



Research-Led Pluralist Typographic Practices: Case Studies from South Asia

Rathna Ramanathan 

Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, UK (r.ramanathan[at]csm.arts.ac.uk)

Abstract: This article is grounded in an exploration conducted by the author on publishing as a platform that brings intercultural communication, pluralism, graphic design and typography into productive dialogue with each other through engaged (in social and political issues; in creative, educational, and critical practice) and situated (local communities; international networks of editors, translators, designers, illustrators, publishers, and readers) design research frameworks and practices. This has resulted in an exploration of spaces in which new kinds of documents can be created, with, by and for marginalized publics, and, conversely, how the production of new texts and images creates spaces that enable emancipatory, temporary, or subversive practices to occur that suggest new directions for the practice of typography and typographic frameworks. This exploration through design research and practice, is framed by the author's own context, as that of a South Asian designer and researcher, working in the Global North.

Some of the initial thinking in this article was explored in a chapter for *The Routledge Companion to Design Research* — 2nd Edition. The article takes a holistic, post-disciplinary approach to graphic design and typography aiming to challenge notions of graphic design as purely aesthetic or craft-based, or as concerns of form and function. It calls for a shift in considering the wider politics and contributions of visual language — graphic design and typography specifically — to societal change. Additionally, it reframes research-led practices (and thereby visual language and typography), not as an elite activity but as a human practice that emerges as curiosity and intent. Such an approach is critical to undertake considering a global health crisis, climate emergency and with issues of conflict and social injustice where communication plays a pivotal role. The article concludes that how we approach design research and practice needs to be rethought so that it makes a meaningful contribution to planetary issues.

@: [ISSUE](#) > [ARTICLE](#) >

Cite this article:

Ramanathan, R. (2025). Research-led pluralist typographic practices: Case studies from South Asia. *Visible Language*, 59(2), 109–129.

First published online August 15, 2025.

© 2025 Visible Language — this article is **open access**, published under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

<https://visible-language.org/journal/>

Visible Language Consortium:

University of Leeds (UK)

University of Cincinnati (USA)

North Carolina State University (USA)

Implications for practice: A holistic, post-disciplinary approach to graphic design and typographic research can challenge notions of graphic design as purely aesthetic, or as concerns of form and function, and speak to the shift needed in considering the wider politics and contributions of graphic design to societal change. Latin (Western) approaches to typography offer a singular view of typography as functional and rational. However, pluralistic approaches make more visible, through design and documentation, a broader approach to typography which acknowledges typography's link to language, as it is spoken, written, and read both culturally as well as materially. The history of the book which still looks primarily at the codex, needs to encompass the histories that are beyond the codex, to manuscripts, scrolls and other "book" traditions which are rarely documented or acknowledged. Where little evidence exists, historical practices can provide guidance for contemporary design frameworks and guidelines. With each of these contexts, research revealed approaches to similar design problems by designers, typographers and publishers in the past. Speaking to the contribution of practice, we must take an approach that suggests that we can design the means through which design happens, challenging the concepts, behaviors, and means of production as well as designing form.

Keywords: design research; Global South; graphic design; intercultural communication; publishing; typography

1. 'South Asia as a Site of Investigation'

In the article "Crisis in the Classics," Sheldon Pollock (2011) draws on a classic humanities dilemma. In a world of big problems, he notes, a small problem (in this case, the disappearance of classics — and classical textual knowledge — in the Indian subcontinent) can seem minuscule and seemingly irrelevant. Pollock, however, draws an important and critical connection that is relevant to our own practices and research: the small problems (or the perception of our problems as small) contain one very big question about what it means to be fully and richly (and diversely) human. This is surely the core of our task as visual communicators — past, present and future.

This article features case studies of three publishing projects — Harvard University Press' Murty Classical Library of India series (Figure 1); and Tara Books' *In the Land of Punctuation* (Figure 2) and *Liberté* (Figure 3) — which evidence a pluralistic and intercultural approach. As both examples are anchored in an Indian context of publishers and/or readers, one could question the relevance of this in the wider realm of visual language and typographic knowledge and practice. Yet this is precisely the point; rather than think of India as a national identity or a limited geographical space, the approach suggests using India as a framework in the manner suggested by Pinney (2013, p. 172). India thereby becomes a site of investigation in which you can develop a typographic framework or model that is relevant and potentially transportable to other models and



Figure 1. Front cover designs for the Murty Classical Library of India (MCLI) titles published 2015–2025.

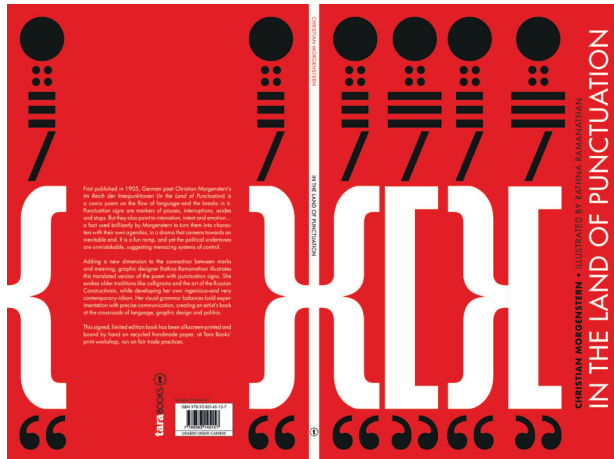


Figure 2. Cover design for Tara Books' *In the Land of Punctuation* (2017).



Figure 3. Cover design for Centre Pompidou and Tara Books' *Liberté* (2024).

contexts. This is particularly critical when establishing an equity and multiplicity in knowledge production in design research and practice.

To turn our attention to knowledge production in India, there has been coverage in media of “alternative facts” but as anyone from an oppressed or colonized society will note, alternative facts have existed as long as we have been writing history. This is often the basis of colonization (i.e., to present reality in a manner which suits one’s own power, needs and contexts). One only needs to look at T.B. Macaulay, the British historian who oversaw introducing English concepts to education in India. When presenting on his findings, Macaulay (1835) dismissed Indian knowledge based on its difference. He refers to Indian history, astronomy, medicine, and religion as false, thereby dismissing hundreds of years of knowledge. Such an approach becomes critical and dangerous when employed by media platforms which are owned by and deployed for political gain all intent on a consistent “othering” of marginalized groups to achieve their purpose.

