



Typography and Storytelling

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Speaking Volumes: Celebrating typographic diversity and storytelling in old regional periodicals in Gujarati and Tamil

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Abstract: This paper explores the rich world of expressive vernacular typography and visual elements, from hand-lettered titles to elaborate compositions, in regional periodical magazines from the 1960s - 70s, positioning them as eloquent conduits for storytelling.

Discussing a finite section of a long-term passion project, the paper undertakes a comparative analysis of two bound volumes of Kumar (Gujarati) and Kalki (Tamil) magazines, examining the semiotic landscape of West and South India respectively, and exploring parallel patterns, commonalities and resonances. Collaborative deconstructions with native speakers and readers enabled a deeper understanding of the temporal and socio-cultural meanings encoded within their design.

The project seeks to celebrate unapologetically detailed and expressive typographic approaches in print media, once commonplace and fading with present-day homogenization. Working at the intersection of design and cultural studies, I aim for it to further dialogues on vernacular type in contemporary practice and contribute to a more inspired, discursive landscape.

Key words: *Vernacular Type, Typographic Culture, Comparative Analysis, Regional Periodical Magazines, Gujarati and Tamil Scripts*

1. Introduction and Motivation

As a collector of old books, my fascination with history often took me to Ahmedabad's Sunday market, where I would acquire vintage Gujarati publications with covers featuring unique illustrations and title designs. The chance discovery of a bound volume of the periodical magazine Kumar evoked memories of my grandmother's library, with similar volumes in Tamil. As I leafed through the pages marvelling at the illustrations, hand

lettered titles and bespoke fonts while the market's crowds milled around me, I knew I would love studying them side by side. In Tiruvannamalai, I would begin the project of uncovering patterns between them, examining the visual and linguistic messaging of their times, and seeing what value they might infuse into today's design landscape. The project aims to pursue this deep curiosity about how storytelling and design operate within specific socio-historical contexts, and reach open-ended questions and interesting observational insights.



Figure.1 A sample of the books collected at the Sunday Market in Ahmedabad

Storytelling and design are both products of a context, engendered by its politics, economy, visual culture, media and modes of communication. The theme of Typoday 2025 provides an apt platform to situate typography as a medium that possesses immense storytelling potential not only for contemporaneous audiences but also for researchers seeking to understand cultural narratives embedded in historical artefacts.

2. Approach and Scope

This paper adopts a primarily visual approach, prioritising the cultural aspects of typography over technical aspects; the sections and observations are organised according to meaning-making frameworks rather than typeface categories within the periodicals under review. In studying the magazines, collaborating with Dharini Padh for Gujarati, and Sukanya S and Padmavathi S for Tamil immensely helped with discussing historical and cultural contexts, decoding visuals, as well as noticing quirky details. An interesting line of questioning with Dharini about whether we were exoticising the typography in these magazine because it belongs to the past led me to define that we were, instead, building on an authentic interest in history and responding to the innate urge to understand the underlying cultural currents and influences that produce any kind of design language.

Providing an exhaustive or technical analysis of typeface evolution and making broad generalizations about all regional typography are beyond the scope of this paper. It offers

a glimpse into a small sample set as part of a larger research project that will eventually include more regional languages and collaborations, aiming to celebrate typographic diversity and its integral role in storytelling in an era when the use of color and photographs were not yet very prevalent.

My paper aims to synthesise and curate these efforts into cohesive, meaningful and compelling questions, generating potential avenues for further inquiry. Additionally, it seeks to foster collaborations that can deepen the understanding of typographic and cultural intersections.

3. Background and Context

3.1 Gujarat and Tamil Nadu in the 1960s-70s: Industry, Identity, and Influence

Understanding the socio-historical and economic context of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu during the mid-20th century is vital to the study and interpretation of our chosen cross-section. Both regions witnessed significant industrial and cultural transformations that influenced the design and content of their print media.

Consumer culture in India was being influenced by state-controlled economic policies, urbanisation and the expanding role of cinema and radio. Textiles were a major industry, and alongside well-crafted cottons, synthetics (terrycot, rayon) gained popularity for their affordability and modern appeal. The 1960s- 70s also saw the rise of home appliances, agricultural technology, construction and packaged foods.

India's banking sector underwent a major transformation, shifting from a largely private, urban-centric system to nationalised banks in 1969. Advertising reflected this shift, with banks emphasising trust and national development through vernacular campaigns. The insurance sector promoted policies as essential tools for financial stability for the family.

In Gujarat, the expansion of the textile and chemical industries in the cities of Ahmedabad, Baroda and Surat contributed to the growth of a burgeoning middle class. Amul began establishing itself as a trusted household brand in India.

Tamil Nadu's economic landscape was being shaped by developments in the automobile and textile industry. The political climate, particularly the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation and the broader Dravidian movement, reinforced Tamil linguistic identity.

3.2 About the Magazines

Kumar (કુમર), founded in 1924 as an avant-garde cultural publication, was one of Gujarat's most esteemed literary periodicals, published from Ahmedabad. It provided a platform for modernist, existentialist, and post-Gandhian themes, featuring contributions from writers such as Umashankar Joshi, Suresh Joshi, and Jayant Pathak. It also engaged with socio-political discourse, publishing essays on Indian philosophy, art, nationalism, and linguistic identity. Kumar's typography reflected its literary ethos, balancing traditional script styles with modern design influences.

Kalki (કલ્કી), founded in 1941 by Kalki Krishnamurthy, was a periodical published from Chennai and known for its emphasis on literature, history, politics, cinema, and cultural discourse. It played a pivotal role in shaping Tamil literary tastes and nationalist thought during the mid-20th century. In the 1960s and 70s, Kalki maintained its relevance as a family-friendly and intellectually stimulating publication, balancing historical fiction with contemporary social commentary. It included sections dedicated to women's columns, household advice and health tips, catering to a broad readership.

