What makes an image Indian?

The Vernacular Design of Matchboxes

by
NANDITA RATAN

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1. Introduction

Abstract

India's seemingly kitschy, contemporary visual culture is a result of a multicultural history. Its visual culture is transitioning into a more digitally influenced language as a result of globalization. Matchbox labels have represented various points in India's history by drawing from cultural, political and social changes. A collection of these old labels will tell the viewer a story about India's history. However, the focus of these communicative matchbox labels has shifted.

This research aims at analyzing, deconstructing and creating Indian Matchbox labels in order to experiment with cultivating a visual language of labels that can engage in current and contemporary narratives of a changing India. It aims at contemporizing the themes on these labels in order to reflect socio-political change and their capacity to tell stories and raise dialogue. The labels on these matchboxes draw from several sources, from socio-political movements to the flora and fauna of India. Comparing the labels produced during India's early years of Independence with those from the last decade, this paper aims to understand how Indian matchbox labels can be used as lens to explore a complex visual language.

The research has chosen to focus on matchboxes as they are accessible, well documented and have been used for an array of purposes over history. Matchboxes as opposed to posters, pamphlets and other forms of printed media have been the most financially accessible printed product, hence making the content presented on them an exploitable form of communication.

Keywords: Indian Visual Culture, Visual Language, National Identity

Glossary of terms

Visual culture

a "look" that is associated with or "native" to a particular time, place, event, or group. It characterizes the image that comes to mind when referring to any one of these specific things, a visual reference to zeitgeist.

Vernacular

dance, music, art, etc. that is in a style liked or performed by ordinary people who are local to the region.

Kitsch

art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way.

National identity

a sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language.

Framing the Research

On moving to Vancouver from Hyderabad, India, I was confronted by a landscape that was vastly different from the cluttered, chaotic one that I was previously accustomed to. Even though the landscape consisted of the usual elements, plants, houses, public property and people, they were no longer easy to read.

A significant portion of my undergraduate studies involved working in public spaces. As an illustrator, it allowed me the opportunity to engage with different communities and understand the visual language in the localities I worked in. I assumed that I would naturally invest myself in understanding the visual language used in public spaces in Vancouver, however, the culture shock I was experiencing drove me to find solace in the familiar. This research journey began with the question, "What makes an image Indian?", and it thrust me into the process of exploring the visual language of Indian matchbox labels.

Working with this subject from outside India allowed me to see it through a different lens and in contrast to the images that I was seeing in Vancouver. It led me to focus more on the impact these images in this visual language, rather than focusing solely on their encoded meanings.

The research focuses on how images might be used to provoke dialogue and be used as a mode of storytelling. Through the course of this research, it has been difficult for me to grapple with the socio-political situation India as off August 2019. The Indian government revoked Article 370 in Kashmir, the northern most state in India. It proceeded to enforce an indefinite internet shut down in the region and after the 5th of August, 2019, there has been limited information about the situation in Kashmir. The shutdown reverted everyone in the Kashmir region to a pre-Internet version of India. There has been documented violence against its citizens (minors under 18 included) by the Indian government, but very little has been reported on Indian mainstream media.

Widespread protests are taking place in different parts of the country to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) which when paired together endangers the rights of non-Hindus, the trans community, women and Hindu religious minorities.

The actions of the Indian government could have led to positive changes within the country had the implementation of their plans been done so in a less violent manner. However, their methods of execution have led to wide spread panic and fear, bolstered by a lack of clear communication by the government. As my main source of information has been through internet news and friends and family at cites of protest, it has allowed me to understand the situation through different perspectives. Through the span of these protests, the violence incited by several Indian political leaders has pushed me to think of ways to support these protests and the role images can play in facilitating change.

Figure 1. A crossing near Mozamjahi Market, Hyderabad. May, 2019.

Introduction: India today

India took its independence from the British in 1947 after 90 years of being a British colony. Prior to which it was passed through many hands, resulting in a wide range of cultures that still influence 21st century India. This diversity is present in India's food, languages and traditions which draw from cultures that influenced it in the past. India's most prominently spoken language in the north, Hindi, is spoken in several different dialects around the country. A large majority of these dialects do not have written scripts and are mixed with the vernacular languages of each state. For example, my home town Hyderabad, speaks Hyderabadi-Hindi which mixes Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Sanskrit and Telugu.

Walking down an Indian road today, one is bound to come across an array of objects and printed media whose origins are complex to trace. A marble statue of Ganesha, scantily-clad illustrated women on a neon coloured circus poster, cheaply printed employment posters in Calibri covering a wall, fake garlands featuring daisies for an alter; these artifacts often have only one thing in common, that they were made in India. The visual language that has "come about" as a result of an array of influences, on a landmass that has been invaded, colonized and for centuries governed by cultures that are foreign to it, is in all senses, incongruous. My process of navigating this mire of visuals has been non-linear and intuitive at the beginning and more structured towards the end of the process. The research draws from India's history, socio-political conditions and the impact of globalization and colonization.

The paper will take you through my process in stages with brief explanations to contextualize specific subjects and the histories attached to them. The first section will explain how Matchboxes became an area of interest by tracing their history and understanding why they are still an integral part of India. It will introduce and explain the initial making process that drove the reminder of the research. Followed by an analysis of two sets of matchboxes and the factors that influenced their comparison.

The final stage of the research focused on creating a curated set of contemporary matchbox labels that aim at bringing out their value as provocative images.

Understanding my Process

The route taken by this research was far from linear. It started by intuitively working with matchboxes in the beginning and reflecting later, to understand why they were a viable visual language to work with. The research drew parallels with methods used by several practitioners.

Figure 2. A screenshot from Raghav Meattle's music video "One Sided Stories" whose visuals were created by Mehek Malhotra and Omkar Potdar.
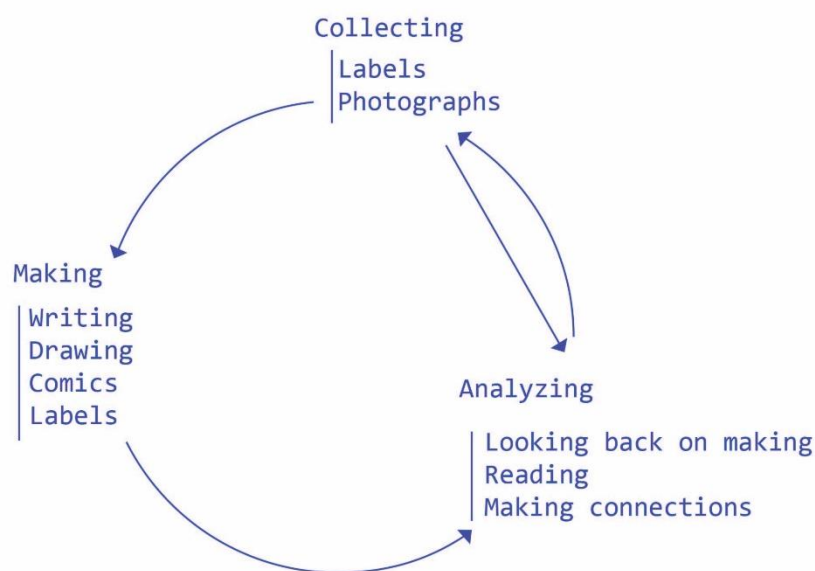
As the research started through experimental making, I only realized later on that the process I was following involved intuitive making, artefact analysis and investigative reading. In hindsight, a large part of this research drew from my memory, intuition and experimental making. The diagram on right loosely describes this process.

Figure 3 The process followed through this research.

The research started when I came across the work of Indian designer Mehek Malhotra and film maker Omkar Potdar for a music video that used matchboxes as visual templates for the video's lyrics.[1] It led me to question the relevance of Indian matchboxes today and why their imagery was not more reflective of contemporary India. Malhotra's use of the matchboxes to tell stories led me to Golsteign and Wright (2013) who explain the use of narrative research, and its importance in design work. It later uses Matt Lee's collection from "Matchboxes from the subcontinent" to analyze the differences between contemporary labels and those from the past. The work also references Sroop Sunar's work with replicating matchbox labels through screen printing.

While observing these labels, I assumed that there must be a rationale behind why they chose to represent certain images and not others. That led to my reading about India's history to help contextualize these images. This investigative reading work allowed me to establish connections between the various subjects that informed matchbox images in the past. And in turn, influence the matchboxes that I created later based on my observations. This section of the paper will speak briefly about the methods I used to navigate my research. They will later be addressed in detail through my making process. (See Ideating and first impressions)

Investigative Reading
In a paper discussing narrative research, Golsteijn and Wright (2013) assert that "the field of narrative research seeks to engage analytically with the storied ways in which we make sense of meaning and experiences, within the wider context of our social world and those social others within it". Narratives and storytelling played a small part in my initial explorations. I used storytelling to explore my home city, Hyderabad as I wasn't situated in India. This process of writing stories about a space allowed me to visualize and think through my hypothetical surroundings.

Attempting to write stories about this city led me to read about its history. Works such as that of Dr. Shikha Bhatnagar in *Legendary Narratives of Hyderabad* allowed me to attach histories to places that I had walked through so many times. Although this process did not take the main stage in my research, it helped me realize that without understanding the history of India, I would not be able to understand the circumstances that influenced the creation of its matchbox labels and their visual language.

Making
The work referenced and built on the process of Sroop Sunar an undergraduate of Central Saint Martins, who worked on replicating existing matchbox labels using screen printing. The research aims at building on the process used in her body of work whilst looking more into the implication of the images used on labels rather than their process of accurate replication.

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[1] Reference One sided Stories by Raghav Meattle [video], 2018

Sroop Sunar who created a set of replicas of matchbox labels, speaks[2] about the misregistration of colours, and misalignment of layers in matchbox labels, a process that she achieved intentionally through screen printing. This process of intentionally planning errors in an image is reflected in my initial process of digitally recreating matchboxes (see Reworking labels intuitively). Having an understanding of the rationale behind her process helped me understand how to start my own making process. In the final stage of making, my work focuses on digitally experimenting with the labels to create a cohesive new set of labels.

Artefact analysis

During the course of this research, I had the privilege of returning to Hyderabad where I spent my time documenting the city through photographs. The resulting image bank was vast and invariably, was not analyzed as intended. During the attempted process of analyzing them, I referenced the writings of John Collier Jr. and Malcolm Collier in *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*, who write that "we must move from visual impressions to systematized procedures for handling visual data". They state that different analytical approaches would expose different data, but emphasize on the need for free discovery in the initial phases of data collection. This process of free discovery occurred when I was looking through images of matchbox labels tentatively on the internet prior to choosing to work with the subject. Although I was later unable to use their advice to draw information from my photographs at this stage, it prepared me for the next stage (creating a visual typology) in my process which centered around gathering information from 2 collections of matchboxes (see Comparing the typologies).

The initial stage of my process, I skimmed through collections of various matchboxes on the internet and attempted to create new labels intuitively. Creating this new set involved riffing off of older labels based on first impressions prior to any analysis. (see Ideating and first impressions) This process allowed me to understand them through making and based on memory; rather than collected data in the form of colour schemes, typography, themes etc. The process of building a typology and collecting data from collected labels came after the initial period of making. In hindsight, having an intuitively non-linear process allowed me to experiment freely with the form and information on these labels without the restrictions and boundaries that the collected data would impose.

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[2] Talk by Sroop Sunar retrieved from https://vimeo.com/5991633

2. Establishing Context

Images from India over the years

Between 1960 and 1990, India went through a period that it has come to call the *license raj* (loosely translates to license era). The Indian government enforced a system of licenses in order to control the quality of products and the economic frameworks around manufacturing in Indian markets. During this period, products available to the masses in India were largely those that were produced in India (Geel & Levy, 2004).

However, after 1991, with the liberalization of India's markets, the license raj came to an end and India started to import and export products. This led to an influx of foreign investment which resulted in a change in India's manufacturing trends. As a result, India's products and the print media on them, started to change and grow with the changing times. The visual culture in India is reflective of these changes showing a broad spectrum of images that use both new and older visual languages.

Certain Indian brands such as Amul (dairy products) and Nirma (for their washing power) have over the years developed an identity that resounds with Indian communities over the generations. Their visual language has changed with the times and this has allowed them to retain their relevance over the years. Growing up, I remember seeing the Amul girl (the company's mascot) in the newspapers. Today, alongside appearing in her regular column in the newspaper accompanied by a witty statement about the day's news, she still has a place on billboards. She has even been used by an artist in India's current protests.

Fig. 4 has been removed due to

copyright restrictions.

Figure 4. Left: A progression of Amul's advertisements over the years. Right: Mohini Mukherjee's use of the Amul girl for the Anti-CAA protests.

Taking under consideration, the format of the advertisements, the mascot, the usage of newspaper headline-esque captions and Amul's story, the simplicity of the brand allows it to retain its relevance even in contemporary India. Amul's mascot unlike Air India's Maharaja, has managed to stay relevant. Although Air India's Maharaja is still in use, their mascot doesn't have the same impact. The Maharaja was created in a time where air travel was for the upper class and the rich. Although it can be seen today as a metaphor for exemplary service, it isn't as all pervasive as Amul's mascot.

This brought about the question "What makes an image Indian?" Creating a successful visual language would involve understanding India and its different communities. India has a vast number of companies producing products for a wide spectrum of consumers, for both export as well as local markets. Taking packaging for instance, commonly packaged products in a middle-class supermarket today rarely buy into the ornate visual appearance used by older brands. While several old brands are able to stay consistent due to an established consumer base, newer brands are choosing to opt away from this visual language. Although there are probably a number of factors influencing this change, two factors that interested me were the impact of digitization and the influence of economic class.

The current turn in images is evocative of a change in India's production and consumption and the values of the customer. I believe it is in response to the changing aspirations of India's middle and upper middle class; whose aspirations are moving to adopt more convenient aspects of the western lifestyle. Thus, also influencing the products they choose to consume.

