

## The Charitra of a Character: The Ramayana as a Typeface

Can a font provide insights into one of the most significant epics of the world?

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### ABSTRACT

Type is a tool for representing landmarks, stories, religious and secular laws and teachings, edicts, decrees, invitations, promotions, and other sorts of communication in the form of inscriptions—on rock, stone, and metal (usually iron or copper)—the written word using pigment—on palm leaf, papyrus, parchment, paper—and finally, the digitally rendered word—on screen or projected on a surface.

Throughout history, the role of lettering and later typefaces has always been subservient to the words written by the author—even if rendered, carved, or typed by a person other than the one whose words they were, which was often the case. This is to say, that the words rendered never morphed or prompted the user to look at them in a new manner.

An exception is the decorated letter, largely used as initials and as historiated letters in illuminated medieval religious manuscripts, these larger letters provided opportunities to insert illustrations that “inhabited” them (Drucker, 1995)<sup>1</sup>.



Fig. 1: A contemporary illustration based on the illuminated, medieval initial letter G combining animal body parts from a dog and a dragon, tendrils, and endless Celtic knot ornaments. By Thoth Adan

This paper will not only describe The Ramayana Typeface but also place it in the context of the historical Western decorative type and the prevalence of religious iconography in typography. It will also discuss the importance of folk art in the narrative tradition of India where the written word was not accessible to all.

Letters combine to make words that tell stories, but now, when certain keywords are typed, the images associated with the individual letters morph to tell another visual story.

#### KEYWORDS

*The Ramayana*, narrative folk-art tradition, Mithila art, Madhubani, typeface as storyteller, font as fantasy, mythology, culture, religion, history, characters, folk art, India, South Asia, contextual typography, diacritics, Hinduism, epic, pictogram, anthropomorphism, anthropomorphic typography, sacred typography

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this font, each letter represents one or more of the main personalities from the Ramayana. For instance, the letter V will not only represent Vali but also Raavan's brother, Vibhishana. The uniqueness of this work (which is rendered in Mithila folk art), compared with previous typefaces made from folk and tribal arts via The Typecraft Initiative is that this typeface not only tells us a story through the static imagery embedded in each of its letters but additionally, when certain words are typed into the computer, the forms of the letters change to highlight a "character" from the Ramayana. For instance, when one types R, A, and M separately, each letter displays the default person associated with that letter—in this case, Ram, Ahilya, and Meghnad respectively. When, one types the name RAM then, the A and M get morphed such that all three letters now depict Lord Ram.

### 1.1 Anthropomorphic Type



Fig. 2: The Bergamo alphabet of Giovannino dei Grassi, around 1390 shows the use of “transparent Gothic space” (Drucker, 1995)<sup>2</sup>, where the interwoven space between the letters identified with the

Romanesque period as well as the “Insular letters” of the British Isles was being replaced. Image from *Le Moyen Age a la lettre* [Talliandier Editions Paris, 2004]

The binary of text and image wasn't so sharp at the early stages of the history of human communication, such as with Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesopotamian Cuneiform, and other types of pictographic representations that combined image, sound, and text. With the transition to the alphabet, images and text became more distinct from each other. This changed with the origin of the decorated letter (in the Latin script) that can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE manuscript called *Vergil Augusteus* (Drucker, 1995)<sup>3</sup>. European fascination with the anthropomorphic type (Fig.1) and the relationship between the human anatomy and type peaked in medieval times, which was especially prominent in religious texts—as mentioned in the article, *Letterforms/Humanforms* by Sair Goetz in the *Letterform Archive*<sup>4</sup>:

“Long before the computer screen, however, putting human bodies into letterforms has been a way in which designers and artists have tried to merge the human body (and) with the flat forms of disembodied communication. Some of the earliest examples of these mergers are found in illuminated manuscripts created when religious imagery was used to educate... conveying religious stories may have been an early motive for merging body and letter.”

