Institution:
Royal College of Art

Unit of Assessment:
32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory

Title of case study:
Expanding communities of readers: typographic support for Indic scripts and for children's books in India

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:
2015-2020

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Rathna Ramanathan	**Role(s) (e.g. job title):** Dean, School of Communication	**Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:** 2015-2021

Period when the claimed impact occurred:
2015-2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?
N

1. Summary of the impact

Research by Ramanathan has enabled the preservation of and enhanced access to Indic classical texts and Indic scripts, by providing typographic frameworks and design guidelines for publication of a bilingual book series, the Murty Classical Library of India. This series preserves two millennia of Indian literary works and makes them accessible to new generations of readers. Harvard University Press have used Ramanathan's research and resulting guidelines in the design of 29 books in this series to date (2015-2020). Her research has also developed an approach to typography that empowers marginalised communities of readers as well as expanding readership in inclusive and decolonial ways, by informing practice at the Indian publisher Tara Books. Ramanathan developed a new approach to typography which was adopted by authors and design practitioners, enhancing reading and improving access to texts for children.

2. Underpinning research

Rathna Ramanathan's research uses publishing as a platform to bring together intercultural communication, decolonial approaches, graphic design and typography through engaged and situated design research, working with local communities and international networks of editors, translators, designers, illustrators, publishers and readers. It explores spaces in which new kinds of documents can be created, and, conversely, considers how the production of new texts and images creates spaces that enable emancipatory, temporary or subversive practices to occur [3.1].

The chapter 'London's Little Presses' investigates non-mainstream approaches to book design, illustration and publishing in post-World War 2 Britain. This research explores design history and practice focussing on forms of typography that are associated with movement, sound and texture, particularly in relation to poetry, that were produced by little presses. Typographic approaches introduced by European emigres to England after WW2 are given voice over English approaches to setting poetry during that time, and reveal approaches to book design and production that differ significantly from mass industrial processes [3.1].

This research led to a collaboration with Harvard University Press (HUP) to create an accessible library of modern translations of important classical Indian texts, *The Murty Classical Library of India* (MCLI) [3.2]. For example, in 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. The colonial roots of printing meant that 'non-Latin' scripts were synthesised with a Latin page, rather than the printing being informed by the requirements of the Indic scripts, languages or texts. As a result, many important classical texts

in Indian literature have never reached a global audience; others are becoming unavailable even to Indian readers. Ramanathan's research has developed the first framework to pay attention to typography specially for Indian languages [3.3].

Ramanathan's research for the MCLI book series included examining historical archives, current linguistic data and non-western modes of design practice, with two main results: 1) Adaptation of historical, non-western, design approaches to the book for contemporary audiences. The research investigated how classical texts presented as bilingual translations (original text and translated to English) could be designed for contemporary and global audiences, taking into account the needs of diverse readers (i.e. levels of fluency and bilingualism; diverse interests and engagements). 2) Development of typographic and graphic design guidelines for books in Indic scripts and languages. A framework was created for the design of the printed book interiors, digital texts and Indic typography for jacket designs [3.2]. The book designs and typesetting were created by Ramanathan using bespoke typefaces designed by Henrik Kubel, John Hudson, Fiona Ross and others.

The typesetting and design of bilingual Indic texts of such range and complexity was unprecedented in modern book design practice and posed many challenges, which were addressed through three lines of enquiry. First, to establish a systematic bilingual book design for English translations of texts in ten different Indic languages and scripts. Second, to accommodate two genres in the template design: poetry and prose. 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 [3.2, 3.3].

There is a lack of attention to printing and typographic conventions in India, and a lack of standards for typesetting modern Indian languages. In addition, existing bilingual design frameworks account for 3 or 4 different languages at most; here the task was to accommodate at least 13 different languages and relevant scripts. 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 colour, size and location. The typographic and book interior designs also recognised that some readers would be fluent in the language, while others might be second- or third-language speakers or not know English at all. Typographic solutions were developed to resolve problems in bilingual reading, including layout that improves dual language facing-page reading, and binding that allows the book to open flat, facilitating cross referencing and margin notes. The results are presented as 29 individual volumes [3.2] designed according to Ramanathan's guidelines [3.3].

Ramanathan's research and expertise in new approaches to typography as well as non-standard ways of designing and producing books from her 'Little Presses' work [3.1] informed a collaboration with Tara Books and the publication of an experimental picture book, *I Want to Be* [3.4]. This children's picture book employs typography as illustration. Ramanathan is recognised for pioneering this associative approach to typography in children's books in India. Imaginative typeplay in this co-authored book illustrates absurd nonsense verse, as letters change shape and texture to create the word and tell a story. An ideal early reader, the book helps children decipher words as puzzles. Research for the book drew from Ramanathan's understanding of how typography in children's books is based primarily on a conventional Global North understanding, with text and image separated. This is counter to the understanding that children experience word and image as equally visual, particularly in India where reading is a visual act. *I Want to Be* explores the potential of a word-image visuality in typography. Ramanathan used design-led conversations and participatory reading sessions with children as well as archival research which led to analysis of secondary and primary sources of ephemera from India (posters, murals, street signs) and from European and Russian archives (catalogues, publicity material, original artwork). 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.

