

# [The interfacing of design mediation and the market: the case of typeface applications in India ]

## The designer- and- market synergy : an exposition into an Indian type design situation.

Deborani Duttagupta's creative efforts at type design are a statement of sublimity rather than of proclamation. In this she identifies with type designer William Addison Dwiggins' notion of letters being critically inclusive of the broader canvas of graphic design. If letters have made a difference to our everyday lives then they probably exist in a form or presence that is "as unperceived as the ticking of a clock in the movement of time". Which could be the very travesty of a basic Indian cultural attitude towards letterforms. For, there exists the instance of Buddhist calligraphy Siddham (which travelled into the East Pacific Rim countries from India in the early ADs), and which literally upheld each of its 'bijaksharas' (seed-letters) as icons of worship. Or, the Devanagari letter for 'Om' which provides a strong indexical reference to worship, since it connotes for Hinduism the most primal/ primordial and yet evolved sound intrinsic to human existence. Or Islamic calligraphy, which makes an overarching statement of aesthetics and powerplay through use of its scripts on public monuments, perhaps suggesting that letter(forms) in its highest form of abstraction could have the effect of making available, to the everyday worshipper, the only representational form of God within a situation that strictly sanctions idol-worship. Yet, Islamic calligraphy veritably continues to function as a basic entity of everyday communications.

Against this backdrop, Deborani belongs to a generation of graphic designers in India whose works roughly represent the country's conscious links to modern market systems through mediations of design. By leveraging design tools such as typefaces, their works promise to make a difference to the way printing and publishing can now begin to organise themselves around their potential users. What is not always obvious, however, is the concerted efforts of these designers to draw from a well of historically evolved typefaces and typography that were obviously not suited in their given/existing forms to cater to the current paradigms of print and desktop publishing. By making functionally workable typefaces available to the marketplace, typography in India seems suddenly to assume a dimension outside of being perceived as just a culture-product, and forever under at the threshold of a potential taxidermisation..

For a thirty-two year old, Deborani's career graph seems replete with conscious decision-making about her intentions, beginning with her move to build her design foundation through an advertising setup. It seemed a rare privilege, in 1989, to have been able to work with Ram Ray - "one of the most visible Creative Directors of the advertising industry in India", in her opinion. So, as a graphic artist right out of school from Bombay's Sir J.J.School of Arts, Deborani joined up Response in Calcutta, founded in 1987 by Ram Ray upon his return to India around the mid- 80's from a position of responsibility at the J W Thompson, San Francisco to head the Calcutta- branch of Hindustan Thompson Associates (HTA), the Indian affiliation of JWT worldwide. Ram Ray represented for Deborani not only her first major creative influence, but also her window to killer-attitudes such as lessons in creative jokes which were meant to serve as an advanced warning device for never having to take one's work so seriously as to endanger one's objective vision. Digital Response,

founded in 1989, as an advanced computer-aided graphic design subset of Response for advertising and allied services, seemed like “a versatile design studio” for its times and gave Deborani her initial glimpse into the conversion potential of Bengali typeface into a marketable product. Needless to say, it heightened Deborani’s interest in typography as a direct function of her perception of what powerful computer applications would seem to allow. For young Deborani, such applications had had the signalling of exciting times ahead - “precise typographic placements, special effects, visuals that could be created with the required fonts and sizes as in the finished design, rather than as greeked-in copylines”. That was when she equally realised the flipside of the use of this technology - that unless there existed a Bengali language software to support a library of Bengali fonts on a standard keyboard, the freedom of designing as one did with English would have to remain non-existent.

Apart from Bengali being her mother tongue there were other compelling reasons for her to wish to work towards diversifying the base for Bengali fonts. Of the twenty six official languages enshrined in the Indian Constitution and the over-thousand and odd dialects that borrow their scripts from these mother languages, Bengali happens to be the second-most popular script on the Indian subcontinent after Hindi (with 200 million people from Eastern India and Bangladesh using this script).