An introduction to Matchbox labels

In order to navigate and understand the dearth of ornate images and the impact of digitization on Indian images, the research started to look into accessible forms of print communication in India. India's current visual vernacular hinted at a certain withdrawal from ornate, decorative images from the past. The intricate nature of traditional Indian handicrafts is present in India's architecture and handlooms but does not seem to permeate into the aesthetics of commonly available printed media. Ashis Nandi (1983) writes that the impact of colonization was not limited to the hegemonic relationship perpetrated by the Raj upon its Indian colonies. It impacted how the colonized view themselves in contrast to the colonizers. While the British colonizers represented oppression, they also represented progress to the colonized Indians. India's shift away from traditional imagery, might be seen as a colonial hangover in its attempts to mimic images from the west. While the shift in images might seem

Figure 7. Example of matchbox labels currently in production from Matt Lee's collection.

like a normal transition from an insular market to one that meets global standards, the lack of importance given to its traditional images in commercial sectors is deeply rooted to the impacts of colonization.

At this stage, the research aimed at observing older printed forms and understanding what led to contemporary print media and the factors that influence it. This was a difficult task as, had I been situated within India I could have looked through physically available examples of these images. A trip to my local stationary shop, kirana (family owned grocery store) or my grandmother's house might have unearthed an array of media to look through. However, working from Vancouver limited me to images that were available on the internet.

Figure 8. Images of matchboxes I had found on the internet. Some of which are Japanese and Swedish. Several of these labels represent Independence era themes.

Amongst various advertisement posters, product packaging and movie ephemera, I found a more familiar and personal sight; a large number of matchbox labels representing India before, during and after independence[3]. I was immediately drawn to them because of their visuals and the vast number of them on the internet. I started to collect photographs of these matchboxes on the internet. Matchboxes were and still are prominent in India, unlike in North America. They litter the roads and are a staple for every Indian kitchen and prayer room. As a child, I remember seeing matchboxes in my grandmother's pooja (prayer) room. Later, I started to notice them because my father used to smoke cigarettes. Their association to these two drastically different activities stayed in my memory as they were both objects of prayer as well as an object associated with a frowned upon habit. My exposure to matchboxes increased when I started college, I found myself using matchboxes once again, this time as a smoker making them a far more personal object. I started to notice that they came in different sizes and types, wax and wooden. Their labels were uninteresting at the time as I did not relate to their images.

Matchboxes were a good way of examining the changing visual vernacular in India as they are readily available and well documented; as opposed to product packaging, posters and other printed artefacts. The images on matchboxes are seemingly random but still convey a story and information about a time without always catering to a larger corporate agenda. Other printed materials such as stamps, packaging or posters were created to serve a purpose, a company or a pre-set national identity. Matchboxes on the other hand, have comparatively insignificant purpose with regards to communication but their images are intentional nonetheless and reflect the era they were created in.

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[3] Unfortunately, the exact dates of manufacture of each label were unavailable, the research uses references within the image and the quality of printing to estimate their era of production.

A brief history of matchbox labels in India

The images and origins of these labels have changed over time. From my small digital collection of 150 matchboxes, the most immediate source of information was the text printed on these matchboxes. A few matchboxes were labeled "Made in Sweden" but portrayed romanticized Indian themes. There were several Japanese labels that looked far too similar to the Indian labels for it to have been a coincidence. According to Nimish Adnani, in the early 1900's Japanese immigrants in Calcutta started making matchsticks to cater to the needs during World War I.

This skill of making matches passed on to a small portion of Indian locals in the north, who started to create their own matches in similar styles but with Indian imagery. Soon, India started to import matches from Japan and Sweden to keep up with the growing demand. During the First World War, trade between India and Sweden was cut off and India relied heavily on imports from Japan. India learnt how to make matches that drew from the Japanese labels. This led to the commencement of matchbox production in South India. The patterns were quite clearly drawn from the Japanese and Swedish matches. India's matchbox production started to flourish from within the country. Matchboxes today are made all over India, with WIMCO being one of the largest producers in the mechanized match sector.

The first experiment:
Ideating and first impressions

During the initial stages of this process, the research predominantly involved collecting information about the history of matchbox labels in India and collecting several of their images to better understand them. The process of understanding these visuals was not linear. It took the advice of David Gauntlett (2007) in *Creative Explorations* to follow a process that "allows participants to spend time applying their playful or creative attention to the act of making something symbolic or metaphorical, and then reflecting on it" (p. 3). It started with intuitively recreating them with a sense of play and banking on my previous understanding of matchbox labels instead of analyzing them first.
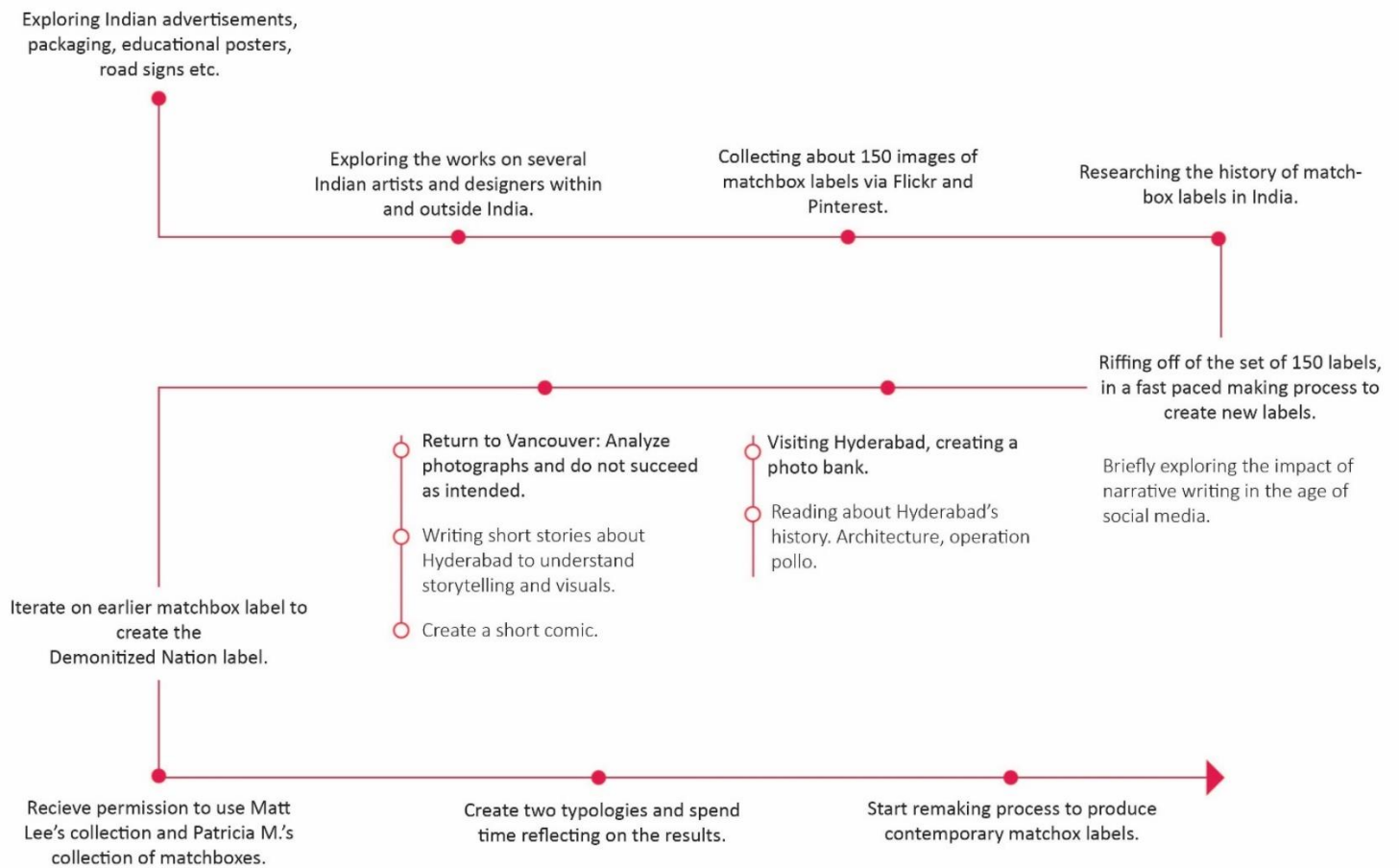

Exploring Indian advertisements, packaging, educational posters, road signs etc.

Exploring the works on several Indian artists and designers within and outside India.

Collecting about 150 images of matchbox labels via Flickr and Pinterest.

Researching the history of match-box labels in India.

Riffing off of the set of 150 labels, in a fast paced making process to create new labels.

Briefly exploring the impact of narrative writing in the age of social media.

Return to Vancouver: Analyze photographs and do not succeed as intended.

Writing short stories about Hyderabad to understand storytelling and visuals.

Create a short comic.

Visiting Hyderabad, creating a photo bank.

Reading about Hyderabad's history. Architecture, operation pollo.

Iterate on earlier matchbox label to create the Demonitized Nation label.

Recieve permission to use Matt Lee's collection and Patricia M.'s collection of matchboxes.

Create two typologies and spend time reflecting on the results.

Start remaking process to produce contemporary matchox labels.

Figure 9. A brief process map of my making process through the span of the research.

This involved studying a few (approx. 150) images that had been collected through Flickr and curated via Pinterest to grasp their layouts, colour schemes and represented themes (See Figure 7). In order to broaden the scope of my research I looked into the collections of other phillumenists, Matt Lee, a former faculty at my undergraduate institution who collected and documented over 750 matchboxes, starting in 2007, during his stay in India. His collection is crucial to my research, as the labels that I have acquired through the internet represent an earlier time and several of them might be reproductions, causing me to question their authenticity. His however, has been physically collected from his travels in India. Comparing my digitally acquired collection of matchboxes and Matt Lee's more recent, extensive collection as a part of his collection, "Matchboxes from the subcontinent"[5] shows the contrast in images used then and now. This contrast is evocative of the changes in India's production and growth after liberalization during which production catered to the needs of the middle-class Indian. As described in the India

Report by Charles and Ray Eames, India was manufacturing for "survival not caprice". Several images used on objects (and matchboxes) promoted national identity and appealed to the senses of a newly independent country.

Figure 10. Examples of older matchbox labels sourced from the internet.

Observing the difference between the selection I had put together and Matt Lee's matchboxes that are currently in production, there were a few obvious shifts to note. Line quality, the quantity of ornate elements, production methods, colours and the themes they follow are entirely different. The matchboxes in our early years (both during and prior to independence, drawing from the independence-era themes on their labels) aimed at capturing a certain reality and appealing to the masses, and they conveyed a story. They not only served their purpose as matchboxes, but also served as a means to communicate visually to India's rural masses. India's wide number of languages and regions meant that images were a strong mode of communication, as opposed to text; as most dialects had not been converted to formal scripts. Several of these labels portrayed symbols of modernity, images of technology and industrial growth that were unattainable in rural communities. As cities were spaces of commerce, the rural areas in India received the benefits of technology much later. This is still the case in India. There were several labels that were indicative of India's freedom struggle, representing images of the movement's leaders, flags and symbols of unity and power. The matchboxes of today however are similar to visuals created to cater to a corporate agenda, their graphics and images seem homogenized; resorting to more generic, less communicative images such as cats, lamps and sunflowers. It made me wonder about the impact of matchbox labels today.

Since matchboxes are as common as they are, selling for Rs.1/- (1/55th of a Canadian Dollar) per matchbox they are an exploitable form of communication. Most matchboxes have 50 matchsticks in them, implying that they would last for at least a week within a certain space. The people using the box would view the image nearly each time that the strike a match.

If older labels were reflective of their times, why weren't todays labels reflective of contemporary India? Why were they resorting to images that were so generalized? A few reasons that did occur to me, were that perhaps the makers of these labels were no longer equipped with the resources required to create a meaningful image. Or that the functionality of a matchbox had overshadowed the need to even have a well-crafted image. Matchboxes unlike lighters, will always be a permanent fixture in every household. They do not need to be marketing in order to sell. However, the allure towards lighters for those who use them is due to their convenience as well as their appearance. While selecting a lighter (a Rs.10 purchase) a person is allowed a wide range of choices allowing them to pick the one most suited to their personality or their preferences. Thus, allowing the lighter to become a

part of ones outwardly image. This person-object relationship was one of the driving factors for the images that were a result of this initial process of creation.

Reworking the labels intuitively

Once elements on a matchbox label such as its title, style of illustration and placement of information was familiar, the process of making them started. Riffing off of themes present in the collected labels, such as birds, cars and specific people, I attempted to create new labels that represented contemporaries to these themes. For example, the theme of birds with a label of an Indian bird, was changed to a label titled "Missing bird" as an ode to the diminishing numbers of the Indian house sparrow. The process of creating these images involved tracing, collage work and extensive use of photoshop to mimic the layered visuals of older labels, whilst incorporating the digitized effect of those currently in production. Using a digital medium like photoshop allowed for experimentation with the image quality. Similar to the use of photoshop to create political posters in local photo studios in India, I was able to achieve the right glows, gradients and the visual appearance used in these studios for fast paced work. The work in these photo studios often only aims at being functional. The image must convey a point and serve its purpose. This generally leads to what one might consider as "bad design" with drastic shadows, strategically placed glows, and gaudy gradients. But it has over time become a signature visual language used by these photo & print shops for work disseminated publicly on hoardings and posters. The process was fast paced and in hindsight, focused more on drawing from the represented themes rather than to replicate the visual aesthetics of the old matchbox labels.