This paper looks at a bound volume of *Kumar* issues from between December 1969 and October 1971, and a bound volume of the serialised novel *Ponnivanatthu Poonkuyil* in *Kalki* issues between January 1968 and November 1968.

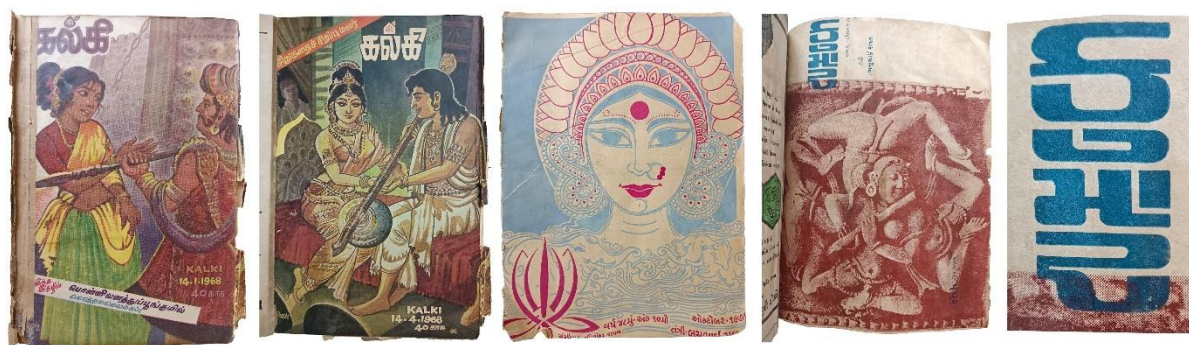


Figure.2 Collage of the magazine covers included in the bound volumes. (1) is a *Kalki* cover for *Ponnivanatthu Poonkuyil* and (2) is a special short story edition (*sirukathai sirappu malar*). Each cover features illustrations of scenes from the progressing story and unique hand-lettered titles and subtitles. (3) is the volume cover for the *Kumar* magazines bound by the collector; note the wavy type integrated with the illustration. (4) is a *Kumar* cover within the volume; *Kumar* also appears to have had unique title designs on the cover of each issue. (5) is the title, enlarged.

3.3 The Visual Language of Print Magazines

In the 1960s, Indian magazines were influenced heavily by the constraints and capabilities of offset printing technology. Hand-lettering allowed for more expressive, calligraphic styles, with custom display lettering for mastheads and section titles drawn by artists before being transferred onto printing plates. Print ads often included bold, hand-drawn titles that mimicked painted signboards, giving them a localised and familiar aesthetic.

Halftone printing was a practical and economical solution for including photographs in mass-printed materials, shaping the visual style of newspapers, magazines, and advertisements of the era. Ads often mirrored instruction manuals and product catalogs, with detailed technical line-drawing illustrations of the product that reinforced precision and reliability.

Magazines were predominantly black and white, with a few pages featuring one or two other colours. Given the limitations of printing colors and higher-resolution photographs, typography played a crucial role in attracting attention and setting one's brand apart. The visual language of technical illustrations and type-driven design layouts became a defining feature of Indian commercial print media for decades.

3.4 Readers, Collectors and Cultural Significance

Kumar catered to audiences interested in art and culture, particularly those in the urban middle class. *Kalki* found prominent readership among the women of Tamil Nadu's middle class. Both these audiences show a keen investment in collecting the periodicals' issues, as evidenced by the meticulously handwritten dates and their having these volumes bound after amassing enough issues. The publications were valued and preserved for their quality content, recurring features and columns, and serialised novels that kept readers engaged.

The main content and the advertisements can both be seen as a kind of storytelling. Today, they help us understand the readers' standard of living, habits, needs and aspirations.

4. Research Questions

A few research questions guiding the overall project are:

1. What visual, thematic, and typographic similarities emerge between the two magazines?

2. What does the study of this period tell us about the evolution of typography in these two scripts?
3. How did the age group and socio-economic class targeted by magazines influence their design?
4. How does comparing typography across two distinct scripts enhance our understanding of their historical, cultural, and communicative functions?
5. What does examining typography from a storytelling standpoint enable us to do?

5. Observations and Discussions

5.1 Unique Features

As periodicals, both the volumes have repeating elements in each issue; *Kumar* has regular columns covering relevant subjects, while this particular *Kalki* volume features a part of *Ponnivanatthu Poonkuyil*. This provides an interesting parallel for studying where the design elements repeat and where they differ.

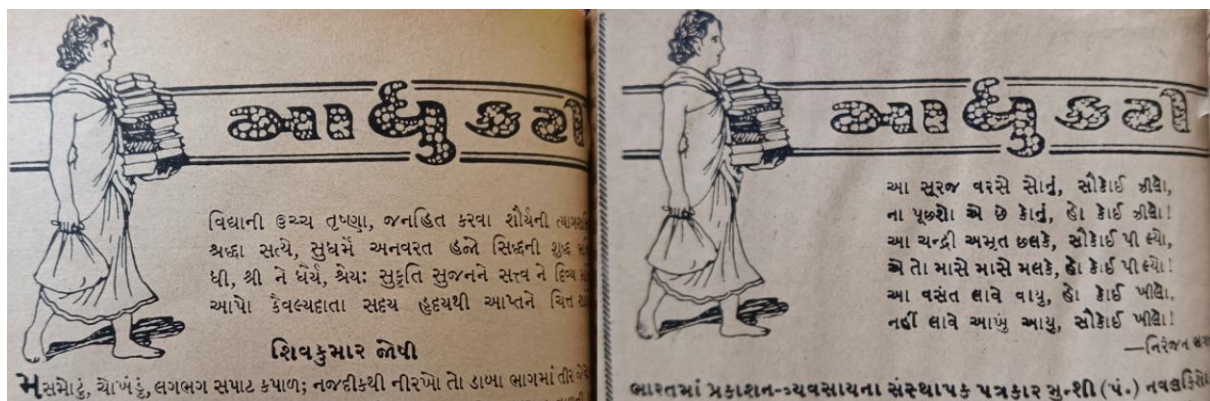


Figure.3 *Maadhukari*, a recurring feature in *Kumar*. Notice the interaction between the title, illustration and the border, and the texturing in the letters.



