



The design contribution of Dr Fiona Ross

*Comments delivered by John Hudson, on the occasion of
the presentation to her of the SOTA Typography Award,
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LIKE MOST OF US in the days before there were degree programmes in typeface design, Fiona Ross came to the type business in a roundabout way. In the 1970s she had studied German literature and then, intrigued by the source material of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and other works, she had attended the University of Tübingen to study Sanskrit. In 1978, she was working in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London when her husband, Rod, showed her an advertisement in a newspaper. It was for a position coordinating non-Latin typeface design at Linotype, and was illustrated by a tree of languages and writing systems. Fiona pointed to this illustration and said 'Well that's not right... and they got that wrong...', to which her husband replied 'You should apply for the job.'

Over the following decade at Linotype, Fiona would build the non-Latin design department into the most technically and aesthetically creative team of its kind, employing designers, draughting staff and computer programmers selected by her. At a time when other companies were busy converting their old metal and photo types to the new digital technologies, Fiona undertook an extensive programme of innovative new typeface design for Indian, Arabic and Southeast Asian scripts, often working closely with the newspaper publishers and editors who were Linotype's biggest customers.

One of those publishers, Mr Aveek Sarkar of *Ananda Bazar Patrika* in Kolkata, sends his greetings and congratulations to Fiona today. He recalls the contributions that she made, with Tim Holloway, in the design of the Linotype Bengali types, as the beginning of 'a new era' in Bengali typography. It is an era that persists, and if you visit Kolkata today, you will still see this typeface used in every available medium: still in the pages of *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and other newspapers, but also on billboards, television, and reproduced by sign painters.

In addition to developing new designs for Indian types at this pivotal moment of technological change, Fiona also pioneered the use of phonetic keyboard input, using software to drive the visual display of characters, rather than requiring the typesetter to enter text in visual order. This model, in which phonetic character strings and visual glyph strings are separated—the now familiar separation of content and display—, influenced both ISCII, the Indian national standard for computing, and the Unicode Standard.

While at Linotype, Fiona also undertook a doctorate through the School of Oriental and African Studies, writing her dissertation on the history of Bengali type, with a focus on how changes in technology had influenced typeface design. This work was later published as a highly regarded book, *The printed Bengali character and its evolution*, first in the UK and then republished in India. It serves not only as an excellent resource on Bengali type design, but also as a model of a research-based approach to understanding design and technology.

When Fiona left Linotype to work as an independent consultant, she had already achieved enough to merit the award that she receives today. Her contributions were far from finished, though.

I first met Fiona at the conference of the Association Typographique International in Leipzig in 2000, and shortly after had the pleasure of working with her and Tim Holloway on the redesign of the Yakout Arabic newspaper typeface for the new Linotype company in Germany. It was the first of many collaborations, each of which has been a wonderful adventure for me and a fascinating education. Together, we have made new types for Adobe, Microsoft and others, in a range of scripts including Arabic, Bengali, Devanagari, Tamil, Telugu, and Thai. In the past two years we have been honoured to create custom types for the publishing of the Murty Classical Library of India by Harvard University Press.

For the past decade, I have been privileged to be in almost daily contact with Fiona. She entered the type business 36 years ago as a linguist, but it must be said that she has a remarkable designer's eye, not only for detail but for the overall impression of a typeface on the page, and she has the ability to describe what she is seeing and how it might be improved. Her contributions to what Tiro Typeworks does are as important as anything that Ross and I do, and we are truly blessed to be able to work with her. Thank you, Fiona.