

Expressive Devanagari: The Visual Storytelling of Kamal Shedge

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Abstract : This paper discusses the pioneering & evocative typographic work of Kamal Shedge's expressive devanagari and analyses it as a visual storytelling tool through typography. It also discusses his significant role in crafting emotional and narrative depth through his designed typographical titles for the local Marathi plays in devanagari along with his other expressive work as an integral part of storytelling, thus making the act of reading a visually and emotionally engaging experience. The study focuses on discussing his work styles, by segregating it into categories on the basis of their purpose and concept, look and feel, original inspiration, expressiveness etc, to further document his concepts behind the work and aesthetics that he has set. Next, it aims to analyse elements of visual storytelling that help to set the tonality of the storytelling and cultural significance through his lettering. The paper intends to explore his contribution in expressive devanagari, and the impact that he has left on the artist and on current visual striking local Marathi theatre play titles through his work.

Keywords- *Expressive letterforms, Symbolism, Visual Metaphors, Devanagari, Storytelling, Typographic Style, Experiments, suggestive lettering, Visual Striking Titles, Beauty*

1. Introduction

Typography is not just a means of communication; it is an effective medium that can arouse feelings, narrate stories, and represent cultural identities. In Indian typography, the late Shri Kamal Shedge stands out as a pioneering figure whose work transcends traditional boundaries, particularly in the context of the Devanagari script. He is renowned for his title designs and logos for numerous Marathi theatre plays, periodicals, newspapers, Hindi and Marathi films, book covers, and record labels.

In the history of Devanagari Typography, the contribution in the area of 'Typographic Design,' made by Shri Kamal Shedge, is simply unparalleled. In his long professional span of over three and a half decades (starting from the early 60s), Shri Shedge has made people look at the letters as a 'beautiful' experience.

(\ Aksharsanvad - An Interview With Kamal Shedge - Aksharaya, 2021).

His creative approach to typography has redefined how stories are told visually through suggestive lettering as an art form that communicates the essence of the story. His ability to convey meaning through typographic titles is not only about aesthetics; it's about creating a visual language that resonates with the narrative's core. During the pre-computer era, advertising in the media was expanding to Indian languages. However, little variety of lettering in Devanagari script was available at the time. In order to accomplish this task, it was necessary to have a transliteration in Devanagari script that could communicate the same meaning as English. Shedge introduced Devanagari alphabets with different weights (bold, light), similar to the serif and sans-serif alphabets in English. This completely changed the world of lettering in advertising (Wikipedia contributors, 2022). He contributed significantly to the transformation of Marathi theater's play ads. Drama and Shedge's advertisements had a cordial relationship long before the idea of drama as a "communication" with the audience gained popularity. Even before actors-directors and playwrights, Kamal Shedge was the first literary artist to gain the audience's faith in drama through his expressive title designs (Kamal Shedge, 2002).



Fig.1. Collage depicting various samples of expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

Expressive typography significantly enhances storytelling by adding emotional and narrative depth to the text, transcending mere readability to create a visual experience that complements the narrative. This is especially important in theater, where the presentation of titles and text can deeply influence audience engagement and interpretation. In Marathi theater, which embodies the rich cultural heritage of Maharashtra, title design serves as a powerful tool to convey the essence of a play. It not only captures attention but also evokes emotions and sets the tone for the performance. This paper examines Shedge's typographical work of local Marathi play titles, highlighting its role in visual storytelling and creating a visually and emotionally engaging reading experience. It also explores his contributions to expressive Devanagari lettering styles and his lasting impact on contemporary title designs of Marathi theater. For this study, play titles from the early 1960s to 2025 were gathered from books and newspapers, along with a survey to support the topic.

2. Process

In the era before computers, handwork was the sole option due to the absence of technology. During an interview conducted in 2010, he explained his process.

“I always sketch my letters with a pencil; the look and feel of the letters should be ‘tight.’ The letters should be well-structured and compact. Till today, I use simple tools like a ruler and a set square. Sometimes, I structure my letters on a graph. After a pencil sketch, I ink it out. Now the ‘artwork’ is ready. A negative is taken to try out various sizes, suitable to the size of the advertisement.”

- Kamal Shedge

He employed a method of cutting and pasting, arranging letterforms in the grid, and subsequently creating reduction or vice versa as needed. The following images depict preliminary lettering sketches designed by Shedge.



Fig.2. Handwork of titles depicting the cutting and pasting method and use of a grid.