Figure.4 *Pacchees Varsh Pahela*: An intriguing feature which revisits editions of the *Kumar* magazine published 50 years prior to the current issue. Both the images show a simplified cover of the issues—notice the varied title designs. One is from March 1945 and the other from May 1945.

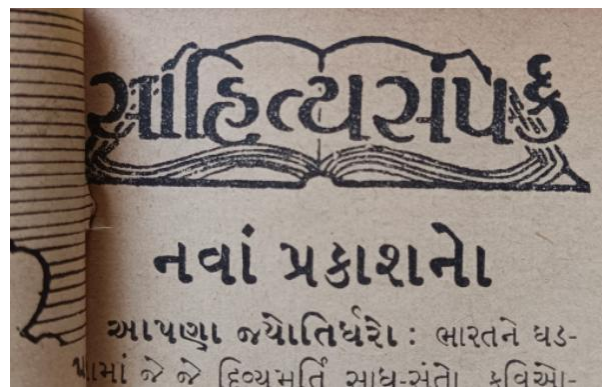


Figure.5 Kalaavarto (Left), and Sahityasampark (Right), regular columns of the magazines. Their distinct design makes them instantly identifiable for regular readers looking forward to these particular sections.

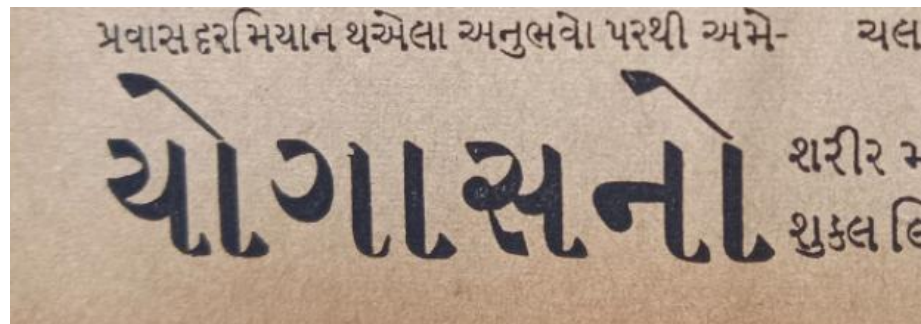
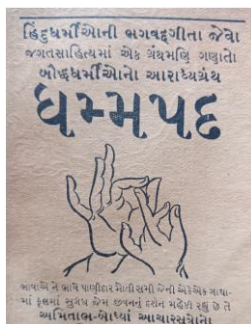


Figure.6 Dhammapad (Left), and Yogasano (Right), these titles of regular columns appear to have been written with a calligraphy pen of a roughly 60° leftward slant.

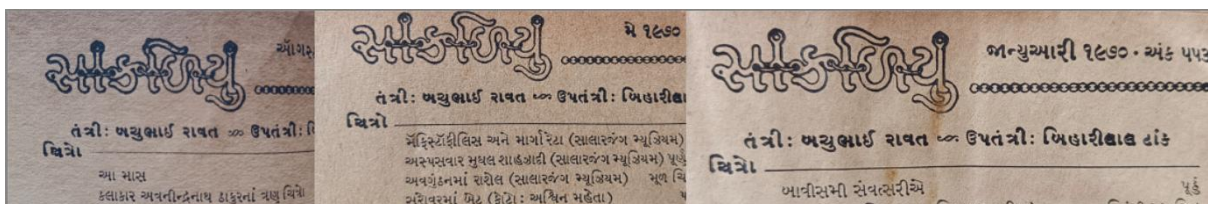


Figure.7 Saankaliyu: Beautiful custom type for the contents page of every issue, reflecting the meaning of the word itself: “linked”.

In the case of *Kumar*, we can see that each recurring section has a title custom-designed for it, giving it a distinct identity. These titles, which are often combined with illustrations and border-line, could even be considered logotypes for their respective sections. This becomes part of a larger design language which regular readers grow accustomed to and know to look for in each issue. Figure 8 shows us, by contrast, how the title of the serialised story in the *Kalki* volume is uniquely hand-lettered for each issue.



Figure.8 A Collage of the same title as it appears in different issues. Notice how in some cases, the *pulli* (top dot which neutralises the inherent vowel in the consonants of Tamil) is drawn as tumbling leaves, or in one case, flowers. Several versions integrate or compose the title alongside relevant illustrations. There are three versions with a deliberate skewing/ distortion, one with the letters in an up-and down scattered arrangement, and one with a sketched oval around the title.

