



BDes | Project I

Multilingual Storytelling

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Guide:

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Declaration

I declare that this project report is based on my own work, carried out during the course of the Fall semester, 2021, at the IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay. The project was supervised by Prof. Ravi Poovaiah. I declare that this written report represents my own ideas, communicated in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been borrowed, I have mentioned the original source. I also declare that I have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not falsified, misinterpreted or fabricated any idea, data, facts or source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be because of disciplinary action by the Institute and penal action from the source in the case the work has not been incorrectly cited or if permissions have not been taken where necessary.

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Approval Sheet

The B.Des. Design Project 1, titled “Multilingual Storytelling” by Krishna Nair, Roll no 18U130016, is approved, in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor in Design Degree at the IDC School of Design, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Project Guide

Chairperson

External Examiner

Internal Examiner

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Abstract

India is a country of many languages. In fact, it is a country that has been divided on the basis of languages. Each of these languages holds within it a treasure trove of knowledge and historical memory. This is reflected in the stories told in these languages.

As part of the system design project done last semester, I'd been able to look at language learning within the context of the Indian Education System. The final output of this project was a community publication company for digital and print media called Bhaasha Co.

Through this project, I have attempted to take it further and use storytelling as a means to bring people from different linguistic communities together. I was quite keen to bring together multiple languages in the same plot and space. Zines seemed to be an interesting way to achieve this. The use of such a medium that also made artistic collaboration easier fit in quite well with the Bhaasha Co. narrative.

Introduction

Multilingualism in India

Most Indians, especially in the urban space, know multiple languages in varying levels of proficiency by default. The nature of multilingualism also tends to be complementary. Thus, an individual might speak one language at home, another in the neighbourhood and yet another in certain formal spaces.

India, as a country, also consists of many languages. As the saying goes, *kos-kos badle paani, chaar kos par baani* (the language spoken in India changes every few kilometres, just like the taste of water) India is multilingual by default, and not quite by design. It also serves an important place in the cultural identity of most people. However, it is interesting to note that it is usually not a closed identity, but an open community of language speakers. A fine example would be the place Rajnikanth, originally a Maharashtrian, holds in the hearts of Tamilians.

However, with the onset of globalisation, there is a shift towards languages like English and Hindi as they also help in maintaining a sense of uniformity and therefore, a

general lack of desire to pick up new languages. While there is appeal in its convenience, it does not have leverage from a cultural and political standpoint. Learning multiple languages has also shown to be beneficial in developing cognitive abilities of growing children. To quote D P Pattanayak, the first director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, "In the developed world...two languages are considered a nuisance, three languages uneconomical, and many languages absurd. In multilingual countries, many languages are a fact of life, any restriction in the choice of language is a nuisance, and one language is not only uneconomical, it is absurd."

Storytelling

Who doesn't love a good story? Stories have the power to captivate imaginations and draw people to cultures that are not their own. I'm always keen to narrate a story and in India, there's never a dearth of those. In fact, you even have multiple versions of the same story. A K Ramanujan's *Three Hundred Ramayanas* served as an inspiration in attempting to gather stories that have regional variations but with similar underlying themes that everyone can relate to.

Bhaasha Co.

Bhaasha Co. was the result of a system design course done in the previous semester. It is a community publication company that serves as a space for content creation in different languages. This was heavily influenced by the findings of Dr. Devy, a prominent linguist who is an advocate for the historical knowledge languages hold. This seemed to have great potential for storytelling.

The mission of Bhaasha Co. was to create a platform for curated content to help preserve Indian languages by promoting a culture of multilingualism through storytelling in a socially conscious fashion. The vision was to help people interact with the languages and create a sense of community.

Thus, I was hoping to take this further with my project and in turn, create something that will fit in the narrative of Bhaasha Co.



