

## [We're Out of Sorts](#)

Category : [January 1988](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 1988

# We're Out of Sorts

Marshall McLuhan wasn't talking about psychics when he said, "The medium is the message." He meant how you communicate something, anything, is just as much of the message as what you are saying. If you tell a friend, in a churlish voice, "Forget it. It doesn't matter to me," you may actually be saying "I can't forget it. It matters too much." When you receive a computer-generated sales pitch in the mail that misspells your name and unctuously exudes care for you as "a highly-valued client and personal friend," your real impression is just the opposite. Having stated that premise, let me explain how it relates to Hinduism.

Here's an example. You're visiting a grand, 700-year-old temple, carved in the Chola period from black granite. The exquisite craftsmanship is impossible to ignore. You marvel that it took 300 years to complete—such continuity, such dedication. Awed, you stand near solid stone pillars twelve feet high which the guide strikes with a wooden mallet releasing sonorous, truly musical tones that echo down hallowed halls. How precious!

Abruptly reality returns as dirt and disrepair assail the senses. The unkempt masterpiece changes, communicating not the glorious achievement of earlier generations but this generation's neglect. Hindus today, outnumbering our predecessors ten to one, still don't have the ability to even properly maintain what they produced, let alone the inspiration to equal earlier achievements. Let's face it. We've lost something, something worth trying to get back. And since great tasks are but the sum of many small, quality-minded efforts, let me focus, as an example, on the quality of Hindu publications. Or more precisely, the lack thereof.

Our offices receive publications from every nation where Hindus live. We get calendars, books, newspapers, brochures, bulletins and printed matter of every kind. Being on many religious mailing lists, we also get slick, four-color materials from the Seventh Day Adventists, from Rev. Moon's group, from Buddhist institutions, from athletes and even Muslim associations. It won't surprise any of

you to learn that, as with the temples cited above, the quality of Hindu publications does not really measure up. But what merely annoys you, galls and torments those of us who know publishing as the art and science of disseminating ideas.

When Hinduism communicates its wisdom teachings to the world, it unwittingly makes some truly terrible impressions. Who can help but cringe when reading the celestial thoughts of the Upanishads and stumbling on a typographical error? Lack of quality turns people off. Especially our youth make such judgments based on form rather than substance. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to be sure form reflects substance. We're strong on substance, weak on form.

Call to mind when last you picked up a book published in India. It was printed on jaundiced government-issue paper. Not the best, but forgivable, since it is not paper that is the real problem, or even those watered down inks or hand-glued binding or off-register color photos. With virtually no technology whatsoever, the craftsmen of the middle ages produced charming, beautiful, hand-illuminated works, more art than book. Quality goes deep, to our attitude about our efforts, our pride in the things we create. But open most Hindu publications and the eye is offended-again and again. How am I offended, let me count the ways...

Spelling is one. Another is that horrible last chapter of every book produced in India: Errata. It's true. Every book that comes from an Indian press has pages and pages of errors carefully appended at the back, or hand glued in after the book was bound. How is the reader ever to know that on page fifteen an essential reference to Hinduism was supposed to be Buddhism, or later in that same chapter the word not was left out totally changing the meaning of a critical passage whose opposite meaning he will now carry through life as flawed wisdom? No one reads the errata that diligently. So errors are spread like seeds of some noxious but prolific mental weed.

Why can't we proofread books before they are printed instead of afterwards? The answer is, we can. But we patently don't care enough about excellence. I suggest we never buy another book which affronts readers with lists of errata. Let's raise our clenched fists and chant together with Ford Motor Company: "Quality is Job 1. Power to the consumer."

Typography may not be your thing, but it is one of ours. When it's not done well, we wince. We know that good type reflects the character of a publication, demonstrates a respect for the message being conveyed. Shoddy type is not just sloppy, it is disrespectful to subject, author and reader. Not unimportantly, it's also less legible. Wading through bad spelling is tough enough. When you add other typographic sins of omission and commission, it becomes impossible to enjoy, and sometimes even understand, the written word. You probably stumbled on the few errors someone mined this editorial with. We look for a Hindu future with no more backwards letters, broken letters, missing letters, poorly spaced letters or unlettered letters.

Allow me to share a few fascinating (well, maybe interesting) things about type. Long ago in the West, and today in the East, type was largely set by hand. Since typographers were the most frequent of communicators-sort of the TV producers of their day-they had a significant impact on language development. For instance, they told apprentices to "Mind your p's and q's." When looking at these two characters in hand-set type, it is easy to confuse them (letters are backwards in metal form) and to put p's where you should have q's. These days you don't see much of that in the West, but it still happens with irritating frequency in the East.

Another English term that has typographic roots is "Out of sorts." Nowadays people use the phrase to mean they are cross or not feeling well. But few know what a sort is. For a typesetter, a sort is a single character in an alphabet, a metal letter which will be assembled with others to produce words and pages that will be inked and then impressed on paper. Oftentimes, the typesetter couldn't afford many such characters, and the most frugal would set one or two pages at a time, print them on the press, break down the individual letters returning them to wooden organizing cases (hence the term to "sort out") capitals to the Upper Case and regular characters to the Lower Case (thus our description of upper and lower case letters. Sometimes the printer/typesetter ran out of the most common characters, usually e's. When he ran out of a letter, the craftsman was "out of sorts," and that made him upset. He might even cheat and use caps to make up his shortfall, or c's which look so much like the e. Well, to him they did!

There are other transgressions type setters indulge in (ingenious offenses by which they wrench type into limited space to save a few copper pennies) but it is unfair to berate them without noting that they are not alone, nor are they the worst violators. If our prognosis for ensuing millenia is to be positive, then in all things Hindu-be they temples, books, arts, rites, thinking or whatever - we must return to excellence and quality. The alternatives are obvious and, we trust, objectionable to

all sensitive, not to mention sentient, souls.

"Keep the best and forget the rest."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.