

Malayalam Writing

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The Malayalam script, like Devanagari, is written from left to right. In the traditional script, each character represents a syllable-sized unit, but recent innovations have introduced a few elements of alphabetic writing into the script.

The script is “phonemic” insofar as it encodes most contrasts at the classical phonemic level of representation. With a few exceptions, a character in the script (called an *akṣaram*) denotes a vowel by itself, or one or more consonants followed by a vowel. The inventory of fundamental *akṣaram* characters in Malayalam is given in their traditional order (reading left to right), vowels (*svaram*) in TABLE 38.1 and consonants (*vyanjanam*) in TABLE 38.2. Note that both written and spoken Malayalam, unlike most Indian languages, contrast dental [t̪], alveolar [t], and retroflex [ʈ] (albeit only when doubled). Also contrastive are nasals in seven articulatory positions: [m], [ɳ], [ɲ], [ɳ̠], [ɳ̡] in the script, plus [n] and [ɳ̠] in pronunciation.

In TABLE 38.2, the transliteration symbols are given in terms of (abstract) consonants alone; when pronounced, the *akṣaram* is pronounced with following *a*, thus ക *k* = *ka*. The *akṣaram* ക്ഷ *kṣ* actually represents a conjunct consonant (see below), but is conventionally listed as a unit, near the end of the canonical order.

In simple cases, the *svaram* and *vyanjanam* characters can be simply strung together to form words: അറ *ara* ‘room’, ആന *āna* ‘elephant’, പക *paka* ‘hostility’. The *svaram* characters are used only when the vowel occurs initially in a syllable, as in the initial syllables in ‘room’ and ‘elephant’. Elsewhere, when the syllable begins with a consonant, the *vyanjanam* character indicates the consonant–vowel sequence.

A marginal contrast between velars ([k] etc.) and palatalized velars ([kʲ] etc.) is not reflected in the script; both series are indicated by the characters ക *k* ഖ *kh* ഗ *g* ഘ *gh* ണ *ṇ*. The symbol ന *n* represents dental [ɳ̠] when initial, alveolar [n] elsewhere; but its geminate form ന്ന represents both dental [ɳ̠ɳ̠], as in പന്നി [paɳ̠ɳ̠i] ‘pig’, and alveolar [nn], as in കന്നി [kanni] ‘unmarried girl’. The symbol റ *r* is pronounced, when doubled, as alveolar [tt], e.g. മാറ്റം *māṭṭam* [ma:ttam] ‘change’; elsewhere it is alveolar [r], e.g. കറി *kari* [kari] ‘curry’.

A *vyanjanam* character by itself has the value of a syllable onset followed by the vowel *a*. When a syllable is followed by a vowel other than *a*, the vowel is indicated by a diacritic on the letter, rather than the full *svaram* character. The regular diacritics and their values are illustrated in TABLE 38.1 with the *vyanjanam* പ *p*. The shapes of *u* *ū* are irregular with some consonants, as shown in TABLE 38.3. However, in the

TABLE 38.1: *Vowel Symbols (svaram); Vowel-Consonant Combinations*

<i>Svaram</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Diacritic (with p-)</i>	
അ	a	[a]	—	പ
ആ	ā	[a:]	—ഓ	പഓ
ഇ	i	[i]	—ി	പി
ഈ	ī	[i:]	—ീ	പീ
ഉ	u	[u]	—ു	പു
ഊ	ū	[u:]	—ൂ	പൂ
ഋ	r̄	[r̄]	—ൃ	പൃ
എ	e	[e]	—െ	പെ
ഐ	ē	[e:]	—േ	പേ
ഐ	ai	[ai]	—ൈ	പൈ
ഒ	o	[o]	—ൊ	പൊ
ഓ	ō	[o:]	—ോ	പോ
ഔ	au	[au]	—ൌ	പൌ
a		[ə]	—	പ_

a. The vowel [ə], which is never word-initial, has no independent symbol.