5.2 Public Interest Messaging

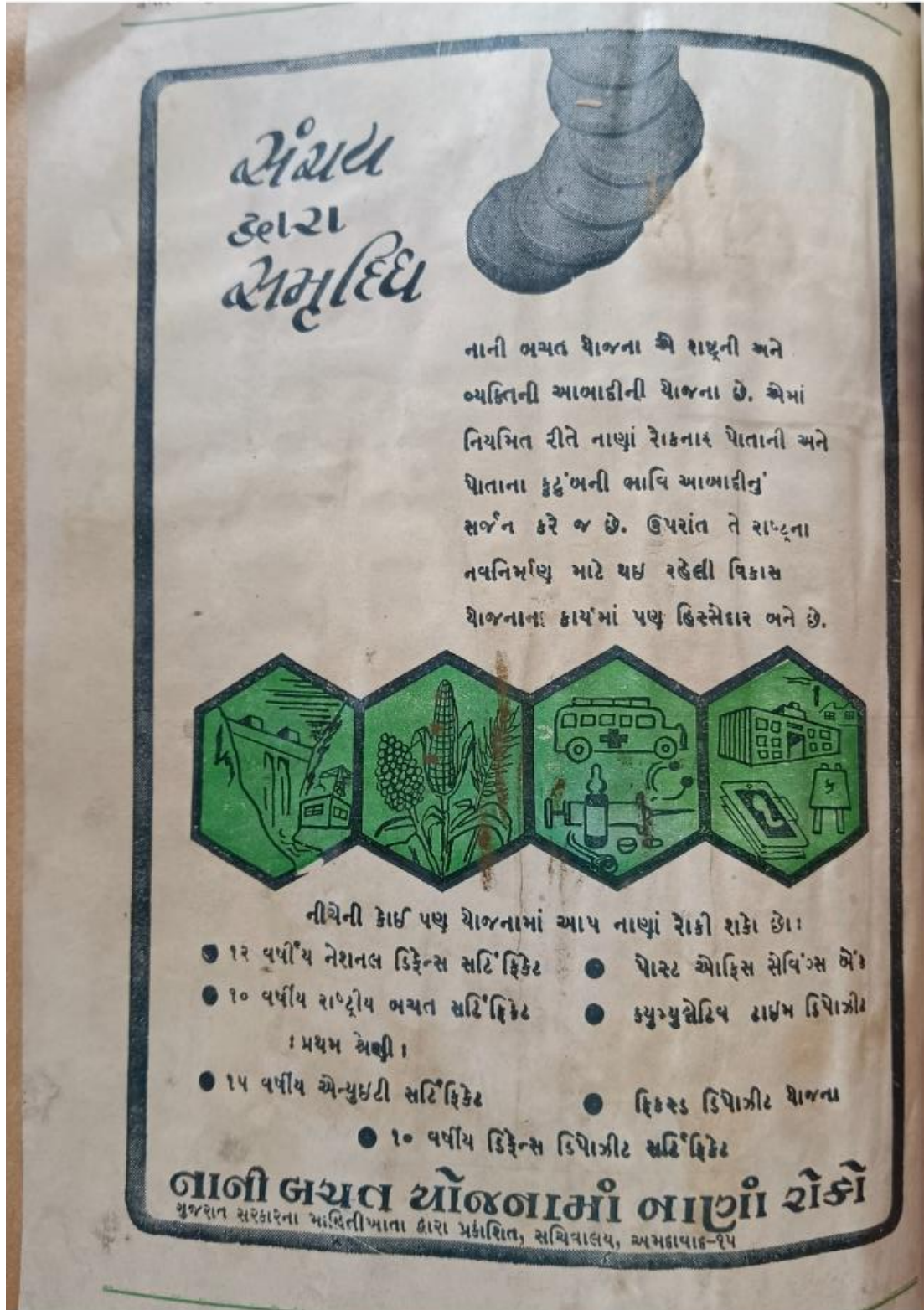


Figure.9 Sanchay dwara Samridhhi (Wealth through saving): A notice about various National Savings Certificates issued by the Gujarat government's Information Department. Observe the use of photograph, colour, as well as bullet points to make the page attract attention and impart information.

