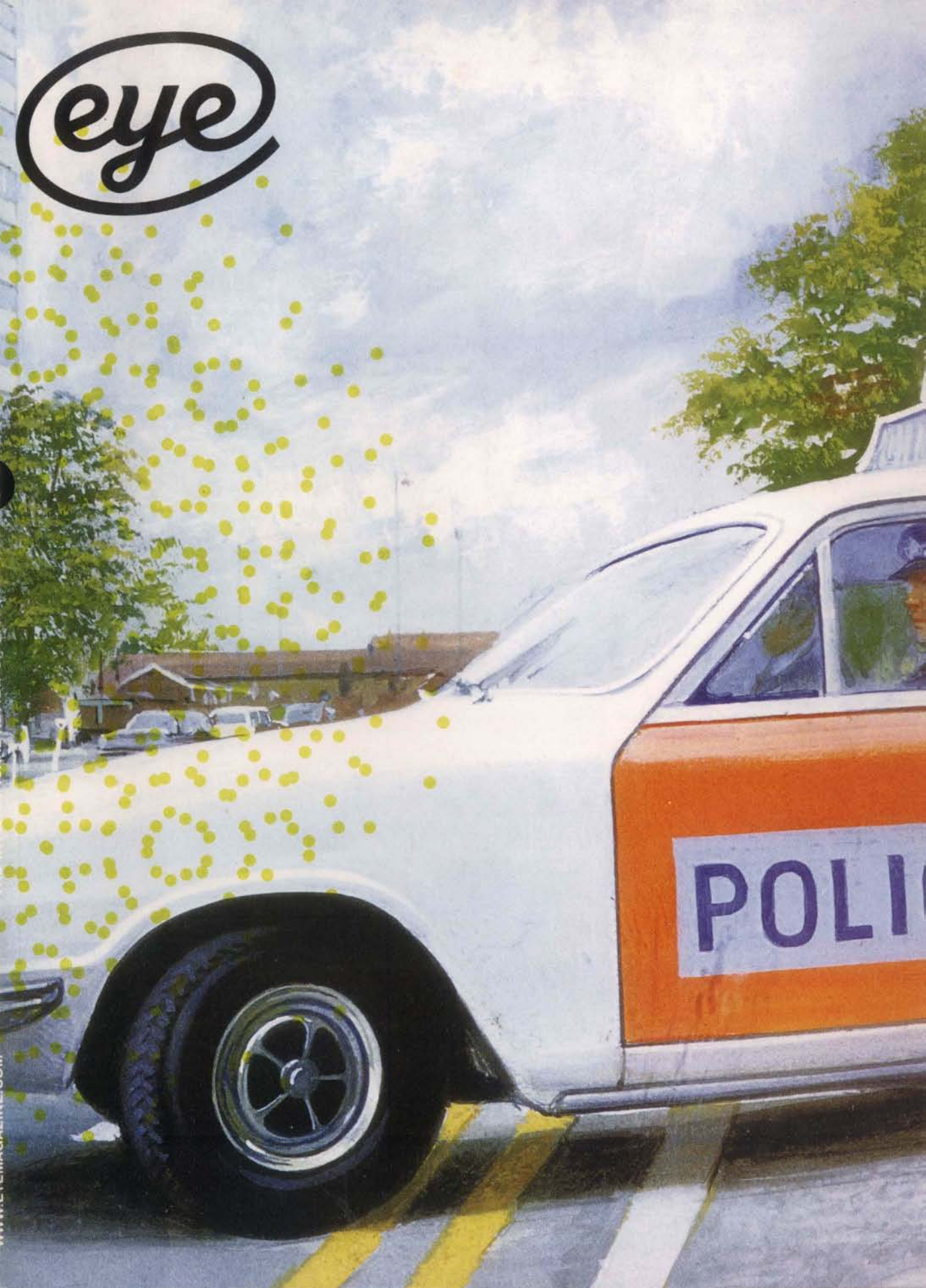


eye



India

Re-tooling the culture for an empire of signs

1. One of the few remaining Mumbai poster artists.
Photograph: Typocity.
2. Hand-painted warning signs on one of the many lorries that transport fireworks and safety matches from production plants in Sivakasi. The week before this photograph was taken, a similar lorry transporting safety matches was in collision with a school bus on the outskirts of Madurai. Fortunately everyone survived.
Photograph: Steve Rigley.