TABLE 38.2: *Consonant Symbols (vyanjanam)*

	VOICELESS PLOSIVES		VOICED PLOSIVES		NASALS
	<i>Unaspirated</i>	<i>Aspirated</i>	<i>Unaspirated</i>	<i>Aspirated</i>	
Velar	ക k [k]	ഖ kh [kʰ]	ഗ g [g]	ഘ gh [gʱ]	ങ ñ [ŋ]
Palatal	ച c [tʃ]	ഛ ch [tʃʰ]	ജ j [dʒ]	ഝ jh [dʒʱ]	ഞ ñ [ɲ]
Retroflex	ട ṭ [ʈ]	ഠ ṭh [ʈʰ]	ഡ ḍ [ɖ]	ഢ ḍh [ɖʱ]	ണ ṇ [ɳ]
Dental	ത t [t̪]	ഥ th [t̪ʰ]	ദ d [d̪]	ധ dh [d̪ʱ]	ന n [n]
Labial	പ p [p]	ഫ ph [pʰ]	ബ b [b]	ഭ bh [bʱ]	മ m [m]
Sonorants	യ y [j]	ര r [r]	ല l [l]	വ v [v]	
Fricatives	ശ ś [ʃ]	ഷ ṣ [ʃ]	സ s [s]	ഹ h [h]	
Miscellaneous	ഌ ḷ [ʌ]	ക്ഷ kṣ [kʃ]	ഴ ḷ [ʒ]	ഠ ṭ [ʈ]	

current revised script (see below), all these variants are replaced by uniform $-ṛ u$ and $-ṛ ū$ after the consonant.

The consonant *m*, when syllable-final, is represented as the symbol \circ (called *anusvāram*): ഔഷധം *auṣadham* ‘medicine’, വരം *varum* ‘will come’, ഹംസം *hamsam* ‘swan’, സംയോഗം *samyōgam* ‘joining together’.

Prepausal sonorant consonants (other than *m*) are represented by a special set of characters which are called *cillakṣaram* ‘letter fragments’ (TABLE 38.4).

TABLE 38.3: *Irregular Shapes of -u and -ū*

ക	k + u =	കു	ku	ക	k + ū =	കൂ	kū
ഗ	g + u =	ഗു	gu	ഗ	g + ū =	ഗൂ	gū
ച	c + u =	ചു	cu	ച	c + ū =	ചൂ	cū
ജ	j + u =	ജു	ju	ജ	j + ū =	ജൂ	jū
ണ	ṇ + u =	ണു	ṇu	ണ	ṇ + ū =	ണൂ	ṇū
ത	t + u =	തു	tu	ത	t + ū =	തൂ	tū
ന	n + u =	നു	nu	ന	n + ū =	നൂ	nū
ഭ	bh + u =	ഭു	bhu	ഭ	bh + ū =	ഭൂ	bhū
ര	r + u =	രു	ru	ര	r + ū =	രൂ	rū
ശ	ś + u =	ശു	śu	ശ	ś + ū =	ശൂ	śū
ഹ	h + u =	ഹു	hu	ഹ	h + ū =	ഹൂ	hū

TABLE 38.4: *Cillakṣarams*

ണ	ṇ >	ൺ	ചാൺ	cāṇ	'handbreadth'
ന	n >	ൻ	അവൻ	avan	'he'
ര	r >	ർ	മലർ	malar	'popped rice'
ല	l >	ൽ	പകൽ	pakal	'day'
ഉ	! >	ൾ	അവൾ	avaḷ	'she'

TABLE 38.5: *Consonant Diacritics*

ന	n	+	യ	y	=	ന്യ	ny	ന്യായം	nyāyam	'justice'
പ	p	+	ര	r	=	പ്ര	pr	പ്രീതി	prīti	'affection'
ശ	ś	+	വ	v	=	ശ്വ	śv	ശ്വാസം	śvāsam	'breath'

All word-internal sequences of consonants, except for *m* as mentioned above, are represented as *kūttakṣaram* 'conjunct characters'; these are of several types. First, when *y*, *r*, and *v* are second members in consonant clusters, they are represented as diacritics adjoined to the preceding consonant (TABLE 38.5). Many other conjuncts are formed by placing the character for the second sound beneath the character for the first sound; *l* takes the rather different shape ് (TABLE 38.6). But ് marks the doubling of a number of characters with the shape ് at the right, e.g. ച്ച *cc*, ബ്ബ *bb*, വ്വ *vv* (but പ്പ *pp*, ല്ല *ll*).