In print media, particularly newspapers, space limitations for theater advertisements have led to the use of compact and bold lettering in his work. This approach maintains readability while accommodating the restricted space available.

3. Elements of Visual Storytelling

Visual storytelling is an impactful method that merges images and narrative to communicate messages, emotions, and experiences. In Kamal shedge's work, several key elements enhanced the effectiveness of visual storytelling in play titles:

3.1 Visuals

The core element of visual storytelling is the visuals themselves, such as photographs, illustrations, and other visual content that captures attention, which is significantly observed in his work.



Fig.3. Collage depicting various samples of visual oriented expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

Here, strong, suggestive, and complementing visuals have played a crucial role in evoking emotions and establishing the story's tone, making them vital for engaging the audience and making it more dynamic and memorable.

3.2 Composition

Titles with effective composition within the allocated space have played a crucial role in visual storytelling. By strategically positioning and designing these titles, Shedge has successfully guided the viewer's attention to key elements of the narrative. The thoughtful composition of lettering not only enhances the overall visual interest but also enables the audience to better grasp the intended message of the play.



Fig.4. Collage depicting various samples of composition-oriented, expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

3.3 Color

The use of black and white color schemes in Shedge's lettering has significantly contributed to storytelling.



Fig.5. Collage depicting samples of expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge, emphasizing expressiveness through color.

The sharp contrast between black and white guarantees that the letters are instantly visible and readable. This clarity enabled the story to be conveyed effectively, as the simplicity directs the viewer's attention straight to the text, highlighting the story's content.

3.4 Typography

When text is involved, typography becomes vital. Shedge's decision-making in designing lettering styles and their weight has influenced how the message is perceived through different typographic treatments. Expressive typography in his titles has enhanced the effective communication that evokes emotions and sets the mood, creating a cohesive visual language that complements the play.



Fig.6.Collage depicting samples of expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge with different typographic treatments.

3.5 Symbolism

Incorporating symbolic elements adds depth to the story. In his lettering designs, Shedge often incorporates symbolic elements to express deeper significance. These carefully selected symbols align with the narrative themes, offering readers a multi-layered experience.



Fig.7. Collage depicting samples of symbolic expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

Here, the typography evolves into a figurative extension of the story, functioning as a visual metaphor.

3.6 Emotion

Evoking emotion is a fundamental objective of visual storytelling. Through the use of forms and typography, Kamal Shedge's titles resonate with the audience on an emotional level. By carefully crafting each element of the title, Shedge creates a visual language that speaks directly to the viewer's subconscious, evoking specific feelings and setting the tone for the narrative.



Fig.8.Collage depicting samples of emotive, expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

The deliberate choice of thick, thin, and compact lettering, the manipulation of letterforms, and the integration of abstract shapes all contribute to a cohesive visual experience that evokes different emotions according to the needs of the subject.

Kamal Shedge's approach to visual storytelling masterfully utilizes a range of elements that complement visual storytelling to create a significant impact. By skillfully integrating visuals, composition, color, typography, narrative structure, symbolism, and emotion, his work not only engages the audience but also invites them to explore deeper meanings within the stories of the play. This ensures that each play title resonates emotionally, transforming the viewer's experience into a compelling journey through the art of storytelling.

4. Styles Categories: Approaches of display lettering and its visual features

4.1 Experimental approach of serifs

Shedge's exploration of serifs in Devanagari typography demonstrates his fascination with Latin letterforms. His Devanagari characters feature stylized serifs and are influenced by Latin typography. Devanagari adaptations of the visual structures of the Stilla caps and Serif Gothic fonts from the Letraset catalog are prominently observed in his work of basic character sets and mantras.