While it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that while in the medieval times between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the human body was inserted into letterforms, usually more than one person was used to construct the letter; in the Renaissance, however, the human body was used as a tool to rationalize the form of letters, where type designers such as Luca Pacioli, Geoffroy Tory (Fig. 3), Albrecht Dürer and others tried to find mathematical relationships between human proportions and letterforms. There was thus the Romanesque tendency to introduce elaborate decoration, visual complexity, and variation of design, which was seen as “anti-classicizing” and then there was the Renaissance influence that simplified and tried to rationalize the form (Drucker 1995)<sup>5</sup>.

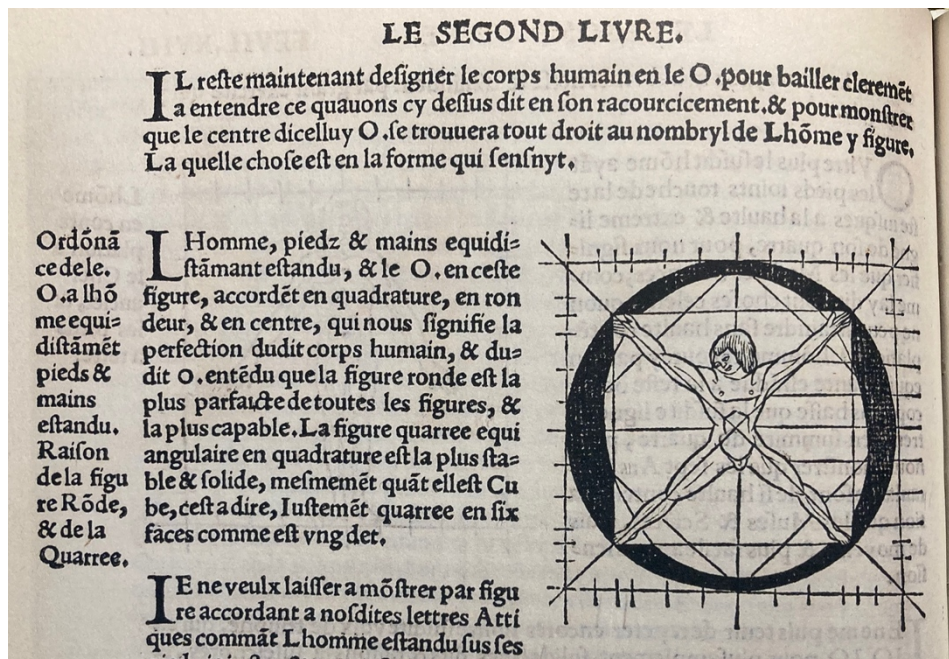


Fig. 3: Geoffrey Tory's constructed 'O' based on human proportions (inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*) from his book *Champfleury*, 1529. Source: *Geoffroy Tory, Imprimeur de Francios 1er Graphiste Avant La Lettre* (Editions Rmn-Grand Palais, Paris 2011)

In the Ramayana typeface, however, the relationship between the body and type is not about finding a mathematical or proportionate link between the two. Nor is it about the notion of anthropocentrism as this story is far removed from the centrality of the human race. Instead, it is about finding novel ways to design a typeface that challenges both the designer and the folk artist—while working within the confines of an indigenous narrative folk tradition such as Mithila art and the restrictions of display type design.

Storytelling in terms of how each letter is illustrated as well as the names of the characters of the Ramayana are critical to this font. This is true whether it will be used in the context of the Ramayana or not. And herein lies the central conundrum of type—that it visually represents something but textually it can represent another thing too. This then is truly a “typeface” which turns the original meaning on its head and instead emphasizes the union of letters and characters (of the epic). This typeface highlights the specific nature of each of the personalities of the story through the shape of the letters and the depiction of characters.

## 1.2 The Ramayana—and its connection to folk art

The fact is that the written word till recent times was only accessible to upper-caste Indian men. The Sanskrit language was restricted to the priestly caste while the

commoners spoke but could perhaps barely read Prakrit<sup>6</sup>. This meant that the Ramayana could not be read by the vast majority of people—women of all castes, and men, who belonged to so-called subordinate castes.