However, some of the most frequent conjuncts are formed by left-to-right combinations (TABLE 38.7).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the difficulties of printing Malayalam script gave rise to the introduction of a simplified script. The most important property of the modern

TABLE 38.6: *Vertical Conjuncts (in order of second member)*

സ s	+	ക k	=	സ്ക sk	സ്കന്ധം	skandham	'shoulder'
ച c	+	ഛ ch	=	ഛച cch	അച്ഛൻ	acchan	'father'
ജ j	+	ജ j	=	ജ്ജ jj	മജ്ജ	majja	'lymph'
ട t	+	ട t	=	ട്ത tt	അട്ടി	aṭṭi	'pile'
ഷ ṣ	+	ട t	=	ഷ്ട ṣṭ	കഷ്ടം	kaṣṭam	'difficulty'
ഡ ḍ	+	ഡ ḍ	=	ഡ്ഡ ḍḍ	ഇഡ്ഡലി	iḍḍali	'kind of cake'
ഷ ṣ	+	ണ ṇ	=	ഷ്ണ ṣṇ	കഷ്ണം	kaṣṇam	'piece'
പ p	+	ത t	=	പ്ത pt	സമാപ്തി	samāpti	'completion'
ബ b	+	ദ d	=	ബ്ദ bd	ശബ്ദം	śabdham	'noise'
സ s	+	ന n	=	സ്ന sn	സ്നേഹം	snēham	'love'
പ p	+	പ p	=	പ്ത pp	അപ്പം	appam	'(sweet) bread'
ക k	+	ല l	=	ക്ല kl	ക്ലേശം	klēśam	'pain'
പ p	+	സ s	=	പ്സ ps	അപ്സര	apsara	'celestial dancer'
സ s	+	സ s	=	സ്സ ss	മനസ്സ്	manasā	'mind'

TABLE 38.7: *Horizontal Conjuncts*

ക k	+	ക k	=	ക്ക kk	പകം	pakkam	'side'
ക k	+	ത t	=	ക്ത kt	ശക്തി	śakti	'power'
ങ ṅ	+	ക k	=	ങ്ക ṅk	പങ്ക	pañka	'fan'
ങ ṅ	+	ങ ṅ	=	ങ്ങ ṅṅ	ചങ്ങല	caññala	'chain'
ഞ ṅ	+	ഞ ṅ	=	ഞ്ഞ ṅṅ	കഞ്ഞി	kaññi	'rice gruel'
ഞ ṅ	+	ച c	=	ഞ്ച ṅc	അഞ്ച്	añca	'five'
ണ ṇ	+	ട t	=	ന്ത ṇṭ	ചെണ്ട	ceṇṭa	'drum'
ണ ṇ	+	ഡ ḍ	=	ന്ധ ṇḍ	മണ്ഡലം	maṇḍalam	'circle'
ത t	+	ത t	=	ത്ത tt	കത്തി	kutti	'stabbed'
ത t	+	മ m	=	ത്മ tm	ആത്മാവ്	ātmāva	'soul'
ന n	+	ത t	=	ന്ത nt	ചന്തം	cantam	'beauty'
ന n	+	ദ d	=	ന്ദ nd	ഇന്ദിര	indira	'Indira'
ന n	+	ധ dh	=	ന്ധ ndh	അന്ധൻ	andhan	'blind'
ന n	+	ന n	=	ന്ന [nn] or [nn]	മന്നൻ	mannan	'king'
ന n	+	മ m	=	ന്മ nm	നന്മ	nanma	'goodness'
മ m	+	മ m	=	മ്മ mm	ആമ്മ	amma	'mother'
ശ ś	+	ച c	=	ശ്ച śc	ആശ്ചര്യം	āścaryam	'wonder'

script is the linearization of the diacritics in such a way that a complex character can be built by a left-to-right sequence of separate sorts for the main symbol and the diacritics (TABLE 38.8).