The colonial legacy is a painful legacy. Trivedi (2008) illustrates an example of how Indian knowledge was colonized using the *Hortus Malabaricus* (“Garden of Malabar”), a comprehensive treatise that documents the properties of the flora of the Western Ghats, a mountain range in India that crosses the states of Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Written in Latin and compiled over 30 years, the series was conceived by Hendrik van Rhee who was then Governor of Dutch Malabar and contains pen-and-ink-wash drawings of some 720 species which are accompanied by a detailed description in Latin. Apart from Latin, the plant names are included in Malayalam, Konkani, Urdu, and English. What is deeply troubling about this text is that whilst it was collated and compiled by “natives” as they are referred to – Indian experts in the field – it was available only in Latin until the 21st century. This text

has been largely inaccessible previously because it was not available in any Indian language. Knowledge about India, written with Indian knowledge has been inaccessible to Indians.

The origins of publishing and printing in India are entangled with colonial ambitions. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) notes that these ambitions sought to discredit, erase, or appropriate the knowledges of the Global South with the aim of contributing to a dominant Global North knowledge and culture. For Tamil language speakers, the first time they read their language in printed form was to communicate a religious text that was alien to their culture (and beliefs). There is a tremendous power in this act of publishing — to use someone's language to represent back to them a culture and religion that is not their own. Who decides what is knowledge and who this knowledge is for? What is knowledge if language and the visual form prohibit people from accessing them? And what role do we play in this as researchers and designers who frame knowledge for reading and in addressing equity in knowledge production? As noted by Ansari (2020):

Decolonization entails not only serious political commitments but epistemological ones: one has to engage with the colonial and precolonial past in order to arrive at a more nuanced and critical understanding of the present. (p. 8)

What of visual language and its importance? In a multipolar, global world of multiple experiences of being human, the way the world is presented back to us is decidedly narrow. Through social media, through packaging of global brands, through mainly consumer culture. To paraphrase Pollock (2011), we learn to know the world and ourselves through language — oral, written, and increasingly, sophisticated visual language. Language shapes the way we experience the world and way we use it as a tool influences what we nurture and care about. If we continue to normalize mainstream media approaches as the singular approach, we start to limit how we might enable others to describe and articulate their lived experiences and their cultures.

November, a design duo based in India who work on global visual language projects through typographic and type design interventions, noted in a conversation for the Walker Reader (Bhatt & November Studio, 2020), an aim to take a broader approach to their practice in order to be more representative of contextual needs of design and typography that rises from multiple cultures and modes of writing, reading and publishing:

We emphasize the values of plurality, which are inherently democratic. It is about accepting and respecting the possibility of a multitude of experiences, opinions, and ways of life.

2. Pluralistic Approaches: Harvard University Press and the Murty Classical Library of India

Many classical Indian texts have never reached a global audience, and others are inaccessible even to Indian readers. The Murty Classical Library of India (MCLI) is a 100-year publishing project at Harvard University Press that aims to make available the great literary works of India from the past two millennia to redress this imbalance. The series provides modern English translations — many for the first time — alongside a vast number of Indian languages. The text in the appropriate regional script appears alongside the translation. Rohan Murty who envisioned MCLI was inspired by his own experience of education in India, and it is one that many middle-class, urban Indians, identify with. The texts that were studied in school were Shakespearean comedies and tragedies, poems from Wordsworth and Shelley, stories by Hardy and Kipling. However, missing from it was the same opportunity to partake of one's own classics and heritage.

There were several design challenges in this project. The first was at the time of the inception of MCLI, no typefaces existed that could set the range of characters in the texts in a manner that was readable, and accessible. Harvard Press commissioned a series of typefaces designed specifically for the library by Professor Fiona Ross (University of Reading) and John Hudson (Tiro Typeworks). The MCLI work featured here is not of typeface design but of the interior book design frameworks for 30 bilingual volumes, and typographic design for 19 bilingual volumes in Indian languages with English translations, as well as design and typographic guidelines in prose and poetry genres for several Indian languages including Apabhramsha, Avadhi, Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Pali, Panjabi, Prakrit, Sanskrit and Telugu; and the Bangla, Devanagari, Gurmukhi, Kannada, and Telugu scripts. The combination of typesetting and design of bilingual Indic texts is unprecedented. These volumes were published in two editions, hardback for the scholarly market in the US and UK and paperback for the Indian popular market. The challenge of this project was to find contemporary design solutions to classical texts (pre-1800) whilst retaining their spirit and originality. The research was instrumental in supporting the expansion of readership in inclusive, decolonial and intercultural ways. This was achieved by creating a comprehensive typographic research framework for Indic scripts to preserve threatened narratives and to improve access and enhance reading for marginalized groups.

3. Tara Books and *In the Land of Punctuation and Liberté*

Tara Books is an Indian publisher founded in 1994 by a group of writers and designers committed to egalitarian principles. Tara was interested in changing the perspective from which stories are told which meant expanding the notion of authorship, the notion of the book and its content, and the role that design plays in the publishing process.

Publishing at Tara is reframed as a collaborative enterprise where the success of a book cannot be attributed to one individual because it is by nature, dialogic, collective, and heavily dependent on the work of others at every stage.

In an interview, publisher Gita Wolf (2021) refers to publishing as a cyclic conversation:

We think of the book as a moment in time, a picture of a much longer process. There is a story of how the book was made, and then you have the book itself, and once the book is published you have the entire story of how it is received, and what else happens as a result of that reception.

The work with Tara Books is about giving a voice to marginalized people who do not normally get a voice, through the act of publishing. *The London Jungle Book* (2017) by Gond artist Bhajju Shyam is titled as such as both a homage and mirror-image counterpoint to Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and tells the story of Bhajju's journey to London from India. The book has a layer of historical significance: A century earlier, Bhajju's tribe had been studied by the British anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who married a Gond woman, and wrote several books about the tribe. Bhajju's grandfather had been Elwin's servant, so he had grown up with the writer's stories. Elwin had written in the preface to one of his books on the Gonds that he considered it a counterpart to Kipling's *Jungle Book*. *The London Jungle Book* was summarized by Bhajju (2017) with a decolonial statement of intent: "Elwin sahib wrote about my tribe, now it is my turn to write about his."