Folk art—through its imagery, and sometimes with dialogue or performance—made epics like The Ramayana not only accessible to the majority of the population but also enabled them to gain popularity and become an enduring part of our tradition. In this sense this typeface also combines the textual and the visual—it can be both read and seen.

The folk arts of South Asia vary from region to region perhaps due to different available raw materials and divergent skills of craftspeople. Each folk art adopted the Ramayana in a unique manner based on its medium; its size which impacted whether it could be carried from place to place; whether it was flat or three-dimensional; and finally, whether it had a performative element to it or not. And thus, one finds images of this great epic on everything from embroidered *rumaals* (handkerchiefs) from Chamba, Himachal Pradesh (Fig. 4), Molela terracotta plaques, miniature paintings, etc. The fact that even the Mughal ruler Akbar commissioned his miniature artists to depict the Ramayana in great detail based on the prevailing miniature styles of the day speaks of the power of this story.



Fig. 4: This artwork—a Chamba Rumaal depicts the Ramayana in synoptic form. Source: The Met Museum, New York.

Performative crafts such as the *tholu bommalata* (leather puppets of Andhra Pradesh), shadow puppets of Indonesia, wooden *kaavads*, and *phad* scrolls all depict stories from the epic that are recited out while the crafted object displays a certain panel or scene to the audience. All these crafts belong to different geographical regions that range from present-day Pakistan to Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia.

The various modes in which The Ramayana has been told throughout history speak volumes about the deep-rootedness of this epic in our collective memory. The use of handmade folk art furthers the richness of the narrative and experiencing the same story via different folk-art formats makes the epic even more enduring.

#### **1.4 The transition from folk art to popular media**

The Ramayana has been told in numerous mediums—as oral recitations of the texts and as myriad handmade folk arts and crafts. More recently it has been popularized via mass media—through the TV series *Ramayan* by Ramanand Sagar made in the 1980s, and even a Japanese animation in 1999 and more recently, the animation, *Sita Sings the Blues* which is a contemporary adaptation. It will not be surprising to see it being retold and experienced in new mediums that are in tune with the times—such as those based on AR and VR. One thing is for sure, that this epic will continue to capture the imagination of people for years to come. Thus, this typeface is but one of the many forms this story will take—where each generation and era will recast The Ramayana in a form that is approachable to its audience.