Overview	52	'Creative destruction' and synthesis in the rapidly changing subcontinent		
	Printing	Typocity	By Steve Rigley	→
	Fireworks	Kunal Rawat		
	MTV India	Vishal Rawley		
	Tania Khosia			pages 56-64



Indian legend has it that the small town of Sivakasi in southern Tamil Nadu derives its name from an aborted journey in the mid-fifteenth century. The King of Tenkasi had been on his way to worship the Hindu god Siva, but finding his path blocked decided to build a temple instead. The town that grew around the temple came to be known as Sivakasi.

Within Hindu culture Siva is revered as the destroyer creator, who will annihilate all worlds at the end of creation. In the mean time he is committed to necessary acts of destruction, cleansing creation of all that would stand in the way of spiritual progress, forging rebirth and renewal.

Sivakasi itself is a small town with a reputation for enterprise. Dubbed 'Little Putty' ('Mini Japan') by Nehru, the town boasts more than 400 printing presses – mostly imported second-hand from the former eastern bloc – that produce 60 per cent of the subcontinent's offset printing. Their main output is packaging for safety matches and fireworks for the many religious festivals that pepper the Indian calendar.

The town offers a vision of time collapsed: bullock carts ease pallets of print between vivid fume-belching lorries, while letterpress compositors set URLs. In a small unit off the main street a group of labourers squat bundling labels. Upstairs, in a dusty office, a designer uses Photoshop to paste images of Hollywood icons on to a design for firework packaging. Such work was once the domain of skilled illustrators, who would make reference to a wealth of Indian folk and religious icons. Now they use a fictional English schoolboy wizard to push the brand. The choice is symptomatic of the seismic shift within Indian culture over recent years as the economy opened up, and MTV and other global exponents of youth culture moved in.

The impact is most apparent in the larger cities, which find themselves subject to the competing claims of national and regional identity. Under the influence of the Shiv Sena party in the late 1990s, many Indian cities have had their names changed, and in an attempt to restore Maharastrian identity and pride Bombay was renamed Mumbai. Within the city itself this has been followed – much to the confusion of the traveller – by the renaming of many of the streets and public buildings. The British influence is still evident in the signage for public buildings in the Fort and Ballard Estate areas of Mumbai, yet these have been neglected over the years and now assume a certain elegaic quality.

In recent years new imperialists have moved in, epitomised by the large swoosh on Nike's flagship store on the Colaba Causeway – rivalled only by a nearby (and equally large) Adidas logo. Such visual invasions have been enabled as much by new technology as by economic expansion. The celebrated hand-painted Bollywood film posters have gone digital, leaving artists either redundant or grappling with layers, dpi and blur filters. Customised shop signs, idiosyncratic and gloriously unpredictable, are being replaced by vinyl, backlit plastic or neon in the colours of familiar global brands.

Further south, the leafy, former retirement town of Bangalore is in overdrive, leading India's technological revolution and winning vital contracts from the west. The area around Mahatma Gandhi Road is sprouting fast-food outlets, coffee shops and designer bars for an increasingly westernised clientele. Bespoke hand-painted shop signs are now to be found only in the margins, for example, cluttered above small industrial units on NR Road. The vestigial British presence in

the signage of older shops, and buildings such as Higginbothams Ltd., the Andrews Building or the Plaza cinema, while increasingly hidden by the sprawling plastic, reminds us that globalisation is hardly a recent phenomenon. Whether through Coca-Cola or the East India Trading Company, we share a history of creative destruction, of cleansing and renewal, of obliterating identities and uprooting existing communities merely to build new ones.

MAPPING THE CITY WITH TYPE

Marshall Berman suggests that 'To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organisations that have the power to control all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight their world and make it our own'. So how are contemporary Indian designers handling the pressure? What does it mean to them to make the world 'their own'?

In Mumbai, Kunal Rawat and Vishal Rawley are halfway through Typocity – a funded project to map the city typographically and produce a selection of representative fonts. Their project – a monumental one, given the sheer scale and diversity of the place – concerns itself not so much with value judgements, dividing good practice from bad, but with recording the moment and analysing the city through 'a typographic lens'. Examples from the beautiful to the bizarre are recorded and archived by time periods, types of business and areas of the city, with special categories such as taxi art and the famous Dabbawalla sign code, a seemingly infallible system used for the distribution of lunchtime tiffin boxes.