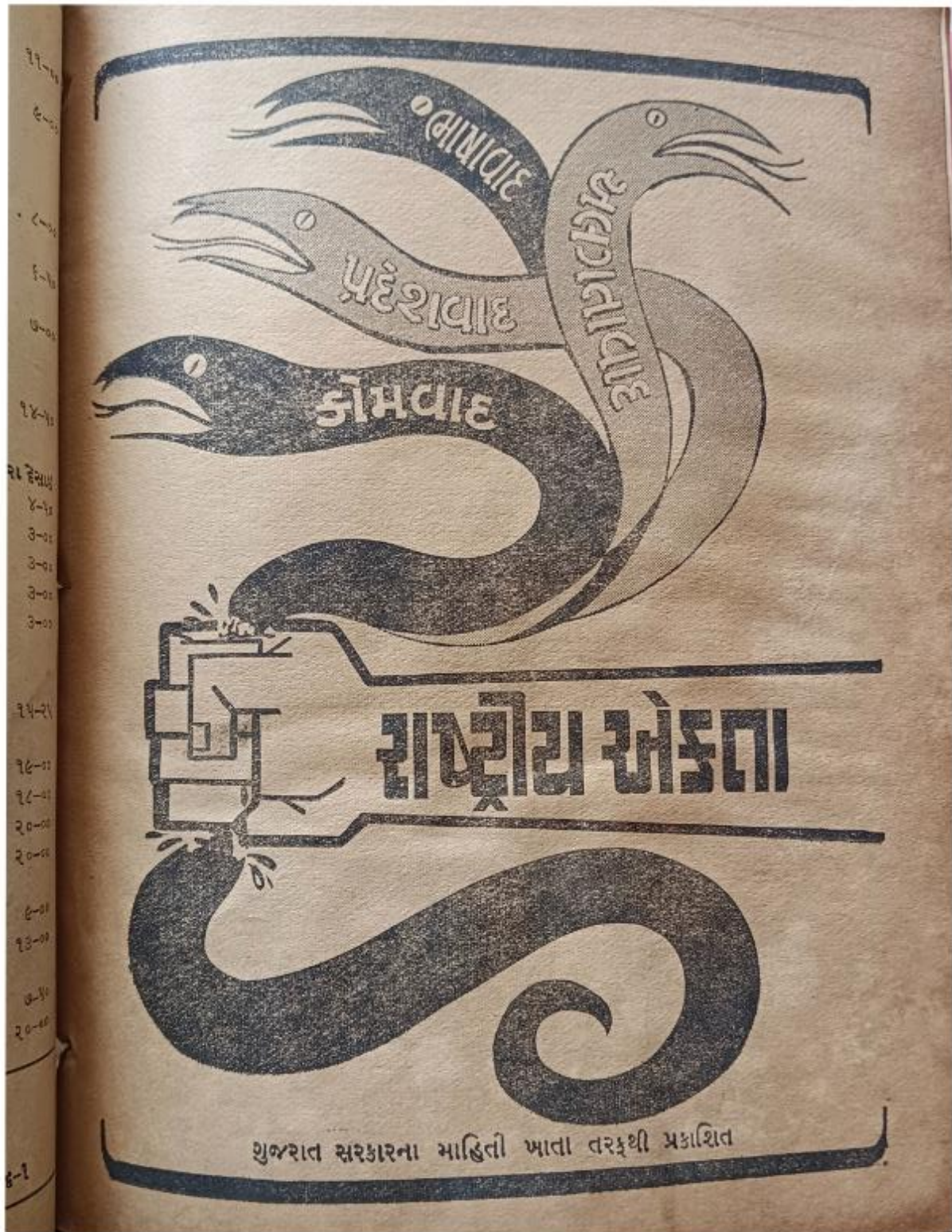


Figure.9 Poster issued by the Gujarat government's Information Department. Snakes with the words *alagtavaad*, *bhaashavaad*, *pradeshvaad* and *komvaad* (fragmentation based on differences, language, state and community) are being crushed by a hand that reads *Rashtriya Ekta* (National Intergration/ Unity) in bold, blocky lettering, signifying strength.



Figure.10 and 11 Campaigns by the state government to warn against trusting medicine-related ads and urging the public to consult doctors (left) and raising family planning awareness (right). The type was often fit into a layout determined by the illustration; the use of ellipses (...) is common.

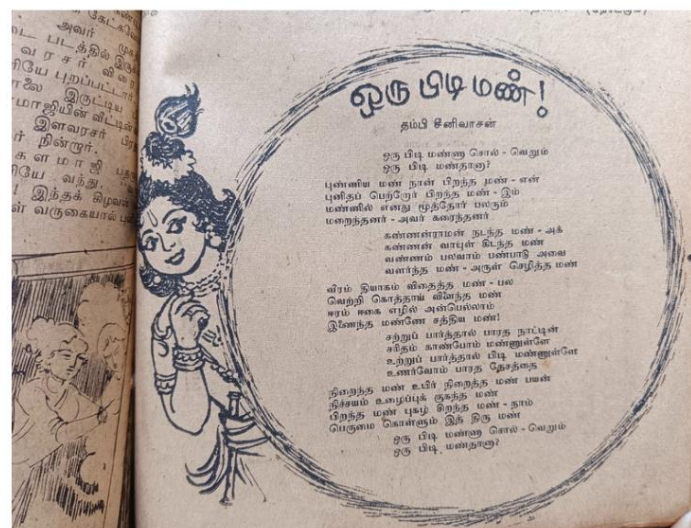
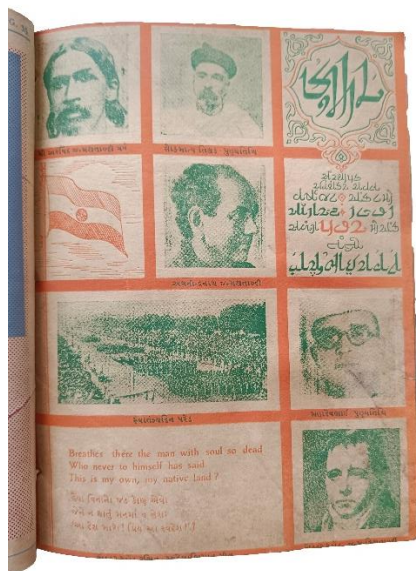


Figure.12 and 13 National integration and patriotism are thematic commonalities between both the publications. To the left, we have a grid composition in Kumar featuring freedom fighters, Urdu calligraphy and a poem on patriotism in English, also translated to Gujarati. To the right is a poem in Tamil, *Oru Pidi Mann* (a handful of soil) which praises the soil of one's motherland, also featuring an illustration of Krishna, referring to a line in the text. Type is given primacy in both magazines, with a visible effort to make it as aesthetically appealing as the images and illustrations.

5.3 Typography in Advertisements



Figure.14 A collage of ads about water and agriculture-related technology. A few patterns can be observed: detailed technical illustrations of the products, complete with the English letters on them; bounding boxes/ lines around the content; logos are often integrated into the ad's copy rather than occupying a separate corner.



Figure.15 A collage of ads for home appliances and electronics. Several ads repeat the brand name multiple times in both English and the regional script, in addition to the logo; (1) Washing machine ad with the Maurya logo given primary attention; (2) Kingston TV; (3) 6to6 Mosquito Repellents: a rare layout that uses a black background, possibly to signify night-time; (4) Some pages have confusing layouts with several brands and typefaces vying for attention; (5) The Amalgamated Electronics Company Limited: This ad is interesting for its idea; representing 4 dance forms with line drawings, the copy proclaims, whether Kathak or Manipuri, Bharatanatyam or Kathakali, the light illuminating them is by (their company), and then goes on to elaborate on their role in national development. The messaging aligns with the national integration and unity-in-diversity themes we have seen in the previous section.

Another interesting observation was that some brands adapted their logos to regional scripts in the same visual style, as Figure 16 shows.

5.4 The Presence of English

The roman script coexists with Gujarati and Tamil in these volumes in surprising ways. Aside from featuring in the product illustrations, some ads also incorporate a combination of two languages for the slogans and the copy. Figures 17 and 18 show how some pages in *Kalki* solely featured English, while others seamlessly blended them in ads.