The second innovation is the breaking up of consonant clusters into sequences of atomic characters, using either a *cillakṣaram* as in ന്മ for ന *nma*, or the diacritic ̣ (which otherwise writes [ə]) to indicate a consonant without a vowel (TABLE 38.9). Given these two changes, one would expect the modern script to become increasingly alphabetic, with each symbol representing a single segment. However, what has happened is that individual printers have opted for “modernizing” some characters but not others, thereby creating an inconsistent script with a large number of random options.

By and large, a space between two characters corresponds to a word boundary. However, Malayalam also allows a common style of writing in which the words of a phonological phrase are strung together such that the space between letters corresponds to a pause. For example, a *cillakṣaram*, as stated earlier, appears before a pause. When a sonorant consonant is followed by vowels in the same phonological phrase, the *cillakṣaram* is replaced by a regular character (TABLE 38.10). Similar observations apply to the encoding of phonological processes across words such as shwa insertion, glide insertion, gemination, nasal deletion, and so on (Mohanan 1986). The results of these processes are quite often represented in the script. When this happens, there is no space between the two words that participate in the phonological process.

The numerals are shown in TABLE 38.11.

TABLE 38.8: *Simplified Characters*

	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>
pra	പ്ര	പ്ര
pu	പു	പു
pū	പൂ	പൂ
p̄	പ̄	പ̄

TABLE 38.9: *Simplified Consonant Clusters*

	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>
kta	ക്ത	ക്ത
nta	ന്ത	ന്ത (with <i>cillakṣaram</i>)
nma	ന്മ	ന്മ (with <i>cillakṣaram</i>)
pna	പ്ന	പ്ന
ṣpa	ഷ്പ	ഷ്പ
ska	സ്ക	സ്ക

TABLE 38.10: *Spelling at Phrase Break*

<i>In Pause</i>			<i>Scriptio Continua</i>		
അവൻ	avan	'he'	അവനതാ	avanatā	'He is there.'
അവൾ	aval	'she'	അവളെവിടെ	avaleviṭe	'Where is she?'
മലർ	malar	'popped rice'	മലരായി	malarāyi	'The popped rice is ready.'

TABLE 38.11: *Numerals*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
൧	൨	൩	൪	൫	൬	൭	൮	൯	൦

SAMPLE OF MALAYALAM

1. *Malayalam:* ആഹാരം നിയന്ത്രിച്ചിട്ടും വ്യായാമം കുട്ടിയിട്ടും
 2. *Transliteration:* āhāram niyantricciṭṭum vyāyāmam kūtṭiyiṭṭum
 3. *Transcription:* a:ɦa:ɾam ɳijaɳɾitɾiṭṭum vja:jɑ:mam ku:ɿɿiɿiṭṭum
 4. *Gloss:* food controlled.despite exercise increased.despite

1. എന്തുകൊണ്ടാണ് ഹൃദ്രോഗത്തിനൊരു കടിഞ്ഞാൻ വീഴാത്തത്?
 2. entukonṭāṇa hṛd̥rōgattinoru kaṭiṅṅāṇ viḷāttata
 3. enṭukonṭa:ṇa hri:ɽro:gattinoru kaṭiɳɳa:ṇ vi:ɿɑ:ttat̪
 4. what.with.is heart.disease.ACC.one harness fall.not.it

1. ദിനംപ്രതി അത് കൂടുതലാളുകളെ അടിമകളാക്കിക്കൊണ്ടിരിക്കുകയുമാണ്.
 2. dinamprati at̪ kūt̪utalāḷukaḷe aṭimakaḷākkikkonṭirikkukayumaṅ.
 3. ḍinampraṭi aṭi ku:ɿuṭala:ḷukaḷe aṭimakaḷɑ:k̪kikkonṭirikk̪ukajuma:ṇ
 4. day.every it more.people.ACC slaves.make.have.continue.also.is

1. ആരാണിതിനു പിന്നിലെ വില്ലൻ?
 2. āraṇiṭinu pinnile villan?
 3. a:ɾa:ṇiṭinu pinnile villan
 4. who.is.its behind.LOC.ACC villain

'Despite controlling diet and increasing exercise, why is it that heart disease has not been restrained? Rather, it continues to enslave more and more people each day. Who is the villain behind this?' — Vasudevan 1994: 40.