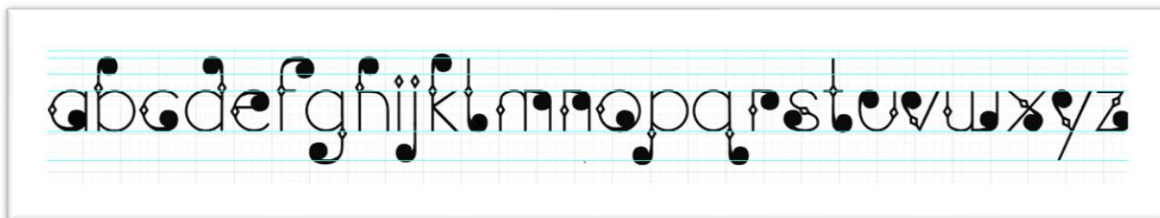


Figure 14. Final font (lowercase)

5.5 Refinement and functional font conversion

The next phase involves refining the letterforms for optimal legibility and functionality. This includes the adjustments of the alphabets to proportions, weights, and spacing, ensuring the typeface is not only visually evocative but also highly readable across various sizes and applications. Subsequently, the refined designs are converted into a functional font format, suitable for digital use in various software and platforms.

The final font is placed on online web application “Calligraphr” font template with proper spacing and guidelines. The font is named as ‘THOLUWA’ that translates to ‘connected to the roots’ in Assamese.

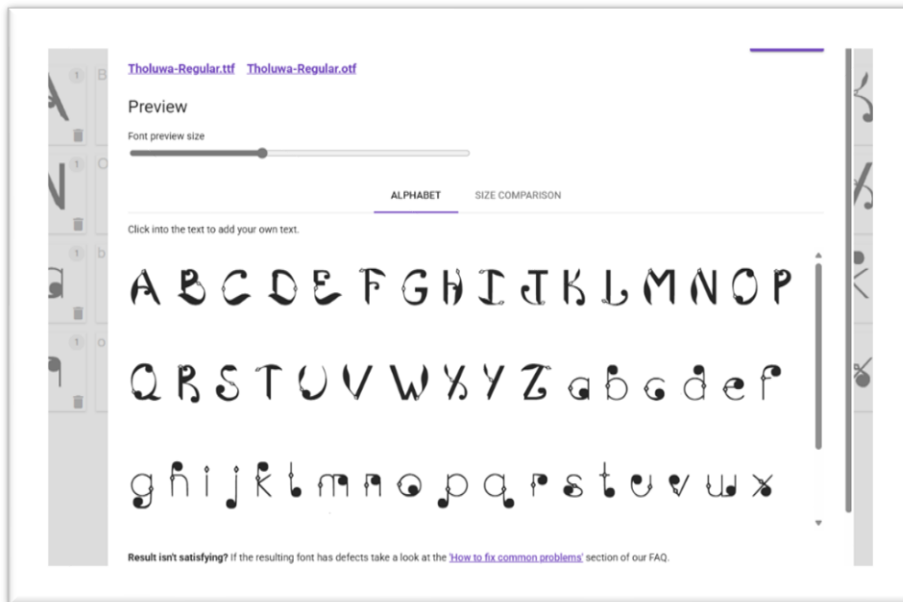


Figure 15. True Type Font output

5.6 Testing of the font by application on different local food names and posters

After the typeface was developed in True Type Format, it is applied on various subject areas related to Assamese culture and food to see the results.



Figure 16. Final output of the typeface 'THOLUWA' after converting into True Type format

The next crucial step involves rigorous testing. This includes applying the font to a variety of local food names, and creating banners and posters. This practical application allows us

to assess the font's legibility, aesthetic appeal, and overall effectiveness in representing Assamese culinary culture.



