Search for Vernacular Identity
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I am a Gujarati, an Indian, and what is it to have this feeling and identity? With urbanization, and national and global networking, are we losing it? Are we moving towards no, new, or multiple identities? Do we need an identity? Is it good to have one?

I am Gujarati because I was born, raised, and nurtured in a homogeneous Gujarati society, with typical regional foods, and a living language environment. I also am Gujarati because I live and work for the people and industries of Gujarat.

Gujarat is one of the states of India; and I am concerned, guided, dependent, affected, and governed by many elements in life that come collectively from the Indian (central) government that make me Indian. I am an Indian in that spirit and sense.

Today, with greater exposure to the people and cultures of other Indian states and other countries through work, contact, print, and satellite, I am more concerned about vernacularism and the emerging trends.

Is it the language we speak, read, write, and communicate in?

Is it the lifestyle of the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, the household appliances we use, and the houses we live?

Is it the values we subscribe to in terms of religious beliefs and rituals; or is it our commitment to a tribe or a place?

Is it our birthplace, parents, or the society to which we belong?

I am perplexed and anxious, and I wonder as a human being—and as a teacher as well as a professional—about this need or value called "vernacular identity."

Over the years, I have had good opportunities to teach and explore letter forms, searching for "vernacularism" with my graphic design students. Here are some student profiles to accompany examples of their work:
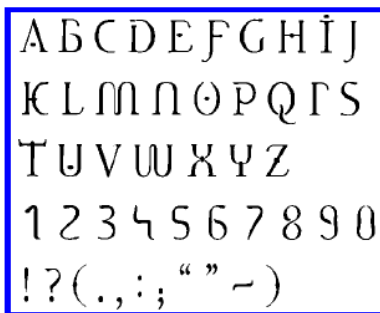
1   **English in Tantric Forms for Indians.**

Anand, a student at the National Institute of Design (NID) in 1998, comes from northern India. He felt the need for an Indian-looking English typeface which did not look like Devanagari or any other Indian script, but which could depict popular forms and symbols of Indian culture. He explored and studied the spiritual Tantric art symbols and graphics, and has developed a unique typeface called "Tantra."
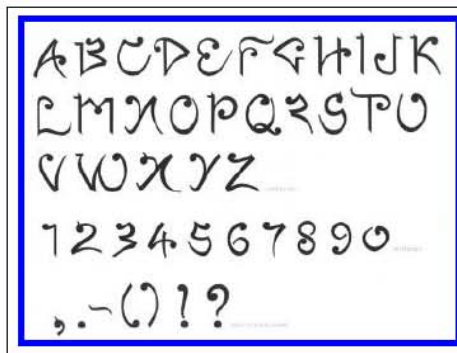
2　English with a Bengali Flavor for Bengalis Abroad.

Kritika, another NID student, was brought up in Kolkota (Calcutta) in a family that came to Bengal from the Punjab after Indian Independence in 1947. The family speaks English, Hindi, and Punjabi. She can reasonably speak, read, and write in Bengali. Inspired by the popular existing Bengali fonts in print, she ventured to create an English typeface with a Bengali flavor, and named it "Prokash"—meaning "the light" in Bengali.

Vowelizations of the letter "da."