The other way of expanding reading that Tara Books explores, is through typography. Tara sees typography (to paraphrase Beirut, 2019) as a fundamental way to understand and engage with the world. Tara's approach to picture books challenges conventional separations of image and text and blurs the boundaries of what text or image should do. Research and expertise in new approaches to typography as well as nonstandard ways of designing and producing books informed a collaboration with Tara Books and the publication of experimental picture books *In the Land of Punctuation* and latterly, *Liberté*. These books employ typography as illustration. Research for the books drew from the understanding of how typography in children's books takes primarily a conventional Global North understanding, with text and image separated. This is counter to the understanding that we might experience word and image as equally visual, and particularly in India and Asian cultures where reading is a visual act.

In the Land of Punctuation as a project was motivating for three reasons. First, the work was out of print in the English language and available only in German, so it is mostly unknown to contemporary readers of English. The publisher felt the text and the context was still relevant and should be made available to a wider audience. Second, from a subject perspective, typography in the picture book context has, like much

of its content, tended to the safe and the cute. The text, due to its political content, called for research into typography and type play for more serious communication purposes. This was interesting within the context of a picture book as a literary but also a social, cultural, economic, and political product. And third, the project questioned the adherence to certain cultural norms. Building on the aim of equity in knowledge production, it was important to challenge the notion that a German poet should only be published in a Western context and only Europeans should work on European projects.

Publishers at the Centre Pompidou were taken with the approach in *Punctuation* and commissioned a special project using the same typographic framework, methods and research to celebrate the centennial of the Surrealists. Their focus was building from French Surrealist poetry but speaking to the international impact and reach of the Surrealist movement. There was a freedom in this commission, to choose an appropriate and relevant poem for our times. The final choice was Paul Eluard's *Liberté*, written in 1942 during the German occupation of France. Printed additionally in London by the Gaullist magazine *La France Libre*, thousands of copies were dropped by parachute by the Royal Air Force over occupied France.

4. Intercultural and Pluralistic Practices

This article is built on the premise that a contemporary and relevant approach to graphic design and typography necessitates a twofold understanding that i) design is not solely a craft, but a fundamental way to understand and engage with the world (Beirut, 2019), and ii) this requires the acknowledgement of non-mainstream, often marginalized approaches to the discipline, in particular, intercultural and pluralistic knowledge.

4.1. Typographic Research and Practice Beyond Global North Conventions and Understanding

Typography is visualizing language. As noted by several authors (Calvert, 2012; Gruendler, 2005; Lees-Maffei, 2019), since Beatrice Warde's proclamation in *The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should Be Invisible*, typography in the Western tradition aims to establish a clear sense of "good" and "bad." Warde made several distinctions of the "good" which gave prominence to the form of typography over intention, and context. Warde's approach has framed modern typography thinking and is defined by Anglo-specific industrial, linguistic, and social contexts, i.e., the letterpress, which converts the page into a grid, Latin languages (predominantly English), and Western publishing, wherein the author (and thereby their words) is given primary importance. There is no acknowledgement nor understanding of other cultures, spoken language, or associative forms of typography, thereby creating a sense of hierarchy and marginalizing or othering other practices.

For example, in the context of the Indian subcontinent, where lithography preceded letterpress and letterpress was introduced with colonial intent, the form of the book was not the codex — the page was visual and spatial rather than linear and chronological, and the reader rather than the author was given prominence. Forms of typography that are associative with movement, sound, texture, particularly in relation to poetry produced by little presses, remains unrecognized beyond key figures such as Cobbing, Hamilton Finlay and Houedard. These (now marginalized) histories are rarely recognized as a part of design research, design history or practice. To extend Fry (2007), “[typography] is profoundly political. It either serves or subverts the status quo” (p. 8).

In the Land of Punctuation and *Liberté* explore the potential of a word-image visuality in typography. Design-led conversations and participatory reading sessions, and archival research which led to analysis of secondary and primary sources of ephemera from India (posters, murals, street signs) and from French and Russian archives (catalogs, publicity material, original artwork) inform the books. The research established visual examples of associative typography, wherein typography is concerned with the meaning and interpretation of the text and representing it using visual, verbal, and spatial aspects of typography. Typography in picture books takes primarily a conventional Global North understanding, with text and image separated. This is counter to the understanding that children in South Asian contexts grow up in an environment where word and image are equally visual; where reading is a visual act.

4.2. Intercultural Approaches to Typography and Book Design

With the MCLI series, the typesetting and design of bilingual Indic texts of such range and complexity is unprecedented in modern book design practice and posed multiple challenges that were addressed through three lines of enquiry. First, to establish a systematic bilingual book design for English translations of texts in ten different Indian languages and scripts grouped into four categories, namely, North Brahmic (Sanskrit, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali), South Brahmic (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada), Perso-Arabic (Urdu, Sindhi) and Prakrit (Pali). Second, to accommodate two genres — poetry and prose — in the template design. Third, as Indian texts do not use italics or bold, it was imperative to establish an Indic hierarchy and grammar through the application of typographic rules. There is a lack of attention to printing and typographic conventions in India as well as a lack of standards for typesetting modern Indian languages, as documented by Deshmukh (1958) and Ramakrishnan (2010). In addition, examples of bilingual design frameworks account for 3–4 different languages at most; here the task was to accommodate at the least the starting mission of 13 different languages and relevant scripts. The typographic and book interior designs aimed to recognize that some readers would be fluent in the language, while others might be

second-language or third-language speakers or not know English at all. It was essential that equity of access was provided for readers of all language fluencies.

With *In the Land of Punctuation* and *Liberté*, it is design and typography that situates universal narratives within a local context. The text was originally a 1928 German poem by Christian Morgenstern about politics, oppression and war that is recontextualized in a modern Indian setting and brought back to life. As noted above, Eluard's French poem spoke of freedom. The book becomes a research space to understand the politics that surrounds typography and language, where "politics" refers to the power that aesthetics that the visual and typography can carry as a voice and as a language in itself. Typography can be a tool which enables us to include rather than exclude, and to give those without a voice, an opportunity to have one.