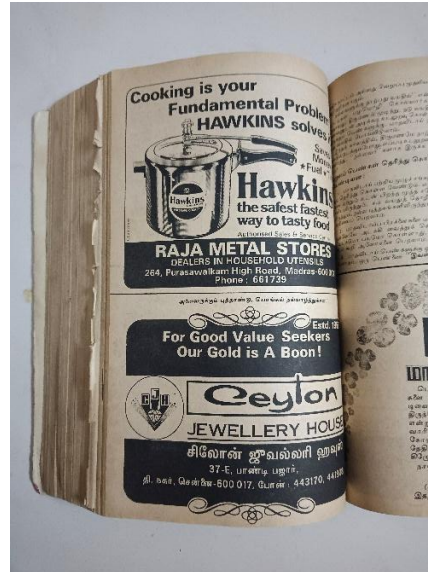
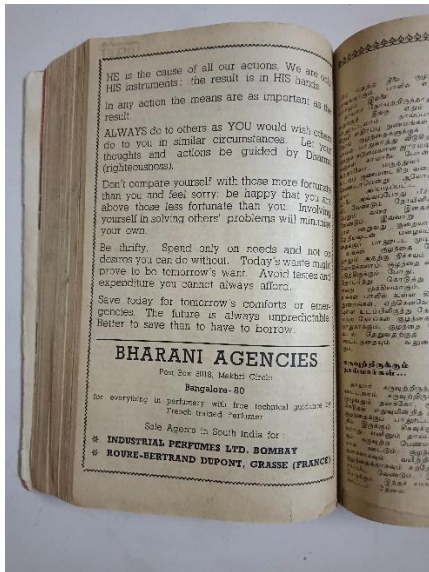


Figure.17 and Figure.18



Figure.19 and 20 In an eye-catching dynamic layout, the Wilson pen ad (Left) uses English for its title and model names, and Gujarati for the description. The Pagoda pens ad (Right) is remarkably similar in terms of style, with the illustrations and the model number callouts next to each pen.

நிரும்பி
ங்குவது
வரை
துகழி
பளம்
சு
பஸ்
துரை-9
னதி மதுரை
R.SWAMI/FF
துணிகளுக்கு
டும்.
உழைக்கும்.
பயோகிப்பதற்கு
விலை குறைந்த இ
டதாகும் உஜாலா.
ம் இரசாயனங்களை
ரு உன்னதமான
இழையையும்
ஞான முறையில் செய்
RATORIES
GAR BOMBAY-400 O

“ரெபிடெக்ஸ்”
இங்கிலிஷ்
ஸ்பீகிங்
கோர்ஸ்

தமிழ்நாடு முதலமைச்சர்
சு. கருணாநிதி
பாராளுமன்ற உறுப்பினர்
மதுரை மதுரை

அதிக அளவு
பக்கங்களுக்கு மேல்
விலை ரூ. 45/-
பயால் செலவு ரூ. 6/-

It's really a good book to learn
spoken English — Kapil Dev

13 இந்திய மொழிகளில் பிரசுரிக்கப்படுகிறது
பத்திரிகை மற்றும் கல்வியாளர்களால் போற்றப்படுகிறது
4,00,00,000 (4 கோடிகள்) க்கும் மேலான
வாசகர்களால் பின்பற்றப்படுகிறது
அனைத்து காலங்களிலும் வியத்தகு அதிக விற்பனை

அதிவேக சாதனை

AVAILABLE AT leading bookshops, Higginbothams Railway Book Stalls throughout India or ask by VPP from:-
PUSTAK MAHAL Khari Baoli, New Delhi - 6. Phone: 239314
Showroom: 10-B, Netaji Subhash Marg, New Delhi- 110002. Phone: 3268292
Branch Office: 22/2 Mission Road (Shama Rao Compound), Bangalore-560027

MADRAS — MADRAS BOOK HOUSE, 49 Ranganathan St., T. Nagar • P. T. BELL & CO. THIRUMALAI BOOK HOUSE,
Chetty St. • NEW CENTURY BOOK HOUSE, HIGGINBOTHAMS, Anna Salai • KENNADY BOOK HOUSE, Mt. Road •
Mysore, Ravi Book House, Mysore • ARUNA BOOK MART, W. Mambalam • MELODY BOOK CENTRE, PURSAI BOOK
Pursawalkam

Figure.21 Rapidex English Speaking Course ad, promising astonishing speed of learning, featuring an endorsement from cricketer Kapil Dev. Like other ads, it has an illustration of the product (a book) and the various features listed, arranged here on a staircase, symbolizing progress.

[illegible]

Typography Day 2025



Figure. 26, 27, 28 Both volumes featured articles on female reproductive anatomy and health, including contraceptive techniques, at a time when such subjects were discussed relatively rarely and were often shaped by social norms, cultural taboos, and editorial constraints.

5.6 Case Study: Banks, Insurance and Finance



Figure.29 Collage of bank advertisements. The first three are by Dena Bank, followed by United Commercial bank and Central Bank of India in Kumar. In *Kalki*, we see The Kumbakonam City Union Bank Ltd., Coimbatore Lakshmi Investment & Finance Co. Ltd., Thanjavur Permanent Bank Ltd. and The Bangalore Finance Corporation. A commonality is that a slogan occupies the prime space, and the logo appears separately as opposed to product advertisements where it is integrated into the copy; they are all enclosed within boxes with borders of varying thicknesses.



Figure.30 It was always exciting to find the same company's ads in both the regional magazines, such as the Bank of Baroda ads (1 and 2); the typefaces used in both scripts for the name are quite similar in terms of weights and the serifs (see Figure 31). To the right (3 and 4) are Bank of India ads. The bank's name is given visual precedence and appears in the bottom. Notice the curvy, flowing type used for the slogan and speech bubbles in 3 and 4.



Figure.31



Figure.32 LIC ads in Gujarati and Tamil. Brands often utilised festive occasions like Deepavali to wish their audience, as seen in (1). The type used for the brand name, however, is quite different in both the scripts. These ads also place the logo and name at the bottom at a size roughly one-sixths of the total space.

5.7 Celebrating Expressive Type

In discussing this project fueled by personal curiosity, I want to dedicate a section solely to intriguing typography and lettering. During this era, there seem to have been fewer boundaries and restrictions—letterforms were as much an art form as the illustrations themselves, embodying a free and expressive visual language.