Primary research

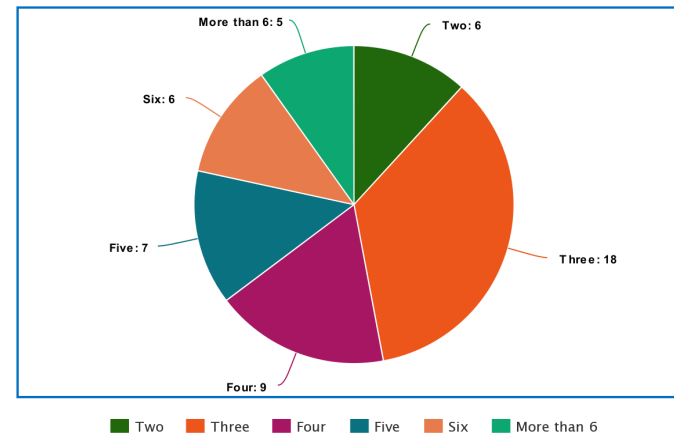
I started by going through some of the earlier research I'd done and attempted to build up on the insights I'd gained from it. These revolved mainly around the benefits of learning multiple languages as well as the need to conserve them.

Furthermore, the talks by Prof. Mohanty and Dr. Vicki Couzens as part of Typo Day 2021 also helped gain a few insights with regards to conservation of languages and culture. Some of the notable points were as follows:

- Conservation of languages plays a key role in the conservation of biodiversity as well.
- Loss of traditional crafts often led to depletion of the local vocabulary as well.
- "Rationalising" the mother tongue to fit into political records often led to over generalisation and alienation.
- A strong foundation in one's mother tongue makes it easier to pick up other languages over time.
- Very often, objects carry stories and culture is found in the relationships and connections amongst people.

But most Indians are multilingual

While attempting to explain the scope of the project, a recurring point made was about how most Indians are already multilingual in a sense. I conducted a study to gain an understanding on the number of languages my peers were proficient in. It was noted that the majority of them had varying levels of proficiency in at least three languages. Urban Indian cityscapes, parents from different linguistic backgrounds, forms of entertainment like films, music literature etc., and mandated courses in schools were some of the reasons for the same.



Observing the interaction between my peers who hailed from different backgrounds on a daily basis and especially on days of cultural significance, like festivals, also highlighted the curiosity within most of them to know more about each other's cultures and languages. This often led to an exchange of stories and practices followed.

Design brief

After the initial research that was quite broad, I revisited my motivation for this project. I decided to focus on attempting to bring multiple languages into one plot/space in a manner that would highlight the parallels between different cultural communities and how language helps to serve and reflect culture and, in the process, bring people closer.

Research on existing content

I began by studying existing content that is shared across multiple languages and how it is done. The Adi Kahani and DreamWeaver series by Pratham Books and apps like Google Bolo and Duolingo were interesting studies that focused on the process of language learning. Works of Kohie Sugiura and Tom Ockerse helped with studying layouts. Poonam Girdhani's *Dastan Little Prince Ki* brought together French and Urdu through a dastangoi. Quite a lot of Indian films have snippets of interactions in multiple languages and the medium of film helped retain how natural such conversations can be in an Indian setting. Bringing type and audio together seemed like a potential path this project could take and the works of David Small proved to be an interesting study for the same. I also noted that there was a substantial dearth in pieces of literature that had been translated from one Indian language to the other.

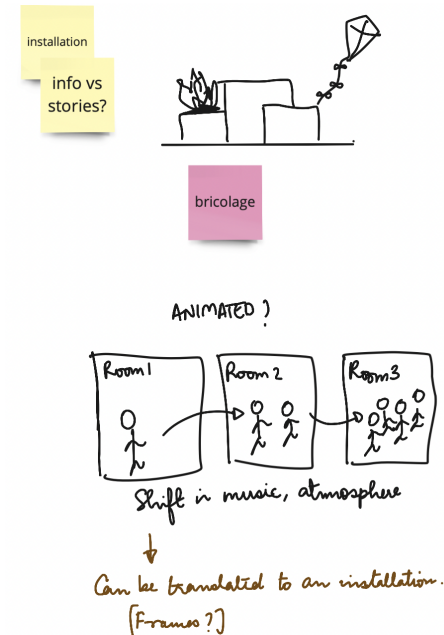


Ideation

After the further stages of research, I decided to look a bit more into other possible avenues I could work on, especially ones that could use multiple media.

