



## Typographic Dialogues: Local-Global

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### Finding the roots of Malayalam Calligraphy

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#### **Abstract:**

Kerala, though small in size compared to other states in India, has a significant presence in the cultural, educational and art scene of the country. Kerala's richness and diversity in all these areas are unique and special.

Though the history of the Malayalam language and calligraphy are not too long, it has an overwhelming presence everywhere - on the walls, posters, the name boards and billboards of shops, trading and business establishments and in the titles of periodical publications, etc. to name a few. More importantly they also have certain characteristics that are unique to them which is not found in other languages. From region to region within Kerala, there are local variations in speech, arts, and cultural practices, which extends to cuisine, dressing styles, and even in everyday interactions and lifestyles.

All these contribute to the artistic patterns, styles and practices followed by artists, that have locational and regional characteristics as well as national and global influences.

**Key words:** *Malayalam, regional, letter, calligraphy, characteristic*

## 1. Introduction

In Malayalam, the romance with the alphabet has a long history; it can be found in the various palm leaf manuscripts, and later in early stone types, block prints etc. before it blossomed in print. Written, painted and printed words are a ubiquitous presence in Kerala; our public spaces are inundated with words; there are graffiti on all the walls, posters and billboards on the pillars and posts that stare at us from all around. With the apparently varied choice of fonts and the freedom to adapt and adopt, over the years, the encounter with the shape and size, gravity and lightness, tone and tenor of the alphabet became mechanical and ordinary.

## 2. Background

Kerala, though small in size, when compared to other states in India, has a rich presence in the cultural, educational and art scene of the country. The diversity of Kerala in all these areas is unique and special.

Though the history of the Malayalam language and calligraphy are not too long, it has an overwhelming presence everywhere - on the walls, posters, the name boards and billboards of shops, trading and business establishments and in the titles of periodical publications, etc. to name a few. More importantly they also have certain characteristics that are unique to them which is not found in other languages. From region to region within Kerala, there are local variations in speech, arts, and cultural practices, which extends to cuisine, dressing styles, and even in everyday interactions and lifestyles.

Such regionalism is evident in politics too. This vernacular language has been the subject of much study and research over the years finding expression in many books, art works, performances and films.

But through, I was immensely fascinated by this distinction in letter writing across regions, when one looks at paintings of artists from different parts of Kerala, one does not find huge variations or differences, except of course for differences in personal styles or 'touch', as we call it.

But in the art of calligraphy, this distinction is very evident. There are certain styles found only in North Kerala. The style of central Kerala is totally different from the rest. In south Kerala, it is a dark colored font, altogether.

### 3. Analysis

Traditionally, the italicized letters slanting to the left can only be found in northern Kerala, while thin and condensed letters are predominantly found in and around the Kozhikode district in the North. Further north, in Kannur, though the letters are condensed, they are not as thin as in the Kozhikode region, but a bit bolder.



Figure.1 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from North Kerala



Figure.2 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from North Kerala



Figure.3 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from North Kerala



Figure.4 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from North Kerala

The letters from South Kerala are characterized by Tamil-influenced colours, rarely thin, and mostly bold and thick.

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 Far the best dictionary of its size  
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അദ്ധ്യാപകർക്കും  
 വിദ്യാർത്ഥികൾക്കും  
 സാഹിത്യകാരന്മാർക്കും  
 നിത്യോപയോഗപ്രദമായ  
 ഒരു നിഷ്പണ്ടു വിവര ദ്വം പതിപ്പു  
 വില രൂ. 5. പൊതുജ്ജ് രൂ. 1.75

നിങ്ങളുടെ കോപ്പികൾക്കും  
 ക്ലാസ്സുലോഗിനും  
 എഴുതുക

**S.T.റെഡ്ഡിയാർ & സൺസ്**  
 കൊല്ലം ESTD: 1884  
 ബ്രാഞ്ചുകൾ: ആലപ്പുഴ, എറണാകുളം

Figure.5 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from South Kerala

**റൂബി** മിട്ടായികൾ  
 ആയുർവ്വേദം  
 മിക്സഡ് ഫ്ലേവേഴ്സ്  
 കോക്കനട്ട് ലഘു  
 ലാട്ടോ ബ്ലാൻഡ് Etc. Etc

**Ruby Sweets**  
**THE TRAVANCORE CONFECTIONERY WORKS**  
**QUILON.**

Figure.6 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from South Kerala

This is not a pattern that is just being followed by a few artists, but a specialty that has evolved regionally more than anything. It is evident that a certain style has been generated regionally. If we dig deeper into the root cause of such styles, we will be able to arrive at some interesting conclusions. Behind each and every board and wall art in any region, it will be the very same calligrapher/s. The other artists in the region will normally try to copy that style and thus the regional flavor gradually spreads all over the area. As such artists do not try to radically improvise or change the style or customize them, it slowly becomes part of the local 'tradition' and tends to be assumed as the style belonging to that region.