### 1.3 Madhubani Art and the region's connection to The Ramayana

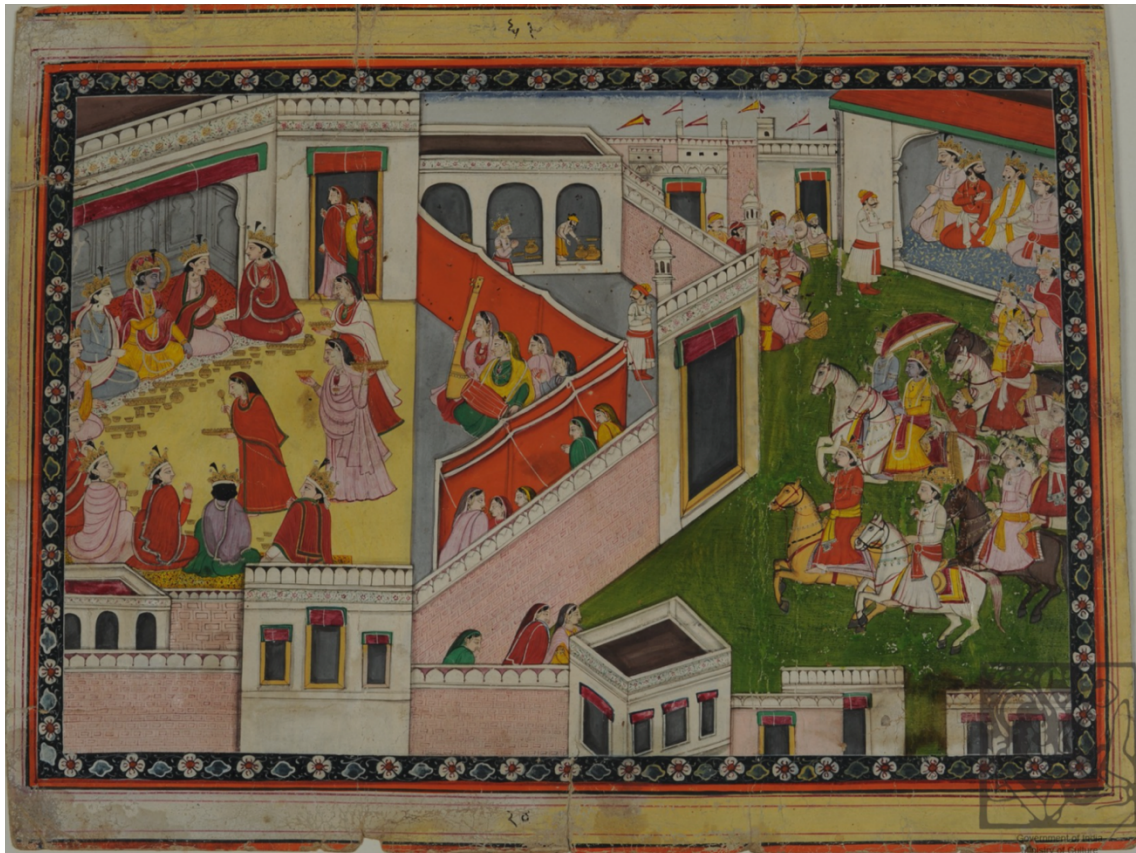


Fig.5: Reception of the Marriage Party of Rama and his Four Brothers in the Palace of Mithila.  
Source: National Museum, New Delhi (<https://indianculture.gov.in/museum-paintings/reception-marriage-party-rama-and-his-four-brothers-palace-mithila>).

The reason Madhubani art was chosen for this project is because the region of Mithila, or Videha, has ancient associations (Fig. 5) with the Ramayana (Jayakar, 1980)<sup>7</sup>.

Paintings on walls—initially caves and later, mud houses—that are still seen in rural India, were the bedrock of visual communication, language, and storytelling. From paintings emerged symbols and pictographs and finally, the alphabet. This display typeface in the Latin script has been created in the folk art tradition of Madhubani (also called Mithila) art from the state of Bihar in India.

The *Khobar Ghar* or nuptial chamber is a central and most significant aspect of Mithila art, which symbolizes the coming together of a man and woman and of the potential of future creation. A ritualistic art form, Mithila art is practiced by upper-caste Kayasth women



(Jain, 1998)<sup>8</sup>. Today men also draw in this art form and it has seen a tremendous transition in the past half-century from being a ritualistic folk art painted on the rough walls of cow-dung plastered walls to one done on paper and canvas, and now... on the screen.

For Mithila folk artists working on this typeface—Pradyumna Kumar and Pushpa Kumari—the Ramayana is a deep and important part of their heritage not just as artists but as people who belong to the Maithil culture (Fig. 6). They have an intimate knowledge of the Valmiki, the Tulsi Das and other versions of the Ramayana. Their interpretation of the story finds its way into the depiction of each of the characters.



Fig. 6: The depiction of a scene from the Ramayana of the *swayamvar* of Ram and Sita, painted with natural pigments in the Madhubani style of art. Artwork by Meena Devi of Raanti village, Madhubani, Bihar. Circa 1989. Collection of The Typecraft Initiative.

## 2. THE RAMAYANA TYPEFACE

### 2.1 The three aspects of this typeface

This typeface consists of three aspects: the first is the *visual* storytelling depicted by the figure and the way it is rendered in Mithila folk art where folkloric aspects are key. The second is the *functional* and *secular* component—that makes a typeface legible so that it can be used as a tool to communicate *textually*—in the writing of signage or a wedding card for instance. The third aspect is the *dharmic* or *religious* aspect of the letter which is seen by the depiction of a god on some of the letters. These three aspects have different roles and each user will find the right balance as to how to navigate these as they use this unusual typeface.