Figure 17: Logo experiment

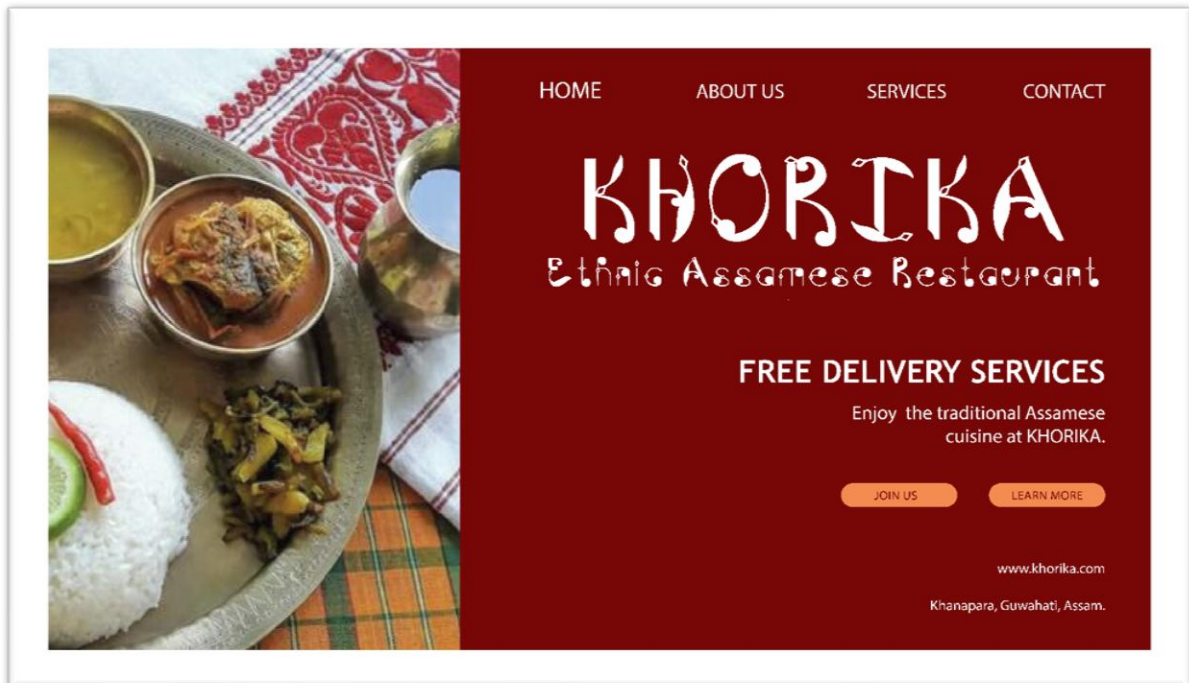


Figure 18. Restaurant website interface concept

KHORIKA



ASSAMESE THALI Rs. 150/-

It consists of bhat, 2 dal, guti aloo bhaji, seasonal xaak, khar, kahudi, boot r chutney and a salad

TIL CHICKEN

Rs. 320/-

Moist chicken pieces cooked with basic spices in a traditional black sesame gravy.



MASOR TENGA

Rs. 240/-

The signature dish of Assam cooked in a tomato based gravy.



HANH R LOGOT KUMORA Rs. 360/-

Duck pieces cooked in a white gourd based gravy.

PATOT DIYA MAAS

Rs. 260/-

Fish wrapped in banana leaf and smoked.

www.khorika.com

Figure 19. Restaurant menu concept



Figure 20. Restaurant visiting card concept



Figure 21. Packaging design concept

5.7 User review, result and analysis

A brief user survey was conducted among various stake holders. They have been given a questionnaire based on few key factors as follows -

- Cultural context
- Aesthetic appeal
- Readability
- Visibility
- Practical applicability

The participants of the user survey responded very affirmatively with positive feedback. From the user survey it was observed that the typeface appeals to the general people as well as the primary stakeholders. The typeface may also be used as a brand face of any food products or cuisine.

6. Conclusion

This exploration into Assamese food and its potential to inspire a unique typeface reveals the rich tapestry of the region's culture. By translating the shapes and forms of dishes like *nimki*, *laru* etc., we can create a visual language that speaks of Assam's culinary heritage. This "culinary typography" could be used in various applications, from restaurant menus and food packaging to cultural event posters and educational materials, effectively promoting Assamese cuisine and culture to a wider audience. This project's potential goes beyond a single typeface. Future research could develop a family of typefaces inspired by different food groups or regional Assamese cuisines, creating a comprehensive culinary typographic system. Incorporating the Assamese script is another avenue to explore. By further examining the intersection of food, typography, and culture, design can visually communicate and evoke the rich sensory experience of Assamese cuisine, preserving its unique flavors.

Acknowledgement

During writing of this article, AI tool ChatGPT was used for improving the language quality and correcting grammatical errors only.

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