



The Sacred and Typography

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## Malayalam Type Design Inspired from *Samkshepavedartham*\* for the Contemporary Setting \*the first printed book in Malayalam script

Raniya Jalal, School of Planning and Architecture Bhopal, India, raniyajalal@gmail.com

Aman Rupesh Xaxa, School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, India, aman.xaxa@spabhopal.ac.in

**Abstract:** Typography has always played a crucial role in various settings, influenced by cultural, social, and technological factors, and reciprocally impacting them. As a result, we have witnessed distinct typographic innovations associated with specific regions and times. In the context of modernity, typography plays a significant role in shaping identities and creating a sense of belongingness. It is a reflection of a society, a region, or time. The project aimed to design a Malayalam display typeface inspired by the first ever printed book in Malayalam, *Samkshepavedartham*, for use in public interactions and contemporary settings, representing culture and heritage. The study discussed the Malayalam script, its evolution and its presence in the contemporary setting, along with a study of the characteristics of glyphs in *Samkshepavedartham* as well as the glyphs of today, exploring different stylizations, different tools thus summing up with making of the font.

**Key words:** *Abugida script, Diacritics, Chillu letters, Vattezhuthu, Tamil-Brahmi, Grantha alphabet,*

### 1. Introduction

Type or typography is a means of communication, advocating to large audiences at various arenas at various levels. It translates the essence that an entity carries, it is an identity of

the place. In a zoomed out perspective, typography is basically writing systems or scripts. The writing systems can be broadly classified into:

- Pictographic/ideographic writing system
- Logographic writing system
- Abjad
- Abugida
- Alphabetic

Malayalam as a script is *abugida* or *alpha-syllabary*.

Malayalam is a Dravidian language spoken in the Indian state of Kerala and the union territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry (Mahé district) by the Malayali people. It is one of 22 scheduled languages of India.

The Malayalam script, being an abugida script, combines consonant and vowel sequences into a single unit. Each unit is centered around a consonant or conjunct letter, with vowel notations playing a secondary role. Vowel notations alter the consonants using diacritics. Vowels are distinct entities only at the start of words.



Figure 1. Dissection of Malayalam script

Source: Malayalam Orthographic Reforms: Impact on Language and Popular Culture Kavya Manohar, Santhosh Thottingal, 2018

## 1.1 Evolution of Malayalam Script

Malayalam was first written in the Tamil-Brahmi script, an ancient script of Tamil and Malayalam languages. However, the modern Malayalam script is based on the Grantha alphabet, and Vattezhuthu, both of which independently evolved from the Tamil-Brahmi, along with adaptations from Indo-Aryan loanwords.

The use of scripts in the region of Kerala has undergone a continuous evolution. Vattezhuthu remained in general use up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the regions of Malabar. A variant form of this script, Kolezhuthu, was used until about the 19<sup>th</sup> century mainly in the Malabar-Cochin area and another variant form, Malayanma, was

used in the south of Thiruvananthapuram. By the 19th century, old scripts like Kolezhuthu had been supplanted by Arya-ezhuthu - that is the current Malayalam script.

Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan, a poet from around the 16th century, is also credited with the development of Malayalam script into the current form through the intermixing and modification of the erstwhile scripts. He further eliminated excess and unnecessary letters from the modified script. Hence, Ezhuthachan is also known as 'The Father of modern Malayalam'. The development of modern Malayalam script was also heavily influenced by the Tigalari script, which was used to write the Tulu language, due to the influence of Tuluva Brahmins in Kerala.

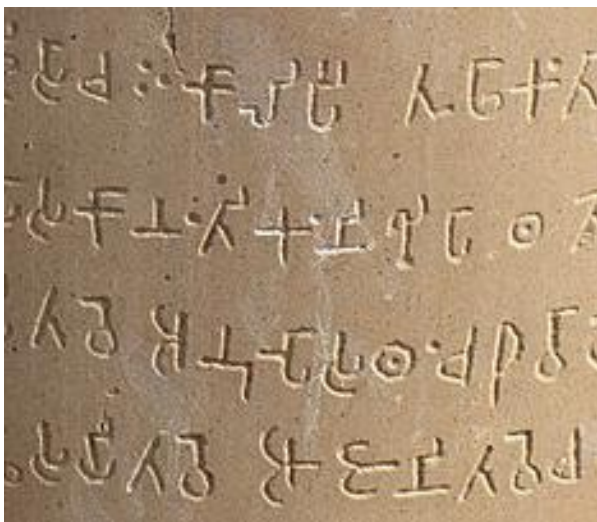


Figure 2. Brahmi script on Ashoka Pillar in Sarnath (circa 250 BCE)  
Source: Time Traveler ([www.blogspot.com](http://www.blogspot.com))