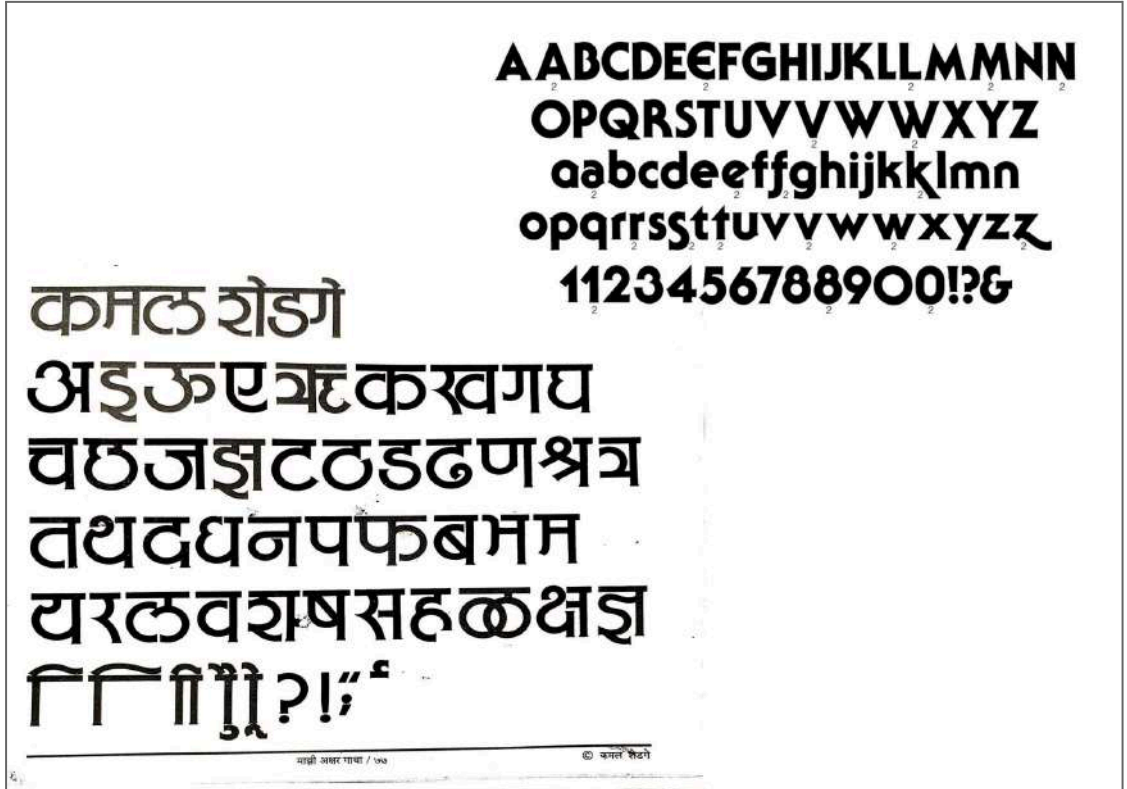


Fig.9. Comparisons of Shedge's Marathi lettering and the original Serif Gothic Latin-script letterforms he based them on.



Fig.10. Comparisons of Shedge’s Marathi lettering and the original Stilla Caps Latin-script letterforms he based them on.

The extensive application of serifs in his Marathi title designs with varying weights, such as bold and light, serves as evidence of Latin visual structure influence.

4.2 Explorations with matra signs

Shedge’s innovative form experiments with matra signs and involves creatively manipulating letters, matras, and anusvaras. These elements are transformed into conceptual components that provide clues about the dramatic narrative and theme of the play. He skillfully manipulates the form of letters using vowel signs, effectively hinting at the story’s subject matter.



Fig.11. Collage depicting samples of expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge focused on matra signs.

4.3 Calligraphic Influence

Shedge's proficiency in calligraphy has a significant impact on his lettering designs. In contrast to the more mechanical and standardized styles dominant in today's digital type, his lettering typically displayed the elegant look and feel of handwritten letterforms according to the needs of subjects. Each calligraphic stroke in individual titles acts as suggestive, making it expressive.



Fig.12. Collage depicting various samples of calligraphic lettering style for Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

4.4 Geometric approach

In some of his titles, he has played with the basic geometric shape and with the letters to create interest according to the needs of the subject.



Fig.13. Collage depicting samples of geometrical lettering style for Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

4.5 Frequently Used Styles

His work consists of categories that are comparable in terms of look and feel and visual structure that are prominently utilized for his various title designs. Basic character sets and mantras for various styles were used across his designs.



Fig.14. Style 1 : Frequently used style in title design based on basic character sets and mantras designed by Shedge mentioned below.