Fig. 7. Alternates: “R” in the form of Lord Ram (in his warrior pose) about to shoot an arrow, and the alternate of R showing Ravan the demon king of Lanka.

### 2.2 The use of alternates\*

In the Ramayana alphabet, each letter represents one or *more* personalities (Figs. 7 and 8) from the great epic. If more than one person shares the same first initial, then alternates can be used to allow for multiple designs for the same letter. For instance, the letter A by default will depict Ahilya. Since alternates show up below the letter, the user can select another version of A, for instance, Akshay Kumar or Angad as well (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Alternates for A. (Left to right): Ahilya, Akshay Kumar (one of the sons of Ravan) and Angad

### 2.3 The use of discretionary ligatures\*\*

The concept of “shapeshifting” or transformation is commonly observed in Hinduism—most Hindu gods have several avatars or forms, and similarly, Hanuman shrinks down to a cat to be able to spy on Ravan in Lanka. To reflect this morphing of characters, this typeface uses discretionary ligatures to allow for the change in the form of a letter if the user types in a name of any of the personalities from the epic.

By default the letter R depicts Ram (Fig. 7), A depicts Ahilya (Fig. 8), and M, Meghnad. When one types RAM without activating ligatures, it will be shown as depicted in each letter by default (Fig. 9). However, when ligatures are activated it will create the word RAM where each of—R, A, and M—depict various roles of Lord Ram—perhaps as a warrior, a ruler and a husband (not pictured). This morphing reflects the magical quality of the story and our rich folklore.

Similarly typing “S for” or “SITA” will produce the ligature of SITA as a word-image, while typing in S, I, T, and A separately will produce the corresponding “characters” that stand for each of those respective alphabets.

Important events or terms in the epic such as the *vanvas* (exile), *Laxman rekha* (a line drawn by Laxman to prevent anyone from entering the forest hut of Sita), *Sita haran* (the kidnapping of Sita by Ravan), *Sanjivini booti* (a herb brought by Hanuman to Lanka to revive Lakshman who was injured by Ravan’s son, Indrajit), could also be illustrated or explained further through an icon or image.



Fig. 9: Typing RAM by default would reveal the three “characters” associated with R, A and M, respectively. Activating the ligature feature in the Open Type pane would reveal just the word image of Lord Ram in *all* three letters (not shown).

### 3. CHALLENGES

#### 3.1 Challenging the boundaries of type design

This project has several challenges including those that are aesthetic and functional as the font is something that has not been attempted before.

Madhubani art is known for its intricate and ebullient floral, animal, and human designs. Like many folk arts, it is believed that any part of the surface mustn’t be left blank. This however runs contrary to type design—where the number of nodes increases as the density of the artwork increases, making the typeface heavy and unstable. The **functional challenge** refers to how one integrates experimental folk art forms into a working typeface while keeping legibility intact. One has to balance the need for intricacy in folk art with minimalist forms of type design.

Transforming characters and scenes from the story into letters was challenging because one has to unite the form of the letter with the action or stance of the character being depicted in a particular scene of the text. Additionally, since each person has a fixed letter associated with their name it is not always conducive to work with. For instance, to depict the iconic image of Hanuman—who while flying in the air is carrying the Sanjeevani booti in one hand—in the H is a challenge.

While the Ramayana Typeface intends to use features such as discretionary ligatures and alternates used in a way like in typefaces such as TilburgsAns—which was designed for the city of Tilburg,<sup>9</sup>—the transformation of the *characters from a book* into *characters of a typeface* has rarely been done if at all. The use of Mithila folk art that traditionally represents imagery from the Ramayana (Fig. 6) to make the font makes it all the more

unique, as is the fact that Sita, the wife of Lord Ram, is from the same region as the art form.