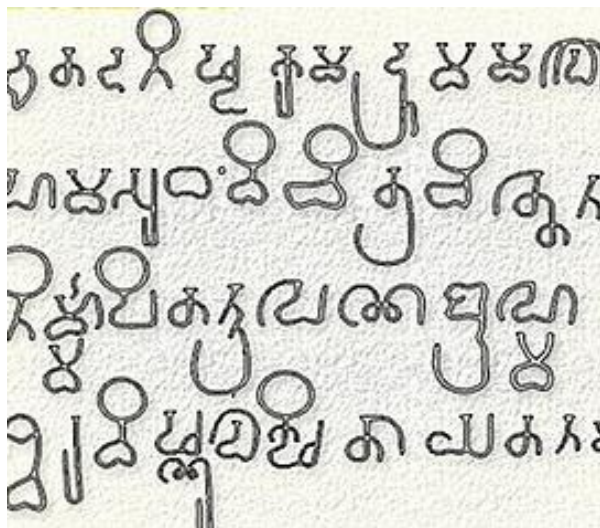


Figure 3. 7th-century inscription in Grantha script at the Mandagapattu Hindu Temple  
Source: Mandagapattu Inscription (2019), R Balaji



Figure 4. Vattezhuthu displayed Jewish Plates (11th century AD, Malayalam)  
Source: Wikimedia Commons, Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin

The script orthography acquired its uniqueness with its complex shaped ligatures formed by the combination of consonants and vowel sign forms. The number of unique glyphs in this system exceeded 1200 at its young age which over time reduced due to standardization. The Malayalam script as it is today, was modified in the middle of the 19th century when Hermann Gundert, a German missionary, who invented the new vowel signs to distinguish them.

## 1.2 Print History of the Malayalam Script

Summarizing the journey of the print of Malayalam:

- **1820s** - Printing in Malayalam started natively, credited to Benjamin Bailey, an Anglican Missionary.
- **1960s** - Typewriters became very popular in Kerala, but lacked a system to support all the complex ligatures. Also there were demands from newspaper and publishing industries to reduce the script complexity.
- **1967** - The Kerala government appointed a committee to study script reformation.
- **1971** - The Kerala government published an order to reduce the complexity of the script.

The first ever book in the Malayalam script was printed in Rome, in 1772. It was a manuscript which was printed under the guidance of the priest *Clement Peanices*.

The book had more than thousand unique types of glyphs, mostly being rectangular. The script chosen was the *Grantha* script that was then in use for writing Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malayalam.

