



## Experimental Typography

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### Experiments in Bengali Film Titles: 1930s till Ray

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to contextualize the notion of experimentation in typography broadly in sphere commercial art of bygone era. Experiments can be understood as shifts from the dominant ethos and practices, as well as taking it beyond the connotative and pictorial aspects of typographical design. We look specifically in the arena of Bengali poster design, and particularly analyze examples from the early decades, from 1930s to mid-50s. The paper opens up the discussion on revisiting archives and archival materials for a better understanding of vernacular design history and lost typographical sensibilities, which is essential to extend the discourse in design studies.

**Key words:** *Film Titles, Poster Art, Bengali Cinema, typography in Indic script.*

#### 1. Introduction

Peter Bilak in his essay 'Experimental Typography. Whatever that means' narrates various conceptions held by typographers involved in experiments to test/ prove ideas or phenomenon – a notion borrowed from the sciences (Bilak, 2006). Within the controlled conditions of studios, such trial(s) of ideas are permissible and responsibilities of results are generally absent. However, in the realm of commercial design, the notion remains particularly challenging to define. To what degree do we call any graphic design endeavor to be experimental depends largely upon how far is the design away from either the visual culture of that era or region, or the generic conventions. We may consider a work to be experimental if it questions formal structures in place. To borrow from deconstruction theory, experimental typography can be defined as one which “confronts and questions the prerequisite structures of what was considered to be good typographic design”

(Williams, 2014), and furthers the accepted notions of typographic abilities. By the above enunciation, it might be interesting to view an instance of typographical design as an experimental work from the following framework – firstly, how is it a shift from its contemporary works and predecessors; secondly, does it break the general rules of typography to achieve an idea. In the subsequent sections, I deal with these viewpoints as I look into detail the poster art, and specifically the film titles, of the late-early period of Bengali cinema.

## 2. Context

It has been over a hundred years since the advent of filmmaking in Bengal, India and in the language of Bengali<sup>1</sup>. Over the time, all aspects of filmmaking has undergone seismic shifts, along with aspects of commercial graphic design of filmic paraphernalia. With emergence of newer sensibilities and styles with each passing era, the lettering work of the film title (adopted in the film posters, lobby cards, handbooks, booklets, advertisements and the like) has seen significant change as well. At the current juncture, it is worthwhile to look back at few of the title letterings of the films and understand their experimental nature of work, reading from the aforementioned framework.

There are a few demarcations that I drew while I attempt to look back. Firstly, the film posters and promotional materials in the first decade of Bengali cinema are rare and sparse for notable comparisons and analysis. This necessitated the need to restrict the study from the start of 1930s onwards for which resources are available. Secondly, Satyajit Ray's title designs for his own films was the definitive departure from the aesthetic that Bengali film titles bore; and had subsequently impacted the nature of graphic design in his times. This distinction is aptly noted in the words of Andrew Robinson, when he pens the biography of Ray, saying:

Even if one had no knowledge of Ray's first incarnation as a commercial artist before he took to film-making, his film credit sequences would soon make one aware of his talent as a typographer, calligrapher and illustrator. They range from the archaic priestly script of *Pather Panchali*, through the exquisite 'postcards' of Darjeeling life printed in 'Tibetanised' Bengali in *Kanchenjunga* and the delightful drawings of kings, courtiers and peasants in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, to the modern typefaces of the titles in *Days and Nights in the Forest* and *The Home and the World*, behind which can be seen the blurred motion of the forest and the

flickering conflagration of Nikhil's funeral pyre. Most of Ray's films have titles that subtly and elegantly contribute to the mood of the film. (Robinson 1989, pp. 296)

We have restricted for this study the period before Ray's own work (1955 and further) dominated or his influence highlighted the typographic scene in film titles.

Within the said period as defined, one could identify the major trends that existed in typographic practices while depicting mastheads and titles in Bengali. Firstly, the name of the film (or broadly, any commercial entity, enterprise) would be written in the available headline typefaces, or generic block-type typefaces extreme thick strokes (in fig. 1).



Figure. 1 Title art of *Natir Puja* (1932), *Nandini* (1941), *Udayer Pothe* (1944), *Dotana* (1945), *Paaper Pothe* (1943), and *Obhijog* (1947) (Left to right)

In many cases of magazine advertisements, no separate title was designed, and the generic typeface of the magazine was used to compose. Secondly, the block woodcut prints and their idiosyncratic usage of waves and flowers was another popular form of representation of the title. Thirdly, there were several imitations of the Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles within the Bengali letterform anatomy, as a monolinear variations to the modulated stroke structure of the traditional form [Fig. 2].