4.3. History and Contemporary Practice

During the process of these projects, it was evident that precolonial and non-mainstream design histories are often unacknowledged and ignored in current design and historical research and practice. Yet cultural typographic histories can contribute and inform contemporary design practice. Western typography and book design have evolved without consideration for non-Western languages, typography, or design practices, so the challenge for MCLI was to incorporate Indic typographic traditions, design sensibilities and reader experiences into these bilingual editions, especially as the books are meant to be both for Western and Indian readership.

5. Research Methods

The projects employed several different research and design methods. Primary and secondary archival research was undertaken to focus on object research and establish an evidence-based understanding of practice and the sociocultural contexts in which book design and typographic design decisions were made. This included correspondence as well as original artwork. Extensive research was conducted on manuscripts, early printed books primarily in private and public collections in India and the UK; specialist archives including Bibilothèque Kandinsky (Centre Pompidou), St. Bride's Library, Roja Muthiah Library and SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) Library as well as Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum collections.

One of the design challenges of a 100-year publishing project was that it was essential that the system or standards that were being created survived the designers and researchers and provided whoever took this on in the future with a strong foundation to build on. The design act was to design texts whilst also simultaneously designing a system that would perpetuate. As noted by Farriss (1986), the key was to combine system (research) with process (design). Systems fit parts together in a synchronic

relationship explained by function; whilst process links them sequentially through cause and effect. The relationship of design is seen in motion, continually changing while remaining somewhat integrated.

With *Punctuation* and *Liberté*, research played a key role in building a sense of context of the time that the poems were written. A sense of authenticity within the design was embedded through material, narrative, and production. Visual research was conducted over three years using four sources. First, examples of “type in play” and “type as image” from a range of sources with the aim of analyzing the use of typography in these contexts. This research was limited to Morgenstern’s lifetime with *Punctuation*. Second, investigations into the industrial production of typography and language (much of the context of Morgenstern’s poem). Particular attention was paid to the way letterpress and typography as a medium could be used in communication of social and political themes. Third, photographic documentation of war in Germany, i.e., the visual imagery that stays in one’s mind or in the popular imagination, even if one is unfamiliar with the firsthand experience of the war. Fourth, typographic testing and the investigation of use of red as a color in a variety of relevant contexts to draw attention for different reasons. With *Liberté*, the project was more challenging due to the relationship between the movement and typography. As noted by Poynor (2007):

...one reason for Surrealism’s relatively unexamined role in the history of graphic design is that it had no decisive impact on typographic methods and aesthetics. While graphic designers are still working today with typographic conventions that can be traced back to Modernism, Surrealism is not part of this narrative. (p. 50)

The visual research therefore had to consider the relationship between Surrealist concepts and the practice of typography and graphic design. Surrealists put the emphasis on automatic writing; it seemed pertinent to then consider an approach of automatic designing. To paraphrase Brian Schorn (as cited in Poynor, 2007), the process was fuelled by a desire to reach content not available through conventional typographic meanings, with each page an “individual universe without rules of logic.”

With both projects, artifact analysis played a key role in establishing a relevant design approach. For MCLI, this focused on manuscripts and early printed books in Indian languages to provide both breadth and scope of knowledge and practice in pre-1800 Indian text design. This consisted of looking at objects whilst interrogating the contexts in which they were produced. The areas of research which fed into the practice were history of the book and printing in India; language, and scripts of India; reading and reader interactions with texts; and bilingual translations employing multiscript typography. For the *Punctuation* and *Liberté*, archival research and artifact analysis was conducted to investigate examples of typography in relation to poetry, particularly,

concrete, sound poetry, and nonsense verse. The research established visual examples of associative typography, wherein typography is concerned with the meaning and interpretation of the text and representing it using visual, verbal, and spatial aspects of typography.

Research through design practice methods were employed, using systematic analysis, typographic classification, iterative design, parallel prototyping and evaluation by expert editors and readers, often 4–5 per book. The design process functioned as a reflective research activity to enhance design practice through the examination of the tools and processes of design making, the critical act of recording and communicating steps, experiments, iterations of the design, and documentation to contextualize and communicate design actions through presentations.

The first consideration for the book design concept were the different languages and genres that the design had to accommodate. The MCLI task was to accommodate at the least the starting mission of 13 different languages and relevant scripts. The concept of “unity in diversity” is promoted strongly in India and is exemplified in the National Anthem written by Tagore. This became a guiding spirit for the interior design, i.e., to exemplify the best of the scripts and at same time, being relevant to the needs of the larger series.

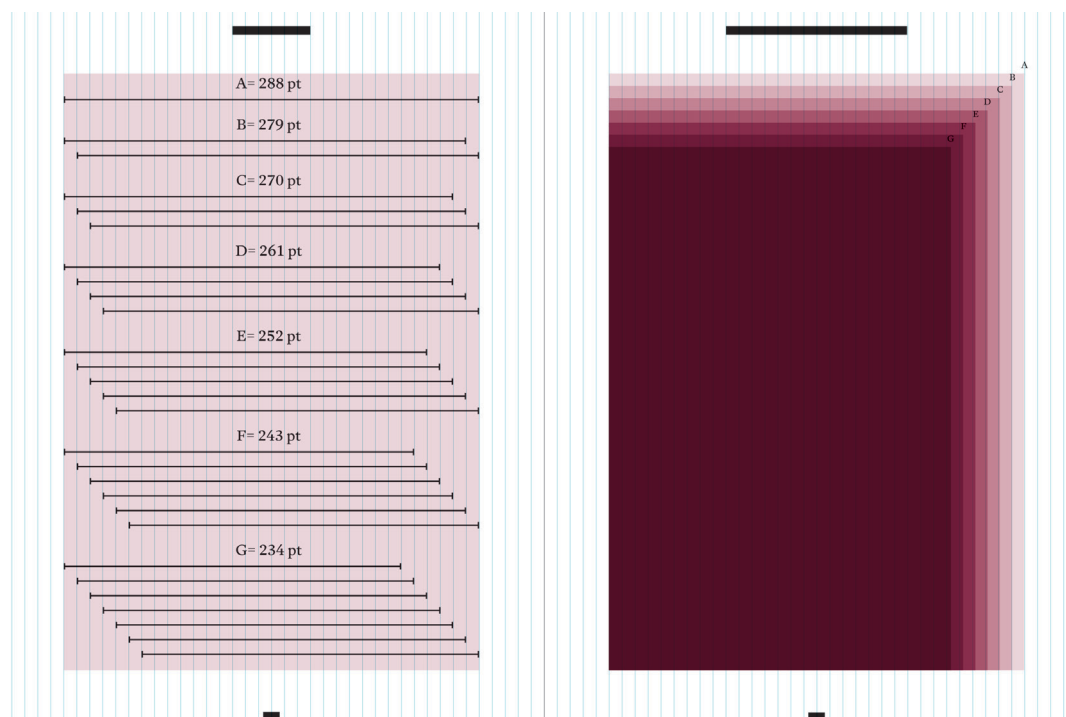


Figure 4. Diagram explaining the different lengths of text boxes in the polyphonic text framework (MCLI).