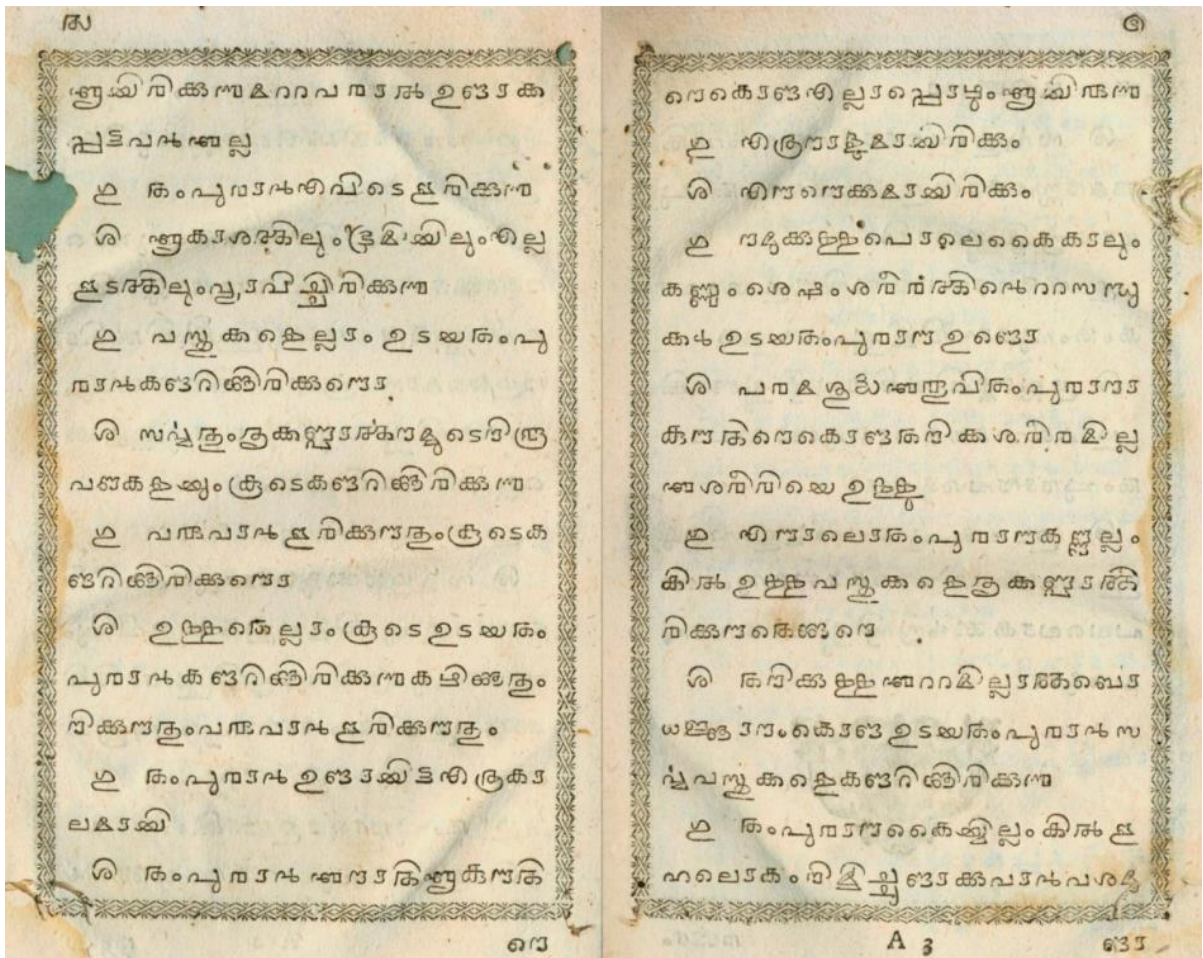


Figure 5. A page from the book *Samkshepavedartham*  
 Source: Malayalam Orthographic Reforms: Impact on Language and Popular Culture Kavya Manohar, Santhosh Thottingal, 2018

After the modification and standardization from the ordinance passed by the government in 1971, the script has been reduced into the following glyphs:

Vowels and Diacritics								Consonants								
അ	ആ	ഇ	ഈ	ഉ	ഊ	ഋ	ൠ	ക	ഖ	ഗ	ഘ	ങ	ച	ഛ	ജ	
	ാ	ി	ീ	ു	ൂ	ൃ	ൠ	ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅa	ca	cha	ja	
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	ṛ	ṝ	[ka]	[kʰa]	[ga]	[gʱa]	[ŋa]	[tʃa]	[tʃʰa]	[dʒa]	
[a]	[aː]	[i]	[iː]	[u]	[uː]	[r̥]	[r̥iː]	ശ	ഷ	ട	ഠ	ഡ	ഢ	ണ	ത	
ൺ	ൺ	എ	ഈ	ഐ	ഓ	ഔ	ൠ	[ɕʰa]	[ʃa]	[ɖa]	[ʈa]	[ɖʱa]	[ɖʱa]	[ɳa]	[ta]	
ṅ	ṅ̄	e	ē	ai	o	ō	au	ഥ	ദ	ധ	ന	പ	ഫ	ബ	ഭ	
[ṅ]	[ṅ̄]	[e]	[eː]	[aj]	[o]	[oː]	[au]	[ɖʱa]	[da]	[dʱa]	[na/na]	[pa]	[pʱa]	[ba]	[bʱa]	
അം	അഃ							മാ	യാ	രാ	ലാ	വാ	ശാ	ഷാ	സാ	
ം	ഃ	ഃ							[ma]	[ja]	[ra]	[la]	[va]	[ʃa]	[ʃa]	[sa]
aṁ	aḥ	mutes							ഹ	ള	ഴ	റ	ണ	ഴ		
[am]	[ah]	vowel							ha	ḷa	ḷa	raṛa	ṅa	ṛa		
								[ḥa]	[ḷa]	[ḷa]	[ra/ra]	[ṅa]	[ṛa]			
Conjuncts								Chillu Letters								
കക	കഖ	കഗ	കഘ	കങ	ട	ണ	ണ്ണ	ത	ൺ	ൻ	ർ	ൽ	ൾ			
kka	kka	kka	kka	kka	ṭṭa	ṇṇa	ṇṇa	ṭṭa	ṅ	n	r	l	ḷ			
[kka]	[kka]	[kka]	[kka]	[kka]	[ṭṭa]	[ṇṇa]	[ṇṇa]	[ṭṭa]	[ṅ]	[n]	[r]	[l]	[ḷ]			
ന	ന	പ	മ്പ	മ്മ	ച്ച	ബ	യ	വ								
nta	nna	ppa	mpa	mma	cca	bba	yya	vva								
[nta]	[nna]	[ppa]	[mpa]	[mma]	[cca]	[bba]	[yya]	[vva]								
Consonant Diacritics								Other Symbols								
ന്യ	പ്ര / പ്ര	ശ്വ						ഃ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ					
nya	pra	śva						prasham	date mark	danda	double danda					