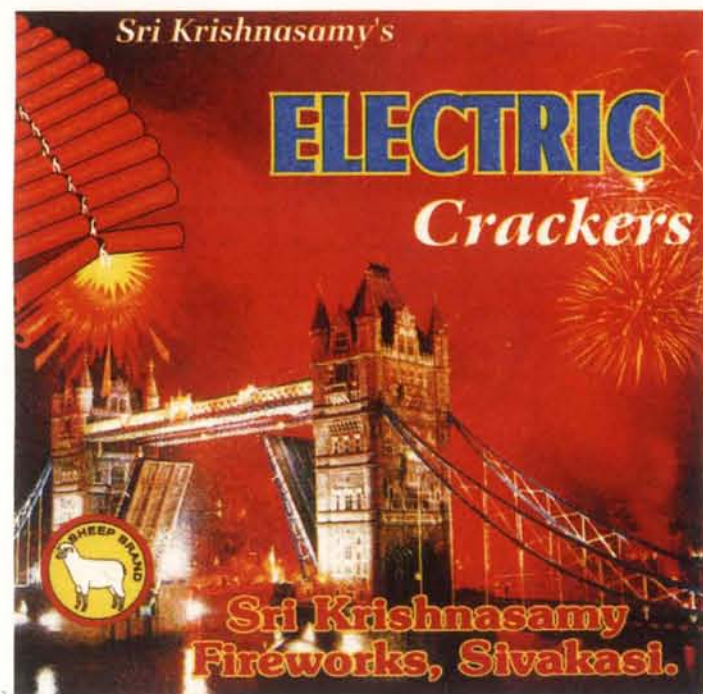
From the final collection ten typefaces will be chosen, drawn up and made available on the project website, typocity.com. 'We could see all this lettering disappearing so quickly and thought we had to do it, even if just for posterity,' says Rawley, a photographic artist and film-maker. Rawat, art director for the Mumbai-based design company Grandmother India, agrees: 'It is really important for future typographers to know about this... India is getting so much influence from outside... we don't want people to forget where they come from.'

They share a keen interest in the relationship between letterforms and the area within which they are found. The tools used within a particular industrial district would have been reflected in the signage: 'It is as though the same industrial tools were used to create the letterforms,' says Rawley. Elsewhere, Rawat notes the influence of Bollywood: 'You'll find that the signage for a barber shop situated next to a film theatre will borrow certain aspects of a film poster – either the choice of colours, the letterforms or the manner of the painting – almost playing up to the idea of celebrity.'

For Rawat, the concern is to capture the personalised touch they see slipping from the cityscape: 'The customised approach is the true aesthetic identity of India, if you like.' He regrets the trend for the big brands to steal prominence on shop signage, relegating the actual shop name to the corner of the sign – usually to be rendered in a standard system font. 'A lot of the owners don't really care. The original was commissioned by their father or grandfather, they don't know who did it, and they think it looks old. So if someone else is paying for it [a new, modern sign], why not get it done?'

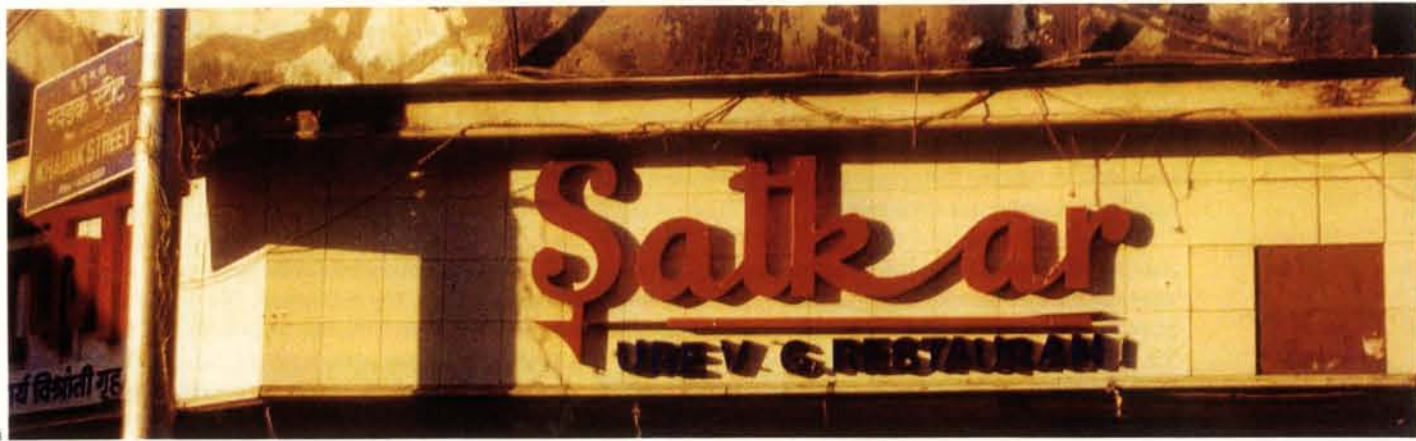
And what of the effects of technology upon the design