Figure 5. Diagram illustrating different permutations and combinations of text boxes in the polyphonic text framework.

It was important to acknowledge that the history of the book tradition in India is not the codex. It is the scroll or the manuscript. Textual content is shaped in part by the form (tools, materials and technology that produce form). With the introduction of printing in India tangled with colonial ambitions, this was something that also needed to be unraveled. Whilst conducting the research the aim was to pull out implicit understandings of how texts should be set as Farris (1986) noted. If it felt like something new was being built, this was not the intention. Instead, the research was reforming what existed for today's reader in a multilingual and intercultural context.

In India, reading is a public and social activity as well as a private activity. In India where there was and still is a sophisticated oral culture, there is a belief that oral communi-

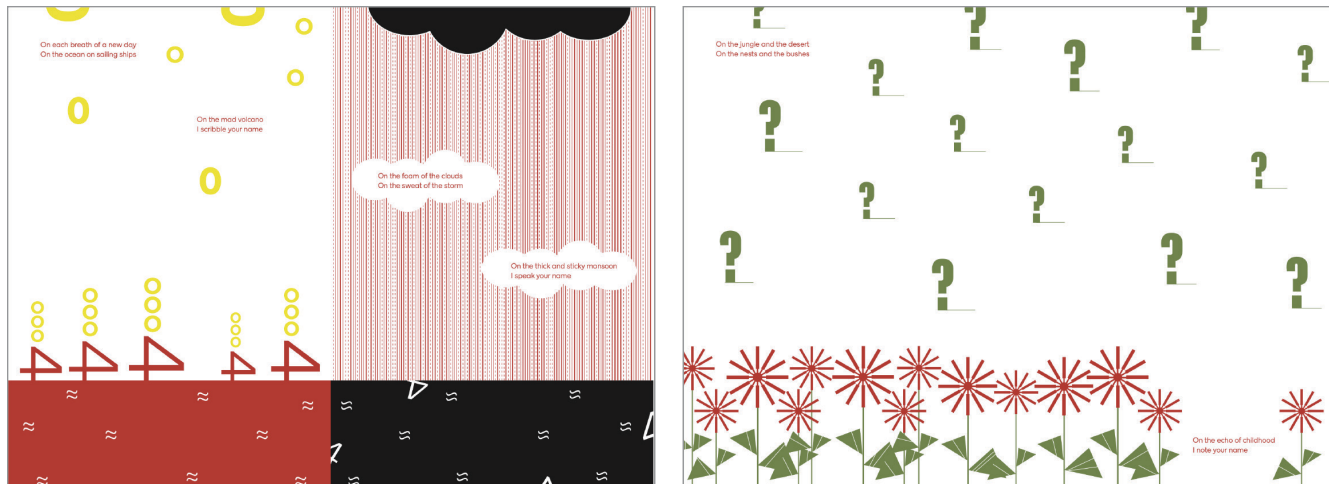


Figure 6. Two pages from *Liberté* (2024) which illustrate how meaning is created using typographic texture, movement, location and shape.

cation is still seen as an indication of one's ability as well as one's sincerity; it is also an affirmation of the belief that while what is written can always be read, what is meant to be heard must be spoken and lived.

In music, polyphony is a texture consisting of two or more independent melodic voices, as opposed to music with just one voice (monophony) or music with one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords (homophony). Taking this as inspiration for facing-page translations in two different languages, the book design adjusts according to the languages and their relationship to each other (in terms of length of language). This system highlights the nature of each text and puts the languages directly in relation to each other on the spread that gives them equal emphasis. Following this concept, a grid was developed as a skeleton of the book, which allows different positioning of the elements on the page according to the length of languages (Figure 4). The template offers a systematic and flexible approach to the design of these classical texts in multiple languages. The width of the text box on the page adjusts according to the language in use and to the type of text (poetry, prose, etc.). The relationship between Indic and English text on the page results in a unique layout for each language/genre. The system aims to highlight the nature of the texts and put emphasis on hypertextuality.*

The page is formatted into a grid which divides the width of the page. While the top and base margins, placement of folios and running heads are set across the series, the side (inner and outer) margins of the template are flexible. The inner and outer margins allow the text block to contract and expand in relation to the language on the reflecting

* Hypertextuality refers to the way in which texts are interconnected through links, allowing readers to navigate from one piece of content to another in a nonlinear manner.