Figure 6. The Malayalam script today  
 Source: <https://omniglot.com/writing/malayalam.htm>

### 1.3 Studying the Malayalam Script

Malayalam alphabet is unicase, or does not have a case distinction. It is written from left to right, but certain vowel signs are attached to the left (the opposite direction) of a consonant letter that it logically follows. Today the reformed orthography, is commonly called *puthiya lipi* and traditional system, *pazhaya lipi*. Current print media almost entirely uses reformed orthography. The state run primary education introduces the Malayalam writing to the pupils in reformed script only and the books are printed accordingly. However, the digital media uses both traditional and reformed orthography.

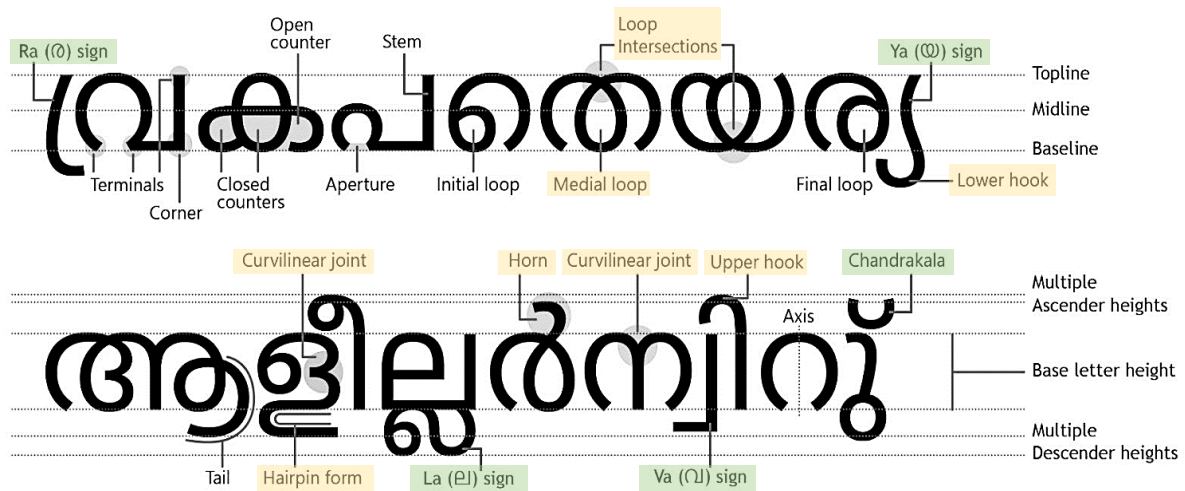


Figure 7. Anatomy of the Malayalam script  
 Source: Typography Day 2018 Unnati Kotecha and Maithili Shingre, Analysis of Malayalam hand printed signs.

The script is employed in various forms and styles that convey the context, atmosphere, and mood in which it is used. Each stylization enhances the distinctive characteristics of a particular piece of writing while maintaining its form, legibility and readability.

#### 1.4 Malayalam as a Script in Today’s Scenario

Going through the various media in which script is used, it is observed that there is a large variety of hand lettered titles that can be seen around. However, there are a limited number of typefaces in Malayalam script making it difficult to convey the messages the way it is.

Looking through examples, movie posters, book titles and other signage and name boards mostly have hand lettered titles in a variety of styles whereas newspapers and publishing houses today still use legacy fonts (*any older font that contains characters not in the original standardized set*) which are not very suitable for design interventions. This also makes it difficult to create a visual hierarchy as most of the typefaces do not have variations in weight and thus the publishing houses try to create a hierarchy with colours. Also, in today’s scenario, in a web base world, there is valid need for digitized typefaces for various purposes which calls in for preservation of forgotten writings.



