Our alphabets for our language
`Rachana` and the renaissance of the original Malayalam script

Dr. Mammen Chundamannil
Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi, Thrissur

Malayalam has a special place in the classification of world languages. It is from Tamil that Malayalam was born. Tamil is the most important among Dravidian languages. However, it is from the traditions of Sanskrit, the Indo-Aryan language, that Malayalam draws its rich diversity of words and compound alphabets (conjuncts). This dynamic synthesis of diversities has been achieved by no other Indian languages.

It was in 1821 that Benjamin Bailey, a Jesuit priest, designed the first Malayalam metal types for the printing machine. From the basic 56 characters, he forged around 600 conjuncts in beautiful metal type. These letters adopted by Benjamin Bailey were in use for hundreds of years in Malayalam script. Later Herman Gundert designed and added several conjuncts. And the Malayalam language came to possess about 900 unique and rich type characters. These two pioneers were also authorities on comparative linguistics of Indian languages. Thereby the design of Malayalam characters and types naturally encompassed pan Indian and local specificities.

Printing and publishing in Kerala owes its origin to the efforts of these two pioneers. The people of Kerala recognise their language and have become the most literate of communities by learning and using these script. That this character set developed by them have survived and spread extensively during the past one and a half centuries shows their wide acceptance and faithfulness to the original script. During this time Malayalam language and literature reached its fullness and self sufficiency and attained a prime position among Indian languages.

During early 1970s this sophisticated and systematised Malayalam language suffered a serious setback. This was the time typewriters started appearing on office tables. The demand for adopting Malayalam as the official language also became strong during this time. Considering the need for typing office files and correspondence, the nearly 900 characters of Malayalam language was reduced to just 90 to fit into the keyboard of a typewriter. Even some of the fundamental vowel signs were excised. The most aesthetic and functionally superior Malayalam language was trashed without any logic or sensitivity to history. The stable structure attained by Malayalam script suffered cracks and several incongruities developed even in the semantic level. This fatal programme was led by a government agency,

the Kerala Language Institute. This denial of history and corruption of its language is an excellent example of the ominous threats on the culture and continuity of the malayali society.

The script modernisation committee while submitting its recommendation to the government in 1969 had clearly insisted that "the revised character set should be used only in typewriting and printing and should not be used for teaching children". Contrary to this, the truncated alphabets appeared in the Malayalam text book of primary class 1, leading the future generations of students to strange and dubious language capabilities.

When computerised typesetting (DTP) became popular in 1980s several software packages and fonts emerged. Several font designers, working in institutions outside Kerala and ignorant of Malayalam language, designed conjuncts casually, generating contradictory character mapping which is not found in any other languages. This is the greatest example of how an integrated and stable alphabet set of a language which survived for centuries can become disarrayed and incoherent.

It was in response to this non-systemisation of Malayalam that a campaign under the banner `Rachana` (which means 'Graceful Writing') led by Mr. Chitranja Kumar was launched with the following objectives.

- ൠ The unique character set developed by a people over centuries, together, transcending class divisions is not just a geometrical sign but the symbol of a culture.

- ൠ The return to the original script is the only way to surmount the disintegration of Malayalam language learning, comprehension, writing and printing.

- ൠ A language should be revised and modernised when deficiencies are observed in use and communication. And not based on the limitations of a transient historical phenomenon of a typewriter machine.

- ൠ Modern information technology has made it possible to include and manage the exhaustive character set of Malayalam in any application. Rather than cut the alphabets to fit a machine, technology should be tamed to serve the language.

- ൠ The original Malayalam alphabets should be made ready for use in the modern language technology. The current information technology is perfectly suitable for this task.

The people of Kerala have welcomed the initiative of Rachana wholeheartedly. Leading intellectuals, literary stalwarts and journalists have supported the venture. Even students brought up with the truncated alphabets have come forward for the original alphabets offered by Rachana. During the last four years several books have been published using the Rachana editor. The autobiography of Guru Nityachaithanya Yeti is one among them. The Ramayana of Ezhuthachan, who is considered the father of Malayalam language,

has also been published in Rachana. The Malayalam Bible published in 19th century is being reprinted in the original script using Rachana currently.

Conjuncts formed by GA, DHA, DHHA, REPHAM and Consonant-Vowels, showing the exhaustiveness of Rachana character set
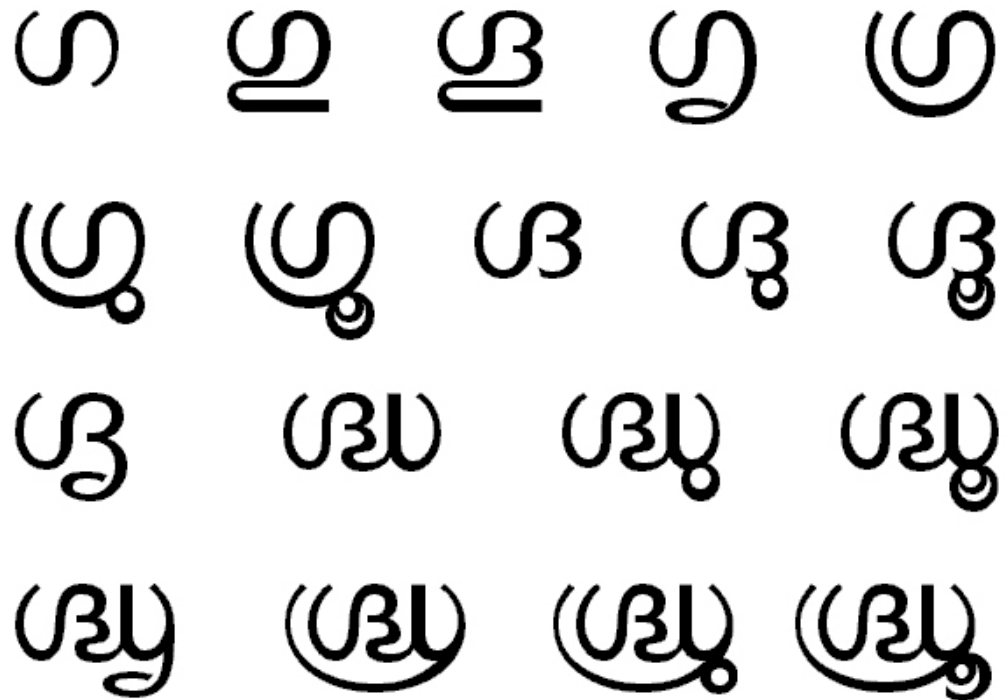
There are only a handful of critics of Rachana. They argue that computer memory is insufficient to accommodate the 900 odd character set of Malayalam!. The Kerala Language Institute is still stuck in the typewriter age. They are unable to comprehend contemporary developments in technology and the future course of history.

Rachana is fully confident and optimistic. The Rachana team and its well-wishers believe that the entire malayali people share their aspirations. They believe that strength and aesthetics of Malayalam will become more and more evident with the developments in IT. The most noted thinker of contemporary Kerala Prof. M.N. Vijayan has commented on Rachana thus, "Rachana is the most meaningful endeavour in the search for the cultural identity of the malayali people in this age of globalisation".

With the declaration of Rachana font under GPL (General Public Licence), the original Malayalam script become the common property of all malayalis and the whole of humanity. Application using the original script in the GNU-Linux platform will induce far reaching results in language computing and localisation. Government agencies still shackled

in the truncated character set of Malayalam will not be able to ignore the developments that will blossom forth with the combined enterprise of Rachana and GNU- Linux. They will have to come around and join the people who ultimately own their language.