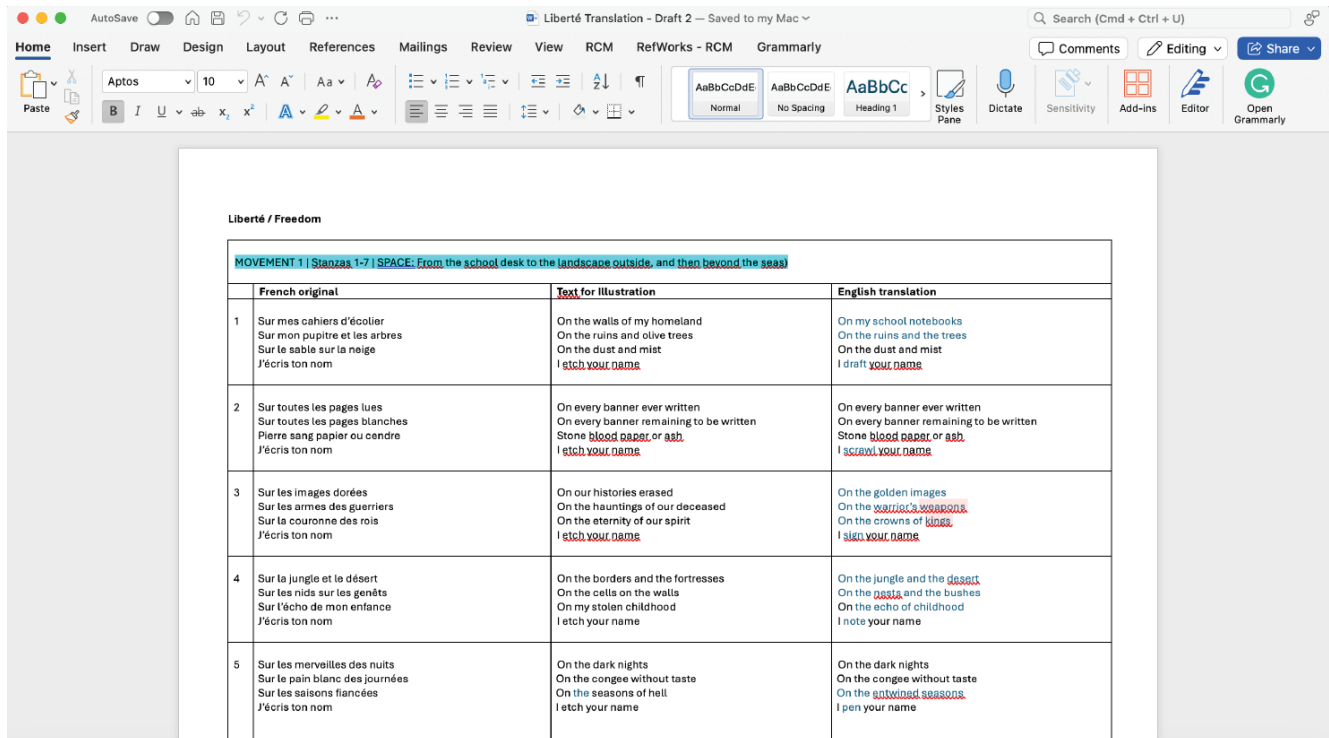


Figure 7. Excerpt from the decolonial visual translation provided by Adeena May which assisted with the contemporary typographic interpretation.

page. The aim of the spread is to let each language reflect the other rather than letting one design decide the others. This means that the text boxes on the verso and the recto need not be of the same width which allows for the text to be placed on the page in 28 different ways (Figure 5). As the two languages do not have to be the same width, variations are possible. For *Punctuation* and *Liberté*, associative examples of typography were classified into different representational categories, forming a type palette and toolbox from which design drafts could be formed. They included texture, movement, location, shape, sound, and color (Figure 6).

A co-research and co-design process was undertaken with MCLI and *Punctuation* as well as *Liberté*. With MCLI, the process of establishing design frameworks involved iterations based on feedback from editors and translators working with Indic languages, as well as printers and binders. The book design and typography were iteratively designed with type designers, with the book design responding to the type design, and vice versa. The design was reviewed by language experts such as Rupert Snell (2018) as one that befitted the origins of the text as well a modern contemporary reading. With the *Punctuation*, readers tested early design drafts. Based on their understanding of the pages of typographic play, words and shapes were adjusted accordingly. This iterative process underpinned the aims of the book, i.e., to enable typography and language to expand

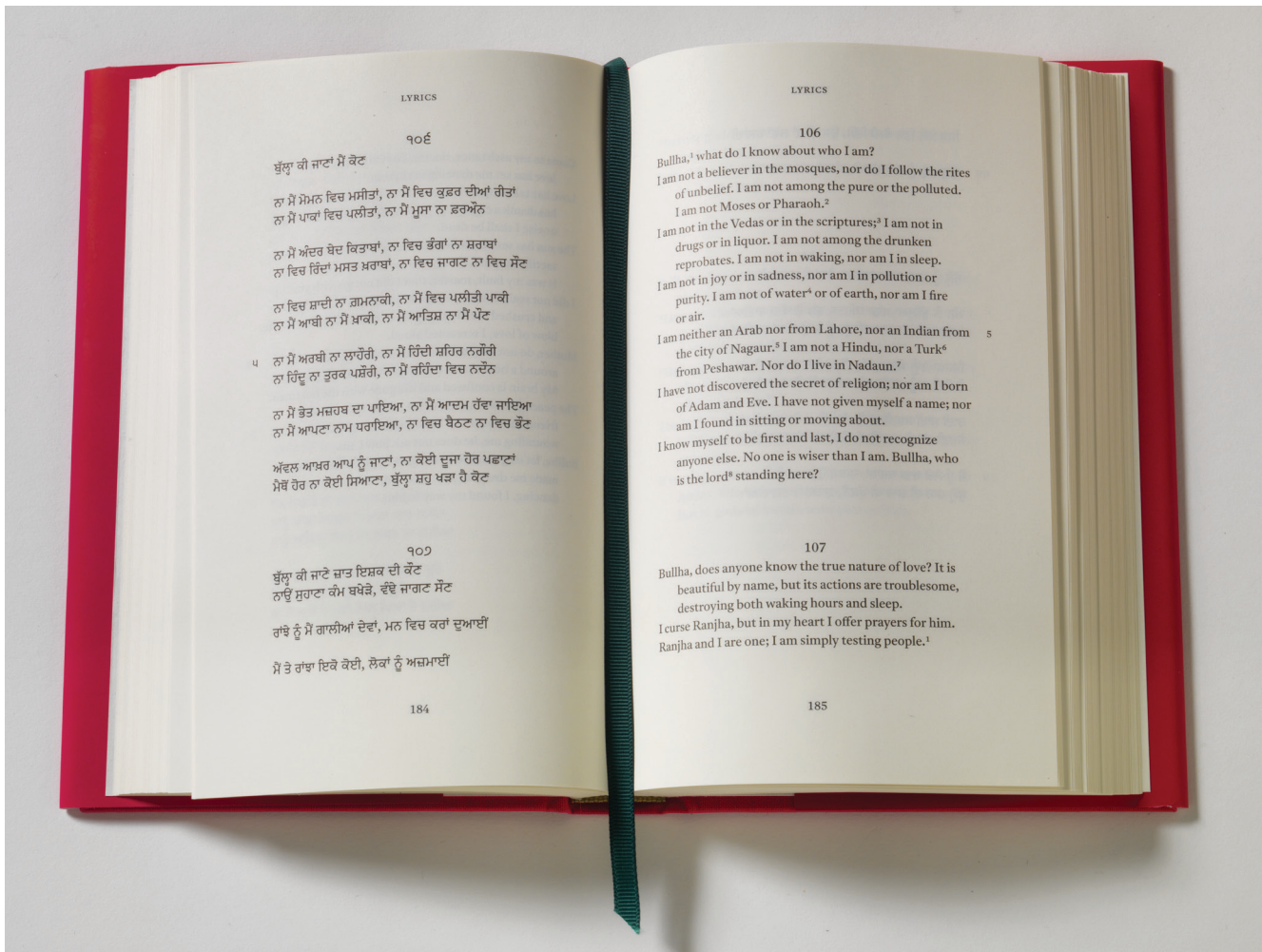


Figure 8. Open page spread illustrating how the book can be read. This title *Sufi Lyrics* has Gurmukhi script (Panjabi) on the left and Latin script (English) on the right.