Figure 8. Collection of movie and book titles in Malayalam  
Source: Collage by Author (from internet)



Figure 9. Collection of signage and name boards in Malayalam  
Source: Collage by Author (from internet)

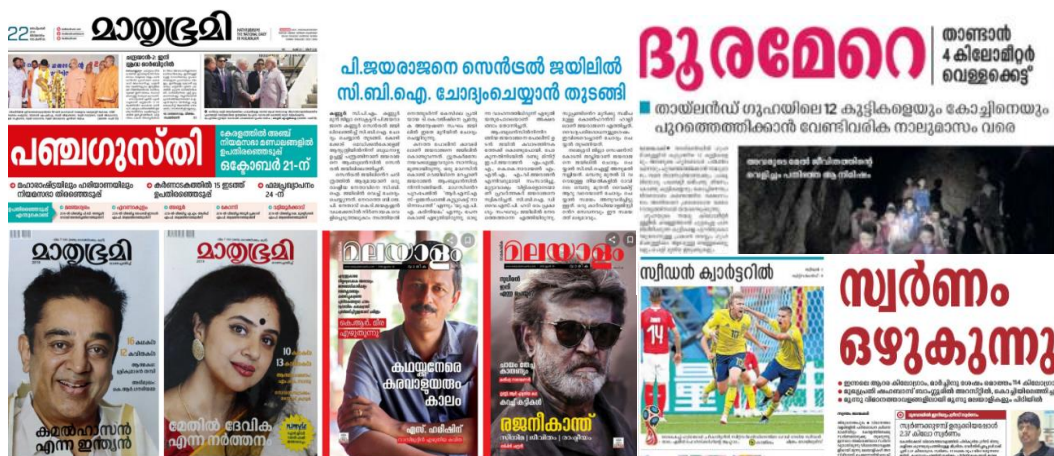


Figure 10. Mass media communication in Malayalam  
Source: Collage by Author (from internet)

Malayalam script is also a big part of identity creation and place making. Taking an example of festivals and cultural meets, it is observed that most of the identities don't have particular character in terms of transliteration or even in terms of cultural reflection.





Figure 11. Malayalam script in large display format at various cultural meets  
 Source: Collage by Author (from internet)

## 2. Making of the Font

### 2.1 Identifying Root Strokes in the Script

The first step towards creating a font is to identify the root strokes and derive the rest of the strokes thus making the process of creating the glyph set easier.

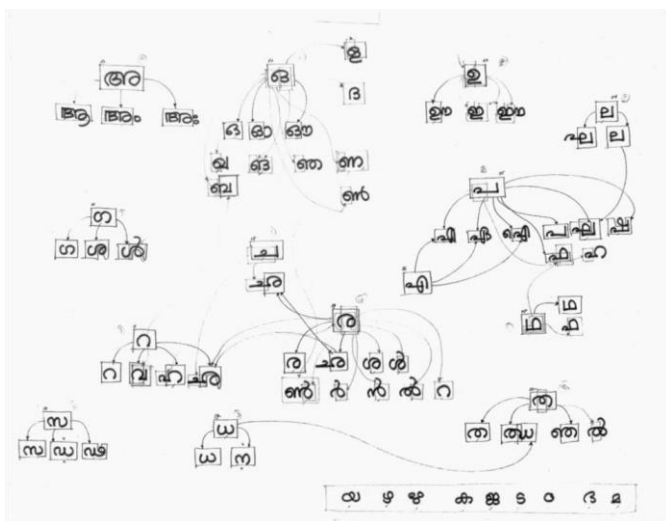


Figure 12. The root stroke chart  
 Source: Athul Jayaraman, Malayalam Type Design (wordpress.com)

## 2.2 Case Studies

### The Jeh Typeface

To mark the 116th birth anniversary of JRD Tata, the Tata group released the 'Jeh Font', designed by the ITF to honour the great leader who was known for penning memorable letters in his distinctive handwriting.

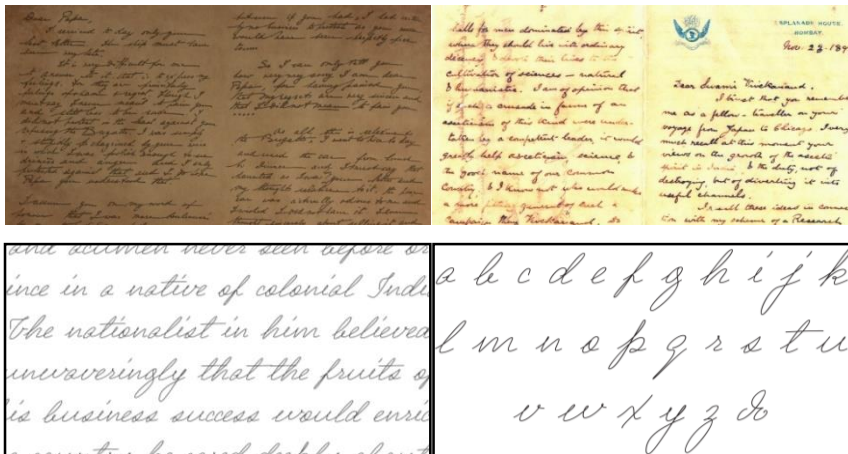


Figure 13. The Jeh Typeface - handwriting and font

Source: Jeh Typeface, Indian Type Foundry

The making of the font followed the process of studying the characteristics of each glyph, with at least 12 to 15 iterations identified from the handwriting. The glyphs were then superimposed to the most prominent characteristic feature of a glyph such as the axis, the stress, the counters and the other anatomical features.