Figure. 2 Title art of *Abhinoy* (1938), *Aahuti* (1941), *Bijoyini* (1941), *Porineeta* (1942), *Bideshini* (1944), *Bande Mataram* (1946), and *Bratacharini* (1955) (Left to right)

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Initial Ideas

In the early years of 1920-30s, instances of separately-created mastheads of the names of the films are few. Rather, we find advertisements on the entertainment magazines, carrying announcements of the to-be released or running films, in the regular body typefaces of the printed matter. One can compare and find similarities of such practice, dominant in both Bollywood (film production centered in Bombay, current-day Mumbai) and Tollywood (film production centered in Calcutta, current-day Kolkata; Bengali being the language used dominantly), as in fig. 3. Other generic trends include blown-up main characters' image with film title written in big block text, ornamentations and decorations of printer borders and headpieces. We look into examples which deviate from the rest.

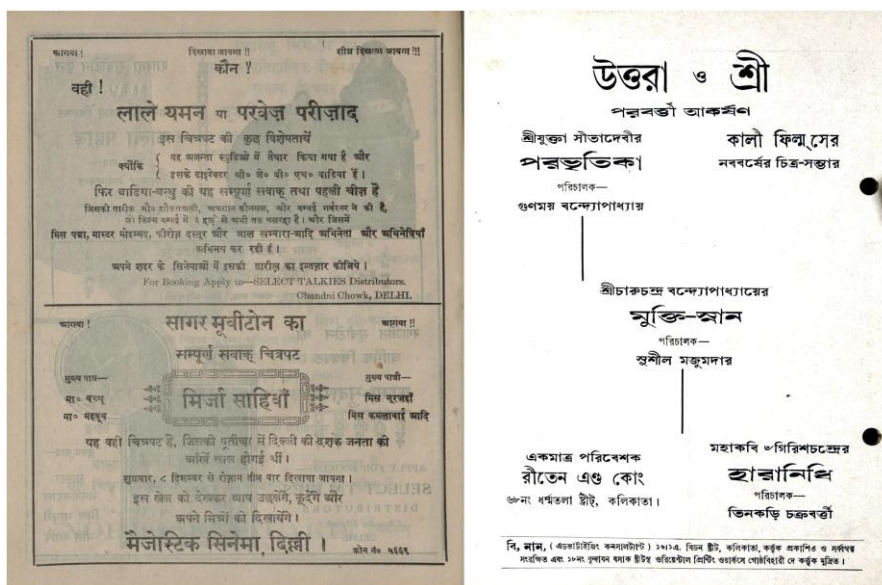


Figure. 3 Page from magazine *Chitrapat*, V.1(28), 1933, pp.10 (left) and page from publicity booklet for *Dasturmoto-Talkie* (1937), pp. 14.

Broadly, our selection of titles follow a microtypographic reading, focussing on typeface, individual graphic signs and letter structures only, in contrast to mesotypographic or macrotypographic study. The posters of the ones chosen are shown in fig. 4.



Figure. 4 Title art of *Tarubala* (1936), *Dasturmoto Talkie* (1937), *Kochi Songsod* (1937), *Obhinetri* (1940), *Bhisma* (1942), *Cartoon* (1949), and 42 (1951) (Left to right)

### 3.2 Detailed Discussion of select examples

The Bengali script has distinct straight-edged stems and *matra* (*shirorekha* in Devanagari terminology) with bulbous loops and knots of blobs. One of the (probably) earliest instances of envisaging the characters away from such traditional form, into letters of strict geometry, was seen for *Tarubala* (1936). The translation of the reed-pen shapes of Bengali into shapes of strong architectural leanings bears influence of Art Deco style. It is distinct from efforts to imitate the Art Deco characteristics (refer fig. 1, titles of *Abhinoy* (1938) and *Aahuti* (1941), for example, which postdate *Tarubala*) and goes further by adapting it to the nuances of the script. The particular deviations attempted, which are significant departures, are:

Semi-circular curves of ত imagined in straight line edges; Triangular structure of র imagined as circular shape; Half-circular curves of ল imagined as straight-edged steps; *Nukta* (বিন্দু) and the side-bearing joiner রু (়-কার) both imagined as a solid triangle; Two thick parallel lines imagined along the strokes of stress.



Figure. 5 A blow-up of the masthead for *Tarubala* (1936).