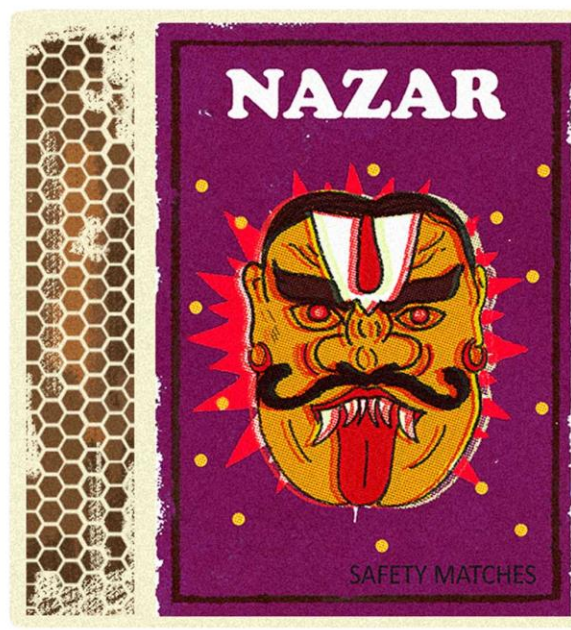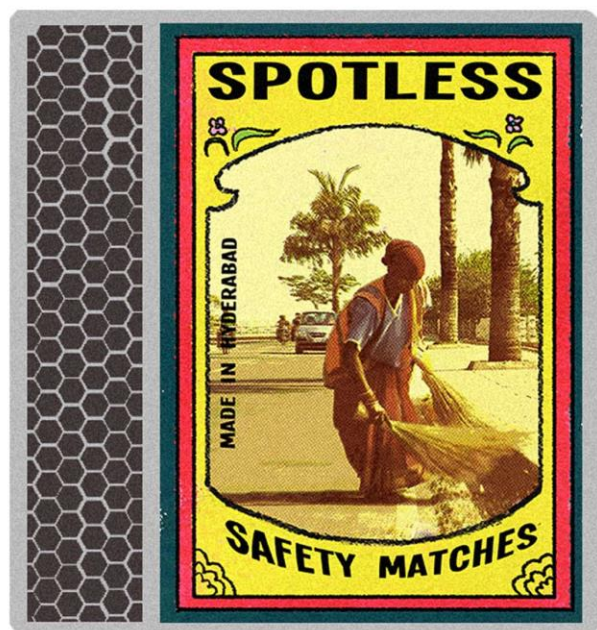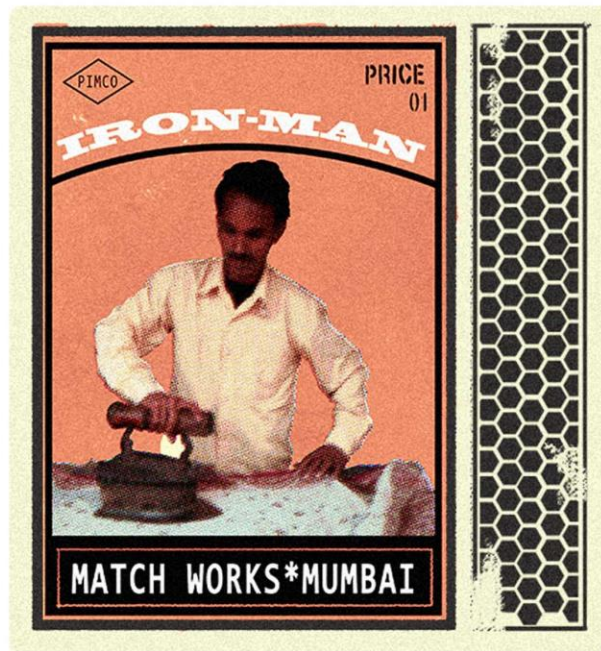Fig. 11 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

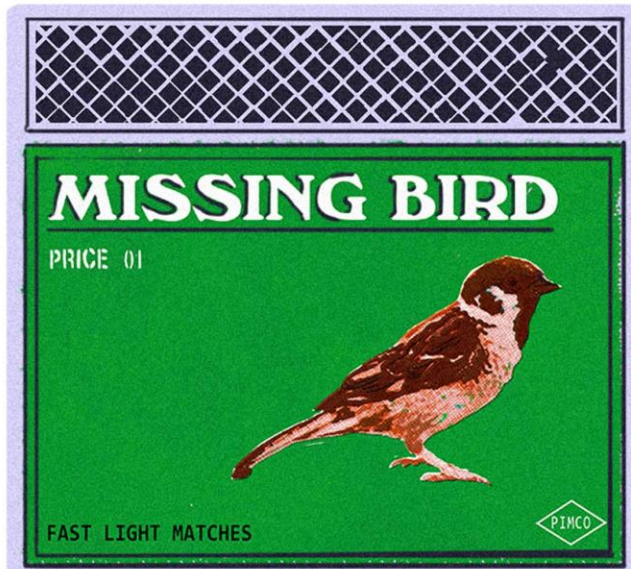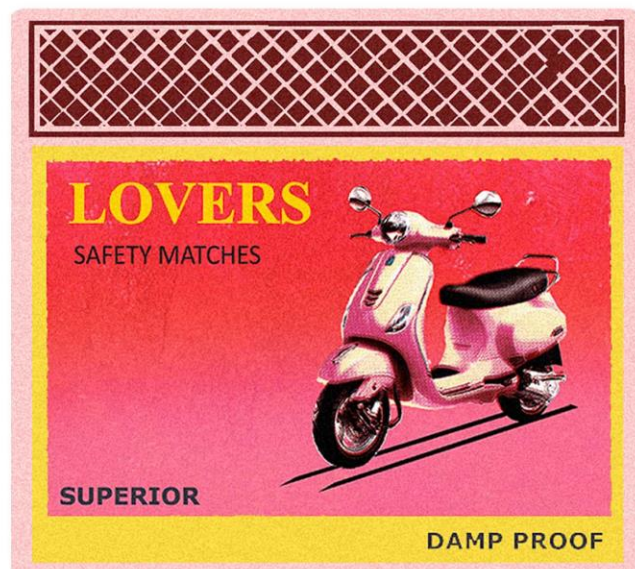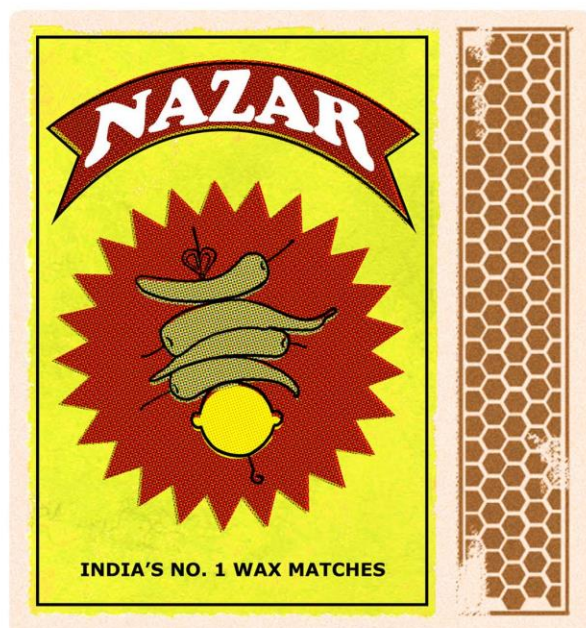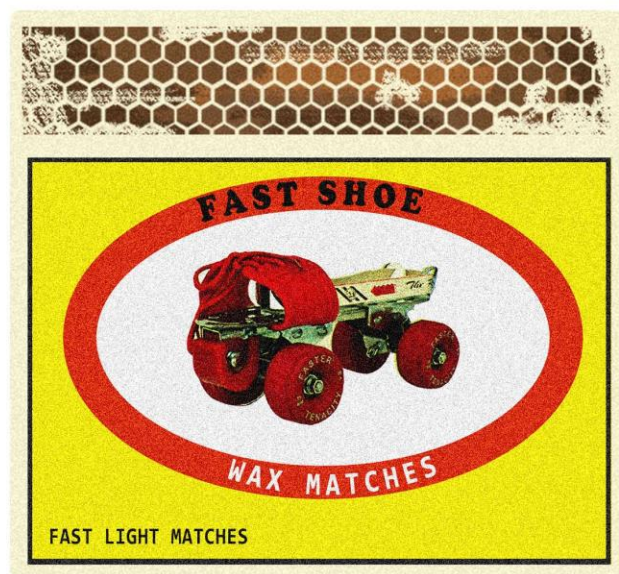*Figure 11 An example of work from an Indian print shop. (political poster in Hyderabad, Telangana. April 2019.)*

Reflecting on the results

This act of fast paced digital collage work with minimal amounts of illustration work allowed for an exploration of what contemporary labels might look like if they were to reflect common sights in India. A few of the resulting images played into the whimsical nature of matchbox labels that often have mythical figures, invertible heads and babies on their labels. Several of the images were mundane and reflective of progress such as the changes in technology, markets and the modern family. I drew from sights that I had seen growing up, and the associations I have to cert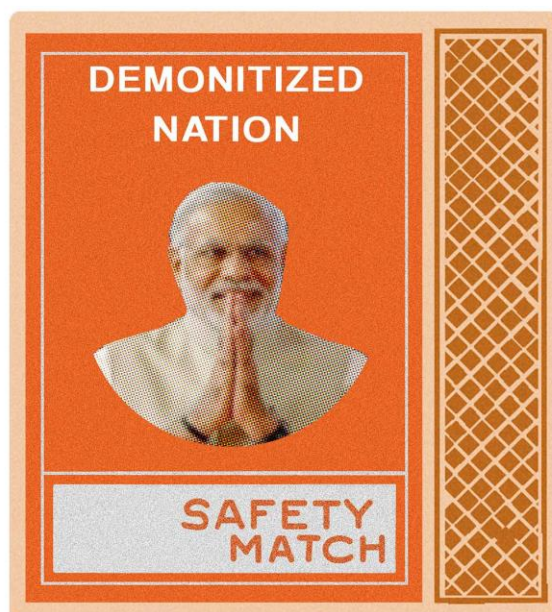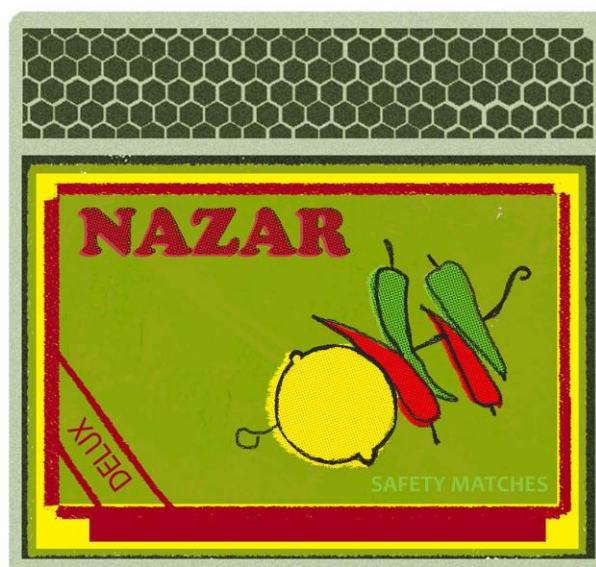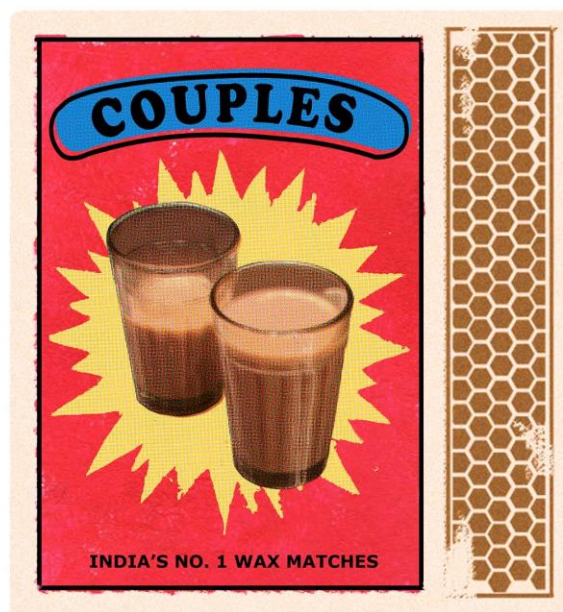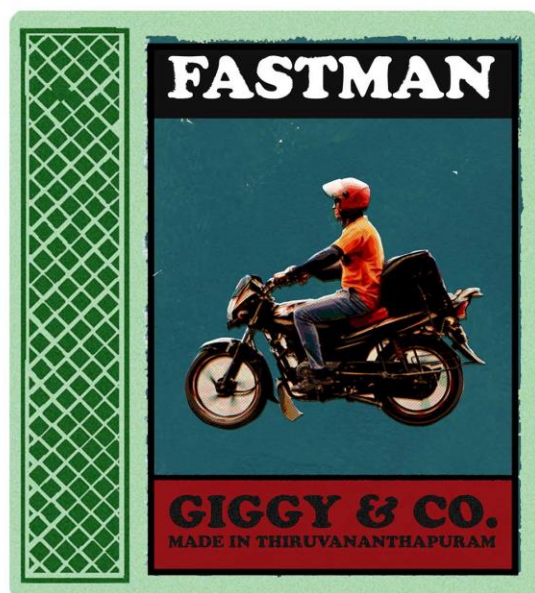ain activities. For example, sharing a cup of tea at a chai stall is often a way to spend time with a loved one and very common sight in India. As love is a largely stigmatized subject, sharing tea in this manner allows the couple to be out in public but while enjoying a very innocent, platonic experience (as seen in the image labeled couples).

This process of image making allowed me to understand how the play between text and image can help create coded messages in images. Considering a matchbox is approximately 5x3.5cms, this use of an implied meaning in images would help maximize the communicative value of a label. I also learnt why certain elements were common in matchboxes. Large ovals, stars or boxes behind the main helped draw attention it as the object was so small. The heading is usually in a bold, non-decorative typeface for the same reason. The images too, follow suit and do not contain unnecessary elements, barring a certain amount of decoration. The image was designed to be functional and visible even from a distance. I attempted to mimic these traits in the images I created, keeping in mind that every visual element had a purpose.

As one of my main references to understand the process of creating these images was the work of Sroop Sunar, I had to consider whether or not to include the usage of misprinting in my images. I decided to try doing so in order to understand how it would impact the image. Replicating the accidental printing of older print technology (as seen below in the image of a car representing family) that results in bleeding colours, misaligned layers and misspelt text, would not be a result of present-day printing. In replicating these errors, I undermine the craftsmanship of present-day label makers. The process of recreating these visuals brought about a few questions. For example, my predominantly digital process led me to question whether I ought to be replicating the visual language of older matchboxes at all? Especially since I was attempting to create visuals that were contemporary. Although it allows me to add an element of nostalgia to these images, I was unsure if it ought to find a place in my later making processes.