3. References to the research

3.1 and 3.2 are being **submitted to REF2021** as part of a multi-component body of work.

3.1. Ramanathan, R. (2017), 'London's Little Presses' in Hinks, J. and Armstrong, C. (eds.) *Text and Image in the City: Manuscript, Print and Visual Culture in Urban Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp. 51-77.

3.2. A series of 29 books in 10 languages including Apabrahmasha, Avadhi, Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Pali, Panjabi, Prakrit, Telugu and Sanskrit and 5 scripts (Bangla, Devanagari, Gurmukhi, Kannada and Telugu). With Guglielmo Rossi, design and research assistant, published by Harvard University Press, 2015-2020. The series includes: 2015: Surdas. *Sur's Ocean: Poems from the Early Tradition*. Translated from Hindi by J.S. Stratton Hawley. ISBN 9780674427778; 2016-20: Tulsidas. *The Epic of Ram, Volumes 1-6*. Translated from Avadhi by P. Lutgendorf; 2017: Raghavanka. *The Life of Harishchandra*. Translated from Kannada by V. Viswanatha. ISBN: 9780674545663. All at: https://murtylibrary.com/volumes.php

3.3. Typographic frameworks and guidelines for Murty Classical Library of India, Harvard University Press (2015).

[3.2 and 3.3 were presented at the Design History Annual conference (The Cost of Design, Newcastle, 2019), the Association Typographique Internationale conference (Tokyo, 2019), the Swiss Design Network Research Summit (Basel, 2018), the International Unicode conference (Santa Clara, 2019) and at the Granshan conference (Reading, 2016), among others.]

3.4. *I Want to Be*, 2020, Tara Books, Chennai.

4. Details of the impact

The impact of Ramanathan's research has been twofold. 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. And it developed for Tara Books an approach to typography that empowers marginalised communities of readers as well as expanding readership in inclusive and decolonial ways.

4.1. Impact on preserving and expanding access and readership of content from India and/or in Indic scripts

The Murty Classical Library of India aims to make available the great literary works of India from the past two millennia, reintroducing them to a new generation of readers. Many classic Indic texts have never reached a global audience, while others are becoming increasingly inaccessible even to Indian readers. HUP used Ramanathan's research and resulting guidelines in the design of 29 books to date (2015-2020) [5.1] supporting the preservation of content in 10 different languages. Tim Jones, Director of Design and Production at HUP, has described the collaboration with Ramanathan as essential to the publication of the series: 'The Murty Classical Library of India is the most challenging project that Harvard University Press has undertaken, and without Dr Ramanathan's outstanding work I cannot imagine that we could have achieved such success' [5.2], He noted Ramanathan's research contribution as 'addressing everything from the historical design traditions across myriad cultures and formats to addressing the critical need for a unified design approach for the series that could encompass a wide array of variation and many disparate requirements' [5.2].

Ramanathan's research on the complex challenges underpinning the Murty Classical Library project changed HUP's approach to book design. In this respect, Tim Jones stated: 'One rewarding aspect of the collaboration with Dr Ramanathan came from the certainty that the work we were doing would have an impact in a long timescale, probably after our careers. We were looking at scripts that historically did not belong in a book whilst creating a framework robust enough to address design questions that will come up in the future. The books of the Murty Library are themselves the documentation of the design choices we are making today, trying to answer the questions for designers who will work on the series a hundred years from now' [5.3].

The research insights also had an impact on translators, requiring them to move beyond seeing the non-Latin scripts as dictated by metal type. 'This is a battle that we might not win every time

but there is now an openness and flexibility to that embedded in the design about the way the original scripts should look' [5.3].

Making the books available in a form and design that will work well into the future enables the press to meet its fundamental aim of expanding readership of the texts and widening accessibility [5.3]. The detail of how Ramanathan's design work supports this is elucidated in a review of one of the books, *The Epic of Ram*, by Rupert Snell, Professor Emeritus, Asian Studies. He notes that the 'question of layout is probably the first aspect of these books to hit the eye (and then the mind and heart)' [5.4]. He describes the traditional setting out of the text and compares it with the new layout, as directed by Ramanathan's guidelines, concluding: 'This reviewer huffed and puffed for a while at the sight of such a radical change, but was mollified when the reason for it became apparent: the new arrangement allows for an exact match between the layout of the Awadhi on the left-hand page and that of the English translation on the right-hand page, where the translator has, in most cases, artfully maximized this connection in his deployment of the English phrasing. This foot-for-foot equivalence greatly facilitates the dual reading of mūla [original text] and translation, and turns out to be one of the most successful and attractive aspects of the translator's approach' [5.4].