Using the medium of film/moving images that could be juxtaposed with audio was an enticing option as it would have made a slice of life narration more efficient. Installing a bricolage was another option to bring together different media in the same space.

However, in the end, I decided to go back to my initial prospect of using print media. Zines seemed to be an exciting way to achieve my objectives. A key inspiration was the interaction I had observed at IDC, especially while celebrating festivals and everyone seemed to have a different version of celebrating it.



Final output: ZINES

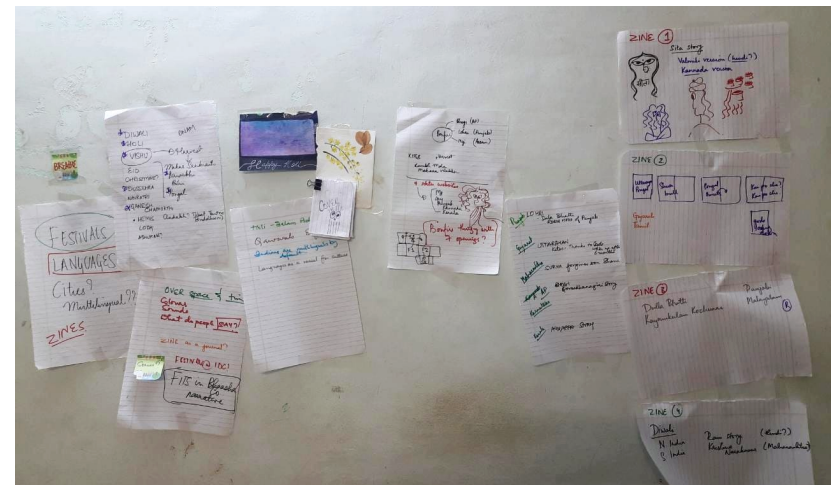
Zines

Zines are usually DIY, small-scale publications that consist of original or appropriated text and/or images. These can be made by a single person or a small group of people. This aspect of zines, and the fact that they're often curated as a form of expression and creation fit in perfectly with the narrative Bhaasha Co. was trying to achieve. Zines also tends to be a medium that could bring people together in its creation and hence, enable a more engaging exchange of stories. It can also be circulated for everyone to enjoy.

As my final output, I created a series of zines that attempted to bring together narratives from multiple languages.

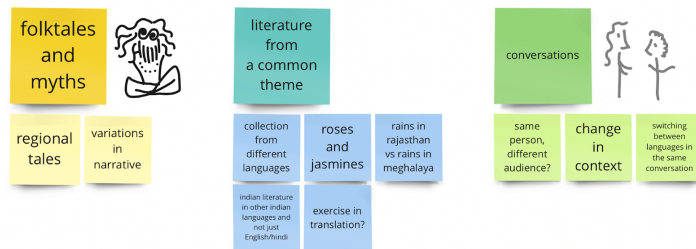
Themes and conceptualisation

The themes I attempted to bring into the zines I created revolved around festivals and the different ways in which they're celebrated, regional variations of mythologies, interactions in a multicultural cityscape, and other narratives that run parallel to each other in different parts of the country.



Content

Content for the zines were sought out in folktales, regional variations of myths, literature that revolved around a common theme, festivals and how they are celebrated, slice of life conversations, so on and so forth.



Typesetting

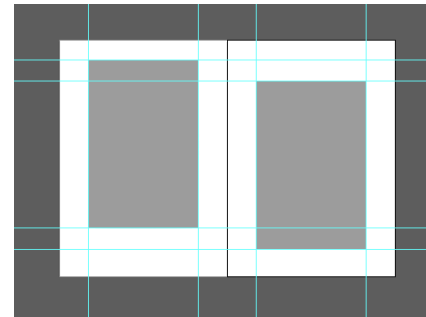
For the trial and sample versions, I decided to tell the stories in just **two languages** and so, looked at good strategies for typesetting bilingual books.