COMPACT DISK

DELUX

SAFETY MATCHES

NATIONAL DOG

Made in India

BAZAAR

PIMCO

PRICE
01

PIMCO

IRON-MAN

PRICE
01

MATCH WORKS*MUMBAI

SPOTLESS

MADE IN HYDERABAD

SAFETY MATCHES

NAZAR

SAFETY MATCHES

FAMILY
PRICE
01
PIMCO
MADE IN MUMBAI

FAST SHOE
WAX MATCHES
FAST LIGHT MATCHES

NAZAR
INDIA'S NO. 1 WAX MATCHES

KABIR
BEST WAX MATCH

LOVERS
SAFETY MATCHES
SUPERIOR
DAMP PROOF

MISSING BIRD
PRICE 01
FAST LIGHT MATCHES
PIMCO

FASTMAN

GIGGY & CO.
MADE IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

COUPLES

INDIA'S NO. 1 WAX MATCHES

SONG
SAFETY MATCHES

NAZAR
DELUX
SAFETY MATCHES

DEMONITIZED
NATION

SAFETY
MATCH

TIFFIN

SAFETY MATCHES

Were my new matchboxes supposed to set an example of what matchboxes ought to look like? Perhaps not, but by delving into the process of their reconstruction, it allowed me (the maker) and the viewer an insight into this visual language and how it is changing. It also allows for the creation of a visual lexicon of Indian imagery that draws directly from contemporary India. It has helped me understand how complex it is to work with these images. While the usage of misprinting and spelling errors might remind me of visual work that I have seen at home and look back on fondly, the implications of my usage of it are unpleasant.

During the creation of my set of relatively current matchboxes featuring food delivery personnel, the prime minister and other relatable symbols of progress, it became more evident that the study of this visual vernacular was also a study of economic classes and market changes. "Class is thus a fecund source of image codes. Image and identity make each other. The objects both indicate and sustain a kind of intra-class signaling, making the mundane exotic, and the adjacent foreign. The result is the creation of a vernacular" (Chaudhuri, 2018). Itu Chaudhuri's writings articulate a very common phenomenon in India. While my intentions of using misspelt text or misprinted images might have stemmed from a sense of nostalgia, they invariably would have made a mockery of the skills and the efforts of those actually creating existing labels. Misspelt menu cards or signage in India are commonplace, but are a result of a lack of English literacy. Using them as a nostalgic symbol would disregard the maker and their possible knowledge of another language, other than English. Using these tropes as a means of achieving a sense of a specific visual language would reduce the original maker's reality to that of a fad, thus creating an exploitative divide.

Similarly, it taught me that the images I choose to work with must take into consideration who they include and why. This also draws attention to who is viewing the image and in what space.

I was once told by a mentor that while creating an image, or telling a story, to always ensure that I was creating it for an intelligent audience. At first, it sounded as if it was only meant to be viewed by an intelligent audience. I realized that what he meant was, by creating something complex, I would influence people to care about those complexities. It would push the viewer to think and feel more about what I was trying to say.

I was curious to see how this form might be used to create provocative images. Through experimentation it was evident that this form holds the potential to represent images that critique society, politics and symbols of power and superstition that impact India without breaking the form and function of the label. So far, most of the images on current day labels are representative of the text. In my experiments with these labels, I worked on a few labels that represented the title on the box. But others engaged in word play to see if the pairing of text and image can suggest a cohesive meaning while drawing from both elements. In my last image, I moved away from simple symbols and the representation of objects and people, and instead attempted to see how far I could push this little image. I'm not sure if the resulting image adhered to the requirements of a matchbox, but the visual language drew from their rules.
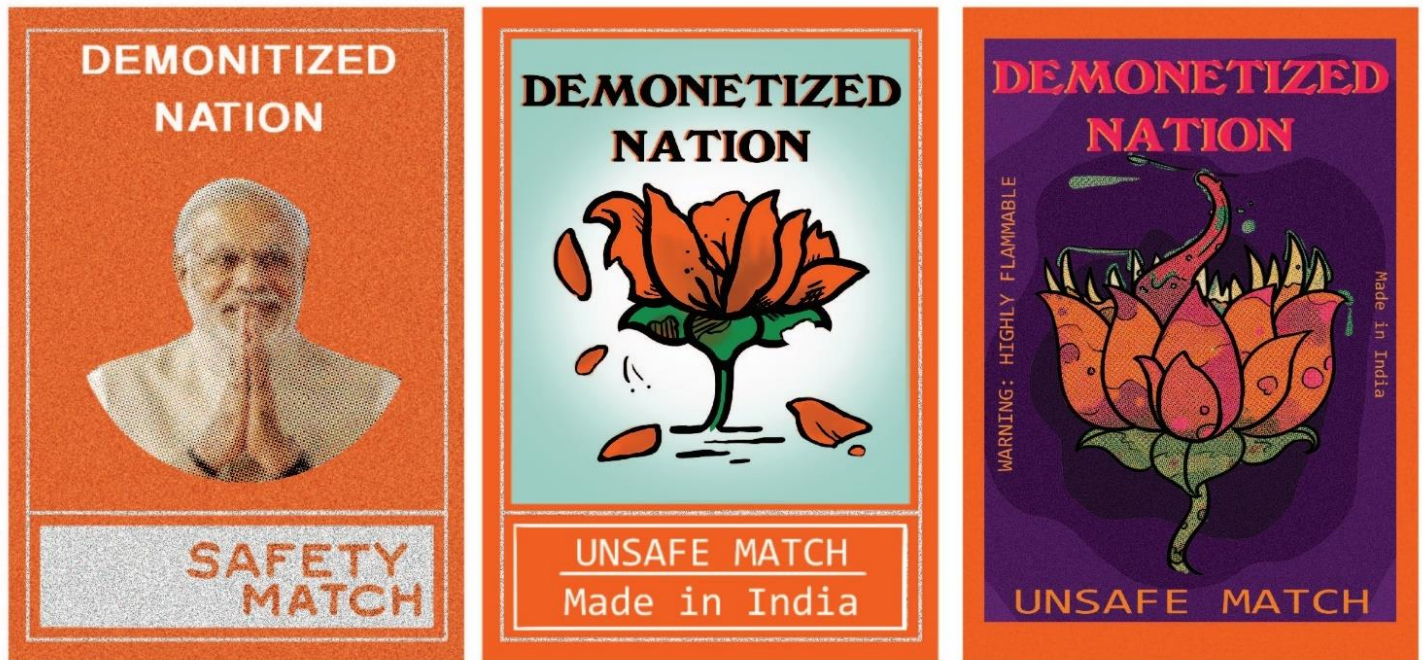
Figure 12 Iterations of a matchbox label in three stages from left to right.

The first iteration of this image, represents India's current prime minister Narendra Modi and the text reads "demonetized nation". The use of this text, paired with this specific image, implies that Narendra Modi was the cause for demonetization. Its visual appearance does not show what I am attempting to indicate. That is, that I do not believe the demonetization of Indian Rs.500 and Rs.1000 notes was a success nor was it necessary. In the second label, I changed the image to that of his political party, a lotus. However, by representing the lotus as withered or beaten, it shows that the party took a beating. The strong glow around the image also suggests that the flower is somehow sad. Which once again, this was not my intention. The third iteration of the label reaches the point I was trying to represent. It shows a carnivorous lotus and the colours are reflective of it being toxic.

It was at this stage that I realized that I was not trying to recreate the labels to push for the widespread creation and production of more contemporary labels. Rather, that I was attempting to use the labels as a means to explore a specific visual language and create provocative imagery through it. It helped me understand how image, text, colour, layout and the encoded meaning in their combination could potentially tell a story.

4. Structuring

Documenting Hyderabad

During the course of this research, I went back home to Hyderabad for the month of May. While I was there, I wandered through the city documenting the places I saw with my camera. It resulted in a large bank of images that I hoped would hint at a visual language specific to the city of Hyderabad. However, on looking through the images, I realized that instead, almost every photograph had far too much clutter and content. It was an overwhelming image bank that I found myself unable to sieve through. Several of the images did hint at a very digitally influenced visual language. With signage and text that were representative of the era we are currently in. It was at this point that I understood what images could really say about a space. In Itu Chaudhuri's(2018) writings, he spoke of images representing different things to people from different classes. If images available to the public eye were not representative of the culture and the values that a society stands for or aspires towards, then do the images have any value to the people viewing them? From lived experience, I know that most Indian families regardless of class, have always held high regard for products that appear to be culturally rich, handcrafted and intricate. I see it on the sarees we wear, in our love for heavy wooden furniture and in the hand painted patterns we put on trucks.

This brought me back to my exercise with the matchboxes. The predominant reason for choosing to explore early matchbox labels was because I could not relate to the labels currently in production. They did not draw from the visually rich India that I had grown up seeing.

On returning to Vancouver, I set about analyzing these images. It was at this point that I looked into the writings of John Collier Jr. and Malcolm Collier (1986) in *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*, in an attempt to find some clarity. Unfortunately, the image bank that I had gathered was vast and overwhelming. In the end, I was unable to do more than sort the images into basic categories such as signage, construction, automobile decal and architecture. I was unable to draw out as much information as I had hoped from my photographs as the Indian landscape documented in them contained almost too much information.

Figure 13. Photographs from Hyderabad from my image bank.

Instead, I chose to skim through the images and see what I could gather.

I observed that there was a lack of a cohesive visual language in my city, Hyderabad, and was indicative of a culture that had been diluted over time. The city is making a shift from a sleepy, small city to one that aspires to become a software hub. To me, the

images I took of Hyderabad could have been from any other metropolitan city in India due to these changes. I saw recurring themes of construction, clutter and technological progress. But the homogenization or rather, a shift towards a more digital language that I saw in current matchboxes was prevalent in Hyderabad's advertisements, clothing, vehicles and even in the posters that covered its streets. It was a stark contrast to the grandeur present in its monuments and older architecture.

Breaking down the matchboxes:
Creating a typology

This section of my research did a large part of the groundwork for the final leg of my making process. It was based on my previous failed process of extracting information from photographs of Hyderabad. It drew from the methodology offered by John Collier, Jr. and Malcolm Collier (1986).

Faced with the assignment "analyze this data, this pebble community," students tend to take one or the other of two extreme approaches. One is to observe the pebbles as a cosmology, the second is to reorganize the pebbles in orderly categories of color, size, shape. What can be learned from each approach? What conclusions might each support? (John Collier, Jr., and Malcolm Collier, p. 171)

From their writings, I understood that the analysis that I would conduct would depend on what I wanted to draw from my image bank. The above example from the writing, uses an activity that asked students to analyze pebbles scattered on a sheet with no further instructions. A few students observed them based on how the pebbles looked on the surface, others made observations about their placement. My purpose of creating a typology was to deduce concrete themes in a randomly selected set of images. And within those images, focus on the aesthetics of their elements to create new images. My necessity was to understand how to work in the way those creating the printed matchbox labels did. Focusing on the information available at hand, through the images on labels, the research looked strictly at the visual information that could be drawn from them. This involved breaking down the visual elements to understand which elements were more extensively used versus others. Drawing out this information would allow me to understand the labels better. I did know that the older labels possessed certain visual traits that the current ones did not and vice versa. But my previous making process drew from both groups in a generalized manner. It limited my exposure and understanding of both groups. And it forced me to see them as separate and not in relation to eachother.

My failed attempt to analyze photographs from Hyderabad indicated that I could conduct a successful structured analysis of matchboxes if I knew what information I was hoping to draw out of them. I proceeded to narrow down to two collections. The first collection was Matt Lee's more recent collection of 750 labels that I had referenced previously. The second collection was via Patricia M, a blogger and collector of vintage images who had put together about 500 Indian matchbox labels from various sources. Indian phillumenist, Gautam Hemmady states plainly that "It is all very unorganised and little has been written about it.". It resonated with me, as the task ahead was overwhelming even with my small collection of just 1000 matchboxes.

Typology 1: Older labels

Note: the older labels will be referred to as Patricia M.'s collection throughout the research to avoid confusion.
Note 2: A link to her collection is listed in the Appendix on page 61

From Patricia M's collection of 500 (approx.) matchboxes, I chose to use 475 as the remaining were repeats with varying colour schemes and misprints. These labels were visibly older than Matt Lee's which were in production. There were several duplicates with misregistered colours, colour bleeds and variations in colour schemes while retaining the same image. Unfortunately, the information on where a matchbox is produced and the date of manufacture is usually found on the back of a box. Almost all the labels I had found online had only the image documented. So, it was impossible to create a timeline of oldest to newest which would have been valuable information. In order to differentiate, I could only go by the quality of the image and draw my assumptions and collect data in that manner.

The title, number of colours, borders and themes represented were the main areas of interest. The process involved observing each of these elements across 475 matchboxes from Patricia M's set of older labels.

The resulting data is as follows:

The first stage of this process, similar to the photographs in the last section, was to break the image bank into workable sections. The images were categorized on the basis of the label represented. The next step involved taking stock of the number of repeats in each category and excluding them from the data. As this information was being collected in order to create new images based on the previous images, it was necessary to set down parameters to collect this information. I was interested in understanding how each element functioned and how popular the use of each was.

Note: For the sake of convenience during the process of calculation, the image bank was split into two batches. This split does not change any of the figures.

S.No	Category	Count	Repeats	Total
1	Action	2	0	2
2	Advertising	11	0	11
3	Animals	73	6	79
4	Babies	11	5	16
5	Bi-colour	5	0	5
6	Birds	35	5	40
7	Bi-Numbers	12	0	12
8	Flowers	22	1	23
9	Fruits	8	2	10
10	Gods	15	2	17
11	Joker	15	0	15
12	Man & Woman	4	0	4
13	Lights	11	1	12
14	Men	19	6	25
15	Monuments	13	4	17
16	Motif Symbols	9	0	9
17	Mystical Things	4	1	5
18	Non Indian Images	3	1	4
19	Numbers	10	1	11
20	Objects	23	5	28
21	Patriotic Things	19	1	20
22	Patriots	14	8	22
23	Royalty	13	3	16
24	Symbols of Industrial Progress			0
24.1	Household Objects	11	1	12
24.2	Machinery	8	1	9
24.3	New Transport	26	8	34
24.4	Old Transport	5	1	6
24.5	Technology	10	0	10
24.6	Tools	20	4	24
24.7	Weapons	7	1	8
25	Text Only	10	0	10
26	Women	27	7	34
		475	75	550

Title: This was looked at in terms of its placement. The main categories being Top, In Border, Top left and top right (bottom left image). It also looks into the orientation of the heading, in terms of the style of its positioning (bottom right image). The miscellaneous section documents styles that have not been used more than twice.