### Jaini Typeface

Jaini is a Devanagari typeface based on the calligraphic style of the Jain Kalpasutra manuscripts by EkType Type Foundry. The design of this font is based on the 1503 Kalpasutra manuscript. Jaini has several unique features not seen in the standard Devanagari script.



Figure 14. The Jaini Typeface - process

Source: Jaini Typeface, EkType Foundry

The process through which font was made:

- The proportions of the Jaini Purva typeface were compared to the standard Devanagari script.
- The conjuncts were simplified into the standard Devanagari glyphs and were stylized according to the font.
- Calligraphy was practiced to understanding the style.
- Since the original manuscript uses letter-shapes which are not familiar to contemporary readers, these have been redesigned along with Latin numbers and punctuations.

### 2.3 Identifying the Characteristics of the Glyphs from *Samkshepavdartham*

The first step towards making the font was to identify the different iterations of a particular glyph from the book *Samkshepavedartham*.

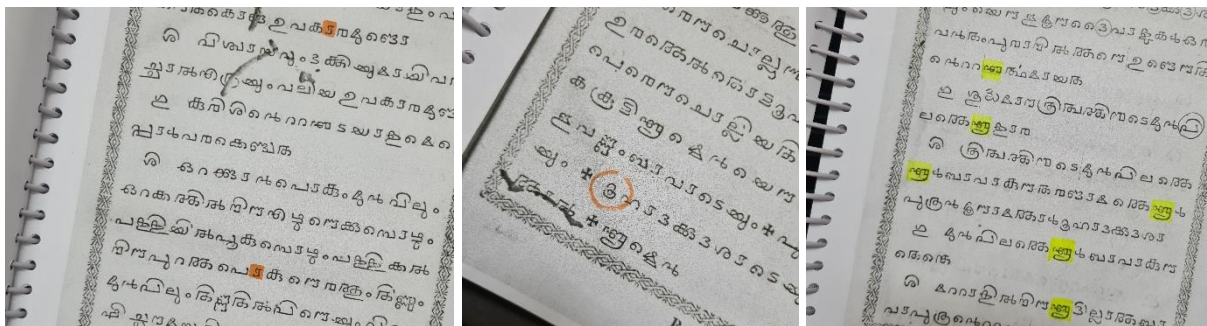


Figure 15. Glyph iterations in the book  
Source: Author

### 2.4 Tool Explorations

Various tools were used to try out different stylizations in the glyphs out of which a particular style or a combination could be used for the making of the font.

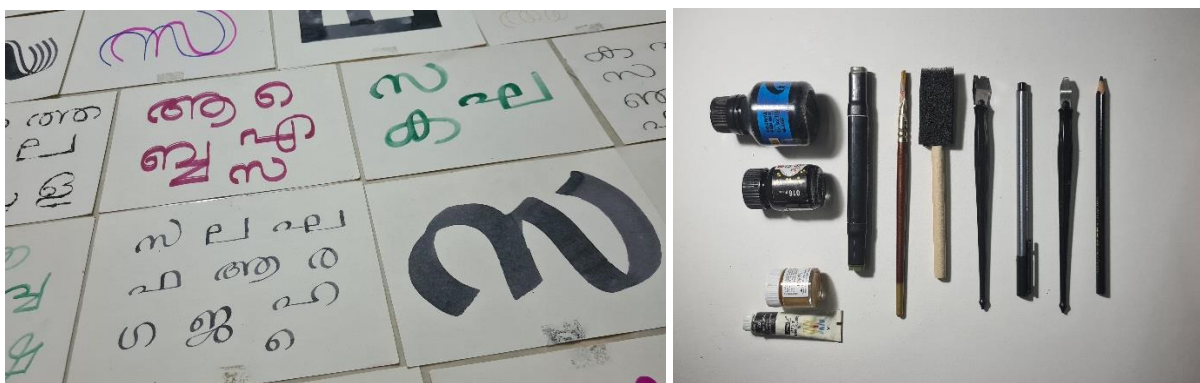


Figure 16. Tools and the Explorations  
Source: Author

## 2.5 Glyph Making

The glyphs from the book are chosen to be superimposed and a skeleton for the Zoomed out and zoomed in iterations were made for several glyphs.