Figure.7 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from Central Kerala



Figure.8 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from Central Kerala



Figure.9 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from Central Kerala

We were able to identify that this local flavor was not just limited to the billboards and the writings on the walls. Newspaper advertisements, book covers from five decades ago, etc. have clearly demarcated the localization in calligraphy of those times. It was visible during the times when there was a practice of using handwriting for text in the advertisements without the use of art pull. Undoubtedly, designers of those times were primarily either artists or calligraphers.





Figure.10 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from Outside Kerala

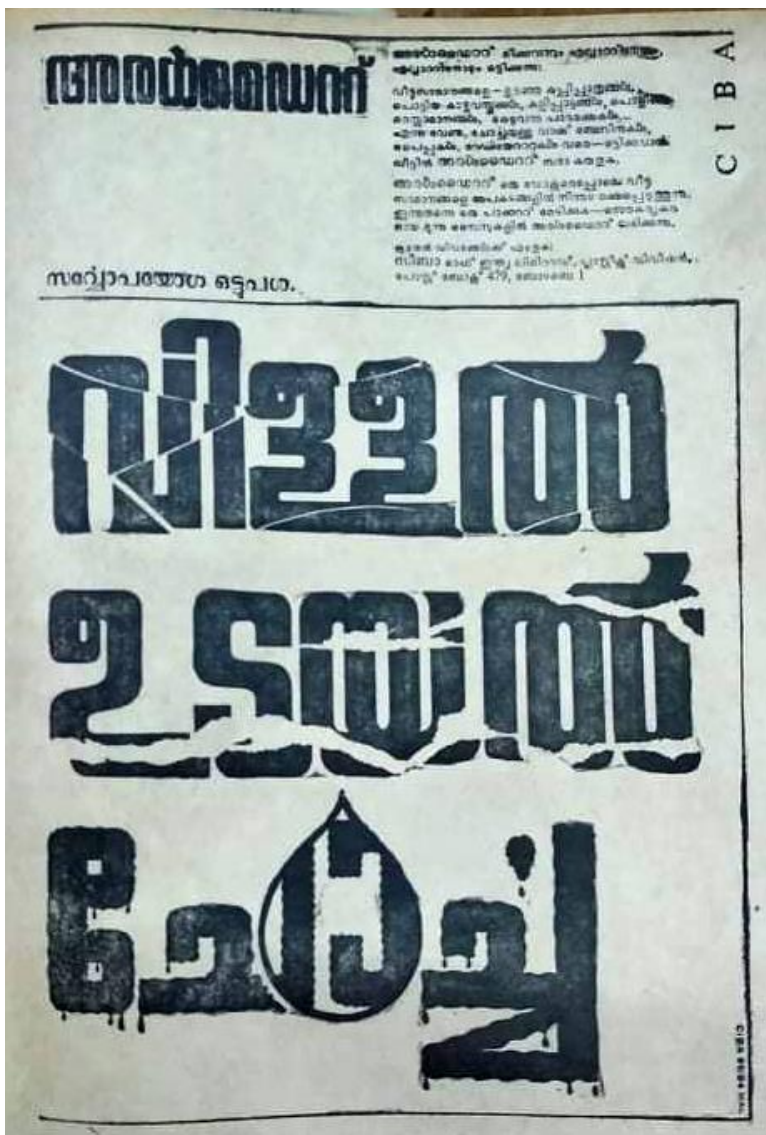


Figure.11 Example of Malayalam Calligraphy from Outside Kerala

## 6. Conclusions

Unfortunately, with the popularity of the computer and the DTP, this regional flavor is completely lost. If you look at the boards in the past, you can get an idea of where the place is. With the popularization of the computer everywhere, the localization of the letters has sadly come to an end.

Sadly, the new generation who are stepping into the world of calligraphy, are devoid of any of these regional styles or flavours in their art. We have come to realize that this regionalism in Kerala and Malayalam is not so clearly found in other languages and regions. But one needs to think deeper into how we can maintain and preserve the rich heritage of diversity that the language and art once created.

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