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Top	90	126	216	45.47%
	Bottom	2	7	9	1.89%
	In Image	16	8	24	5.05%
	In Border	33	6	39	8.21%
Title	Top Left	47	86	133	28.00%
	Top Right	20	26	46	9.68%
	Bottom Left	2	1	3	0.63%
	Bottom Right	0	1	1	0.21%
	Vertical	0	4	4	0.84%
	Group Total			475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Rectangle	156	185	341	71.79%
	Arc	28	30	58	12.21%
Shape	Straight Top Arc	16	32	48	10.11%
	Misc	8	11	19	4.00%
	Italics	5	2	7	1.47%
	Inverse Arc	1	1	2	0.42%
	Group Total			475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	No Line	23	51	74	15.58%
	Single Line	100	138	238	50.11%
	Two Lines	53	60	113	23.79%
Borders	Bordered Box	31	12	43	9.05%
	Dynamic	1	2	3	0.63%
	Stamp	3	1	4	0.84%
	Group Total			475	

Borders: This category was loosely based on a few prominent trends. Labels that had a single line, double line, boxed borders and no borders. The borders play a crucial role in the image as they tie together the decorative elements with the image and text. (Image on the left)

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Solid / No Background	115	151	266	71.89%
Background	Illustrated	49	55	104	28.11%
	Group Total			370	

Image: Breaking up the image was a slower process. It involved looking into the main types of images. There were few with completely illustrated backgrounds, others with no backgrounds and a floating image. There were also those with a shape behind a floating image that tied the image together. Sometimes, these three variations would be used in combinations. As it was not possible to distinguish them into perfect categories, the percentage of their use has been taken into account.

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Circle	25	19	44	Percentage
	Pokey Star	16	14	30	20.41%
	Oval	10	20	30	20.41%
Image	Rectangle	3	10	13	8.84%
	Diamond	4	2	6	4.08%
	Dynamic	13	11	24	16.33%
	Group Total			147	

Colours: Although several of these images appear to use a lot of colours, on looking closely one can see that the colours were printed by layer. This is especially visible in misprints and labels that have been printed badly. The colours have hence been counted based on the number of visible layers in an image.

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	1 Colour	7	18	25	5.26%
	2 Colours	29	30	59	12.42%
	3 Colours	118	102	220	46.32%
Colours	4 Colours	46	76	122	25.68%
	5+ Colours	17	32	49	10.32%
	Group Total			475	

The last few tables look into the number of images that use a glow, the images that feature the title within the image, labels that can be reversed and seen the same way, and those with spelling errors.

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Glow / Gradient	8	5	13	2.74%
	Group Total			475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Text in Image	10	0	10	2.11%
	Group Total			475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Inverseable		2	2	0.42%
	Group Total			475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Batch 2	Total	Percentage
	Spelling Errors	3	2	5	1.05%
	Group Total			475	

Typology 2: Newer labels
Note: the newer labels will be referred to as Lee's collection throughout the research to avoid confusion with those in the former typology.
Note 2: A link to his collection is listed in the Appendix on page 64

This set of labels was easier to draw from as they were more current (hence, more familiar) and a timeline of their manufacture was not necessary and would not have contributed any useful information. They were collected post 2007, by Matt Lee. Although he had 750 matchboxes available, I chose to work with 475 of his matchboxes (selected at random) to keep my numbers even.

Unlike Patricia's collection however, these labels were less direct. It was hard to categorize them as the image and text often did not correspond with each other. This part of my process draws from Justine Rudniki's (2017) writings of Roland Barthe's methodology to categorize images into linguistic, non-coded iconic and coded iconic. Although it does not function in as detailed a fashion, it follows the theory that the meanings attached to images are subjective.

In order to understand and categorize several of these labels, the meaning implied by combining text and image had to be used. Several of these "implied meanings" are specific to the Indian community. Where in their implied meaning holds significance with a select group of people.

The resulting data is as follows:
Similar to the first typology (Patricia's collection), this categorization process started by splitting the images into themes.

S.No	Category	Count
1	Advertising	24
2	Animals	95
3	Babies	10
4	Birds	39
5	Cartoons	19
6	Cultural Significance	7
7	Fish	5
8	Flowers	10
9	Food	11
10	Foreign	4
11	Magic Joker	5
12	Material Goals	4
13	Men	8
14	Mystical Things	3
15	Numbers	11
16	Objects	32
17	Patriotic	6
18	People with Animals	7
19	Places	8
20	Popular Cultures	19
21	PSA	2
22	Religious Symbols	26
23	Royalty	11
24	Sports	10
25	Sun Light Lamp	36
26	Symbols	17
27	Symbols of Progress	6
28	Text Only	17
29	Tools	4
30	Vehicles	16
31	Weapons	1
32	Women	2
	Group Total	475

The themes in this set were harder to put into groups as they weren't as plainly representative as the previous set. For example, a label title AAG (translates to fire) had an image of a ball on fire. This could easily be categorized under either sports or the broader category Sun Light Lamp, featuring lamps, fire and images of matches.

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	Plain	251	251	52.84%
	Implied	112	112	23.58%
Image	Unsure	71	71	14.95%
Meanings	Just Image	24	24	5.05%
	Just Text	17	17	3.58%
	Group Total		475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	Illustrated	196	196	41.26%
Image type	Vector	177	177	37.26%
	Photo	102	102	21.47%
	Group total	475	475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	English	334	334	70.32%
	Hindi	22	22	4.63%
	Other in English	81	81	17.05%
Language	Other	7	7	1.47%
	Other+English	31	31	6.53%
	Group Total		475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	Upper Case	333	333	74.66%
	Lower Case	42	42	9.42%
Text	Upper & Lower	71	71	15.92%
	Group Total		446	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	Circle	29	29	15.68%
	Pokey Star	7	7	3.78%
	Oval	61	61	32.97%
	Rectangle	62	62	33.51%
Image				

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	No Line	128	128	26.95%
	Single Line	321	321	67.58%
	Ribbon	8	8	1.68%
Borders	Bordered Box	14	14	2.95%
	Dynamic	2	2	0.42%
	Stamp	2	2	0.42%
	Group Total		475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	More than 1 image	6	6	100.00%
	Group Total		6	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	Inverseable	1	1	0.21%
	Group Total		475	

Heading	Category	Batch 1	Total	Percentage
	Spelling Errors	7	7	1.47%
	Group Total		475	

Image meanings:
To address the issue of non-linear meanings in these images, the first category calculates the percentage of images with plain, implied and unsure meanings.

Plain: Image represents the text.
Implied: Image combined with the text to indicate more meaning.
Unsure: The combination of text and image has no obvious meaning.

Image type:
This is another new category that was needed for this set of images. Illustrated images were similar to the previous set and possessed a hand made quality. Vector illustrations were mainly composed of solid colours with clean lines. Labels with photographs were often over exposed or washed out.

Language:
Unlike the previous collection, Matt Lee's collection had a more diverse representation of linguistic experimentation. English and Hindi were commonly seen. However, there was an apparent trend of local languages being written in English.

Text:
This heading took stock of all the text on a label. In the previous collection, most labels were only written in uppercase. The remainder of the headings, Image background, Image, Borders etc. were calculated by the same parameters as the first typology. This typology does not look into the colours, glow and position of title as that information would not help the next stage of the work.

Comparing the typologies:

As both typologies represent very different times with different imagery, it was important to draw different information from them. Information taken from Patricia's collection focuses primarily on the visual details present in each label. Lee's collection however focuses on the increased complexity of the image. The rise in the number of languages used, image meanings moving from linear to ones that infer significance and the disproportionate use of text made the 2nd and newer set of images harder to understand.

Patricia's collection had a vast number of matchboxes that included images of industrial progress, several others had images of patriots, flags and symbols of national pride. These images were far less common in Lee's collection.

The visual elements in both sets varied greatly as well. Patricia's collection was flush with decorative elements, borders and arcs. They possessed a visual richness that the new collection did not. Lee's collection however, used technology to its advantage and had clean, crisp images in decent resolution with nearly no errors in the printing. Comparing the implications and usefulness of the images on both these sets, it can easily be said that Patricia's collection is more productive in terms of understanding a history. There is more content that can be drawn out of those images as they represent various instances from history plainly. While Lee's collection might have technology and better print on its side, the images are not as openly communicative and do not seem to reflect India in its entirety. They seem to serve the purpose of being functional items with kitschy imagery. They would make for good curios or mementos but do not possess the more open story telling value of their older counterparts.

Fig. 14 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 14. Left: An image of goddess Laxmi from Matt Lee's collection. Right: An image of Lord Krishna from Patricia M's collection.

Apart from smaller observations such as the rise in spelling errors and the use of more modern technology, it is interesting to see the influence of technology on this medium. While there are similarities in the themes of both sets, Lee's collection shows these themes through a very digitized lens. The above image of goddess Laxmi is representative of the goddess but does away with the traditional decorative elements that are usually found in images representing deities.

Reflecting on the typologies:

The difference in these images might be a result of monopolies within the industry or the rapid urbanization of the matchbox sector. But in the Indian context, considering the importance and avid use of matchboxes, it is almost comparable to turning a postage stamp into a mere memento. The cultural and historical role of a postage stamp as a way of preserving and tracing the socio-political histories, draws parallels with older Indian matchboxes. Which, in their time and even currently are more commonly accessible than postage stamps. The current labels do not exploit the medium well enough, and they could be serving a better purpose.

Apart from the statistics that were drawn from the study, one aspect became very apparent, labels from Patricia's collection were definitely more directly educative, communicative and evocative of India in the past.

Figure 15 Labels from Patricia M.'s set.

The matchboxes, even without information of their make and date, can be used to understand historical and socio-political events. Lee's collection of matchboxes has images that could serve as entertainment or as a collectable, but they are not composed of the same socio-political considerations that Patricia's collection possessed. Lee's collection, however, does show communication-oriented promise. The new collection uses the text, image and the limited space of a matchbox to imply more meaning. The image and text can be used as a code to fully utilize the small space. A matchbox unlike a poster or a pamphlet, cannot be too full of written or visual information due to its size. Although these current matchboxes are not focusing on images that could be informative, the method they use of encoding these images with information shows that they could be. It is indicative of a population willing to consume complicated imagery.

Fig. 16 has been removed due to

copyright restrictions.

Figure 16 Three images from Lee's collection that show examples of image and text implying meaning.

Lee's collection also showed a significant rise in the number of symbols used in the labels. The third image (titled "AAG") in the above set of images, uses a ball set on fire and a mark indicating a swing, or momentum. Aag is the Hindi word for fire. The Hindi text in red and black reads "fire matches". But the usage of a ball in momentum in the image, leaves the image open to interpretation. It also shows that the current images allow the viewer the freedom to their own interpretations of the images. Additionally, as Lee's set of labels broke away from the rigid layout structure used in the older labels, it would allow me as a maker more freedom to explore the boundaries of their structure.

5. Playing with Images

Ideation

Selecting the Themes

Outcome & Reflection

Image Break down

Starting the process of creation:
Ideation

The first part of making new labels involved looking into the two typologies and picking out themes that I felt would raise productive dialogue when viewed. The new images would have to resonate with India's current progress and look towards the future. From Matt Lee's collection, the labels featured current day printing techniques and a digitally influenced language representative of the changes in India. But the images did not posses the communicative and documentative value of Patricia M.'s collection. The aim of this making process was to explore a visual language that draws from both collections, to combine the digital appearance of current labels with the communicative value of past labels. Technological advancements, flora and fauna and the socio-political climate were themes that stood out to me the most in the two typologies. The previous making process that led to set of 18 images, focused on playing with the text and the image. It had allowed me a glimpse of what this process might look like. In this process however, I wanted to draw from the labels in Patricia M.'s collection which painted a picture of what India might have been like when they were created and when seen together, they told a story about India's history. I wanted to try and focus on telling a story through the resulting images, whether through individual images or when the images were viewed as a set.

As my explorations would not result in 500 images like the collections in the typologies, I was looking to create a collection of images that harnessed the potential of the visual language but also focused on creating provocative imagery that would open up dialogue. Similar to the initial making process (see Ideating and First Impressions) that riffed off of commonly seen sights in India, this process aimed to do so with a better understanding using the two collections (Patricia M. 's and Matt Lee's) as reference. In the first making process, the act of riffing off of experiences and visuals in contemporary India led to the creation of a playful set of images that drew more from my own personal experiences in India. This second set aimed to approach the images, and the themes they would fall under as a form of documenting the changes in India, instead of playing with the subject matter.

As the initial making process (see Ideating and First Impressions) worked with collage and minimal use of illustration, I was curious to see how I could take a similar approach forward. It would allow me to build on the visuals seen in Matt Lee's collection, that possessed a more digital quality and the visuals (like political posters) that are a product of small photo studios in India. I decided to look back at my photo exercise in Hyderabad (see Documenting Hyderabad) to see if going back to my image bank at this point in the research, might allow me to reinvestigate them and use them through this process. Looking at them through the headings I drew from the typology allowed me to distill my image bank and draw more specific themes out of them.

Clutter

A large number of the images focused on cluttered landscapes. This clutter was either in the form of a number of elements, or in the form of meticulously stacked objects intended for sale. It is common to see pushcarts, vendors and stalls in the streets of Hyderabad with similar arrangements.

Technology

In Patricia M's as well as Matt Lee's collection, there was a focus on industrial growth and development. Several images of aeroplanes, tools and electronics were symbolic of India's growth over the years. My image bank showed similar signs of technology in public spaces, unlike their isolated representation in the previous two collections. It made me realize that it contrasted the representation of landscapes in the older collection which focused on natural images of parks and gardens. I wanted to draw attention to this changing landscape from my images, a majority of which were from the center of a densely populated urban city.