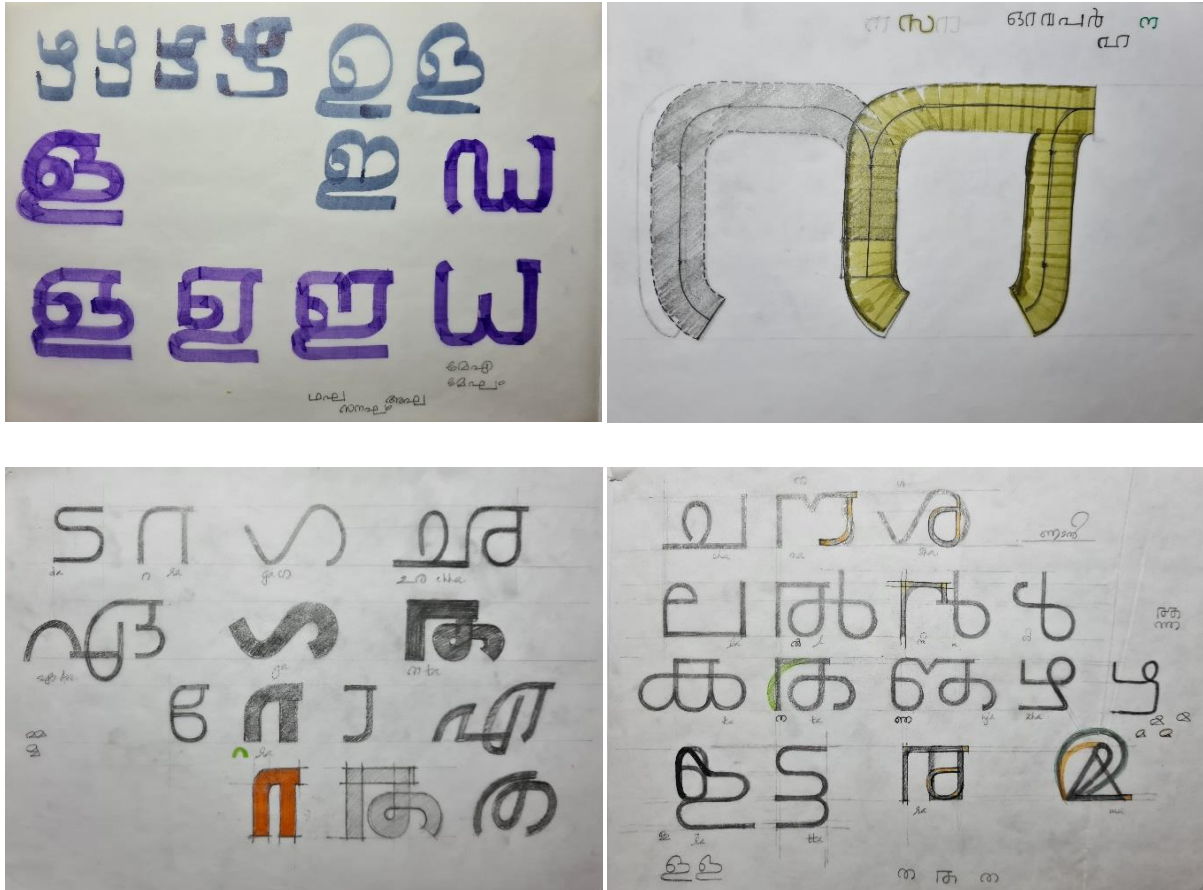


Figure 17. Glyph Iterations  
Source: Author

## 2.6 Digitizing the Font

The initial drafting was done on Adobe Illustrator.