But even apart from the undisputed primacy commanded by the language, Deborani’s attention to Bengali typeface might have been rooted in her native sensibilities as much as in her acquired ones. While her acquired sensibilities quite simply emerged from her training in the arts and design, her native sensibilities about the Bengali script were in no small measure the function of the broader environment and the consciousness that has always informed Bengal - the land of her belonging and her upbringing, and standing as a gateway to the Eastern boundary of India. As

the first liberal products of Macaulay's education policy much in the manner in which the Japanese were products of the Meiji education policy, Bengalis had been "early seekers" of the concept of modern India. Through progressive alignments such as the Young Bengal Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "Bengalis critiqued the past, reformed society, gave birth to the political movement for Independence, and ushered in Modern India". However, in more direct relevance to the issue of typeface development arises the factor of the relatively early entry into Bengal of the hot press in its modern industrial version. Introduced initially by the East India Company around the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as an instrument to facilitate conversions into Christianity through Bengali translations of the Bible, as well as for material written originally in Bengali; the hot press soon assumed enlarged significance through its trenchant use by the British rulers to 'acclimatise' local Indians into a more widespread use of the English language for purposes of administering the country. By the thirties, the major presses in Bengal had embraced the Bengali Linotype created by Linotype, U.K. And which, by its monolithic character, was going to determine the market's future receptivity to any new font, because as it happens, the Linotype would continue to remain deeply entrenched within the prevailing print industry until well into the present.

Deborani began on a crest of radicalism by designing 'Likhani' ('to write') as part of her masters' project in 1992 under her second major creative influence, R. K. Joshi - calligrapher and typographer - as also at that time a part of the faculty at the Industrial Design Centre, Bombay where she had undertaken her master's of design in 1991. Deborani considers Likhani to be the first attempt to shake up Linotype's hitherto unchallenged position. Likhani was a handwriting-style typeface - an exercise in pure calligraphy using a round end pen - an effort that culminated

in the individual characters being digitised and finally integrated as a font. Apart from the thrill of seeing a letter transform itself from calligraphic strokes into a font through the digital medium, there was a sense of conquest in having made inroads into uncharted areas of dominance. This was the first time that anything so radical had been done to Bengali typeface since the LinotypeU.K25 of the past 50 years. Not surprisingly, therefore, Deborani's auteur now came to be determined by a post-Linotype UK25 genre that drew its inspiration and resources from the wealth and variety of styles already existing within the script itself. Primarily unearthed as calligraphic and typographic styles from manuscripts and temple inscriptions, from wood cut types of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as from decorative styles present in invitation and wedding cards, in mastheads, in story titles and book titles; in the informal handwriting of well-known individuals from the arts; and not in the least from graffiti and public writings scrawled rather infamously all over Bengal, quite predictably in India's hothouse for political debates, giving rise to Bengal's penchant for political sloganeering. And all in all, delightfully subcultural in its tone of defiance.

At the end of the day, however, what may not be discounted as a factor contributing towards the process of assimilation of information from one's culture, and information that has always been there but not necessarily taken in, is the force of one's immediate cultural environment. Deborani's 'savoir faire' may be attributed to her family's pedigree which had had, for generations together, nurtured exponents of the arts, the crafts, literature, music, political discourse, pedagogy as well as religious reforms - all happening from a university setup, the Vishwa-Bharati created by the family at the turn of the century and located a few hours away from Calcutta at Shantiniketan - the abode of peace. The most illustrious of them - Rabindranath Tagore, who happened to be her great grand uncle was a Nobel

laureate of literature among his other accomplishments, and additionally knighted by the British monarchy but an honour turned down in protest against the 'Empire's' atrocities committed in India..