3-5 (opposite). The emergence of western icons and imagery is reflected in the brand range of a Sivakasi fireworks manufacturer. A photograph of London's Tower Bridge (3) is now preferred to illustrations rendered in the style of Indian folk art (4 and 5). 6. Islamic calligraphy and hand-painted signs in English fight for attention in the vicinity of the Minara Masjid, Mumbai. Photograph: Typocity. 7. Signs of the new empire. Nike Store on Colaba Causeway, Mumbai. Photograph: Steve Ringley.



New imperialists have moved in, epitomised by the large swoosh on Nike's store in Mumbai





'India is getting so much influence from outside . . . we don't want people to forget where they come from' KURNAL RAWAT, TYPOCITY



8-11 (opposite). A residual British presence persists in Indian shop-front signage. 8. Beauty parlour sign, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore. Signage within Bangalore is required by law to carry both English and the regional Kannada script. 9. Store in Mohammad Ali Road area, Mumbai. 10. Ajmal Press, Mohammad Ali Road area, Mumbai. 11. Ice cream stall, Mumbai. Photographs: Steve Rigley (8 and 9) and Typocity (10 and 11). 12 and 13. Hand-painted signs employing a variety of styles within the same sign. 12. Ganesh Stores Mumbai. Photograph: Typocity. 13. The Book Cellar, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore. The curved forms of the Kannada script often inspire attempts to find similar letterforms in English. Photograph: Steve Rigley.

process? 'Ten years ago, all drawing of type was done by hand. Even Helvetica was done by hand. Now designers are sitting at a Macintosh with two or three hundred fonts, and the palette is completely cut down. It is no longer about hand-drawing and customising, it is about what is looking nice and what is available right now. In the older Indian logo designs you can see that they are hand drawn; look at more recent work and you can see that it is drawn on the computer, so it loses its personalised touch. It is becoming more "graphic", but also more bland.'

Typocity is a timely project, and not just because some of the material it records has already been taken down and replaced with digital prints. More than a typographic freeze-frame, it establishes a lifeline between a dying craft tradition and emerging digital technologies. Yet without elements of the original media, or the trace of human imperfection, how successful can the Typocity fonts be? Surely there is something in the process of making, the relationship to materials and the spontaneity, that will be lost for good? Rawat remains optimistic: 'I believe that customisation will come back really strongly; everyone will be hell-bent on having everything customised and the old materials will come back, too.' It remains to be seen whether such a return would come about in reaction to the restrictions of new technology or to the erosion of essential identity.

SPONTANEITY AND STRUCTURE
Rawat hopes that Typocity will ultimately encourage a new generation of Indian designers to re-focus: 'It is a case of looking inside rather than trying to look outside for your influences.'

India has so much within itself.' This is a view shared by the Bangalore-based graphic designer Tania Khosla. From a bright studio in the smart Indiranagar district, she recalls the impact of her postgraduate study at Yale, and her shock at seeing the western appropriation of Indian motifs, with little sense of the true source or meaning of the symbols used. 'I kept coming back to India and I realised that there was so much that I took for granted. It was only while I was away that I was able to look at it from an outsider's perspective, in a completely different way.' On her return to India in 1996 she set up her own company, sharing a studio with her architect husband, Sandeep. Tania Khosla Design's client list now includes Nike India, mrv India and a host of upmarket hotels and bars in which to toast the new era. 'Youth culture is totally different to what it was seven years ago, and it is all because of tv. It has changed our dress, our attitude, the way we speak. Today we have this retail boom. The culture of buying is all very new.'

How have these changes had affected her design practice? 'I've got a very systematic approach to design. It is generic in a sense, the same principles could work anywhere.' Something in her comment reminded me of V. S. Naipaul's reaction to India's National Institute of Design set up in the early 1960s on the recommendations of Charles and Ray Eames. 'It is an imported idea!' the Trinidad-born Nobel laureate raged. 'An imported institution, and it has been imported whole!'

Would this 'systematic approach' not lead ultimately to more subtle forms of homogeneity? Khosla thinks not. 'You have to ask how your own history, your experience as a designer can make your work personal to you.' She clearly benefited from being at Yale during a time of transition.

