



Typography and Children
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Alphabets as Visuals

Can one treat letter-art effectively as illustrations for children?

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Abstract: Typography in children's books, is more often used as a functional element. Children's picture and chapter books are predominantly illustrated, where the illustrations act as a tool to elaborate the text and help understand its meaning. Illustrations can transform simple text into something exciting for children. The visuals help children in comprehending the content better and improve their interest in reading, making the text more approachable. But, can the written words get more expressive such that they become the prominent visual, thus assisting in bringing out the meaning of the text, and at the same time open another avenue of visualisation for the child? Here in this paper we explore this possibility through the powerful work *Naye Shabd* by feminist and child-rights activist Kamla Bhasin.

Key words: *Children's literature, letter-art, emotive typography, illustrated typography, Devanagri script*

1. Introduction

Naye Shabd, written by Kamla Bhasin and edited by Lovleen Misra, enlightens various topics that children, educators as well as parents should be aware of. The digital book, published by Pratham Books on its open source platform StoryWeaver, introduces the Hindi *varnamala* (alphabets) to children with relevant thoughts of gender, equality, social justice, child rights, among others, in a playful manner, as opposed to the conventional idea of *Aa for Annar*. These are subjects which we all are hesitant to discuss, especially amongst children, but yet important in today's time and world (for children as well as adults).

The last few years has seen a shift in children's books, with feminist tales like *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls* and alphabet books for older children and their adults like *A is for Activist* and *Antiracist Baby*. Kamla Bhasin's stories were ahead of her time, and they needed art and typography that complemented the bold narrative.

An unconventional and meaningful book idea needed an innovative approach to the way it is presented to the children. Instead of following the usual path of plain letters supported by visuals, the idea here is to present the letters themselves in a more expressive and playful fashion; transforming them into visuals, underscoring the difference between the conventional text and illustration combination of picture books for children.

The attempt was to communicate these important and serious topics while making them as simple and essential as learning the basic varnamala.

2. Approach

There were various possibilities of approaching this exercise. Thanks to the extensive work done in Indian language typography, there is a considerable selection of well-designed fonts to choose from, now than earlier. But they all come with pre-designed characters and have their own unique voice. Would a font then lead itself to a large experimenting? Maybe not. The primary role of type here is to express feelings or the message. These are more intangible ideas which we wondered if could be achieved merely by selecting an appropriate font and working with other parameters like type style, weights, kerning, scale etc. Apart from the pre-designed fonts, there are other ways of using, creating, and drawing letters. Lettering is a way of drawing or illustrating letters, and calligraphy is like free hand-writing with many possibilities using traditional as well as an experimental tools. We decided to opt for the latter route, as it offers flexibility to deal with the content in numerous ways and it would be interesting for younger audiences to get exposed to non-digital, analog yet artistic alphabets as well as seeing calligraphy/ hand drawn letters beyond the convention of pretty cursive writing.

This allowed us the flexibility to go beyond what was available and to explore the words in a new dimension. It also opens the avenues of giving the opportunity to showcase the versatility of the Devanagiri script to a varied audience, especially children.

I collaborated with calligrapher Nikheel Aphale who works with Devanagiri script, to help bring the meaning of each concept through hand-drawn lettering. To support the letters I also commissioned illustrator and animator Priyankar Gupta, who has been working with children's books for more than a decade.

The aim here was always to use the illustrations only as a supportive element and seamlessly blend type, colour and illustration, while offering enough space for children to be able to read, interpret the words and rhyme. Since a lot of concepts are non-tangible or abstract or even difficult for a child to grasp, we were hoping that the playful use of lettering would help in putting these ideas across, in a more friendly manner.

3. Typography

The book comprises of forty letters, and words and concepts related to them. It was overwhelming to choose exactly what we wanted to communicate or hero for each letter. While brainstorming we debated whether it's the letters, the word or a particular concept that needed to be highlighted or visualised. While all three go hand-in-hand, to present them without making it confusing for the reader was the priority.

Finally we choose a more organic approach. Instead of having a standard/ consistent approach for each page (where the emphasis is either on a letter or a word), we started with breaking down each verse and exploring multiple possibilities with it. We realised that each verse lead towards its own unique voice. As we dwelled over each verse, we opted for both illustrative and emotive approaches of typography, to express the meanings.

