

SEARCHING FOR INDIAN TYPE FOUNDRIES

Stuart Isto



FOR YEARS I have heard stories about metal type from India. Tanja Bolens, a well-known Granville Island book-binder, said she had ordered type from India and never received anything sending away a good deal of money.

Denise Wilde, a Vancouver artist and printer, spoke of having waited months and months to receive some Indian type, only to receive the letters without any punctuation characters.

Yet still some people kept trying to order type and other letter-press items from India, drawn by the claims of extremely low prices.

India had one very famous type foundry, India Type, which had a large assortment of type faces. The only trouble was that they had given them their own obscure names, so typophiles had to guess from specimen books what they were ordering. The same foundry published a beautiful and elaborate type specimen book early in the 20th century, which collectors from all over the world admired and tried to get.

Because of these and many other stories, I looked forward to my train trip with my wife, Elizabeth, across India last December. I hoped to find some of the legendary type foundries and perhaps even buy some metal type to bring back. Most exciting of all was a rumour about hand-cranked type casters, said to be available for sale in Jaipur, India.

Our travel itinerary saw us arriving at Calcutta, traveling west to Delhi, then north to the Punjab, west to Gujarat, then south to Bombay. We traveled at night by train, stopping for a day or two at many different places.

We discovered as we traveled that letter-press printing is very much alive in India, in tiny shops in every town we visited. The type foundries were not so easy to find. Before the trip began, I identified three type foundries which had produced English letters in the past. The first, Gujarati Type Foundry, was located in Bombay, the second, India Type Foundry in Ahmedabad, and the third, Sind National Type Foundry, in Jaipur.

The Punjab is the center of Indian printing machinery manufacture, but we could find no foundries producing English fonts. The next hopeful place was Ahmedabad, a city severely damaged by recent earthquakes. There was no trace remaining of the India Type Foundry, but we did find the Ahmedabad Type Foundry. Unfortunately no one there spoke English.

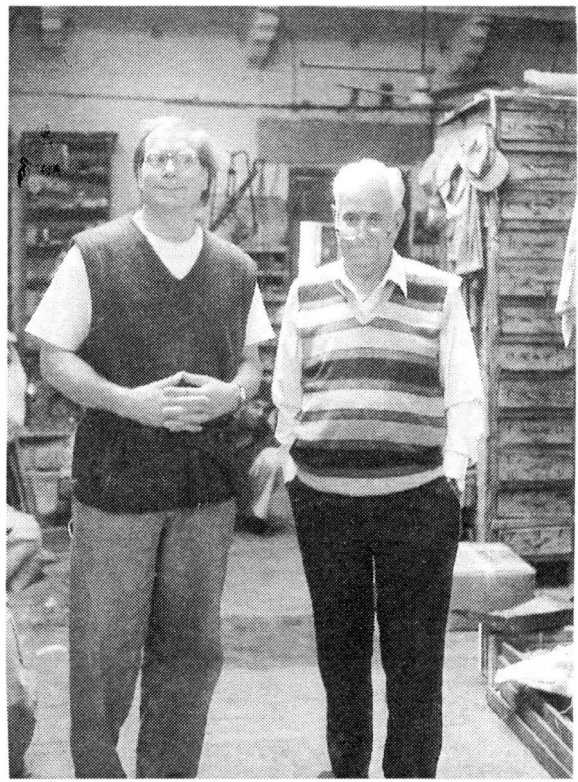
Our next destination was Jaipur, the blue city. Here we had high hopes of finding a working foundry, since Anil Raghani had left messages on the Letpress List Server on the Internet. This foundry was said to have metal type as well as hand-cranked type casters.

Armed with a map and an address we had gotten from the Internet, we set out on foot from our hotel looking for Nehru Bazar, Jaipur. By walking the length of the Bazar, we finally stumbled upon the foundry. It didn't open until 10am, so we climbed the mountain behind Jaipur and visited the Nahargarh (Tiger Fort), a huge castle on top of the mountain.

When we got back to Nehru Bazar, the type foundry was open and we met some members of the family who operate it. We spent the rest of the day there, watching typecasters in action. T. D. Raghani is the senior manager of this business, and he described for us the history of the foundry.

In 1947 Pakistan was partitioned off from India with the intention that Pakistan should be a Muslim country and India a Hindu country. As a result, Hindus in Pakistan were forced to move to India, while Muslims in India moved to Pakistan. The Raghani family, which had been manufacturers in Pakistan, moved to Jaipur, India. Looking around for a new business opportunity in India, they saw a good opportunity in manufacturing metal type. Since they had no previous experience in this business, they were forced to rely on the talents and knowledge of newly hired employees in order to produce a product. They were hampered as well by the fact that the only type founding equipment they had were many ancient hand-cranked, kerosene-fired casting machines.