Urban Change

To build on the previous heading, I was interested in working with images that represent literal changes in physical spaces. The Hyderabad I returned to on my short visit (See Documenting Hyderabad) had already changed drastically from the one I had been staying in, just a year before. Spaces that had previously been homes or commercial plots had been broken down either to accommodate the new intra-city train system or to widen the roads to accommodate more vehicles. This constant need to rebuild in order to accommodate modernization is a common sight in India. It impacts not just the people dwelling in urban spaces but the wildlife that is struggling to survive within it.

Protests

This final theme was not drawn from the Image bank but instead draws from the protests occurring in India between 2019-2020. In *Design and National Identity*, Javier Gimeno-Martinez (2016) explains that nationalism is disseminated in a top down structure. But its discourse is created, examined and consumed from the bottom up. The construction of a national identity in India has followed this pattern, wherein its ideals and communal identity have been guided by the government. However, the discourse and the interpretation of these structures has come from the janata (common people). The creation of visuals at different stages in history has helped mark movements and document its progress. I aimed to create images that would focus on few such movements that have been led by women in Indian history.

Outcome & Reflection

The labels that were a result of this making process drew from both current and past visual languages. The new images are predominantly digital. The use of traditional media was reserved for specific templates that required a more traditional approach.

The preliminary stage of creating each piece involved digitally cutting out pieces of images from my photographs and the occasional stock image when required. These cut out bits served as the base image for each new label.

Figure 17 Work in progress cut out-s of images from my image bank.

I then proceeded to create rough sketches of these images to understand how to work with these cut out bits. As these images were proposing to use unstaged images from candid photographs, I had to find ways to tie them together into a sound composition. This involved creating a process that I could use repeatedly for each image to iterate with, till the image was cohesive. I was focused on replicating the heavily digital visual appearance present in Lee's matchbox labels and in the images from Indian photo studios. This involved working with image masks, halftones, glows and shadows placed strategically on the image so as to highlight it. I enjoyed the intricate nature of decorative elements used in the older labels. I chose to work minimally with them using them to either draw focus to areas of text or the image. In my process, I found that decorative elements not only serve as a good way to fill space, but to tie the image together cohesively.

Clutter

When these images were taken on my trip to Hyderabad, I found myself unable to make sense of them on my return. The main reason for this was because each image seemed to hold too much information. This process of making allowed me to realize the importance of that clutter when representing an Indian landscape. Unlike in Vancouver where public spaces have designated purposes and the sanctity of those purposes is respected, communities living in Indian urban spaces have always capitalized on the space around them by claiming it, leading to the clutter that I saw in my images.

The representation of objects and spaces in both Matt Lee's and well as Patricia M.'s collections were not representative of this aspect of India. Images of objects did not allow the viewer to establish the context of the object. Its make, owner or space of dwelling is unknown to the viewer as the illustrations of these objects are floating images against a coloured backdrop.

Through my images, I hoped that by allowing the viewer a sense of scale and repetition that it would allude to the clutter in India and offer the viewer more information about the background of the object.

While making these labels, I tried to draw from the visual richness of Patricia M.'s collection and the digitized appearance common in Matt Lee's collection. Combining both these visual languages was an interesting task as it allowed me to use both illustration as well as photomanipulation techniques.

The title text on these images drew from Matt Lee's collection of current day labels that often offer the viewer more context to the image. Instead of labeling the image as it is, as done in Patricia M.'s collection, this contextualizing allows the viewer the chance to draw out more information from the label. For example, the first label, titled "Taaza", meaning Fresh in Hindi bring back memories of coconuts stacked on a cart for sale on a hot summer day. These carts are frequently seen on street corners in India. The first question one usually asks the seller, is whether the coconuts are fresh or not.
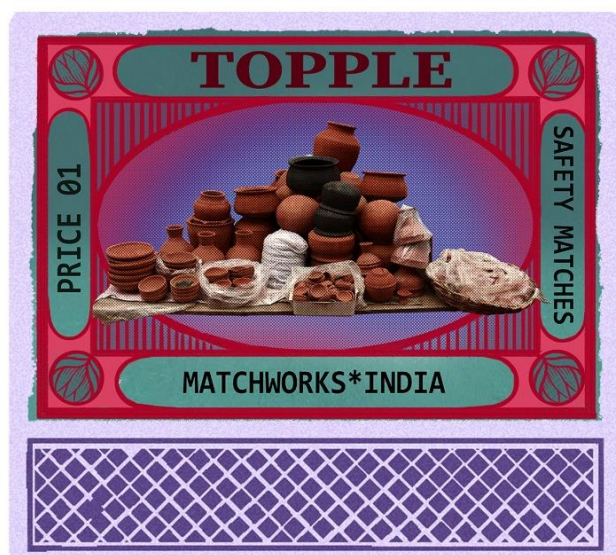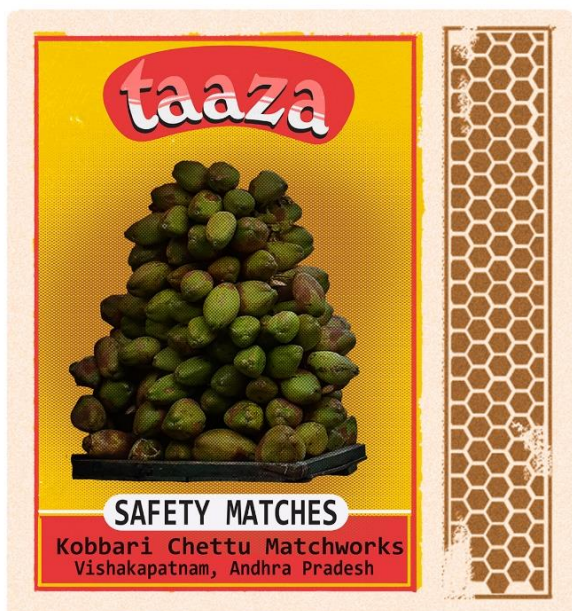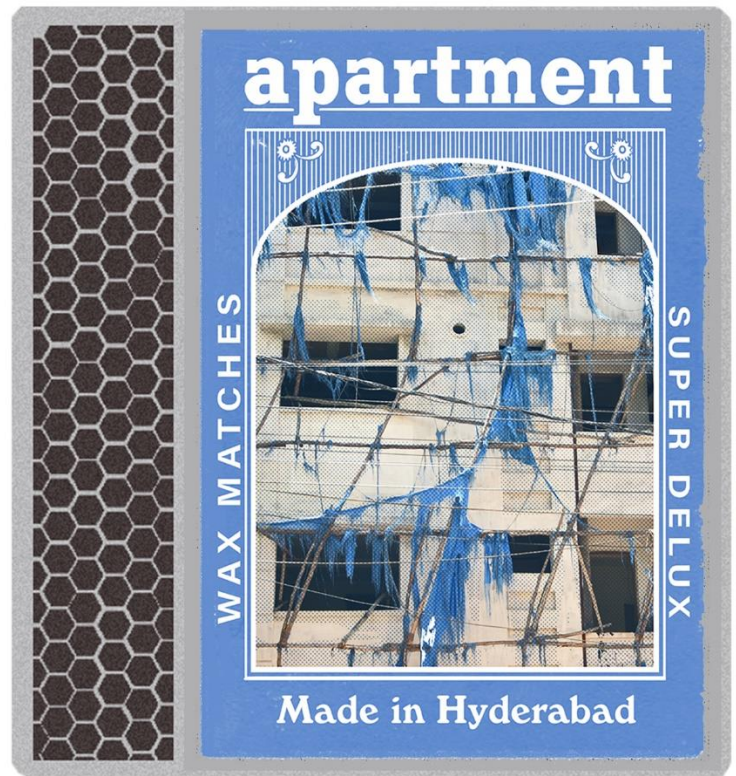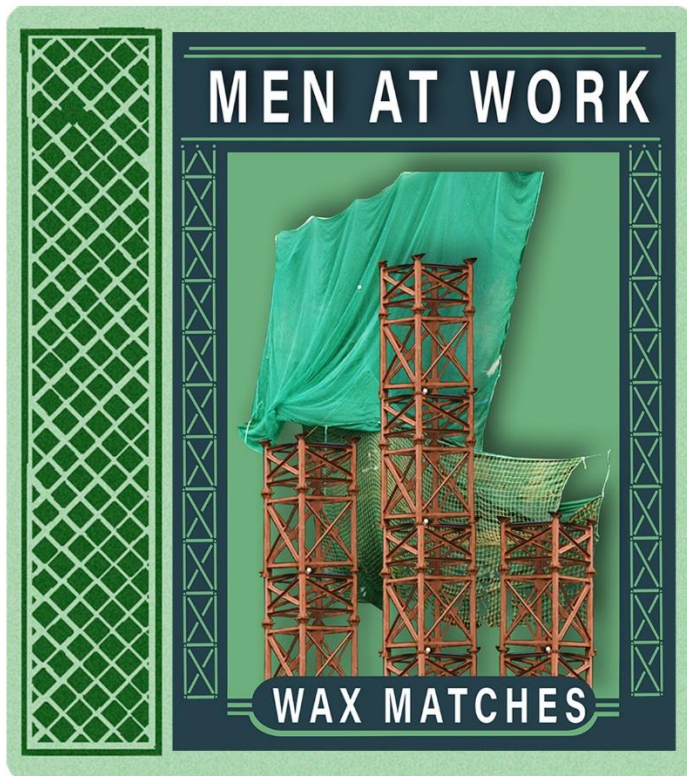
Technology

The collections used in the Typologies, represented technology in the form of tools, electronics and vehicles. I was keen on exploring technology in these images from a different angle, considering the extent of its development.

The first label titled "Booster", is a commonly seen sight in Hyderabad. Under the red and white umbrella is a stall selling prepaid sim cards and recharge plans, often called Booster or Tarif packs. What drew me towards using this image was that it showed technology indirectly by focusing on the physical act of buying access to it. It is a stall in public that allows one the access to a virtual space. It felt representative of how complex technology is now and how it is no longer attributed to a single object, and can instead be broken down into the processes that lead up to it.

In the second label, titled "television", I chose to take a similar route to indirectly represent the use of a specific object. This was to attempt playing with the idea of a coded image, similar to the ones with implied meanings in Matt Lee's collection. I chose to use satellite dish tv's as the focus image and the actual television as a decorative but informative icon in the margins. Taking under consideration the size of a matchbox and the practical and functional mentality of Indian print shops, it allowed me to replace the standard decorative elements in a matchbox label's layouts with decorative elements that were functional.

Of all the labels created during this final making process, creating this set of labels focusing on technology helped me understand how to navigate the imagery in this visual language the most. It allowed me the opportunity to view the decorative elements in a label as sources of visual information.

MEN AT WORK
WAX MATCHES

apartment
WAX MATCHES
SUPER DELUX
Made in Hyderabad

safety net

CONSTRUCTION
AMBUJA MATCH*WORKS
SAFETY MATCHES
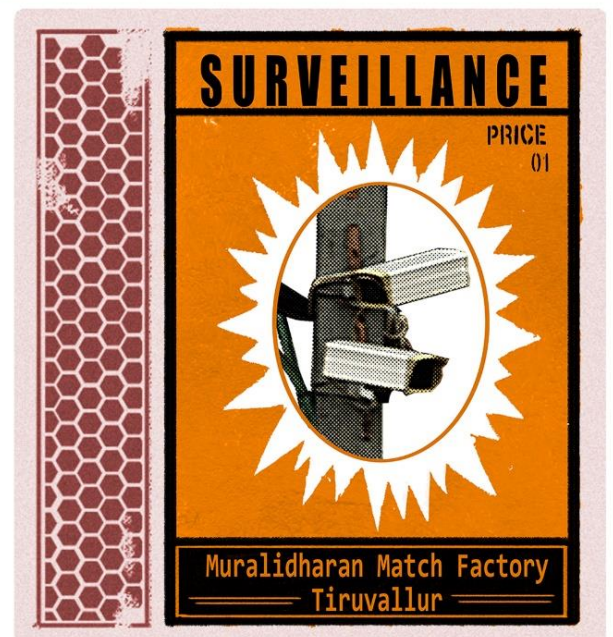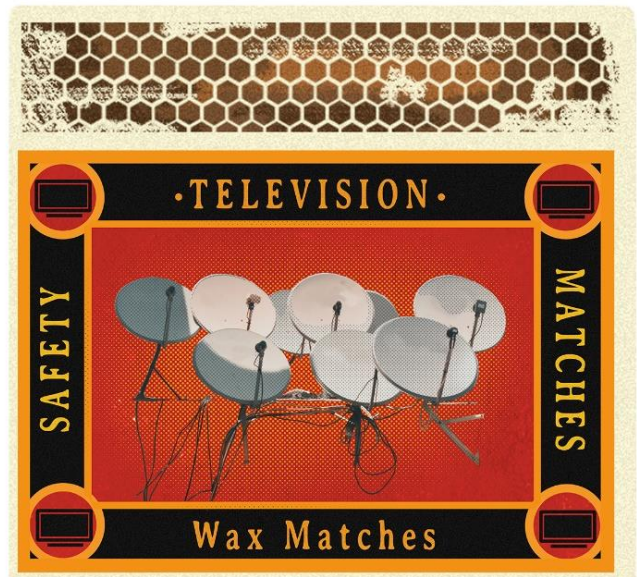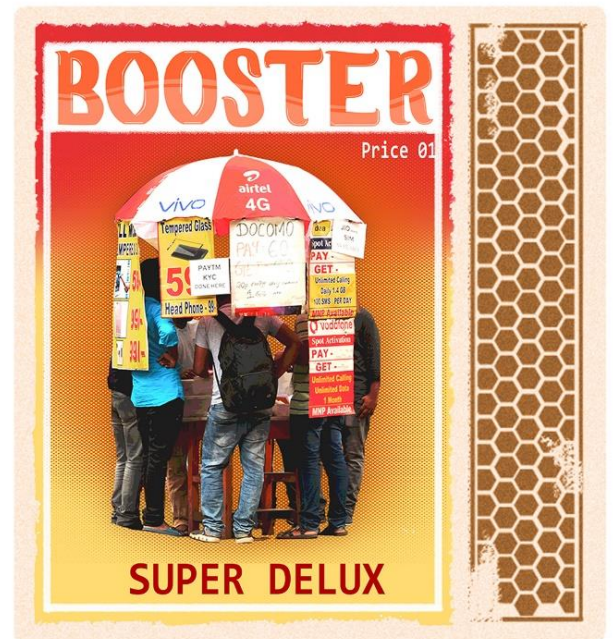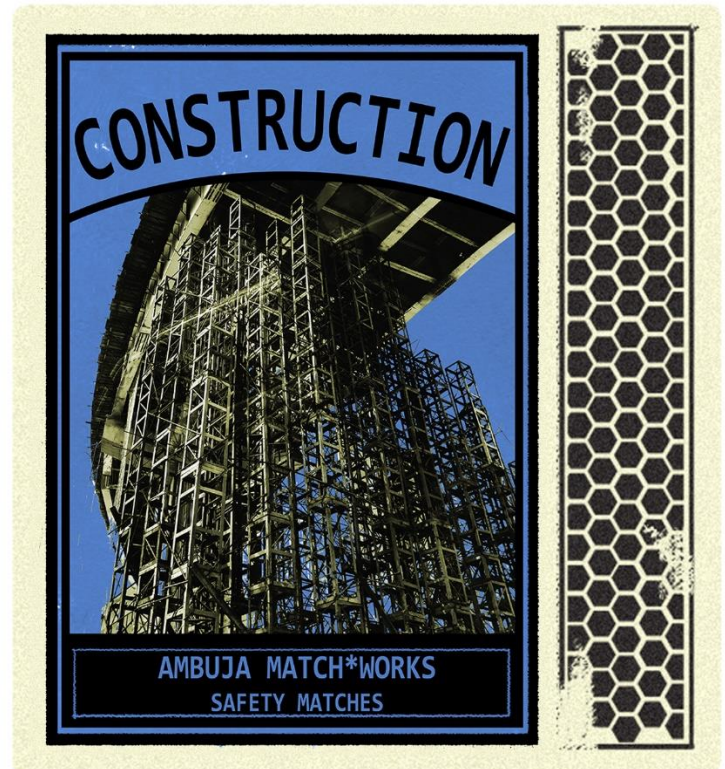
Working with images of construction allowed me to explore the use of detailed complex images. The prominence of construction sites in Hyderabad is overwhelming. I noticed that in Vancouver, construction areas are cordoned off and secured prior to the beginning of the construction. Road blockages are addressed and traffic is redirected. In India, construction sites are often established over night. Traffic and the everyday lives of people continue to function around the area in spite of the disturbances and the dangers the construction might bring.