Sometimes it is the letter, while at times it's the words, which lead themselves to a visual. All through, we played with the integration of the expressive lettering with the illustrations. The illustrations are always a part of the words and vis-a-versa. Thus creating its own peculiar visual language.

To achieve the above, we broadly treated the typography in two possible ways. One was, by drawing the letters such that they communicate the meaning and the other was to use the characteristics of the letters or treat them such as to create an illustration out of them.

3.1 Drawing the characters differently to communicate

Just the way our facial expression, body language and tone of voice communicate various moods, similarly, the way the letters are drawn can create various moods. Their physical attributes help the viewer perceive a particular idea. Curved strokes, straight strokes, jagged edges, rough endings, round letters, slim letters etc all communicate different meanings or create a different visual perception. These associations are developed because of our consciousness of recognising things in a particular manner. Also, there are some visual principles or conventional set of rules (social surroundings, traditional connotations etc.) that decide how we comprehend these physical attributes.

Following are a few examples it illustrate, how the pages and the related text has been treated in terms of the typography, keeping the above ideas in mind:



Figure 01: Aazadi (आजादी) = Freedom

Physical Attributes: Rounded, soft, free brush strokes

Expression: Casual, carefree, without any constrain, personal



Figure 02: Gussa (गुसा) = anger

Physical Attributes: Thick and rough strokes, dry texture, strong black, slightly pointed endings

Expression: Force, irritation, dislike

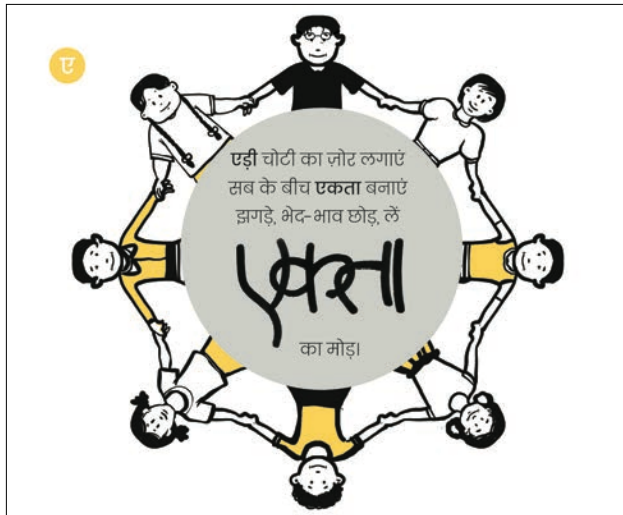


Figure 03: Ekta (एकता) = unity

Physical Attributes: Mono-linear and connecting strokes, open, soft and rounded forms

Expression: Holding hands, together, friendly, approachable



Figure 04: Khilkhilana (खिलखिलाना) = to laugh, giggle

Physical Attributes: Distorted, unstructured arrangement of letters and words, extended strokes, uneven stroke widths

Expression: Happy, playful, fun, movement

(Instead of working with the letter Kha (ख) we have used a part of the text which says 'you should smile and make other smile too', to highlight the playfulness of the verse. Hence the unstructured and casual placement of the letters)



Figure 05: Khabardar-Khamosh (खबरदार-खामोश) = beware (warning)-be quiet (silent)

Physical Attributes: Crooked/rough letters, not very neatly drawn

Expression: Rebel, confident, care-free

(Here the author wants to tell the reader that even girls, women have the right to spaces, leisure as well as they should break the silence and speak against injustice. Hence such treatment of the letters)

3.2 Using the characteristics of the letters and working with them to create visuals

The letters have their own peculiar characters. It could be their shape, their counter spaces, turns (ट, ग, फ etc.), knots (इ or ढ), diacritic marks (ई, ओ, औ) and other such interesting elements. These structural forms and elements can be used to create a meaningful visual to fit the context. In addition to this, the letters can be broken or treated such that they become an expression or a visual/illustration in itself.

