

Feedback on preliminary proposal for Devanagari letter numerals

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W.r.t. L2/17-010 and any similar proposals that may arise, I submit that these are not valid candidates for encoding. This is a known system of numerals called akṣarapallī that I already rejected for encoding. I quote myself from my Malayalam fractions proposal L2/13-051R pp 9-11:

It is to be noted that this akṣarapallī system was evidently devised by scholars who needed to include numbers into verses. For instance, mathematical or astronomical treatises would require an easy way of representing numbers (rather than by their full words), and the fact that a great amount of Sanskrit scientific literature is in the form of metered verse would require that letters be used and also restrict their count.

Thus the letter forms (whether simple letters or ligatures) which were most similar to the separate written forms of the numbers were used to denote those numbers in the olden days. (Ref: Appendix on Palaeography in “South Indian Temple Inscriptions”, T N Subramanian, Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras, 1953-1957, p 1567.)

Thus, the specific letter forms came to be associated with the specific numbers and this notation continued to be used even after the shapes of the letter forms and those of the digits diverged in their separate evolutions. As a result, not only in Malayalam but old Indic manuscripts in other Indic scripts exhibit this system of denoting numbers too.

Therefore this is to be merely seen as a re-use of letter forms and hence does not warrant separate encoding.

The above-mentioned epigraphy work by T N Subramanian specifically mentions the use in Devanagari manuscripts and clarifies that the shapes actually are those of the letters or ligatures of the period which were most similar to the numeral forms:

This system is used in North India only for numbering the leaves of manuscripts. The figures in the earlier manuscripts resemble the numerals of those days. But in the later day manuscripts the forms of these letters differ very much from the forms of the numerals then in use.

Thus it would not be appropriate to encode letter numerals for Devanagari or any other Indic script. If there were distinct written forms for 10, 100 etc, they may be encoded, but not these.