These included:

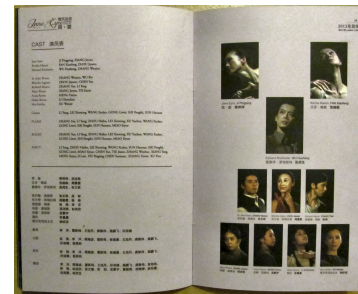
- (a) Change in font and colour
- (b) Italicising (especially useful when both languages use the same script)



- (c) Change in position of type area



- (d) Horizontal separation



- (e) Columns
- (f) Upside down (content in one language starts from the front while the other does from the back)



Trial: Studying layout

The Story of Diwali: Narkasur vs Raavan

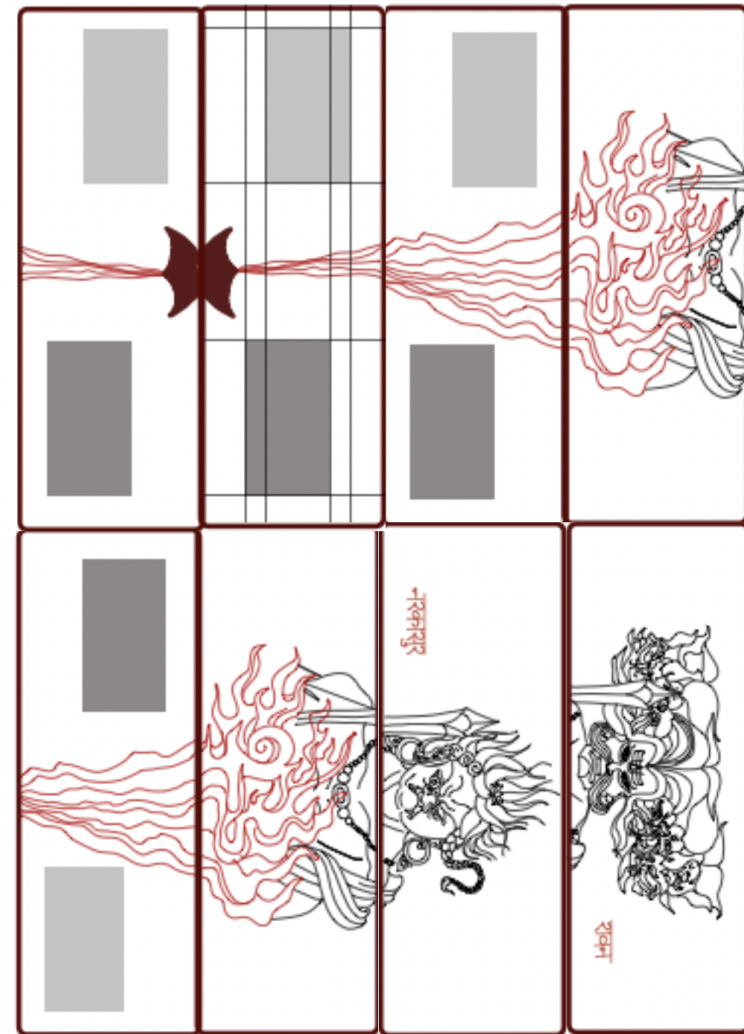
I tried out how different plots could be translated into zines. To try out the medium, I chose to work with the story of why Diwali is celebrated in the country.

These trials were to mainly serve as an experiment in how the story could be presented using the chosen medium.

In Northern India, Diwali is celebrated to mark the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after defeating Raavan. Effigies of Raavan are set on fire during Dussehra celebrations.

In regions like Goa, Diwali is celebrated to mark the victory of Lord Krishna over Narkasur. Narkasur was a tyrant who ruled over the land of Goi/Gomtak. The people of Goa pray to the gods who then ask Krishna for help. A great battle is fought from which Krishna emerges victorious. During Narkachturdashi, large effigies of Narkasur are built and burnt.