The following are a few examples to illustrate the above:

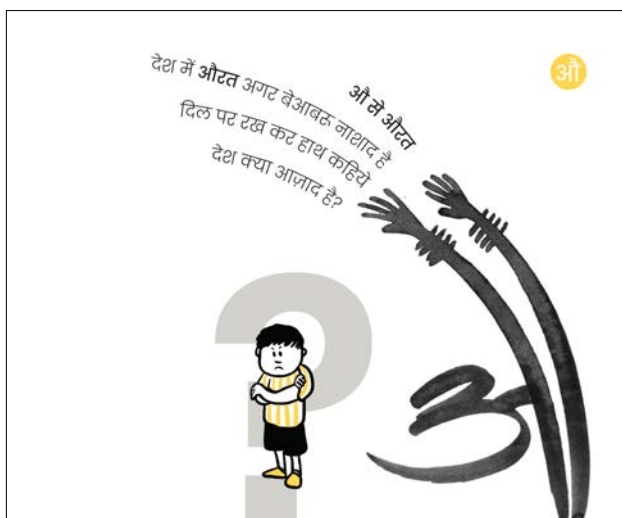


Figure 06: Aurat (औरत) = Woman

Visual treatment of the letter AU (औ): The *maatras* of AU (औ) have been used to show a women’s helpless hands reaching out for rights (showing bangles to show female hands in the general). The letters have been drawn with a thin brush and executed in a watery grey.

(In this verse the author questions the idea of freedom in a place where a woman is not respected)



Figure 07: Upar (ऊपर) = Up/ Above/ Higher

Visual treatment of the letter U (ऊ): The *ukaar* (the curved mantra) of U (ऊ) has been used to show a steep curve which the children are climbing and helping each other.

(In this verse the author tells the reader to help each other to move up in life/ progress)



Figure 08: Cha// Chaabee (चाबी) = Key

Visual treatment of the *shirorekha* (the horizontal line on top of the letters): The line on top of the letters has been extended to create steps which the children are climbing. (In this verse the author talks about following ones own path even if they are alone. She talks about unlocking all the possibilities and moving forward to attain success)



Figure 09: Pitrusatta-Jaativaad (पितृसत्ता-जातिवाद) = patriarchy-racism

Visual treatment: The complex words Pitrusatta-Jaativaad have been drawn in the traditional calligraphic style to expressive the conservative, orthodox root of these ideas. They have been further cut and broken to express that these need to be eliminated from the society.

4. Illustrations

Illustrations have been used to support the text/ typographic experimentation and further help make the content more accessible and meaningful. The illustrations vary from children's characters to supportive graphic elements such as they become a vehicle for readers to understand the meaning of the text better.

Each time the illustrations are drawn such that they interact with the letters, understanding the negative and positive spaces between the letters and integrating them. Thus making them part of the typography, creating a complete visual.

Some examples of how we have tried to achieve this:

4.1 Interacting/ integrating with the text such as it becomes a part of the letter:



Figure 10: Darr (डर) = Fear

The author talks about overcoming our fears, hence though the word *Darr* has been drawn really big, dark, uneven and rough, the children are smiling and playing around it, to show that they are not scared.



Figure 11: Bhavishya (भविष्य) = Future

Children are the future of the country. So the children here are literally holding hands to complete the word *Bhavishya* (future) by making the 'e' *matra* (इ) for the letter 'va' (व)



Figure 12: Duniya (दुनिया) = World

In this verse the author talks about the girls having equal rights in the world and that they should get equal opportunities to see (experience) the world. The knot of the letter 'द' holds the telescope thus making the letter and the illustration an opportunity to be a part of the lettering.

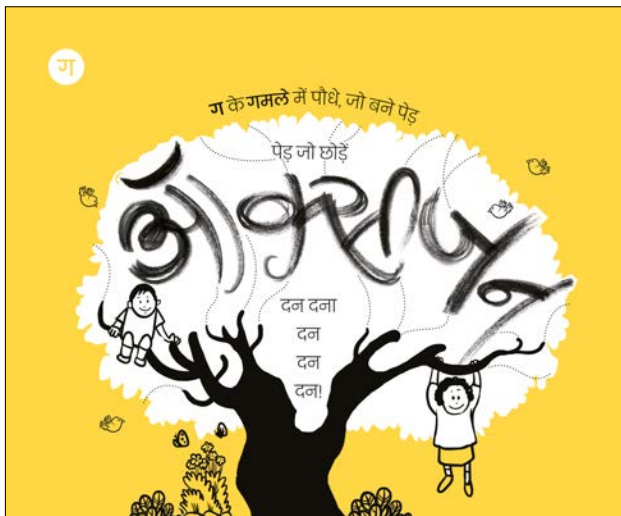


Figure 13: Oxygen (ऑक्सीजन)

Here the illustration almost works as a backdrop for the lettering, yet holds it together making it a complete visual.