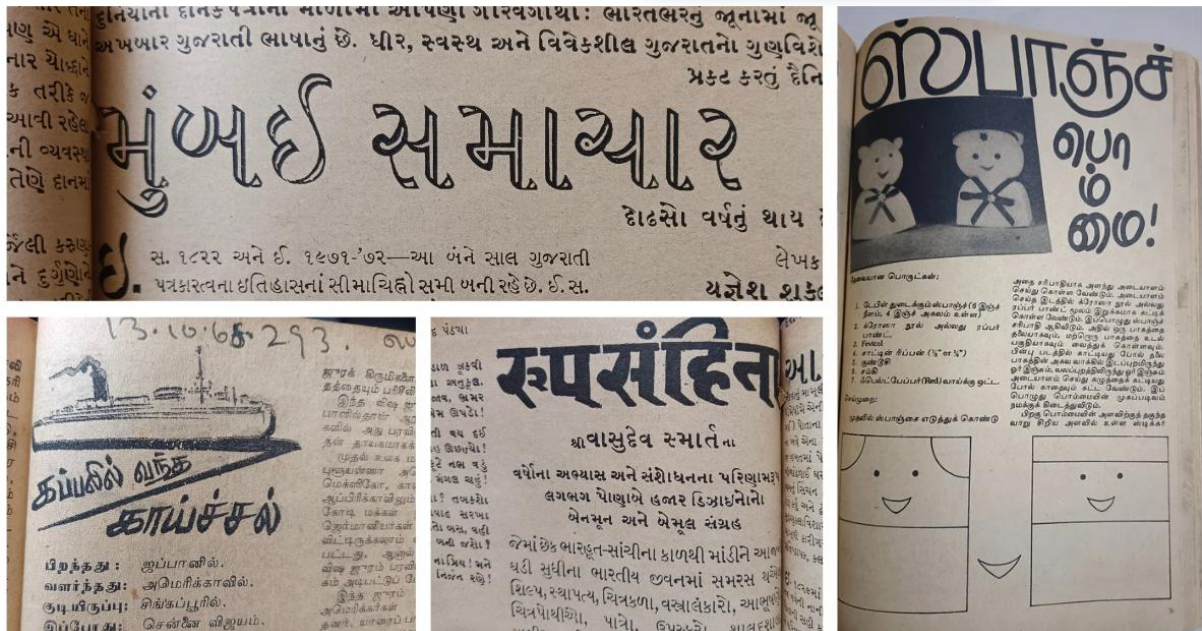


Figure.31 Collage: Carving out negative space within letterforms; splitting a word vertically into three written syllables; integrating words with illustration, mirroring the triangular, sharp lines in the letters themselves; *Roopsanhita* title with various stroke weights within the same word. It is interesting to see the dots (*pulli* and the *chandrabindu*) in these scripts being customized.

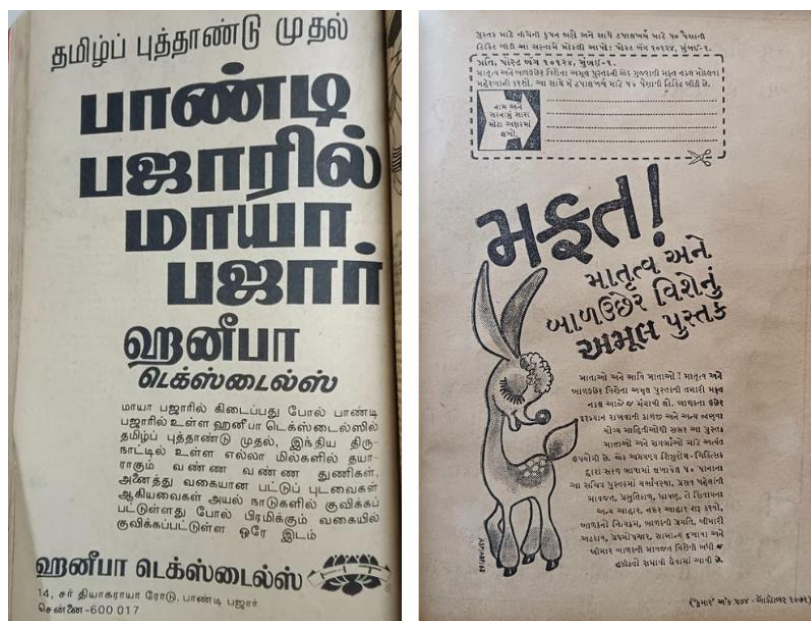


Figure.32 Black and bold lettering used to emphasize sales, discounts and offers. The image on the right uses the logotype of Amul within the copy.

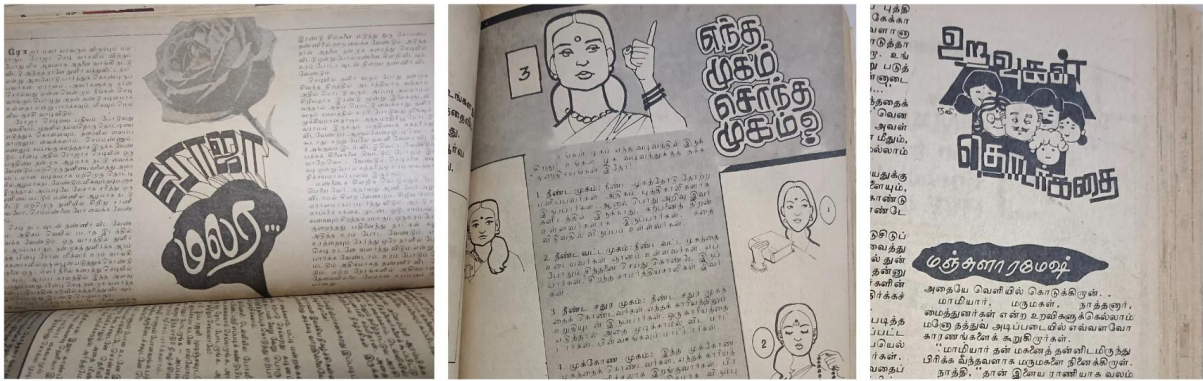


Figure.33 Type with depth, outlines and unique uses of positive and negative space: *Roja malara...* (To make roses bloom...: gardening tips); *Entha mukam sontha mukam* (Which face shape is yours?); *Uruvugal thodarkathai* (a serialised story).