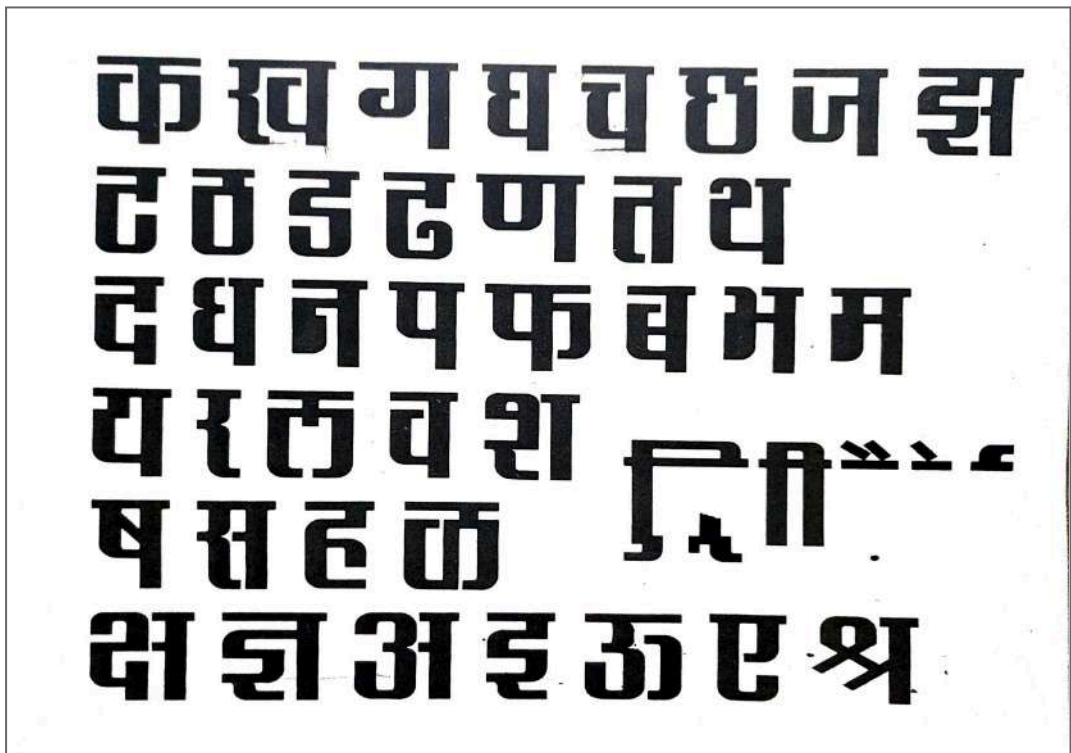




Fig.15. Style 2 : Frequently used style in title design



Fig.16. Style 3 : Frequently used style in title design

4.6 Conceptual typographic Integration

Shedge's work is notable for integrating the play's concept into the letterforms, making it a visual representation of the story rather than just a title. This approach strengthens the brand identity by turning the title into a conceptual symbol of the play. He often includes subtle visual cues in his lettering to suggest thematic elements, inviting audiences to think and engage with the typography.



Fig.17. Collage depicting various samples of conceptual Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

4.7 The Emotional Impact of Letterforms

His letterforms emphasize readability and expressiveness, often reflecting the narrative's emotions or themes. For instance, depending on the content, a well-crafted title may inspire joy, nostalgia, or fear. Shedge uses an appropriate lettering treatment to convey the emotional undertone of the story. Shedge's careful drafting of lettering, chosen for its aesthetic appeal and the ability to capture the story's subtle emotional undertones, is a noteworthy style of his work. Emotional intensity is efficiently expressed by the letterforms' balance of size and weight.



Fig.18. Collage depicting joy through lettering in Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge.

The curvy, playful, handwritten, and dynamic spacing of letters in titles evokes cheerful sentiments through its look and feel.



Fig.19 . Title depicting horror through lettering, designed by Shedge.

Irregular, distressed, horror-style treatment given to the lettering through uneven spacing and shaky letters conveys fear and the meaning of the play.



Fig.20.Collage evoking aggressive emotions designed by Shedge.

The bold, sharp-edged, aggressive brush strokes, thick strokes, broken letterforms, and splattered ink effect resemble aggression.

4.8 Cultural Representation

Shedge often draws inspiration from Indian art forms, scripts, and cultural motifs, weaving them into his lettering and adding authenticity and depth to the title. By using scripts like Devanagari, he captures cultural nuances and linguistic heritage, resonating with the target audience. This strengthens the connection between the play and its audience, making typography an integral part of the brand identity. Evidence of experimenting with Indic scripts, like an exploration of the Bengal and Urdu scripts into Devanagari, is observed in his work.



Fig.21 . Collage depicting samples of expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Shedge inspired by indic scripts.

5. Impact of Kamal Shedge's work on current visual striking local Marathi theatre play titles

Kamal Shedge's innovative approach of designing titles for Marathi theater plays has left a lasting impression. His visually striking designs have captivated audiences and inspired a new generation of designers to push the boundaries of creativity in play title designs. The impact of Shedge's work becomes evident when comparing his designs to contemporary title designs, revealing a clear influence on style, typography, and visual storytelling techniques.