Following closely, we find an attempt made in a similar fashion. In 1937, *Kochi Songsod* modelled the letters, either in rectangular or sections of circle forms, similar to treatments of *Acier Noir* and *Bifur* typefaces (of Art Deco typography). The regular shapes of ক, চ and দ have been imagined as half, full and parts of a circle blending with rectangular strokes (refer fig. 6). Configuring the identity of the letters to deploy a certain mood is a practice that is undertaken in this case. Both *Kochi-Songsod* and *Cartoon* (1949) moulded the letters into circular shapes to play on the humour of film itself. This plays along the role of the poster, ingraining use of type, as a new form of sign. The design of the image (character) of the object of publicity is ingrained in physicality of the lettering. Incorporation of the circular shape in the title as well as a recurrent motif in the layout of the poster (illustrations of wave forms, boat, lovebirds) and the body text type contributes to the physiognomy of the composition.

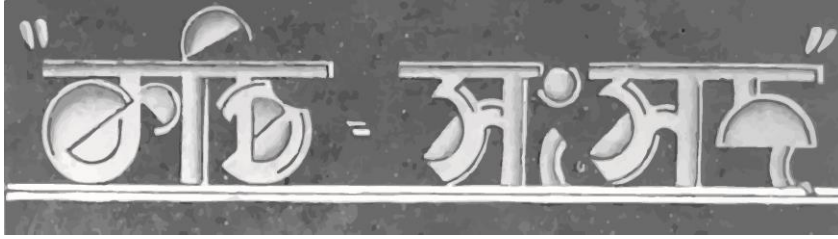


Figure. 6 A blow-up of the masthead for *Kochi-Songsod* (1937).



Figure. 7 A blow-up of the masthead for *Cartoon* (1949), vectorised.

In the remaining crop of film titles for discussion, we focus on the pictorial potential in order to act as icons signifying objects, affairs or actions beyond the immediate semantic of the text. The personality of a charismatic actor, with turmoils of personal and public life, has been a subject of film story for ages. *Obhinetri* (1940) imagines the dichotomous life of the heroine fraught with spotlight of focus and darkness, with the title oriented vertically and a strip of red carpet running along its length. The highlighted part on the body of the letters are illuminated in white while the rest is in dark/ black. The framing spatially integrates the visual rhyme of four glyph units, arranged in squares, with the strip leading the visual scan-path.

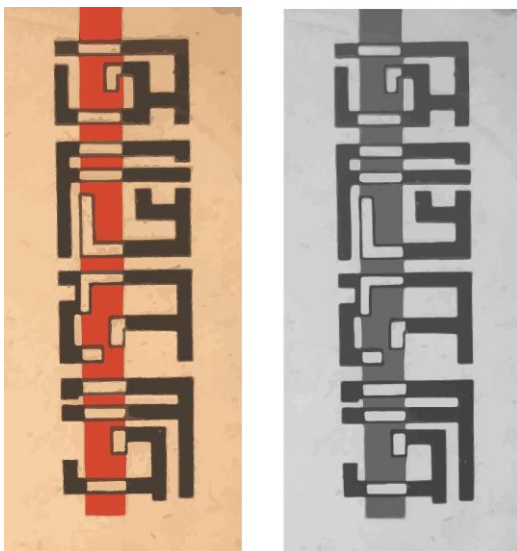


Figure. 8 A blow-up of the masthead for *Obhinetri* (1940) (left) and vectorised, in grayscale (right).

*Bhisma* (1942) portrays the eponymous character from the epic *Mahabharata* in his stead as an upright, morally persistent prince, family-man and warrior. In the microcosm of the epic with its many strands of characters and struggles, Bhisma is a towering figure of constance, sturdy in his devotion towards promise. The title-art shows the name embedded in an invisible circle, akin to a dot as an auspicious mark on forehead, a seal/ stamp of authority, or the sun as halo. The strokes are slender without superfluous ornamentations, and are bold without a hint of fraility. The motif provides a rich textual significance through the sensory qualites of the pictorial elements, which attain a deep organic unity.



Figure. 9 A blow-up of the masthead for *Bhisma* (1942), vectorised.

Nationalism provides for “perhaps the most compelling identity myth in the modern world” (Smith 1991) with language being one of the modes of stating the identification. The orthographic image of the language blends into the seemingly emblematic marker of nationalistic fervour for the film *42* (1951), which uses a story set in the backdrop of Quit India movement of 1942 to highlight the atrocities on and struggles by Indians. Captured within the two solitary numerals, the material body is smoky, almost unclear in an overlapping envelope of red and black despair, darkness and mayhem. Here, the national and linguistic areas do not coincide, however capture the collective conscious of the land at large, reigniting the passion plays of the independence won a few years back. Not only is a persuasive image created, but the finer emotions of sensibility and collective philosophical belief play in. This remains one of the glorious usage of type in films, conveying the mood with minimalty.