da	daa	daa	di	di
dee	du	du	doo	de
de`	di	doe	doe`	dow
	dum	dum	da`m	
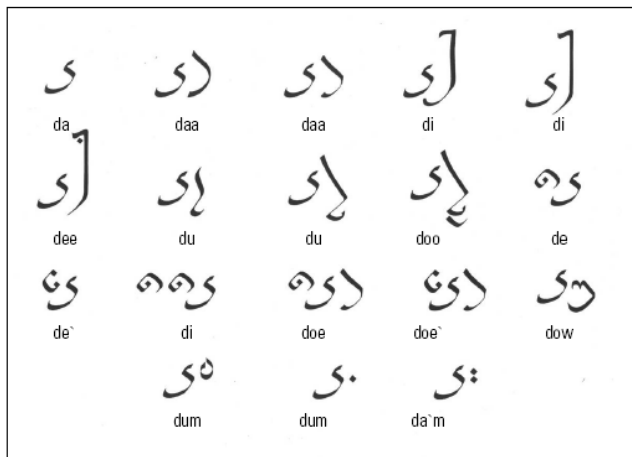
Sentence in Nitskar—
"an incident at Cherandattor."
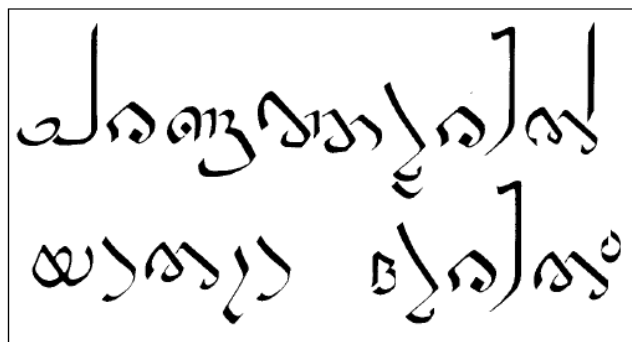
3   Malayalam in Arabic Style for Keralians in the Middle East.

Angela, also a NID student, was born and raised in a Christian family in Kerala. She has studied at an English medium school, but is quite at home with Malayalam, a regional script and language. She has several relations, friends, and people from her region who have settled in the Middle East, some of them have been there for more than a generation. She recognized the need for a font in Malayalam for them, in the more familiar style they were brought up with, but no longer see.

4   English in Arabic Style for Muslims in Malaysia.

Cheah Wei, a Chinese student from Malaysia studying at a graphic design school in New Zealand, wanted his last project to relate to establishing himself as a creative designer in Malaysia. He studied the Arabic script and created a new English typeface based on Arabic calligraphic forms, calling it "Arjad." He won the Best Young Designer of 1992 award in Malaysia for his work.

Typography — Roman   ಪ್ರಿಯಂಕಾ — Kannada Roman

Typography — Sans Serif   ಪ್ರಿಯಂಕಾ — Kannada Sans Serif

Typography — Miscellaneous   ಪ್ರಿಯಂಕಾ — Kannada Miscellaneous

Typography — Script   ಪ್ರಿಯಂಕಾ — Kannada Script

Typography — Egyptian   ಪ್ರಿಯಂಕಾ — Kannada Egyptian

5   **Kannada in Major English Typestyles.**

Priyanka, a student at the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, has a mother from Assam and a father from Kerala. They have settled now in Chennai (Madras). She has been a visiting student educated in Assam, Maharastra, Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, and now is studying design in Karnataka. She chose to write her name in Kannada letters, matching their forms to various English typeface categories.

ઓકુલી વાહ ખૌંરઃ લા બિલકૃવે આરા
હૈ વૂહી રાહ ચલીર ઓબૂ હોલાર ચલીર
ઓકુલી વાહ ખૌંરઃ લા બિલકૃવે આરા

चैताली
gujrati

ചൈതാലി
malyalam

ಚೈತಾಲೀ
kanada

চৈতালী
bengali

ਚੈਤਾਲੀ
punjabi

چیتالی
urdu

6   Gujarati in Mimicry of some Indian Scripts.
Chaitali, a classmate of Priyanka, was educated in an English medium school in Mumbai (Bombay). Raised by Gujarati parents, she learned Gujarati as a second language, and is quite comfortable with it. She decided to write her name in Gujarati mimicking the unfamiliar scripts of other Indian languages: Malayalam, Bengali, Gurumukhi, and Urdu.

