

[TYPOGRAPHY As a Paradigm of Quality](#)

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TYPOGRAPHY As a Paradigm of Quality

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When Archana Dongre and her husband Arun visited our editorial offices three weeks back, we should have known something important would happen. Archana, a Sanskrit scholar and one of our ace journalists, has written articles on stress among Hindus, the L.A. Unity in Yoga conference and profiles on personalities as diverse as dancer Chitra Das and actress Phylicia Rashad. When asked how we might better serve readers, Archana had a ready answer: "Larger type. Many of my friends love HINDUISM TODAY, but they are over 40 and the small type poses problems for them."

This is the type Archana was speaking about, and that we have used for 12 years. She doesn't know it (and will find out only after this issue arrives at her Los Angeles home), but her comment stirred long discussions among the staff and led to a decision by our publisher to increase the type size 9 point to 9.75. That may not sound like much, but it does make a difference. This paragraph is set in our old type and linespacing, to give readers a sense of the overall visual effect of the change, which we hope will make our unique mix of original news, philosophy and features more user-friendly. Thanks, Archana, for the suggestion.

Ahh! That's much better. Typography has been much on our minds this month. 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 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 exudes phony care for you as "a highly-valued client and personal friend," your real impression is much the opposite. How we say something is equally as information-rich as what we say. Let me explain one way this related to Hinduism.

Our offices receives publications from every nation where Hindus live. We get calendars, books, newspapers, brochures 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 Muslim associations, Buddhist institutions and atheists. It won't surprise you to learn that the quality of Hindu publications does not measure up. But what may merely annoy 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 creates some truly terrible impressions. Who can help but cringe when reading the celestial thoughts of the Upanishads and stumbling on a horde of typographical errors? Lack of quality turns people off. Especially our youth make judgments based on form rather than substance. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to be sure form reflects substance. As a world faith, we've strong on substance, weak on form. This was not always true. Our progenitors were graphically sophisticated. What happened?

Call to mind when last you picked up a publication in India. It was printed on jaundiced paper with off-register color photos and watered-down inks that soiled your hands. The art was puerile, the language inept. With far less technology, craftsman of the middle ages produced beautiful, hand-illuminated works - more art than book - in which form and content were equally flawless. Quality wells up from our attitude about work, our pride in the things we create. But open most Hindu publications today and the eye is offered. 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 chapter the word not was left out changing a critical passage whose opposite meaning the reader will 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 afterwords? The answer is we don't care enough about excellence. I suggest we never buy another

book which affronts readers with misspellings and lists of errata. Let's raise our clenched fists and chant together with Ford Motor Company: "Quality is Job 1. Iradikate errata!"

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 regard 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 to understand, the written word. We look for a Hindu future with no more 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 (like a rubber stamp, letters are backwards in their 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." 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 assembled with others to produce words and pages that will be inked and then impressed on paper. Oftentimes, the typesetter couldn't afford to own many characters, and the most frugal would set one or two pages at a time, print them on the press and 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, and was "out of sorts." That upset him, so "out of sorts" came to mean cross or disturbed. He might EvEn chEat and usE caps to makE up his shortfall, or c's which look like the "e." Well, he said they did!

There are other transgressions which shortsighted (ingenious offenses by which

they wrench more and more type into less and less space), but it is unfair to berate them without noting that they are not the only violators. Type is our example, but quality is an issue in all things Hindu. If any prognosis for the approaching millennium is to be positive, then in our varied works - be they temples, books, arts, television, rituals, thinking or whatever - we must demand a return to excellence and quality. The alternatives are obvious and, we trust, as objectionable to you as they are to us.

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