In the next phase of her post-Linotype auterism, which followed her completion of her graduate degree from Bombay, arrived three fonts that she now designed as part of a dedicated group for font designing at the GIST (Group for Intelligence-based Script Technology) located at the CDAC (Centre for Development of Advanced Computing) at Pune near Bombay. 'Kaali', which is the name of a Hindu goddess embodying fertility and strength, was a text and display face drawing inspiration from a 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of the epic 'Mahabharata', and intended at "keeping the past alive in a contemporary context" The next typeface was named 'Kailash' - after the mountain in Tibet since a part of the inspiration came from Tibetan letterforms, the remaining from an early 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengali manuscript. A completely calligraphic display face, the characters had initially been drawn with 'baru', a special bamboo pen originating in Persia. The third typeface, 'Bidisha', was a redesign of a text face from the original hot metal Linotype Bengali font, with characters combining to form linear conjuncts in place of their original classical ones in order to achieve transparency of display. But there was another compelling operative factor that restricted her to the use of linear conjuncts. This was the absence of a sufficient number of characters on the ASCII code with its existing total of 256, whereas the Bengali character set in fact required almost 350 characters. The Bengali software developed by a team at the CDAC to integrate the font within the Windows environment attempted to accommodate the larger numbers within the conventional 256.

After developing the three typefaces, she now set out in the true spirit of design enterprise to feel the pulse of the market in the heart of its user territory - viz., in Calcutta's publishing district, the College Square, which has an ambience akin to that of Cambridge, Massachusetts with its "confluence" of book sellers and book lovers, but with the addition of printers and publishers thrown in for good measure. Till date, College Square continues to carry the sprinklings of a one time fountainhead for a Marxist-Leninist student movement that had erupted alongside the student revolts in Mexico City, Paris and Berkeley in the summer of 1968 . Such volatility, in no small measure, attributable to a critical mass of students and intellectuals located in those few thousand square feet of geographical expanse. It did not take her very long to get a pattern of the resistances operating in the market as a foil to any potential font innovation. The steadfast resistance put up by the big publishing houses (that owned the major dailies, weeklies, fortnightlies as well as books) to new typefaces melted ever so slowly into the middlebrow ones (that published children's books, text books and such) being indifferent to innovations. The advertising industry at the other end of the spectrum showed almost complete receptivity to the idea of a change from the Linotype. Obviously, the resistance pattern resonated with what the different segments of the market were willing to stake. The print industry, never quite part of mainstream consumerism, has often had to operate in the market strapped for profit-margins. Unless a particular print product itself has been a part of the demand paradigm of the conspicuous consumption model, such as in the instance of publications like the Vogue or the Harper's Bazaar as in the West. Advertising, on the other hand has been the earth mother of all things that were meant to be consumed and hence driven by a continuous stream of cash-generativeness..

Ordinarily, this should have spurred Deborani into making her first proposition of change to her erstwhile mentor and creative guru - Ram Ray, until recently at the helm of affairs at one of India's largest advertising setups - Clarion. However, simultaneous to her work at typeface upgrading at CDAC she seemed to have honed to perfection her task of developing mental strategies aimed at breaking the spell of the Linotype Bengali font, which in her own opinion seemed so "ingrained in the minds and the psyche of the users." And typically, she arrived at a decision that challenged her to make a difference through the critical mediation of design, not where it hurt the least but where it hurt the most, viz., through big publishing..

. That was when she joined the Ananda Bazar Patrika (ABP) the nerve-centre of publishing in Bengal. As one of the largest publishing houses in India , ABP owned the country's largest circulated single-centre Bengali daily (reaching out to a readership of 10million on a weekday, 14 million over the weekend ); Bengali language fortnightlies for children as well as for fashion; publishing rights for the works of renowned poets and writers; English language dailies, as well as a sports and business fortnightly, again in English; and above all, its 'piece de resistance' - the 'Desh'- a literary fortnightly of long- standing publication and considered the Granta of India. Aware of the big brotherliness of a large publishing setup such as this, Deborani also let herself to understand the potential gains which, expectedly, would recompens for the anticipated trade-offs. Working for ABP, which is the same age as the BBC (b. 1922), would carry an unwritten assurance that the work will enjoy wide readership; and if one was going to spin out innovations then by virtue of ABP's credibility alone these would set themselves up as veritable conventions to be followed by others in the future.