The series has prompted positive reactions from critical reviewers, including recognition of the contribution of the research to social impact [5.5], and in the media, acknowledging the ambition and cultural impact of the project: 'One of the great benefits of this kind of project is that it illuminates lost things, brings back to recognition texts that were once crucial' [5.6]. The *Guardian* review stated that: 'It is worth noting that some of these texts are not only unknown to western readers; very few Indians have read them either. This makes for a significant opportunity for rediscovery; it also points to the millennial silence from which some of these authors emerge' [5.7].

The series prompted a debate in the public realm on issues of cultural appropriation, voice and identity in Indian culture. Tim Jones stated that 'In terms of immediate impacts—apart from how much Harvard University Press learned from it and the straightforward effect it has had in the preservation and accessibility to classical Indian text in Indic scripts—the series opened up, in the public realm, pressing discussions about diverse approaches to designing, translating and publishing classical Indian texts. Our model should be one of many other possible models and we are fortunate to be part of this constructive debate' [5.3].

4.2. Impact on changing attitudes to typography and to design research, and publishing practices

Ramanathan worked with Indian publisher Tara Books, applying her research in intercultural communication, decoloniality, graphic design and typography, encompassed in *I Want to Be*. Tara Books has employed Ramanathan's approach to typography in several titles including *Hic*, *Mother Steals a Bicycle*, *Tail Tale*, *Brer Rabbit Retold* and *Tree Matters* [5.10]. The publisher has sold books produced in India to a global audience, as well as featuring in international exhibitions and the press. The company's founder and publisher, Gita Wolf, confirmed that Ramanathan's contribution was paramount in supporting the publisher to expand readership: 'Rathna was responsible for using typography and communication design to expand readership, bridging social divides such as class and caste, and that is how her approach was taken up, not as a progression, but as an ongoing conversation. It's about a commitment to building and expanding a community of readers around the globe, and bringing more people to the conversation whilst also building our own communities and livelihoods' [5.11].

An article in the *Hindu* newspaper reviewing Tara Books' social and cultural achievements described Ramanathan as having 'revolutionised' [5.12] Tara's work. Gita Wolf explained that: 'What we have done in focusing on the visual as a language is to bring access into people's lives who don't speak or read or write the same language, or who don't read and write at all. This has an impact on both sides of the book as a process: the side of the readership, and the side of the story-tellers' [5.11].

Ramanathan's research is recognised as having changed attitudes to typography within Tara Books with the result that other practitioners have taken up her framework and applied it,

including through Ramanathan's mentoring [5.11]**.** Gita Wolf concluded that: 'Rathna's legacy can be seen in terms of the strength she brought to typography as a process, an ongoing conversation in which typography is a voice' [5.11].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1. Murty Library website http://www.murtylibrary.com/design-and-typography.php

5.2. Recommendation Letter from Tim Jones, Director of Design and Production, Harvard University Press, 2018.

5.3. Testimonial Letter from Tim Jones, Director of Design and Production, Harvard University Press, 2021.

5.4. Review of *The Epic of Ram* (trans. Philip Lutgendorf). Volume 1. (Murty Classical Library of India.) xxxiii, 374 pp in Snell, R. 2018. 'Reviews: The Epic of Ram'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. 80 (1): pp. 165–167.

5.5. *Design Research for Change Showcase*, Paul A Rodgers (ed.), 2019. ISBN 978-1-86220-363-1

5.6. 'Many gods, many voices: the Murty Classical Library is uncovering India's dazzling literary history', *New Statesman*, Neel Mukherjee, 5 Mar 2015. https://bit.ly/36gVvuo

5.7. The Murty Classical Library of India review – great literary works for a new generation. *The Guardian*, Amit Chaudhuri, 24 December 2015. https://bit.ly/2JnMGWz

5.8. 'Harvard project aimed at translating ancient text sparks outrage among Hindu right', *The Washington Post*, Annie Gowen, 2 March 2016. https://wapo.st/37mQhMO

5.9. 'A Library Controversy', *Live Mint*, Salil Tripathi, 24 March 2016. https://bit.ly/2J9ttID

5.10. Evidence of impact on typography within Tara Books including links to example publications, 2015-20.

5.11. Testimonial from Gita Wolf, Publisher and Founder, Tara Books, 30 January 2021.

5.12. 'The story behind Chennai's Tara Books', *The Hindu*, Pracarsh Rastogi, 16 January 2019. https://bit.ly/2Vj9VUg