The Birth of a Typeface

Examining the idea of a typeface and the three stages in its life cycle

Hashim P M

Presented at Typography Day 2011
NID, Ahmedabad
The Idea of a Typeface in Malayalam
Malayalam stone inscription displayed at Arakkal Museum, Kannur.
Malayalam script written on palm leaves.
Pages from *Samkshepa Vedartham*, the first book printed in Malayalam from Rome.
Malayalam Bible printed with type cut under Benjamin Bailey’s supervision. Bailey reduced the character set from 1000 to 500.
Initial letterforms were crude and misaligned.
Over time Malayalam typedesign got standardised and regularised.
Many Malayalam typefaces were designed within Kerala and in Madras and Pune during foundry days.
“The old fellows stole all of our best ideas.”

Frederic Goudy
Script reforms in Malayalam reduced the characterset from 500 to 150 and split the complex script into components.
Script reforms in Malayalam split the complex vertical and horizontal conjuncts into linear components.
1980–90’s

Monotype

Linotype

Photoypesetting and DTP systems standardised the letter forms further, but made different keyboard standards.
Malayalam Letterforms have evolved over years, but the skeleton of the alphabet has remained largely unchanged.
“A typeface in any script is a complex blend of historical influences and personal preferences.”

Sebastian Carter
The Life cycle of a Typeface
1. Conception

2. Execution

3. Release
1. Conception
“The important ingredients of type design are conventionality and formality, combined with just the right dose of the designer’s personality and with that, inevitably, a sprinkling of time.”

Gerard Unger
A type designer in Malayalam script has to make a few **choices** if he/she chooses to make a typeface from scratch.
Serifs, alien to Malayalam script are being adopted increasingly in display typography for the sake of variety.
a. Designed to solve a problem
b. Revive an old typeface
c. Inspired by Roman typefaces
d. Inspiration from other sources
e. Hybrid Typefaces
f. Self-expression
g. Cloning
a. Designing for a particular purpose
Vartha was designed to serve as Malayala Manorama’s headline typeface.
Vartha has larger x-height, shorter ascenders and descenders, and overlapping conjuncts.
Thumba was designed for on-screen legibility for a CD-ROM for D C Books and was later adopted as their corporate typeface.
Thumba is an open monoweight typeface well suited for low resolutions.
Thumba has become the corporate Malayalam typeface for D C Books.
b. Reviving an old typeface for contemporary use
“Type designers are often found backward looking.”

Alec Wilkinson
Garamond has revived and reinterpreted many times over the last centuries.
“This is the crucial paradox of type design imitation, and the force which drives type design evolution. A designer skilled and knowledgeable enough to perceive and render all the subtle nuances of another master craftsman is really too good to do a slavish copy. A master designer will inevitably transform an imitation into a creative act, which will give the new design true individuality.”

Charles Bigelow
Vasupradhip’s display typeface in Malayalam has been adapted to many technologies and revived many times.
c. Inspired by Roman Typefaces
Roman typefaces have been a fountain of inspiration for several Malayalam typefaces.
Some of my type designs based on the squared Roman models.
d. Inspiration from other sources
Jyotsna, seems to be inspired by tendrils of plants.
Saakshi is inspired by left-wing wall grafitti.
e. Hybrid Typefaces
Keli combines a few features from Thumbera and Chirutha.
Pingala takes inspiration from DIN, Meta and Interstate to make a contemporary Malayalam typeface.
Pingala has been used in a spiritual magazine as well as an auto magazine in Malayalam.
f. Self-expression
Script typefaces are often self-expressive.
Ravivarma is based on broad-nib calligraphy while Thulasi is based on casual writing style in Malayalam.
Calligraphic trials for Ravivarma.
More script faces in Malayalam
g. Cloning
Linotype Manorama has many clones in many names.
2. Execution
“Identify the problem, like space-saving, bad paper, low-resolution, on-screen use, then find typefaces that almost work but could be improved. Study them. Note the approaches and failings. Sleep on it, then start sketching without looking at anything else.”

Erik Spierkermann
The initial sketches of *Thumba*. 
Many letters share many common parts which can be designed first.
Letters take shape by manipulating the control points carefully.
“I think a good analogy might be a sculptor, working with a huge piece of marble. The sculptor has an idea to make something, and when he’s chiselled the basic image, then the very last part—getting every fingernail and detail perfect—probably takes a long, long time.”

Robert Slimbach
Fine-tuning Thumba.
“The heavy lifting begins when the alphabet is finished. I begin then to see how the letters go together to make words, how they line up next to each other, how they sit on the page of the screen, how they work with the punctuation and the symbols. I print up to forty or so pages, and when I first see them I feel suicidal. Nothing is working. If it isn’t working, I don’t necessarily know immediately why it isn’t. It simply looks bad...
...Then starts the long process of going back and making changes here and there. You change something one day, and the next day you change it back, because you realise that it wasn’t the problem. Nothing gets better, you despair, until one day you’re looking—you’ve changed something small—and you realise suddenly you’re looking at a typeface.”

Mathew Carter
Expanding the family.
Technical Constraints of using software meant to handle the Roman Script
Different keymaps and keyboard standards have hampered type development in Malayalam.
Different Formats
PostScript, TrueType, OpenType

Different Keyboard Standards
Inscript, Manorama, Mathrubhumi...
Microsoft’s Kartika sets the clock back by a few centuries.
3. Release
1970's–90's

ITC released their fonts with much fanfare.

rrc released their fonts with much fanfare.
Aarcha the new display typeface for Malayala Manorama replaced Vartha and is still in use.
Unniyarcha, design of a new text typeface
Aaracha and Unniyarcha in use in Malayala Manorama Daily.
Redesign of Mathrubhumi’s text typeface
New **Display** and **Text typefaces** in use in Mathrubhumi daily.
“Type design moves at the pace of the most conservative reader. The good type designer therefore realises that, for a new fount to be successful, it has to be so good that only very few recognise its novelty.”

Stanley Morrison
Type design is rarely, if ever, about being wholly original.

Type designs may get revived, remixed or even cloned later. Some type designs may even inspire others to design their own.

But the skeleton of the alphabet remains largely unchanged.
and the cycle of birth and rebirth continues...

Thank You