

Request for annotations to be added to Malayalam NNNA and TTTA

Shriramana Sharma, jamadagni-at-gmail-dot-com

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N3494 (L2/08-325) has requested for two characters to be added to the Malayalam block: 0D29 Malayalam Letter NNNA and 0D3A Malayalam Letter TTTA. We are informed that this proposal has been accepted. The current document is a request for annotations to be added to these new characters to clarify that they are not in widespread use in Malayalam.

Absence of these characters in widespread usage

N3494 has said that these characters “are used in scholarly orthography which distinguishes the alveolar sounds”. However, it would seem that apart from A R Rajaraja Varma’s Kerala Panineeyam (cited as reference by N3494) and the two other documents – Reinhold Grünendahl’s study of Sanskrit manuscripts in South Indian scripts and Thomas Pedersen’s document on transliteration of Malayalam (both also cited as reference by N3494) – which merely follow Varma, these characters are used nowhere else by the Malayalam community, whether in common or scholarly contexts.

This is borne out by the inability of N3494 to present any other attestations for these characters and the following statement of Rajeev Sebastian in his mails to the indic@unicode.org mailing list:

these characters ... have not been accepted by the community and have no attestation. (2009-Sep-18 23:33 +0530)

few to none scholars use these characters to record this information ... Attestation doesnt mean "encode every character created by anyone". It means that such character has been in use for a period of time by any set of people. The set can be as large as an entire population or as small as a set of scholars, but the point is that it has be widely accepted within that community. The proposal for NNNA and TTTA does not pass this test. (2009-Sep-19 04:27 +0530)

Rajeev Sebastian bases his statements on feedback from Messrs Chitrajakumar and Gangadharan both of whom are apparently recognized Malayalam scholars and have previously submitted researched documents to the UTC regarding Malayalam.

In fact, the very originator of these characters, A R Rajaraja Varma states (and this is a rough translation from the original Malayalam to be found at <http://ml.wikisource.org/wiki/കേരളപാണിനിയം/പീഠിക/അക്ഷരമാല>): “The alveolar ‘na’ currently does not have a

distinct letterform in the alphabet. The letter ᵑ is used for both dental and alveolar ‘na’.” Thus it is clear that these are not a natural part of the script. They are an artificial construct like the IPA but they never gained widespread acceptance unlike the IPA.

Annotations to be added to the characters

Despite the arguments for not encoding, others have pointed out that if someone has seen the need for these distinct letters in Malayalam, others may also see fit to use them in the future, as John Hudson said in his reply to Rajeev Sebastian on 2009-Sep-19 06:11 +0530:

... scholars ... have special character requirements, and ... characters that have very limited use (including characters that occur in a single text). ... these characters have been used to make this linguistic distinction, and other users may wish to use them for this purpose. ...

Therefore it would be appropriate, while encoding these characters, to clarify that these have neither archaic nor current widespread use and are provided solely for their potential use as suggested by some Malayalam scholars (specifically, A R Rajaraja Varma).

In my personal experience, a lot of people who are not native users of Indic scripts get misconceptions about the usage of Indic characters based on their names given in the Unicode chart. Therefore annotations are very important to avert such misconceptions.

I hence suggest that the following annotations be added:

0D29 Malayalam Letter NNNA:

- rare use instead of 0D29 ᵑ for alveolar ‘na’

0D3A Malayalam Letter TTTA:

- rare use instead of 0D31 ᵐ for alveolar ‘ta’