4. Colours

This book discusses varied subjects like freedom, honesty, unity, empowerment, child rights, orthodox, etc. A lot of these themes can lead to very strong colour associations. To knit them all together visually into a pleasing experience with consistent aesthetics we

choose to have a fixed and minimal colour intervention. Too much colour can sometimes create a distraction from the effort of conveying important messages. Hence, we decided to mainly use black and white, (grey), with the yellow brand colour of Pratham Books as an accent. After all the 'text' is the hero and that should do the talking.

5. Body text

We were looking for a Devanagari typeface that was neutral, genuine, and non-serious which suits the content. Something that complements the hand-lettering and illustrations rather than standing out on its own.

The typeface 'Poppins' designed by Indian Type Foundry, seemed a good choice, as it has soft characters, with good open spaces, making it easily readable to not so fluent readers too. It also has a neutral characters which don't interfere with the otherwise visual heavy book.

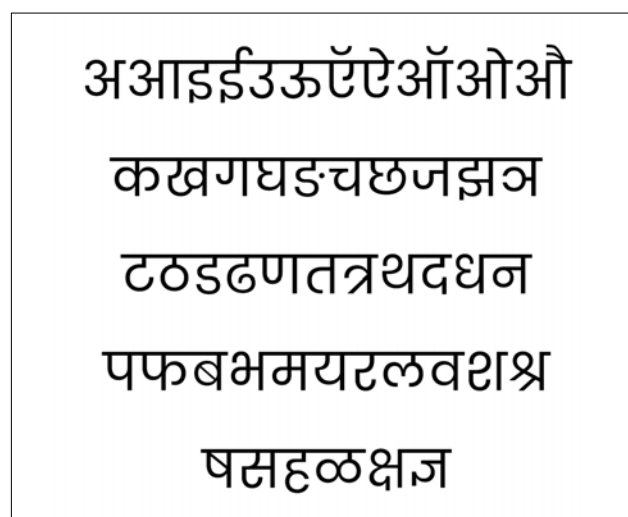


Figure 14: Glyphs

6. Response/Discussion

As of now the book has been read by approximately 1,700 readers on the Storyweaver digital platform. Apart from that the book was circulated among a few children and adults for review, mainly from the visual point of view. Here are a few responses and observations from the readers.

- a) *This book has more letters than pictures and the letters are drawn differently. I think they are drawn such to express the meaning of the words. I loved the way the word 'डर/dar' is drawn with the expressions of fear in the word. Hindi is not my strong*

language but the way the words are drawn made it interesting to read the book.—
Nived Menon (11 years)



Figure 15: Word expression of the word Taakat (strength) by Nived

b) I think this is a very interesting book as it explains lot of important subject but in a child like manner. I really like the page with एकता Ekata (unity), समानता Samanta (equality) and डर darr (fear). The hand drawn letters play along with the meaning of the words and at times they actually helped me understand or guess the meaning of words which I didn't know the meaning of. I didn't miss the colour in the book but some more colours would be nice.—Maya Law Gupta (11 years)



Figure: 17 Word expression of the word Khushi (happiness/joy) by Maya

c) The purpose of this book is different from the regular picture books. I think while teaching some important lessons about life, it also encourages us to read Hindi. Since I am not a native Hindi speaker, it was a bit difficult for me to comprehend. But the hand drawn letters encourage the children to read the book.—Mrinalini Biswas, (11 years)

d) I think the hand drawn letter show that we can view the letters/words through a different dimension or angle. Though in a few pages I think they were too stylish. I

enjoyed all the pages as they all have something different to tell.—Sharanyaa Biswas, (11 Years)

e) I think the hand drawn letters describe each word beautifully and make it enjoyable. I feel the colours used are such that one doesn't long of colours. I liked the pages with Aazadi and Kaamayabi the most.—Vera Kundra, (11 years)

f) While I have seen experimenting with fonts in English in children's books, for a Hindi book this was the first time and I found it very interesting. Additionally I really liked the idea of using alphabets to highlight certain important themes. I really liked the detail of 'आज़ादी Azadi' not having the line on top of the letters. Though I feel some words were a little difficult to read.—Mandira Saha (mother of 9 year old and children's book author)

5. Observation/ Conclusion

From the responses that we documented, it appears that the experiment with the letters as visuals is successful in communicating with the reader. It did open a new window of visualisation to the children. While there are a few loopholes as to how much one can experiment and how much of the readability can be retained or compromised for a successful visual communication. Hopefully we will be able to address these when we create the print version of the book.

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