Seeing that they needed better knowledge and better equipment, Mr. Raghani attended Monotype School in England to learn type casting using Monotype casting equipment. The company bought several Monotype Super Casters and Monotype OA casters, and by the early 1950s was producing a decent product. With time, they were able to cast many varieties

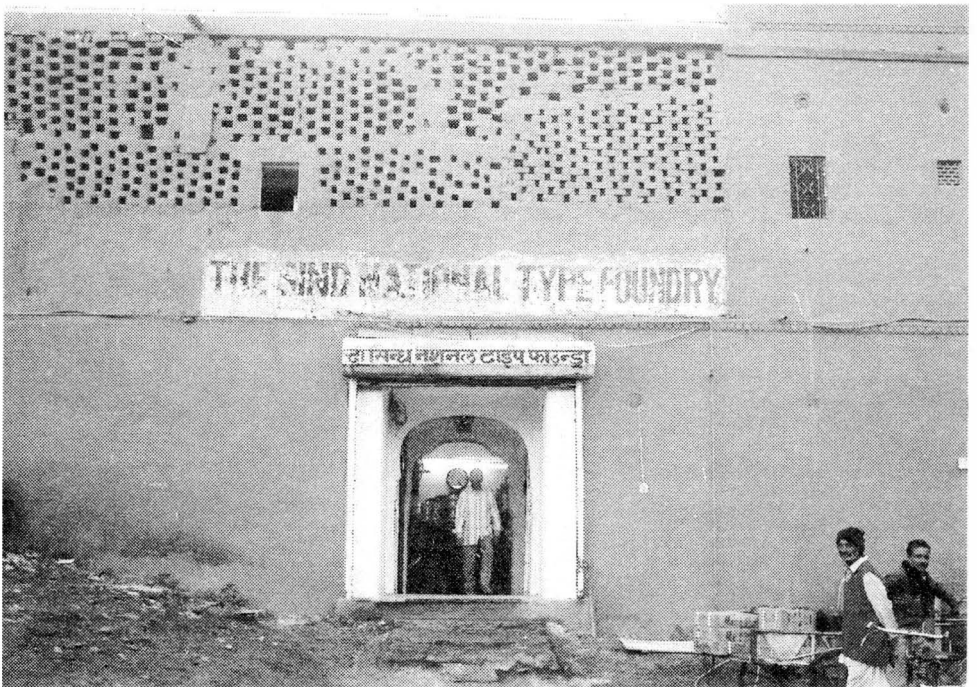


Stuart Isto, left and T.D. Raghani, senior manager; Sind National Type Foundry.

of type in both Hindi and English faces and in sizes ranging from 6 points to 72 points. Currently they have a catalog showing about 150 type faces including some which are unique to this foundry, as well as popular and well known faces. Of particular interest are their Indian-text-looking faces such as Ramakrishna and Maharaja.

Those who are interested in buying type from this foundry for fine press work would be most interested in their Garamond, Times, Bodoni, Old Style, and Piranesi faces. These are all available in 14, 18, 24, and 36 point size and in Roman, Bold, and Italic. Prices are significantly lower than American sources such as M&H Type in San Francisco.

Since I was especially interested in the hand-operated type casters, they got one of these out of storage. They still have about 25 of these machines, but none have been in use for about 40 years. Unfortunately, I was unable to imagine a way to get this machine back to Canada, and make it capable of producing quality type, so I didn't buy one of these.



Sind National Type Foundry, Jaipur, India.

Bernhard Fashion
36 Point
6 Kg.

THE QUICK BROW

SET PRESS

Wide Latin
24 Point
7 Kg.

Rockwell Shadow
36 Point
6 Kg.

THE PRINTING

WHEREVER THE

Madras Shadow
36 Point
5 Kg.

Othello
36 Point
6 Kg.

WHEREVER A

WHEREVER THE SIZES OF TYPES

Playbill
36 Point
6 Kg.

A few of the Sind foundry's more interesting typefaces. The Othello face is a version of Neuland, Rudolph Koch's great typeface.

However, I did buy a good many supplies which I was able to carry back home in my pack. Out of the large selection of items the Sind foundry stocks, I picked the following: two fonts of new ATF type (left over from about 50 years ago); two cans of excellent Indian letterpress ink (red and black); a numbering machine; a soft brayer; a very good pair of printer's tweezers and the current *Sind Type Specimen Book* (one of the very few metal type specimen books now produced anywhere in the world). Many days later, after carrying my pack on and off trains, returning to Calcutta I regretted having bought as much as I did.

Mr Raghani told me that the other foundries which had produced English-language fonts were no longer in business. This foundry is definitely still in business though, and the product which they produce from the Supercasters is of a very good quality. While I haven't yet tried ordering from them and having goods shipped from India, I believe that it is worth a try, since I personally found them to be very accommodating. They can be contacted through their web site, www.sntfworld.com.

Stuart Isto is a member of the Alcuin Society Board and of the Editorial Committee of Amphora.