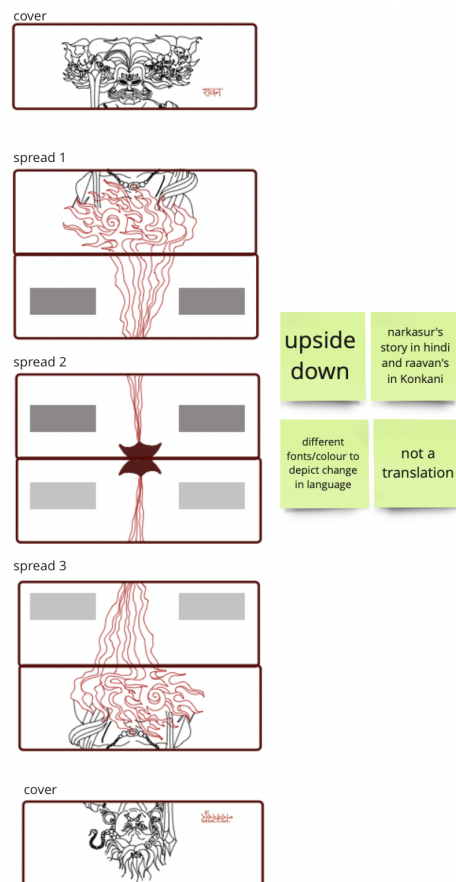
Both these stories run parallelly. The trial zine follows the upside down approach, wherein each plot starts from each of the covers. I tried out two versions of the trial zine.



Trial zine A

For the first trial, I made the story of Narkasur be told in Hindi while Raavan's was told in Konkani. One runs from the front to back and vice versa. Both Konkani and Hindi use the Devanagari script, so a difference in font and colour could be used to help the reader differentiate the two.

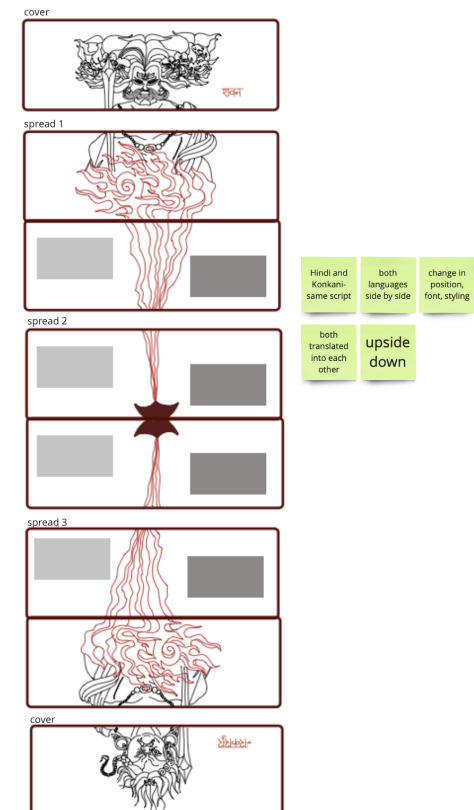
However, this poses a difficulty wherein the reader cannot access both stories if they're not fluent in both.



Trial zine B

In the next trial, each story is translated into the other and runs parallelly. The upside down approach is still maintained with each story starting from opposite covers.

Differences in positioning of text, font style and colour are to be used to help the user differentiate between the two languages.



Sample *Sita's story*

To create a sample zine, I picked Sita's story, specifically the Kannada version of the story and Valmiki's.

In Kannada, Sita means “he sneezed”. She is said to have borne out of Ravana's sneeze who later was asked to leave her. In Valmiki's version of the story, she is found in a furrow by King Janaka and is named Sita. (Sita means ‘furrow’ in Sanskrit). Here, I had a story where the etymological root of the word had a direct connection to the plot of the story.

For the sample zine, I attempted to bring together these two stories and narration ran in such a way that Valmiki's origin story served as a continuation to the Kannada version of the story. The story is being narrated in both languages in this case.

A change in positioning of the text is used to make it easier for the reader to differentiate between two languages. This was also made easier in this case since both languages use different scripts.



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