To evaluate the reach of his work, a visit was made to the studio of Akshar Shedge, a publicity designer and Kamal Shedge's son. Akshar Shedge is responsible for approximately 90% of the current Marathi play title designing industry. The discussions and visit to Akshar Shedge's studio provided valuable insights into the current state of Marathi play title design and the enduring influence of Kamal Shedge's pioneering work.



Fig.22 . Discussions with Akshar Shedge Sir at his studio.



Fig.23 . Collage depicting samples of current expressive marathi theater play titles designed by Akshar Shedge.



Fig.24 . Collage depicting samples of current expressive marathi theater play titles designed by Akshar Shedge.

An examination of Akshar Shedge's title design work reveals the influence of Kamal Shedge's style. Similarities of typographic treatments, expressiveness, composition, matra signs exploration, and elements of visual storytelling play a crucial role in conveying the underlying themes of the play. The visually striking nature of Akshar Shedge's designs not only captures the viewer's attention but also serves as a hint to the meaning of the play, making the design an integral part of the overall theatrical experience.



Fig.25 . Collage depicting samples of expressive Marathi theater play titles designed by Kamal Shedge and are still in use.

The titles listed above were created by Shedge and are still used in theater advertisements. This demonstrates his significance in this field and his enduring influence. His enormous portfolio of work serves as a tool for visual storytelling and has managed to secure a position in the market that is still relevant today.



Fig.26 . Collage depicting samples of expressive marathi theater play titles designed by other current designers.

Mentioned above are the titles designed by other designers, wherein here as well, Shedge’s influence is observed in grabbing the essence of the play. This justifies his pioneering work that will keep on inspiring generations through his expressive Devanagari.

6. Impact of Kamal Shedge’s Title Designs on Marathi Theatre: Audience Perceptions

The following table summarizes key insights from a survey conducted to analyze audience perceptions of Kamal Shedge’s title designs in Marathi theatre.

The findings highlight the strong impact of visual storytelling in shaping audience expectations and enhancing the emotional and aesthetic appeal of Marathi plays.

Sr no	Category	Key Findings
1	Familiarity with Marathi Theatre	50% watch Marathi theatre regularly
2	Awareness of Kamal Shedge's Work	Many had heard of him, but some had never noticed title designs
3	Where His Designs Were Seen	Newspapers, magazines, theatres, play venues, online platforms
4	Importance of Typography & Design in conveying the theme of a play	Rated 4 or 5 (high importance) by most respondents
5	Key Elements Catching Attention	Typography (Font & Lettering), Colors & Contrast, Imagery & Illustrations, Overall Composition
6	Influence on Audience Interest	Majority agreed that title designs influence expectations before watching a play
7	Visual Hint at Play's Meaning	Most respondents believed that his designs effectively convey the theme
8	Effectiveness of Visual Storytelling	Rated " Very Effective " or " Effective " by most
9	Contribution to Marathi Theatre's Visual Appeal	Strong agreement that Shedge's work enhances visual and emotional engagement

Table 1 . Analysis report of the survey

The responses indicate that Kamal Shedge's title designs are a crucial aspect of Marathi theatre's visual identity. While some audiences may not consciously notice these elements, the majority believe that typography, color, and composition play an essential role in setting the tone and expectations for a play. His work has been instrumental in making Marathi theatre more visually compelling and emotionally engaging.

7. Conclusion

When typography in the Indic script was still developing, Shedge's work played a pioneering role with his ability to convey meaning through typography by creating a visual language. It is acceptable to state that his expressive Devanagari lettering, for Marathi theater play titles, is an integral part of visual storytelling, as it creates the act of reading a visually and emotionally engaging experience. He skillfully guides viewers through narratives with suggestive letterforms and element placement, which hints at themes of the play without compromising legibility, thus ensuring that the typography serves both beauty and communicative appeal.

His versatile approach has significantly shaped memorable and impactful brand identities for Marathi theater play titles, depicting a delicate balance between aesthetic appeal and readability. The study's significant purpose of documenting Shedge's contribution to expressive Devanagari and the impact that he has left on the artist and current visually striking local Marathi theater play titles serves as an inspiration to typographers and design students. In the future, it is suggested that researchers and existing type designers for further exploration take inspiration from this study and design typefaces as an extension of Shedge's letterforms that are unexplored as a typeface.

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