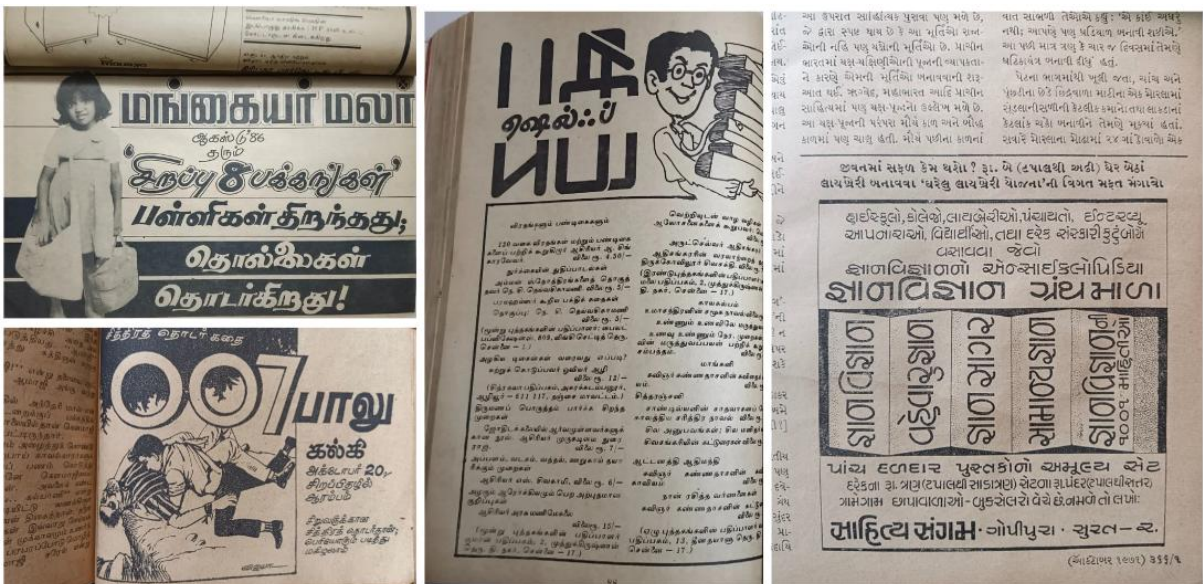


Figure.34 Pages on books, magazines, anthologies and stories. In the middle image, reading *Book Shelf*, the word *shelf* appears in the horizontal centre of the word *Book*. The *pulli* is a triangle resting on the slanted roof of the *Ka*.



Figure.35 Type with drop shadow



Figure.36 Type enclosed within interesting shapes: waves, polygons and circles. The bottom-left images in Tamil are the title design for *Vatta Mejai*, meaning Round Table. This section would combine opinion columns by various contributors.

6. Discussion

This study of *Kumar* and *Kalki* magazines from the late 1960s offers a window into the visual, cultural, and narrative strategies that shaped Indian print media of the time. Though this paper does not cover this dimension, a gendered approach becomes evident when one looks at ads for soaps, detergents, utensils and makeup (see Figure. 37).



Figure. 37 Soap, detergent, kitchen appliances and makeup were aimed at women

These magazines also exemplify the intersection of information and entertainment, where serialised fiction, household advice, and political commentary coexisted with advertising. Examining the archive reveals patterns in the use of typography, where expressive hand-lettering, customised type, and the interplay of English and vernacular scripts created

distinct brand identities. The use of color, sparingly used due to printing constraints, was strategic in directing reader attention and establishing visual hierarchy.

Typography was a defining element in both Gujarati and Tamil cultures, not just in aesthetic terms but as a fundamental part of communication and identity. The integration of English alongside regional scripts was a crucial adaptation to a globalising world, reflecting shifts in consumer psychology. The period's design language maintained a strong connection to Indian visual heritage, incorporating handcrafted lettering, expressive layouts, and a more regionally embedded approach to communication.

Compared to the present day, where homogenization has led to 'blanding' and minimalist aesthetics, the design of this period had a stronger connection to regional traditions, with type in regional magazines retaining a sense of distinctiveness and cultural uniqueness that stemmed from bold experimentations with the characteristics of the respective scripts themselves. What may seem like typographic experimentation, intervention or whimsy today—such as type paired with illustration or hand-drawn display fonts—was often a standard industry practice at the time, even across geographical regions.

Through this brief journey, we glimpse a portrait of an era that treated typography as any other art form— it would elevate the content to more than mere text, and attempt to speak to its beholder.

7. Further Inquiries and Directions

A periodical serves as a time capsule, capturing the needs, aspirations, and aesthetics of its time; studying historical typography offers a fascinating lens into the ideological and cultural imprints of an era, making it an enriching, delightful subject for those interested in the history and evolution of design.

While we did read some text in the magazines during the collaborative deep dives, this paper does not discuss the publications' content or how it might have been experienced by the readers. Would someone encountering them at the time have engaged differently with the content? Would they have skipped advertisements (despite the enticing typography) as often as we do today? The body text itself presents an intriguing area of study—its size, legibility, and variations all contributing to the reading experience in ways that deserve closer examination. Studies comparing illustrations, photographs and layouts across regions may also be undertaken.

Additionally, as we admire the expressive typography of this era, we might ask: Is such ornate intricacy still possible in today's print magazines, or does it inevitably evoke the past? Could we modernise such typographic expressiveness and keen storytelling, or has contemporary design philosophy shifted toward making type so intuitive and invisible that audiences no longer notice or question it?

Acknowledgements

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