Figure. 10 Poster of 42 (1951)

In the final example, we choose a film that can be termed dramatization of the type. Not simply because the film promotional announces its plotline to be “rich with drama” and “intriguing premise”, but it caters to the promise by having three different title art treatment (as shown in fig. 11). It is arguably the first instance of such variety of lettering employed in film publicity, each significantly differing from the other. We, however, do not focus on how well it fits, but rather appreciate the novelty of doing “it in a way that no one has done it before”, as Kurt Schwitters had once put it. The main title on the cover of the booklet shows a figurine announcing the title, the various components of the letter structure emerge out in organic shapes - the transformation of the aural into visuo-verbal representation. The second instance appears on the verso page of the booklet, in the style of a faux-handwriting, with continuous conjoined letters. The third one appears within the text, in strict geometrical shapes, where many conventions of the script have been modified – like the flowing stroke of ট and ী have been imagined as spurs, the triangular structure of র as semicircle, and an unique treatment of স in the conjunct স্ত.

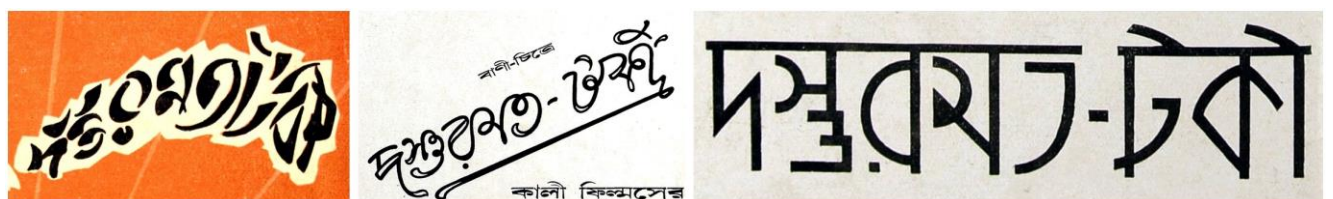


Figure. 11 Title art of *Dasturmata-Talkie* (1937), Three versions appearing on promotional booklet cover, verso and within article.



It is important to note that in the non-digital era of designing and printmaking, almost none of the discussed examples use traditional tools of brushes or reed/ bamboo-nib pens in organic writing styles or even attempt to closely mimic the same. Later on, since late 1990s the use of dry brush technique to draw the name gained popularity in title designing in Bengali. In this aspect, the examples can be considered as attempts to break away from the normative orthographic practice and trials of experiment with letterform structure.

### 3.3 Other notable examples

Apart from the ones discussed above, there have been some interesting uses of type which merit a generic note rather than individual discussion. We can group these title arts in two categories. Firstly, there are examples of what can be called cross-cultural usage of type. In films which portray a particular ethnicity or race, the script followed in that geographical location has been used to write the title (refer to fig. 12). Though not extremely innovative in execution, such attempts have tried to visually match the type with the script and instantiated a certain feel or 'authenticity'. However, the act of the affirmation of another culture (Arabic, Chinese, Farsi into Bengali) to appropriate the film's needs deserves some thought. Secondly, there are instances of transforming the type as metaphorical word-image of the theme. The optical signs of movement-experience have been translated in terms of typographic-image, wherein physical characteristics of the type present a kinesthetic experience of the turmoil of events. The tension of separation, the horror of phantasm and the sweeping storm is embodied in the dynamic, three-dimensional nature of the letters, as shown in fig. 13.



Figure. 12 Posters of *Alibaba* (1936), *Chiner Putul* (1951) and *Baghdad* (1952) (Left to right)

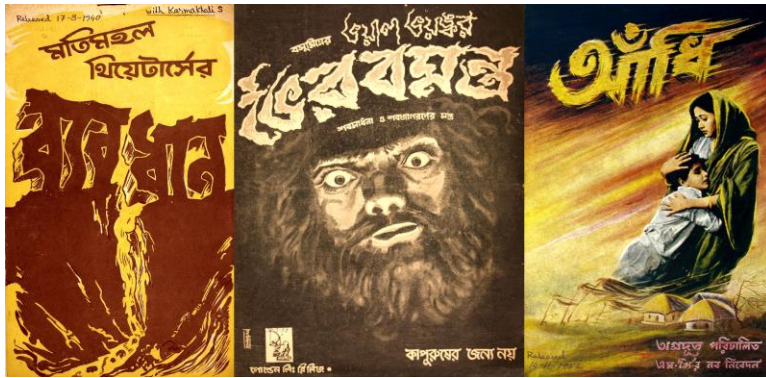


Figure. 13 Posters of *Bybodhan* (1940), *Bhoirobmontrô* (1951) and *Andhi* (1952) (Left to right)