This set of images was the most challenging to work with. I was using these complex visuals of construction to contrast the landscapes and monuments seen in the collections from the typologies. Like in the previous themes, the process of making these images involved carefully cutting them out of their source images. However, this set required far more time and precision due to the complex nature of the structures themselves.

Similar to the previous theme of Technology, I attempted to use decorative elements as a way to strengthen the contents of the image rather than using them as just a way to frame or draw attention to the image. The first label titled "Men at Work", uses a decorative border that draws from the structure of scaffolding. It buys into the digitized visuals of Matt Lee's collection, using clean vector lines. The second image titled "apartment", does use decorative elements in the way Patricia M.'s collection does. But I chose to do so as residential buildings in India are often adorned with Plaster of Paris or gypsum decorative details.

Figure 18 An example of decorative gypsum embellishments in Indian houses.

Each part of the labels can be used a means to strengthen the meaning of the image. The main parts of these labels are the title text, the focus image, borders and information about the labels make and price. This process of making unlike the initial making process (see Reworking the labels intuitively) taught me how to be more intentional with my usage of additional elements in these labels. It led me to question the value of an ornate image in current day India, the rise of small print studios has led to an increase in functional images that focus more on communication and which often do not contain any decorative elements. It was similar to Matt Lee's collection, where in the matchbox label only features the central image. This process pushed me to consider how ornate or decorative elements can be contemporized to serve as functional, communicative parts of an image.

Protests

From my typology, I saw that matchbox labels have been used as a mode of communication due to the number of times a person has to interact with the object. Advertisements for various brands and social messages were a common theme. Drawing from this strategy, I wanted to focus on the events taking place in India currently. I wanted to explore the value of a set seen together, in order to tell a story about it rather than plainly represent a political cause.

I chose to use this part of the creating process to draw attention to protests led by women in India. The first image to left is based on Andhra Pradesh's Anti-Arrack Movement in 1992 where women protested the sale and auction of Arrack in the state. The second image represents the women of Shaheen Bagh who are currently protesting the implementation of the CAA and the NRC within the country. The last image of two women hugging a tree is from the Chipko movement in the early 1970's. The word "Chipko" means to stick to something.

The labels from Patricia M's collection often featured socio-political movements and figures. On viewing her collection of images, it was possible for the viewer to gauge the time and circumstance under which the labels were created as they were reflective of current affairs. Matt Lee's collection however is not as communicative about similar information. I was keen on ensuring that the set of labels I created were reflective of where India stands today. Creating this set of images was slightly different from those in the previous themes. I chose to use illustration as a medium as opposed to collage as I did not want to use photographs of select individuals. The process of illustration allowed me the chance to use layered colours like in Patricia M,'s collection. The use of half tones and repeated vector patterns allowed me to digitally create their light, multi layered colours.

It was important that the image did justice to these movements. The use of illustration led to an exploration of rendering that I hadn't previously tried for the other labels. Drawing focus to different parts of the image and creating depth and distance were made possible because of this style of rendering. It helped me understand why Patricia M.'s illustrated labels used bold lines and stippled details.
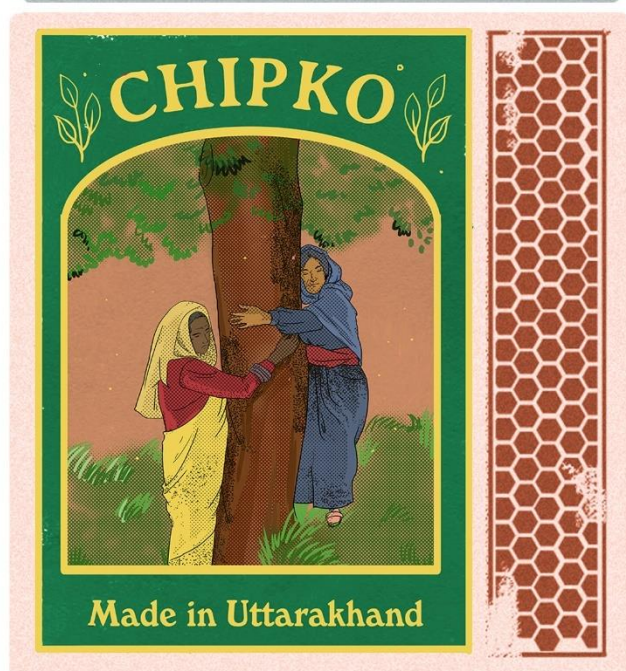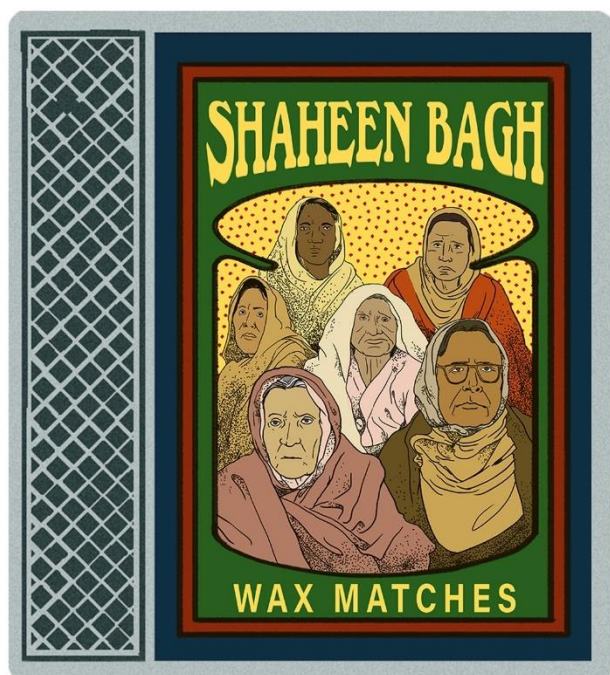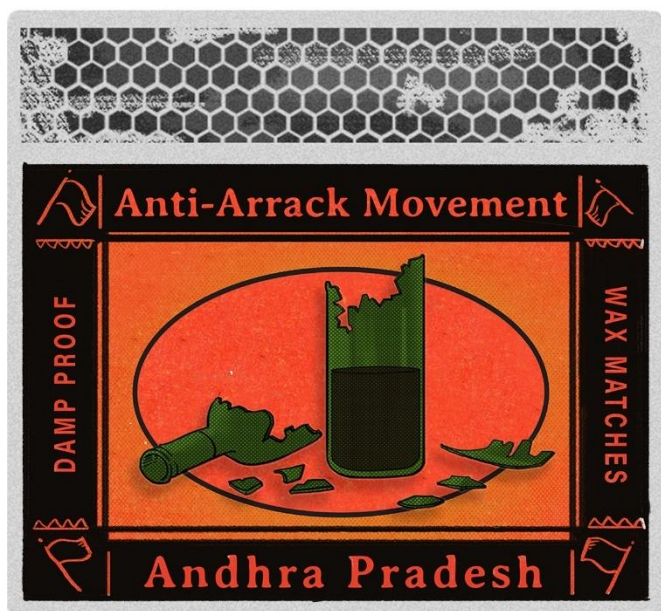
Image Breakdown

Figure 19 A close up of the details on a few select labels.

The process of creating this set of labels led to an exploration in the use of various digital elements that I hadn't used before. It pushed me to break all the rules that I had been taught regarding digital images. It mimicked the work that I had witnessed in local Indian Digital studios which allowed functionality to take over rather than the visual appeal of an image. The use of glows, half tones, drop shadows and skewed and stretched text are common in their images. Through my illustration process, I chose to keep my lines clean and functional, but allowed the use of these effects to add depth to the image.

SHAHEEN BAGH

taaza

BOOSTER

Figure 20 Titles from 3 different labels.

A large portion of the text on these labels were stretched or squished to suit the spatial requirements of the layout. However, the titles followed a different process. This involved drawing from hand painted signs, movie posters and truck art as a source of inspiration. I traced and altered existing posters and typefaces to create title text that would suit the image.

6. Looking forward

Conclusions

This research started with the question "What makes an image Indian?" The initial stages involved looking into various subjects, Indian art, artefacts, traditional ways of making and the more popular Indian fix, Jugaad. Although I cannot concretely define an answer to my question, I have come to understand that the history of a skill, its usage, the functioning of the artefact and the rationale behind it are all factors that influence the "Indianness" of an image. The choice of narrowing it down and researching matchbox imagery was a conscious decision. The images we view are information. And subconsciously, they influence us. Every part of India has a visual identity that is changing with time. The visual language that I had the opportunity to research has allowed me to learn about one such visual medium and in the process learn about my history.

Analysing matchboxes while located outside of India was a challenge and the research might have had other conclusions had it been conducted within India. Studying similar themes during my time in India was an entirely different experience that involved speaking to the makers and owners of these images first hand, however studying them in Vancouver helped me to see them from a very different lens. I found that it was easy to be distracted by the chaotic landscape that surrounded me in India. An item as small as a matchbox, was just another item amongst a hundred others. Distancing myself from them led me to see them as more than just a functional object. The sentimental value that I associated with them increased because of my distance.

If this research had been conducted in India, I would have taken the time to further understand the photo manipulation and image making processes used in local photo studios. The processes I have followed rely heavily on my memory of the work I have seen in these studios during my time in India. I would have also had the opportunity to reach out to elders within the community and receive more personal information about these matchbox labels rather than rely solely on secondary sources. It might have even given me access to physical collections of labels and information from other Indian phillumenists.

This research allowed me to learn about India in a different manner, my understanding of the country is due to my living there. Although this research focused on the visual vernacular, it forced me to take the time to understand why India is as it is. By studying matchboxes, I had the opportunity to delve into various readings about India through the images represented on them. I had never taken the time out to immerse myself in India's history, my understanding of it was limited to my experience of it. Protests against the CAA and the NRC started shortly after I reached Vancouver. Apart from the issue being politically driven, it brought about questions around caste, religion and history that I had not previously learnt about. This research allowed me the space to understand and negotiate the boundaries of what it meant to be a woman from India in context to these circumstances. Moving to Vancouver was a cultural shock, I learnt quickly that the politics of this space were vastly different from my own. It propelled me into a journey to understand the politics of this space and hence question several parts of my own understanding of India. It let me see what equality meant, outside the confines of caste and the Indian social structure.

The goals I hope to carry forward in this ongoing creative research and design practice will include further understanding the scope of this visual language. I would like to pay attention to specific elements within these labels to understand how to better my use of text and layered colours. I also hope to look into how these labels can be disseminated outside of social media. Although social media will help me communicate with a wide range of communities, having a physical dissemination process that allows one to view these images in person and will lead to more productive dialogue.

I am keen on having this work seen by a public, in the form of a book or an interactive exhibition. If the images can occupy a space to tell a story and encourage interaction between people it will allow for in depth conversation and an exchange of beliefs and ideals. Additionally, if the images could be interacted with, by encouraging people to play with them, it would serve as a real time way of engaging different communities of people to understand how visual languages function.

In the work that follows, I expect to look into more concrete ways of drawing people in to interact with this work, this step might start with the diasporic Indian community in Vancouver.

The visual language that emerged from this research and experimentation process draws from sources that are specific to India and combines both the past and the contemporary. This process of analyzing, deconstructing and making new matchbox labels has allowed me, as a researcher and as an illustrator, the privilege of working with and questioning the essence of an Indian image. Not only has it allowed for material exploration, it opened me up to the politics of an image in the current time.

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Appendix

Learning about storytelling

As a part of my process (after creating the first set of matchboxes) I started to look into storytelling. This process started by looking through the books and comics that I have learnt from and read in the past. It allowed me to explore the role storytelling plays when creating an image and how a static image is capable of telling a story. The following image is an example of a short exercise I did after my visit to Hyderabad. During this stage in my research, I was attempting to find a visual language specific to the city. As I found the image bank overwhelming and cluttered, I decided to write about my memories from Hyderabad in an attempt to find clarity. Although the storytelling activity did not factor into my main research, it helped me realize how little I knew about the city. This led to my readings about Hyderabad through the works of Omar Khalidi, Shireen Mirza and Shikha Bhatnagar.