### **3.2 The use of the Latin Script**

The Latin script has been used instead of the more obvious choice of Devanagari, due to the large character set of the latter. The complex ornamental forms of Mithila art would make the typeface, in Devanagari, slow and heavy. In such a case, compromises would need to be made in terms of reducing the character set or simplifying the design. While the former would limit what one can type, the latter defeats the purpose of working with ornamentally rich folk art.

## **4. GOALS AND OUTCOMES**

### **4.1 Education**

This typeface helps provide much-needed local contexts for learning the alphabet for school children. The English language is taught in a colonial manner in our country since it is disconnected from local contexts. This font can connect children to not only a well-known epic that is ingrained in our culture, but by also using local crafts it also sensitizes them to the handmade at an early age.

This typeface could also hasten—adult audiences already familiar with the Ramayana—to learn the alphabet. For instance, seeing the image of Ram or Ravan in the case of the R could facilitate memory and build an association between the character and the letter, thus hastening learning.

### **4.2 Functional Applications**

Applications of the font can range from the secular—signages of railway stations (such as Madhubani), bus stands, letterheads, and drop caps in books to the religious—such as wedding cards and signs related to a festival.

### **4.3 Awareness and Pride**

One of the goals of this typeface is to not only create pride but also raise awareness about the richness of these stories and their relevance today, as well as the folk arts and artists to a global audience.

This typeface can also be used to make people (especially outside India) aware of the story of the Ramayana which is not just a religious story but it is the about the victory of good

over evil. The portrayal of animals such as the *vanarsena* (army of monkeys) who supported Ram in his victory over Ravan, goes to show the importance of animals and the natural world in our culture and tradition. In the world of climate crisis, this can provide important lessons to us to live in harmony with and to respect nature.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Creating new opportunities for folk-artists

Despite their richness and beauty, many folk arts in the sub-continent are disappearing as they are not able to keep up with relevant contexts and technologies. This project aims to change this, by finding contemporary ways to tell ancient stories in collaboration with talented folk artists. We endeavor that this typeface will appeal to broad audiences—from school children to adults beyond our culture and beyond those in the visual arts. This typeface is aimed to be a benchmark for other folk artists, and designers to explore new avenues to take our rich heritage to new levels.

### 5.2 Redefining what a typeface can do

This typeface, which combines folk and narrative traditions with type design—aims to push the boundaries on how we *understand* and *use* typefaces not just as literal tools for communicating (by just using a language) but as something that can add another dimension to *what* and *how* we communicate.

With the development of novel single-function fonts such as Chartwell<sup>10</sup>—which is a typeface that uses discretionary ligatures to construct infographics—typefaces will not just be used to communicate in the English language and only to humans, but they will be used for specific tasks; as well as to communicate with AI as they can become a way to code for non-coders.

With the ubiquity of AI-generated tools such as ChatGPT, how we communicate is changing drastically. The rhythm of language, which tended to be personal and individual, will be replaced by a plausibly more algorithmic, and scripted way of communicating based on Large Language Models. This might mean we might even stop writing ourselves and depend on AI to communicate on our behalf. In such a situation, and especially because we rely so much on the visual and textual and less on verbal communication, *how* something is written becomes even more important. In the future, typefaces will teach us more about epics, periods, places, or even a state of mind.

\*Each letter of the alphabet represents *at least one* character of not just the epic but also the typeface. This is achieved through the use of alternates.

\*\*It is to be determined which discretionary ligatures will be used to generate each name. For instance, people not familiar with the story will find it easier to type in “S\_for” to discover the name and images of SITA. While those already familiar with the story can just type “SITA”. The disadvantage of the first example is that only one name can be created with each ligature associated with one alphabet. However, in the second example, the names of many people can be typed in even if they have the same initial—RAM or RAVAN for instance, can each have their unique ligature.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work has been conducted in collaboration with renowned Mithila artists, Pushpa Kumari and Pradyumna Kumar.

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