It is also pertinent to note that there have been other instances of very interesting experiments done in typography, which has shown up in product advertisements. A number of them were encountered in the film magazines, promotional booklets, paraphernalia etc. when a search for relevant material for the study was undertaken. We have chosen to look only into film titles, to restrict the scope of analysis. Of course, type design for film titles or film promotion is not the only means to capture the public imagination; however, it is a dominant one to put forth innovative works to a broader field of vision.

#### 4. Implications

We have chosen the inexhaustive set of titles for them enacting out specific nuances in typographic innovation and advancing the conversation in practice. When compared to other titles produced in the same timeframe, these have attempted deviate from prevailing patterns, which exist due to conventions (and structural limitations) of the Bengali script, or stem from set rules of film-studio culture. Surely they have attempted to deviate, but how much they have permeated into discourse of erstwhile painters/ designers is uncertain. Since the creators of such work is not acknowledged, it is not possible to ascertain these works as voicing of anticonventionalism by the individual. We have no data to analyze the same on basis of audience acceptability, which is often a marker of breakthrough experimental interventions. Neither do we have a definitive catalog of Bengali typefaces arranged chronologically to understand the nature of departure from the popular text types used in print. These remain as shortcomings in the study. Some directions can be achieved if archives are uncovered/ recovered.

In the course of lookout for film titles for the current purpose, few issues were unearthed. A study of the extant Bengali typefaces of that period would have indicated a compact picture vis-à-vis trends in experimentation in titles. However, literature survey done in

context of Bengali typography indicated lack of resources towards genealogy of types, nomenclature, production and influences. Accounts provided by Ross (1999) indicate efforts within missionary and colonial paradigms of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, and further down only in connection to the development of the dominant Linotype Bengali typeface. As such, the history and tradition of development of numerous Bengali typefaces (Double Great, Great Antique, Great Primer, Bourgeois Antique, Bourgeois et al. just to name a few) are not documented, except for references in many undated type catalogs of the middle/ late twentieth century. This points to bigger issues of archival documentation and maintenance of artefacts of print culture import. Active effort is required to salvage the artefacts before obsolescence and complete termination. Even before an analysis from typographical/ graphic design perspective can be undertaken, effort must be made to assemble the rich body of poster art in Bengali filmdom in a coherent, accessible archive. Akin to works of Mazumdar (2003) and Pinto & Sippy (2008) in relation to Bollywood, what is missing is similar work in relation to visual culture of Bengali film publicity material. Only then can a researcher proceed to interpret the artefacts and lay forth a critical evaluation of objects of popular culture and produce. Current practitioners of typography need to be ever alert in their search for newer sources of inspiration, and they might want to look into traditions of the past, to extend their imagination and add to the variety.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study tries to put forth two notions. Prima facie, we produce an inexhaustive spread of unorthodox, nontraditional and aesthetic innovations made in the realm of poster art typography in a particular timeframe. Explanations have been provided as to how the examples differ from the traditional flow of affairs, looking from some framework of typographic, graphic design and visual design. However, it is not an end in itself. Such and similar exercise can bear epistemic implications for neophyte designer. It can shape him/her better in the stead of experimenting, i.e., trying things out different from current conventions, only if he/she is abreast of the developments and evolution of typography historically. The current design education pedagogy can supplement itself with a curriculum of revisiting the history and font tradition. Popular culture gives an easy access to history of typographical discourse, and how various typographic elements bear markers of enculturation. It bears enormous significance, as Dalvi (2012) notes:

Pragmatically speaking, for type designers, it is essential to understand that members within a culture or identifying with a tradition will, by and large share preferences on earlier established visual shapes in typefaces. (pp.30)

The knowledge of the 'earlier established visual shapes' leads the path towards extending, furthering and even arriving at experiments. The latter cannot but follow the former. One believes that revisiting the repositories of the past in order to understand the bygone modes of production is an important knowledge to be imparted to any student of vernacular culture and indigenous design.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The earliest efforts of filmmaking in India, and not just in Bengal, is credited to Hiralal Sen. Refer to Rajadhyaksha, A. & Willemen, P. (1998) *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp.17-18 for further chronological details.

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