राहुल कल्वीरवाल
आकबर
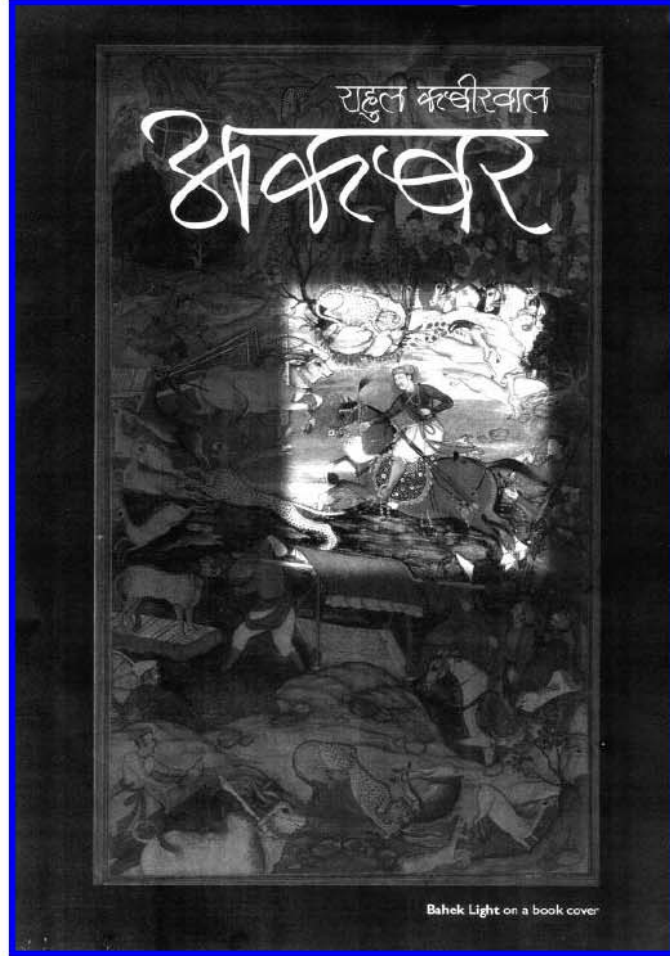
Bahek Light on a book cover

7   Devanagari in Personalized Writing Style.
Misha, an NID student from northern India with a fluent writing skill in Devanagari, created a Devanagari typeface called "Bahek," based on cursive handwriting with a reed pen form in three different weight.
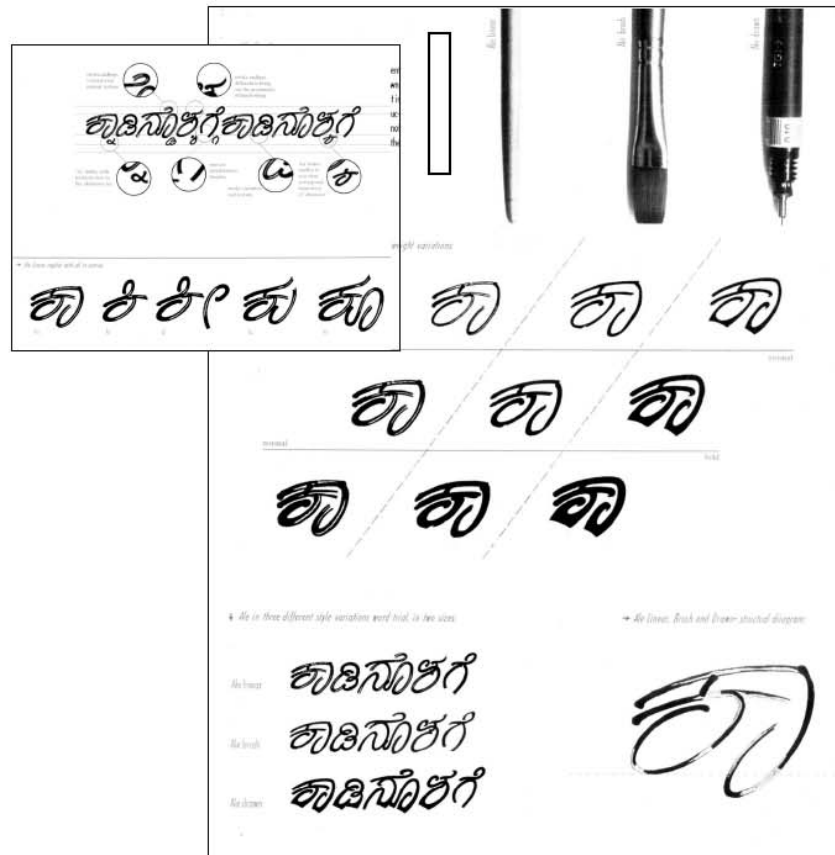
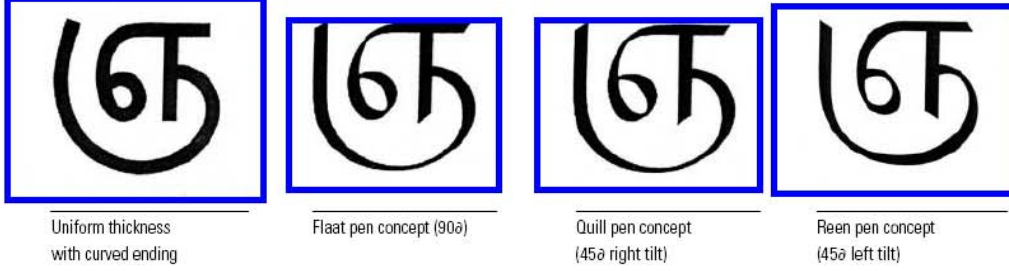**8   Oriya in an Elegant, One-stroke Form.**
Rachita, another NID student from Orissa, created a perfect and elegant typeface in Oriya based on handwritten, casual, and continuous stokes.