After this process of writing from memory, I went over what I had written to circle out parts the writing that felt most evocative of Hyderabad. These key words aided my process of selecting images for the final making process.

tree beside her. It had been a while she had returned to this city, very little had changed. Barring the construction and the traffic, the city was the same sleepy place that it had been when she was a child. Such a stark contrast to busy, bustling Bombay where she worked. Hyderabad was an urban vacationer's paradise. There was always something to do, but there was no urgency to do it. Her grandfather always said "Its because of the Musi river's water, it makes us sleepy". She didn't know whether there was any truth to that, but it was indeed a sleepy city. If you were the kind of person who woke up early and expected to find a kirana store open to make breakfast, this wasn't the place for you. If you were the kind of person who was quick to anger at a chaotic traffic signal, Hyderabad's lite lelo attitude would do nothing but cause you more strife. And if you were the kind of person who had a religious bias, this city would show you why it made no sense.

It was, in all aspects, slow and carefree. Unlike the rest of the country, it was relatively safe for an outspoken woman of 25 as well. Ramya missed that, Bombay attracted people from everywhere. People with places to be, biases to hold on to and judgement to pass. It was a tragically fast paced life.
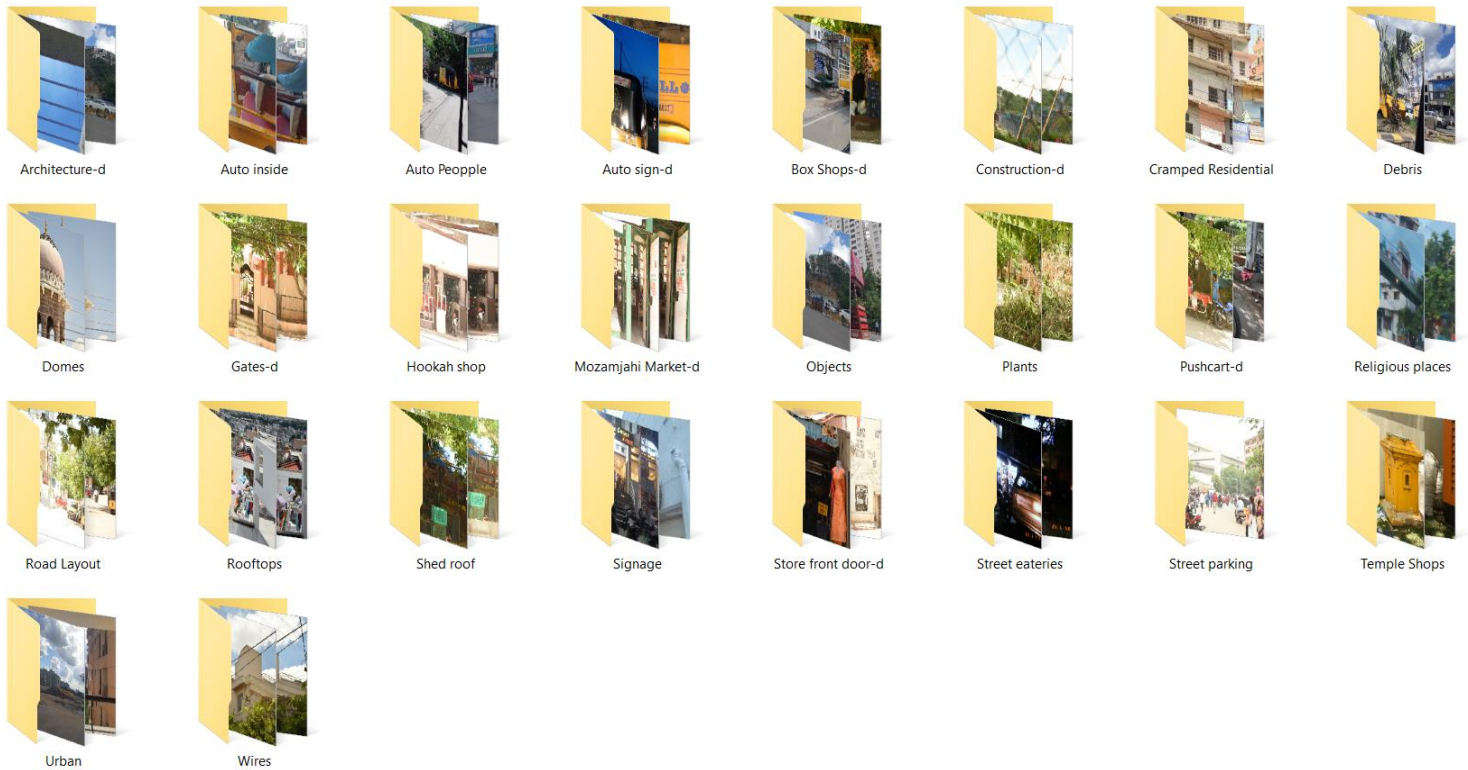
She was here for 10 days and she intended to make the most of it. She had already visited the nearby temple, more for the prasadam than the prayer, said hello to old Mrs. Alexander next door, bought dozens of boiled orange sweets from the kirana and taken multiple walks around the area. She had six days left and needed to meet a few friends, visit her uncle who had for some reason moved to Gandipet. Gandipet was once just a lake, but apparently now people had built little colonies and were actually living there, 2 whole hours away from the city. She needed to learn how to cook her mother's beetroot rasam and how to make chilakalu from her maid. Her phone range and she snapped out of her daze to answer it. It was Anushree, she was going down to the lake with a few friends after a house party and wanted to know if Ramya would be interested in meeting some new people. The two girls had grown up together and their time apart hadn't wedged a gap between them. Ramya obliged, she was looking forward to seeing how things were in the city, it had after all been a few years since she had paid it any attention.
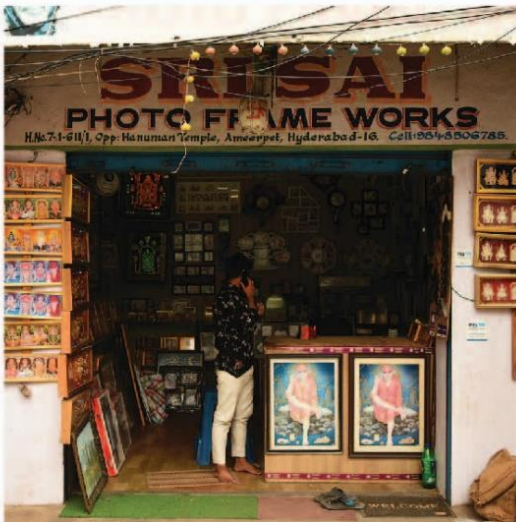
At 8pm, she dressed up and got ready to leave. She knew that even though it was a house party, a cozy scene didn't imply shabby dressing. A Hyderabadi would dress up to go grocery shopping. She left when her cab arrived and reached the address that Anushree passed on to her. It was a big old white house on the edge of Banjara hills. The watch man nodded as she tentatively walked through the large ornate black gate. A long, winding, cobblestone pathway led her through an over grown garden peppered with dim lights. The air smelt faintly of Chinese honeysuckle she noticed a small alcove in the middle of the garden with an intricate filigree table and wrought iron garden chairs occupied by two men talking softly to each other. The man waved at her and urged her to follow the path. She followed the sound of laughter and music till she reached the patio.
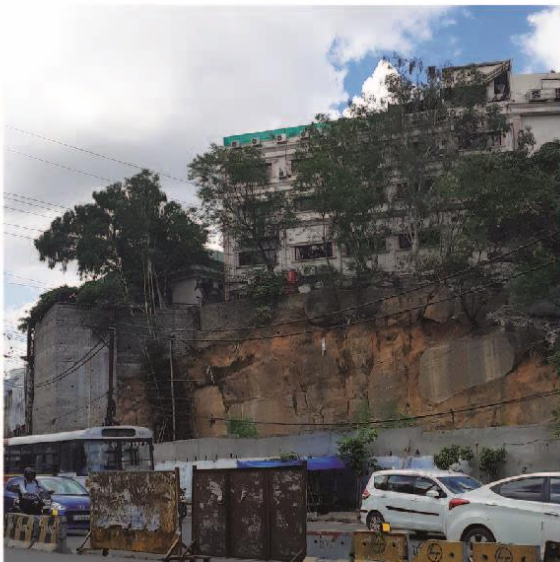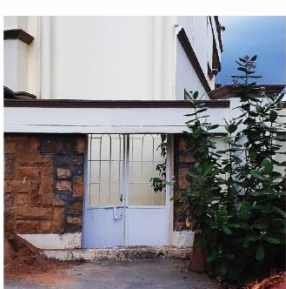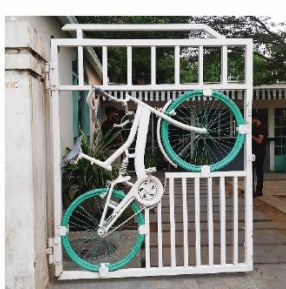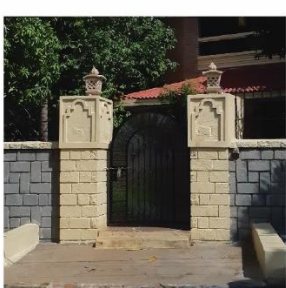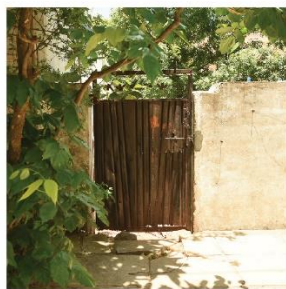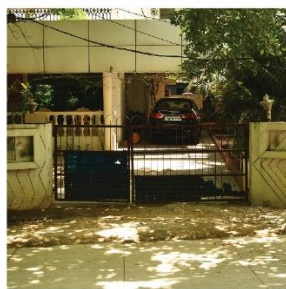
Photo bank from Hyderabad

These are few examples of the images I took while I was in Hyderabad. A select few have been used in the final making process. While taking these images, I chose to focus on public spaces rather than objects or indoor spaces. I chose not to include all the images within this document as several of them were not used in the final research.

The below image shows how I categorized the images.

| Architecture-d | Auto inside | Auto Peopple | Auto sign-d | Box Shops-d | Construction-d | Cramped Residential | Debris |

| Domes | Gates-d | Hookah shop | Mozamjahi Market-d | Objects | Plants | Pushcart-d | Religious places |

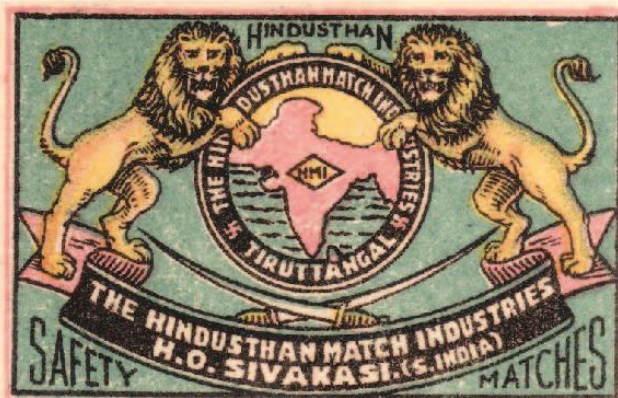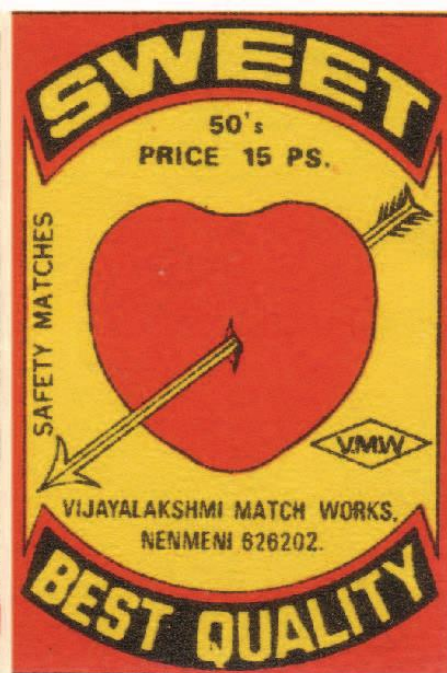| Road Layout | Rooftops | Shed roof | Signage | Store front door-d | Street eateries | Street parking | Temple Shops |

| Urban | Wires |
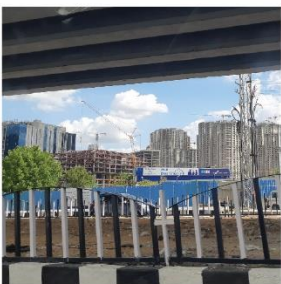
Patricia M.'s collection of images

The following images are a few of the images I used from Flickr user, Patria M.'s collection. These images were used in my first typology.

WATER LILLY

A.P.R.S.P.
NATIONAL MATCH WORKS SIVAKASI
SAFETY MATCHES

WITTY
PRICE
Re 0.0.6

PEEVY MATCHES TRICHUR

SWEET
50's
PRICE 15 PS.
SAFETY MATCHES
VMW
VIJAYALAKSHMI MATCH WORKS,
NENMENI 626202.
BEST QUALITY

FANCY
MATCHES
PRICE Re.0.0.4
GOPALAN MATCH FACTORY
PERNAYAKKANPATTI (VIA) SIVAKASI

विजय
PRICE   Re 0.0.6
குஜாத்மேச் ஒர்க்ஸ், சாக்தூர்.
M.K. VAJIRKAR
SHOLAPUR & BIJAPUR.

GOPI CUP
കപ്പ്
PRICE   GMC
0.0.6   0.0.6
GOPI MATCH CO,
P.O. ARIMBUR.

STAR MATCHES

HINDUSTHAN
HMI
THE HINDUSTHAN MATCH INDUSTRIES
H.O. SIVAKASI, (S. INDIA)
SAFETY   MATCHES

Matt Lee's collection of images

The following matchbox labels are a few of the images used in my 2ⁿᵈ Typology from Matt Lee's collection, available on his website. (https://www.matt-lee.com/matchboxes-from-the-subcontinent)

Fig. has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

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