aspects of reading (to incorporate sound, shape, texture, movement, color). With *Liberté*, the testing process had to work with two publishers — one who had grown up with the poem, and had previous context (a well-known poem taught in French schools), and the other without the national context for whom the work had to translate. Translation was an important aspect of the latter, with *Afterall* editor Adeena May providing a decolonial visual translation (Figure 7) for the typographic narrative.

In addition, contextual design methods were used to establish material-based narratives for MCLI. With MCLI, the books are produced in a hardback or library edition and a less expensive paperback, for the mass market in India. The hardback is bound to lie flat so the reader can make notes in the side margins and cross-reference the bilingual texts with ease (Figure 8).

6. Findings, Insights and Conclusions

The project aimed to establish the relevance of an approach not just to “non-Latin” typography but more broadly to the practice of typography, in relation to language. The aim here was to make more visible, through design and documentation, a broader approach to typography which acknowledges typography’s link to language, as it is spoken, written, and read both culturally as well as materially. As noted by Pollock (2011), such approaches provide many occasions for learning something about our “shared humanity” from these works, but they also “give access to radically different forms of human consciousness for any given generation of readers, and thereby expands for them the range of possibilities of what it means to be a human being” (p. 36).

The history of the book which looks primarily at the codex, needs to encompass the histories that are beyond the codex, to manuscripts, scrolls and other “book” traditions which are rarely documented or acknowledged. Research revealed that there are no existing bilingual design frameworks for the presentation of Indian texts in Indian scripts and languages, nor as translations into English. In a letter written by Tim Jones, Director of Design and Production at Harvard University in 2018, he noted, “we had never applied the facing-page translation concept to such a wide array of languages and scripts.” Jones goes on to say that the research “addressed the critical need for a unified design approach that could encompass a wide array of variation and many disparate requirements.”

As discussed previously, existing approaches with Indian texts come from colonial roots of printing which have aimed to synthesize “non-Latin” scripts with a Latin page, rather than from the requirements of the scripts, languages, or texts themselves. This is a primary framework for research and design for multiple languages that can be applied to other world languages. The broader aim is to show the relevance of this approach not just to “India,” not just to “non-Latin,” but more broadly to the practice of design and typography and the relevance of research. Such a decolonial and intercultural typography acknowledges all periods of textual history, not just the dominant and the easily accessible.

Typographic guidelines for Indian texts that respond to Indic hierarchy and grammar in the application of typographic rules can enable contemporary reading and accommodate multiple (and new) readers. Indian typography borrows conventions from Western models of typography, converting typographic styles such as “bold,” “underline,” “italics,” and “slanted” to contexts which do not use such styles. The research addressed the challenges of emphasis and hierarchy in texts by providing solutions more relevant to the roots of Indian scripts, for example, by employing color, size, and location (Figure 9). In relation to the layout, as noted, the design framework was based on the

MCLI STYLE GUIDE FOR TYPESETTING: **HINDI TEXT**

The following guide refers to treatment of text set in Hindi.

All text is set in MCLI Antwerp and Murty Hindi only.

Paragraph style language setting to be set in Hindi

** Refers to alternative treatments of the text adopted for the design of specific titles.*

PARAGRAPH STYLE CONVENTIONS

H4: HI Subsection Num 11.5pt

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 11.5pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: -25;

CASE: Normal; ALIGNMENT: Centre;

TO USE FOR: Main Text Poem Numbers;

H5: HI Side Number 9pt

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 9pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: -10;

CASE: Normal; ALIGNMENT: Left

H5: HI Side Number 9pt 80% K

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 9pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: -10;

CASE: Normal; ALIGNMENT: Left

TO USE FOR: Alternative Numbering System;

COLOUR: Normal

H5: HI Poetry Text 11.5pt

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 11.5pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: 0;

1ST LINE INDENT: -18pt; LEFT INDENT: 18pt

H5: HI Poetry Text 11.5pt 1st Line of Pg

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 11.5pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: 0

ALIGN TO GRID: First line only

H5: HI Poetry Text 11.5pt 1st Line

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 11.5pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: 0

1ST LINE INDENT: -18pt; LEFT INDENT: 75pt

H6: HI Notes Text 8pt

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 8pt; LEADING: 10.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: 0;

ALIGNMENT: Left Justify;

1ST LINE INDENT: -18pt; LEFT INDENT: 18pt

H7: HI Notes section Number 9pt

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 9pt; LEADING: 10.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: 0;

ALIGNMENT: Centre

H8: HI Notes Text 18pt Indent

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 8pt; LEADING: 10.5pt;

KERNING: Metrics; TRACKING: 0;

ALIGNMENT: Left justify;

1ST LINE INDENT: -18pt; LEFT INDENT: 18pt;

CHARACTER STYLES CONVENTIONS

HI Note Ref H5

STYLE: Italic; SIZE: 11.5pt; LEADING: 17.5pt;

TRACKING: 0; CASE: Normal;

POSITION: Opentype Superior/Superscript

HI EN Note Text 9pt H8

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 8pt; LEADING: 10.5pt;

TRACKING: 0; CASE: Normal; POSITION: Normal

HI EN Note Side Num 7pt

STYLE: Regular; SIZE: 7pt; LEADING: 10.5pt;

TRACKING: 0; CASE: Normal; POSITION: Normal

Figure 9. Typesetting guide for setting Hindi-English in the MCLI series.

relationship of scripts and languages to each other, on a facing page to enable reading for both scholarly means as well as for pleasure, and with readers of different fluencies.