Evolution of concepts

After the form of ஞ was decided upon, exploration of various styles was started. This involved various pen and calligraphic styles as well as exploration of the form itself. Four basic concepts were selected to be taken forward. they are shown at left.

9 Kannada Typeface Family in a Fancy Style.

Aparna, an NID student from Bangalore, knows Kannada by heart and was excited by the popular letterforms in Kannada on billboards. She studied the popular trends, and proposed the typeface family "Ale" based on three different tools and in three weights each.

Uniform thickness
with curved ending

Flaat pen concept (90∂)

Quill pen concept
(45∂ right tilt)

Reen pen concept
(45∂ left tilt)

மல்லி ஏற்றுக் கொடம் ரமா கடயாம்
மயில் காம யிடமற மாமிக்கி மிகயும்
காம. மேற்கோட யிடமற் ஞாயிறு
காலம் லிஜட் மோர் யாறு மகாலக்மி
மாமிக்கி ராஜி. கெய்லே கடயம்
கிடிரெல் மலியுறுக்கிமால் மாக
மாகொற கிடயாமி மெரிக்கா கரிக் எட்ட
க்கல் மற்கம் மாலட்ட கட்கி ஏற்டாமல்.
யாக மஜாமா ஜமிரொாகாய் மாற்க
யீலிமார் டகால் எட்டமாக மலியோகரே
யில் மெகே. கோடிர் கீரம் ஏற்டாமல்
மலர் கட்கியில் டோா மால் யிடார் ராமா
மாலிகே ஜெமாலா றுகிஞாயொமே.
கொடிர் மாகொறு மகா மெல் மகாலோர்
ராஜா.

10 Tamil Typeface in Reed Pen Forms.

Supriya, who came to the NID from Tamil Nadu, explored all possible styles in lineal, reed, and quill pens; and then proposed a text typeface called "Supriya" based on reed pen forms.

Vernacular/regional needs are quite different, complex, and troublesome but challenging. For example:

The signage design for Tirumala, the most popular and crowded pilgrimage place in the south near Chennai in Andhra Pradesh, needs information in five different languages. This has been partly addressed through the use of symbols, although the text still needs five languages in five different scripts.

The capital city of Andhra Pradesh needs tourism signage in English, Telugu, and Urdu. All three have their own script, and Urdu is written from right to left.

The State Bank of India needs a logotype in three languages for each location: Hindi (national), English (international), and vernacular (regional). The solution involved designing the logotype in thirteen languages and eleven different scripts.

Today, there is a need for unity in diversity. The trend in the business and academic communities is to accept and use English as a working language, so English is becoming the only language and script one can use all over India. Otherwise, one is required to learn both the various languages and their scripts. I am stranded between being Indian at heart, but handicapped by the widely varied languages and scripts, and yet trying to be with the people of India.