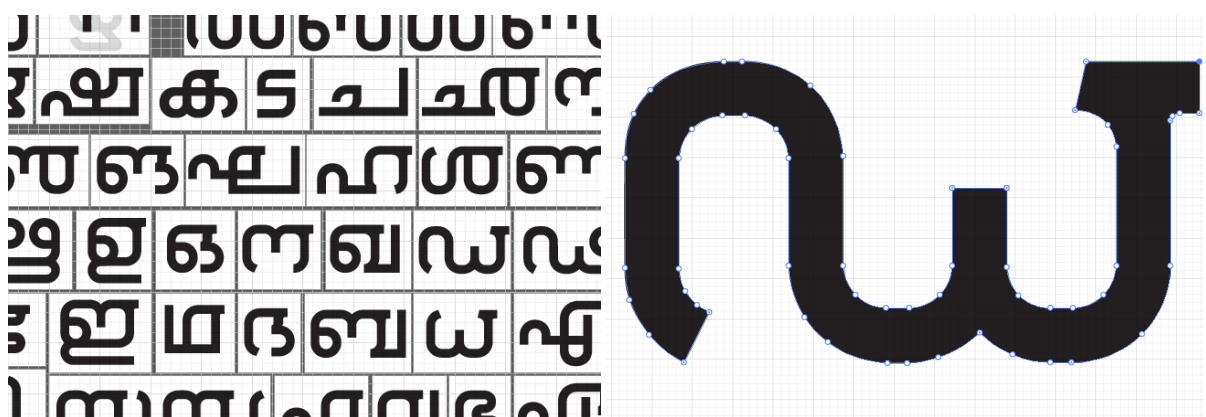


Figure 18. Glyphs on the Adobe Illustrator interface  
Source: Author

The refinement of the glyphs and making of the font as a whole was done in Glyphr Studio including the aspects of kerning, spacing and the final tweaks.

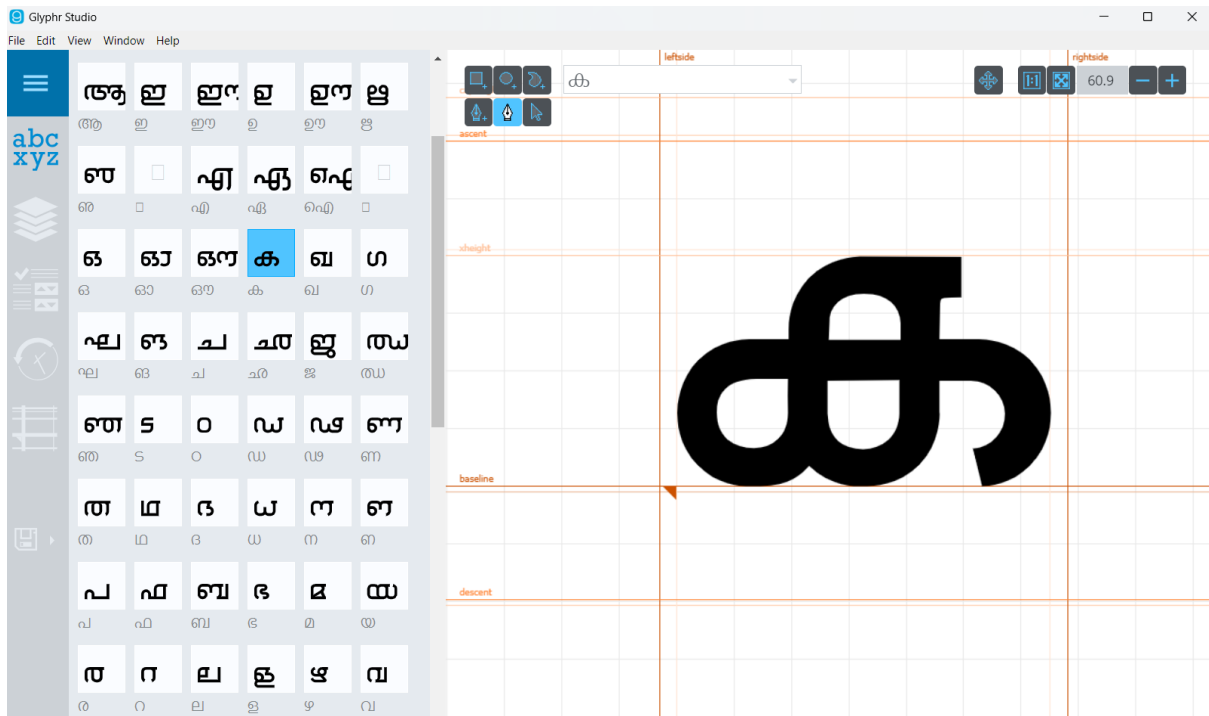


Figure 19. Glyphs on the Glyphr Studio interface  
Source: Author

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, this project aimed to create a culturally rich and visually captivating display typeface in Malayalam script, inspired by the historical text *Samkshepavedartham*. This project is a return to the script, its origin, its beginnings. The project acknowledged the role of typography as an identity maker and its significance in conveying messages across various media, while addressing the need for digitalized scripts in the modern age. Through research and font-making processes, this project attempted to preserve and celebrate the legacy of Malayalam typography while contributing to its use in public interactions and cultural gatherings, bridging the past with the present for the future.

### 4. Way Forward

The project has a large scope that needs to be completed. After designing the basic weights of the font, the project can be taken forward to create different stylizations thus aiming to create a layered font. Taking forward the scope of working with different Indian scripts is also something that I am aiming for.

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