Deborani's proposition to ABP's editor-in-chief Avik Sarkar, known for his progressive attitude toward change, was two-fold: that, in collaboration with a software team she would create a well-integrated Bengali software that would work with current applications, such as QuarkXpress etc., and secondly, she would endeavour to break the enigma of Linotype Bengali, and create "some really good fonts that would be far superior in form and structure to those of the existing ones". This was 1995, and it seems that Deborani's typefaces had had a certain convincing quality about them for Avik Sarkar to have firstly accepted her offer, and secondly, to have taken a personal interest in opening up opportunities to see a future product-to-market run happening with the typefaces, that Deborani along with a designer-colleague were now going to work on.

The role of the entrepreneur in facilitating or debilitating a design intervention merits some attention here. As the prime mover of this intervention, Avik Sarkar had shown a remarkable clarity of purpose. To cite an instance, his position on the use of technology clearly stated that while the tool at hand being offered through technology could be subverted in favour of another, the purity of the script could not be interfered with. In other words, the dominant guiding principle would have to be innovations, not at any cost but innovations underlain by a healthy respect for the historically evolved reality in order to attain as seamless a transition as possible - all in all a matter of upholding the broad issue of cultural integrity while at the same time, honouring the more specific issue of design integrity. A decidedly Neville Brodyish posturing about the inherent value of continuity - in a world where most entrepreneurial leadership today, balks at the idea of having to extend its vision beyond the industry's latest innovation.

Thus started Deborani's first task - to design a multifold, language-independent, Bengali software for Bengali typefaces that would contain all the compound characters(conjuncts) in addition to the basic characters, vowels, vowel signs and all the ascender/descender groupings. Equally she was aware of the boundary conditions of design for a daily newspaper - its distinct typographical needs in terms of the fonts' readability, legibility, and utility and yet having to maintain neutrality of visual effect so as not to overpower news or news hierarchy. What resulted from this mandate was the Ananda Expanded in 1996 in which she designed two weights 'Bold' instead of 'Normal' and 'Extra Bold' instead of 'Bold', which now made both the weights of the new font bolder than those in the Bengali Linotype.

Her future endeavours would seem to include the designing of an equal weight font in Bengali, as well as compensate for the lack of good italics never quite designed in Bengali.

Deborani's work offers the prototype for three design constructs; the first, based in an attitude that seeks to draw elements of design from one's roots and tradition, and then connect them up with modern technology in order to make them functional in real world setups. The second, based in a certain persuasiveness towards convincing the corporate sector about the viability of design input in the act of productionising. And the third, based in the much-needed deconstruction of English language's sphere of influence in India by putting to work one's design training and sensibilities into regional focus - whereas the usual pattern worked in the reverse in India, with designers from premiere design schools remaining embedded in western codes of training and sensibilities and then transposing their designs, the methodologies, their very visions of design through these alien screens onto their respective productive spheres, and which, at the end, obviously lacking definition by not being adequately rooted.

Firm: The Ananda Bazar Patrika (ABP) Group

Location: Calcutta, India

Principal name(s): Avik Sarkar and Arup Sarkar

Number of Staff: 1800

Age: of firm: 75 ; of designer: 32

Educational Background : Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) from Sir J J School of Arts, Bombay and Master of Design (M. Des) from Industrial Design Centre (IDC) at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay

Place of Birth: Calcutta

What is your favourite place in the city where you live?

The Eden Gardens Stadium. Watching a game of cricket on a winters day!

And Why?

My love for sports; also it is the largest expanse of greenery in the heart of the city. The incredible crowd of a nearly 100,000 spanning an age group of 6 to 60 - all of them equally enthralled and excited about cricket! And finally, the active participation of the Eden cricket crowd, whether through writing funny one-liners on placards or by making human waves.

What is your favourite word in your own language?

Shubhojatra

And what does it mean?

"Auspicious journey". Also used while wishing someone a Happy Journey.