'When we were at Yale we had the best of both worlds – we had Michael Rock and Sylvia Harris and we had Sheila Levant de Breteville. I see a lot of merit to the "American Swiss" approach to design, since it gives you a very thorough foundation. You are not just a spokesperson for culture, but also a designer. If I hadn't had the American Swiss approach I don't think that I would have noticed the things that I have. It enabled me to take the very spontaneous way of seeing and doing that we have here in India and integrate it with a more structured approach.'

The strategy is most evident in the company's work for the hospitality sector. Recent identity and wallpaper design for Touch – a lounge bar and restaurant in Hyderabad – blends Indian jewellery motifs, symbolic of an opulent past, with ultra-modern materials in a distinctly minimalist palette. Inspiration came from an early nineteenth-century Mughal ornamental *sarpech* that the ruling Nizam of Hyderabad wore on his turban. This motif was digitally translated and screenprinted in silver to form a seductive backdrop to the lounge. The wallpaper on an opposing wall was inspired by the Nizam's belt buckle. These are pertinent choices. Although the Nizam did adapt to emerging European trends and wore formal suits, the turban and the buckle were his constant accessories: reminders of his ancestral and royal past in a rapidly changing society.

Khosla has clearly derived inspiration from the arrival of mrv India in 1996. The station, which reaches Bangladesh, Nepal, the Middle East and Sri Lanka, offers a heady fusion of Indian street culture with edgy western editing. 'What mrv did brilliantly was to give us back the things that were common to us in a new and exotic way,' she says. 'You would see your

own culture and think how charming!' Tania Khosla Design went on to create lively offices for mrv India, re-contextualising familiar objects – the rickshaw, a barber's chair, the hand-painted film star – in an unfamiliar office setting.

The blending of cultural forms through travel and trade finds an articulate response in Khosla's identity for Pasha, a new nightclub in central Chennai. Chennai, formerly Madras, is the capital of Tamil Nadu and the international transportation hub of southern India, and the name Pasha means a benevolent nobleman (Kismet, the name of its members' lounge, means faith). Drawing upon the concept of the travelling nobleman, the club's identity and interiors fuse contemporary western, Moroccan and Persian motifs. The logotype carries a hint of Arabic calligraphy, yet retains a distinctly western, clubby feel.

Again, the designers have invoked the decorative tradition, in this case graphically translating an ornament from a seventeenth-century Mughal dagger sash-cord. The concept is deeply reflective of present-day Indian experience, integrating the contemporary with the historic, the machine-made with the hand-cut, forming cultural hybrids from both the global and the local.

Not all clients place the same value upon regional difference, of course. Some, like the large Indian pharmaceutical company for which Khosla's company recently completed a corporate identity, have to look 'global' to compete in a global marketplace. 'It's not that you don't want to look Indian, but rather that you don't want to look anything. You need to look global,' she says. 'That's where the American Swiss thing comes in very useful, since it is a global aesthetic.'

14-17. A lettering artist works on a political slogan in the lead-up to elections in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Photographs: Steve Rigley. 18 and 29 (opposite). Samples of the new font Taxi Stand, May 2004, from Typocity: Kurnal Rawat and Vishal Rawley. 19-28. Taxi art, Mumbai. Letterforms are chosen from a catalogue and quickly drawn out on to sticker plastic. These are subsequently cut out and layered in vivid colours. Photograph: Typocity. 30-35. Taxi art, Mumbai. Individuality and ownership achieved through a colourful fusion of commissioned sticker art. This may include words and symbols derived from such diverse sources as Bollywood, religious symbols, the name of the area in which the taxi is based, old Letraset catalogues, family names and favoured global brands. The transport authorities have now banned the decoration of the actual number plates, and therefore many of the embossed decorative elements have been painted over. Photographs: Typocity and Steve Rigley.