The approach was commended by Walker (2017, p. 8) in a paper “Research in Graphic Design” as an example of good practice: “Rathna Ramanathan and Fiona Ross’s work on book and typeface design for the Murty library is an excellent example drawing together cultural and historical precedent to inform contemporary graphic design.” Schulze and Arnall (2011) proposed that we can design the means through which design happens, challenging the concepts, behaviors, and means of production as well as designing form. The project is not just about the spirit of the design process but about the impact of the project through design on everyday situations. The typefaces used in the project are available open-source to anyone working in the Indian context. The books are being brought back into universities, are available at an affordable price to the Indian public as well as accessible to an international audience. As noted by Pollock (2011), we need ways of describing the world that do not just belong to one tradition. MCLI, its purpose, design and production in all aspects are just one small step towards that.

With *Punctuation*, involving children and readers into the design process contributed to the final design of the text, and the approach changed the practice of the publishers themselves. In an interview conducted in 2021, Wolf noted in relation to the research,

This has left a legacy that can be seen in terms of the strength brought to typography and design as a voice, to the process of the book understood as an ongoing conversation in which typography also has a voice.

With MCLI, the impact of this research has been twofold. Firstly, it has enabled the preservation of and access to Indic classical texts and Indic scripts by providing typographic frameworks and design guidelines for publication of bilingual books in Indic and Latin scripts by the Murty Classical Library of India. For Tara Books, the research has developed an approach to typography that empowers marginalized communities of readers as well as expanding readership in inclusive and decolonial ways. The success of *Punctuation* inspired the commission of another project — bringing that dialogue and process to a wider audience.

For us to address global challenges such as climate, health, or fake news, we need to acknowledge that communication is a fundamental right that needs to encompass culture and recognize context. It must understand that readers have multiple perspectives, reading fluencies, and bring their own contexts to the page or the screen. To build pluralistic and intercultural frameworks for typographic practice, we do this through the depth and interrogation of research not as an elite activity but as an everyday practice. This requires, primarily, a genuine need to know and understand that which

is not known or understood, rather than to solely pursue something that is “new” or “original” for practice or research in design.

7. References

- Appadurai, A. (2006). The right to research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 4(2): 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600750696>
- Ansari, A. (2021). Decolonisation, the history of design, and the designs of history. Paper presented at the Annual Design History Conference, online, September 1.
- Beirut, M. (2019). [Blurb]. In D. Reinfurt, A. Micheals, and E. Lupton. *A *new* program for graphic design*. Inventory Press.
- Bhatt, S., & November Studio (2020). Pluralism and power dynamics in Indian design: November Studio. *Walker Art Center*. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/pluralism-indian-design-november-shiva-nallaperumal-juhi-vishnani/>
- Calvert, S. (2012). Materia Prima, text-as-image. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 4(3), 309–328.
- Deshmukh, C. D. (1958). *The printing press in India*. Marathi Samshodhana Mandala.
- De Sousa Santos, B. (2018). *The end of the cognitive empire: The coming of age of epistemologies of the south*. Duke University Press.
- Eluard, P. (1942). *Liberté*. In *Poésie et vérité*. Les Éditions de la main à plume.
- Farriss, N. (1986). Foreword. In A. Appadurai (Ed.). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fry, T. (2007). Book review: The Archework Papers. *Design Issues*, 23(3): 88–92. <http://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2007.23.3.88>
- Gruendler, S. (2005). *The life and work of Beatrice Warde* [PhD dissertation]. University of Reading.
- Jones, T. (2018). *Letter to the Royal College of Art*. Harvard University.
- Lees-Maffei, G., & Lees-Maffei, N. P. (2019). *Reading graphic design in a cultural context*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Macaulay, T. B. (1835). Minute on education. Bureau of Education. In H. Sharp (Ed.), *Selections from educational records, part I (1781–1839)*. Superintendent, government printing, 1920. Reprint. National Archives of India, 1965, 107–117.
- Nallaperumal, S., & Vishani, J. (2020). In S. Bhatt (Ed.), *Pluralism and power dynamics in Indian design: November studio*. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/pluralism-indian-design-november-shiva-nallaperumal-juhi-vishnani/>
- Pinney, C. (2013) More than local, less than global: Anthropology in the contemporary world. In C. Shore & S. Trnka (Eds.), *Up close and personal: On peripheral perspectives and the production of anthropological knowledge* (pp. 160–175). Berghahn Books.
- Pollock, S. (2011). Crisis in the classics. *Social Research*, 78(1), 21–48.
- Poynor, R. (2007). Dark tools of desire. *Eye*, 63(16), 54–61. <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/dark-tools-of-desire>
- Ramakrishnan, C. (2010). Tamil typography. Email correspondence.
- Ramanathan, R. (2023). Politics of publishing: Exploring decolonial and intercultural frameworks for marginalized publics. In J. Yee & P. A. Rodgers (Eds), *The Routledge companion to design research* (pp. 75–90). Routledge Art History and Visual Studies Companions. Routledge.

- Schulze, J., & Arnall, T. (2011). Change through making. *Eye*, Summer. <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/change-through-making>
- Shyam, B., & Wolf, G. (2017). *The London Jungle Book*. Tara Books.
- Snell, R. (2018). Reviews: The Epic of Ram. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 80(1), 165–167.
- Till, J. (2021). Research after research. Paper presented at IoA Sliver Lecture Series 21/22: Research Cultures, online, December 2.
- Trivedi, H. (2008). The ‘book’ in India: Orality, manuscript, print (post) colonialism. In R. Fraser & M. Hammond (Eds.), *Books without borders*, Volume 2 (pp. 12–33). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wolf, G. (2021). Unpublished interview [for REF impact case study at RCA].

Author

Rathna Ramanathan is a typographer, practice design researcher and academic known for her expertise in intercultural communication and alternative publishing practices. She is Provost, Central Saint Martins, Executive Dean for Global Affairs and Professor in Design and Intercultural Communication at the University of the Arts London. For the past thirty years, Rathna has led research-driven, intercultural, multi-platform graphic communication practice design research projects primarily in the Global South, all fuelled by a love for, and lifelong interest in typography and languages, and a belief in communication as a fundamental human right.