'Two years ago everything was painted – the whole town. Now it's all digital. Yes, it's much better!' TAXI DRIVER



14-17

30-35

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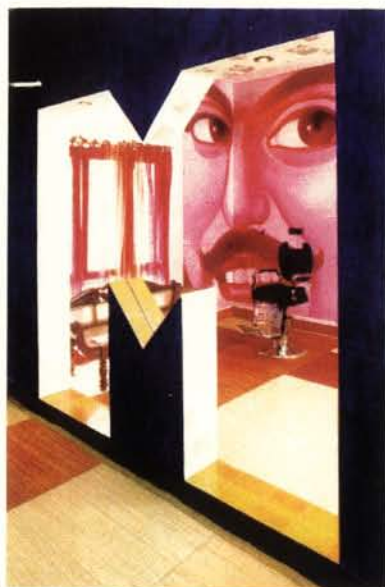
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'It's not that you don't want to look Indian... you don't want to look anything. You need to look global' TANIA KHOSLA

A GIFT FOR CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

For Khosla, the goal is 'responsible design', working carefully with clients while being critically engaged in the shaping of new India, searching for new forms while taking appropriate opportunities to remind and rekindle. If designers are the 'rulers of the contemporary empire of signs',¹ those concerned with issues of identity have significant choices to make as they sift through the rubble of historic and cultural motifs left in the wake of modernisation. Whether it be in the selection of a definitive set of fonts from the exhaustive Typocity archive, or in the recovery of potent symbols for a Hyderabad business, the world's largest democracy throws up difficult issues. On a regional level, a degree of identity can be established through the formal properties of colour and calligraphic tradition. Yet is this possible on a national level, given India's highly complex blend of language, religion and history? And what exactly would constitute 'India-ness'?

For Rawat, the Indian identity is found in the customised, the hand-made and the instinctive. For Khosla it is in the choice of symbol and materials, and is expressed through the inclination to adorn and decorate. It seems that 'India-ness' is also expressed in the Sivaist willingness to tear down and rebuild, the recognition of the need for creative destruction in a temporary and imperfect world, not unlike the Dionysian instinct in western art. This may explain the Indian gift for 'cultural synthesis',² but it also places great demand upon the provision of the raw materials necessary to create difference.

Back in Sivakasi, the managing director of a large fireworks concern talks of the liberation that has come with digital technologies – 'It used to take an artist two to three weeks to

design, now it can be done in two to three days' – then tells me of recent moves to ban religious iconography from packaging. His younger, western-educated assistant talked with enthusiasm for the 3D fonts, for the sci-fi characters and western icons that now dominate such brands. The company's product range reflects the trend. Older brands are rendered folk style with careful illustrations of Indian motifs such as the serpent, the peacock, the Red Fort in Delhi and the Taj Mahal. More recent products feature smiling western children and a Photoshop composite of Tower Bridge. Mild amusement for western designers, and an intriguing copyright scenario, but also indicative of a cultural dumbing-down, a narrowing of vision. Perhaps the branding will mature to present a new expression of 'India-ness'. But on this evidence it appears more likely to drift ever westward, towards the predictable and the global. The only hope for the future lies in responsible designers, prepared to dig deep through the ruins in search of the materials necessary to maintain difference.

Weaving through the bustle of Chennai under the shadow of a huge digital film poster washed deep in Coke red, the taxi driver informs me that 'Two years ago everything was painted, the whole town. Now it's all digital. Yes, it's much better!' And so he reminds me of Siva's final mission: the complete destruction and dissolution of worlds, of cultures, of ideas, forms and memory into nothingness. @

1. Marshall Berman, 'The Experience of Modernity'. Reproduced in John Thakara, *Design after Modernism: Beyond the Object*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988.
2. V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilisation*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.
3. John O'Reilly, 'Introduction', *No Brief: Graphic Designers' Personal Projects*. London: Rotovisionz, 2002, p. 10.
4. V. S. Naipaul, *op. cit.*

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36. For the identity of the Hyderabad lounge and bar Touch, designer Tania Khosla drew inspiration from the jewels of the ruling Nizam of Hyderabad, one of the city's prized historical treasures, and a symbol of its opulent past. Khosla graphically reinterpreted an early nineteenth-century Mughal *sarpech* that the Nizam of Hyderabad wore on his turban as a symbol of his stature. The motif was posterised, stylised and screen-printed manually in silver on to the vinyl backdrop to the raised exclusive area of the lounge.
37. For the Touch interiors, architect Sandeep (Khosla's husband) used white leather and etched anodised aluminium to sit alongside Khosla's mural of the *sarpech*. Photography: Pallon Daruwalla.

38. MTV India Interior. Khosla commissioned a Bangalore billboard painter to create a dynamic mural in an 'Ironic' play upon stereotypical Indian references. Photography: Pallon Daruwalla.

39. A subtle blend of the hand-crafted and the digital in the menu for Kismet, the exclusive members' lounge. The cover is formed from anodised aluminium, hand die-cut and acid-etched with the Kismet logo.