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Visual Voices of Kerala's Politics:

A Study of Hand-Painted Political Graffiti.

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Abstract: The visual anthropology of political engagements in India reflects evolving political attitudes and serves as a dynamic cultural phenomenon. In Kerala, hand-painted political graffiti captures contemporary events, collective sentiments, and design trends, often paralleling print media and cinema. This study explores and categorizes Malayalam letterforms in political graffiti across urban centres in eight of Kerala's districts, focusing on regional nuances, visual attributes, and stylistic trends. Artisan interviews provide insights into the craft's evolution, challenges, and the shift toward digital media. Originally a promotional tool for left-wing communist parties, political graffiti in Kerala now encompasses a broader civic discourse but faces decline due to limited space and the rise of digital media. This research underscores the importance of documenting and preserving Kerala's vibrant yet fading tradition of hand-painted political graffiti as a testament and a symbol to its rich socio-political history and visual culture.

Key words: *Hand-Painted Graffiti, Street Graffiti, Malayalam Script, Malayalam Letterforms, Malayalam Lettering Styles, Malayalam Typography, Visual Culture of Kerala, Graffiti Culture of Kerala, Visual Language of Indian Politics, Street Visual Politics.*

1. Introduction

Hand-painted political graffiti is not merely a representation of political events, but it is a cultural phenomenon that captures the sentiments of the populace, its visual language and acts as a catalogue of design trends followed in print, news-media, cinema and other public communication of a particular time. This temporary colourful instance is used to promote political campaigns, gatherings, marches or local meetings.

Hand-painted political graffiti bridges art, politics, and public communication and provides insight into the socio-political landscape of the region. This study documents and categorizes the letterforms found within political hand-painted graffiti across urban

centres in eight of Kerala's fourteen districts in Malayalam script, focusing on their visual and anatomical attributes. The study also included interviews with artisans who are engaged in the domain to understand their attitudes towards the craft and projections towards its future in the face of digital mediums.



Figure.1 Collage of graffiti found in Kerala.

These letterforms found in Kerala's political graffiti are vastly undocumented and unstudied - decades of visual culture may already be lost to time. What began as a practice followed by the left-wing was adopted by other parties, pouring in their distinct flavours. The study revealed profound differences in how the craft is executed across the urban sectors of the documented districts. There is a noticeable decline in the use of hand-painted graffiti in some districts in comparison to the atmosphere before the rise of digital media. With limited wall space available and with urban spaces shifting towards digital media, this culture of political artistry risks becoming a relic of the past in many city centres.

2. The Evolution and Expression of Malayalam Script

'Dravidian' is the family of language common to Kerala and the other South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. Today, despite similar roots, their languages are distinct and not mutually comprehensible. Palaeographic and epigraphic studies and copious writing styles reveal the gradual evolution of these scripts (S.J.Mangalam, 1988).

Evolution of 'a', 'e' & 'u' through the eras

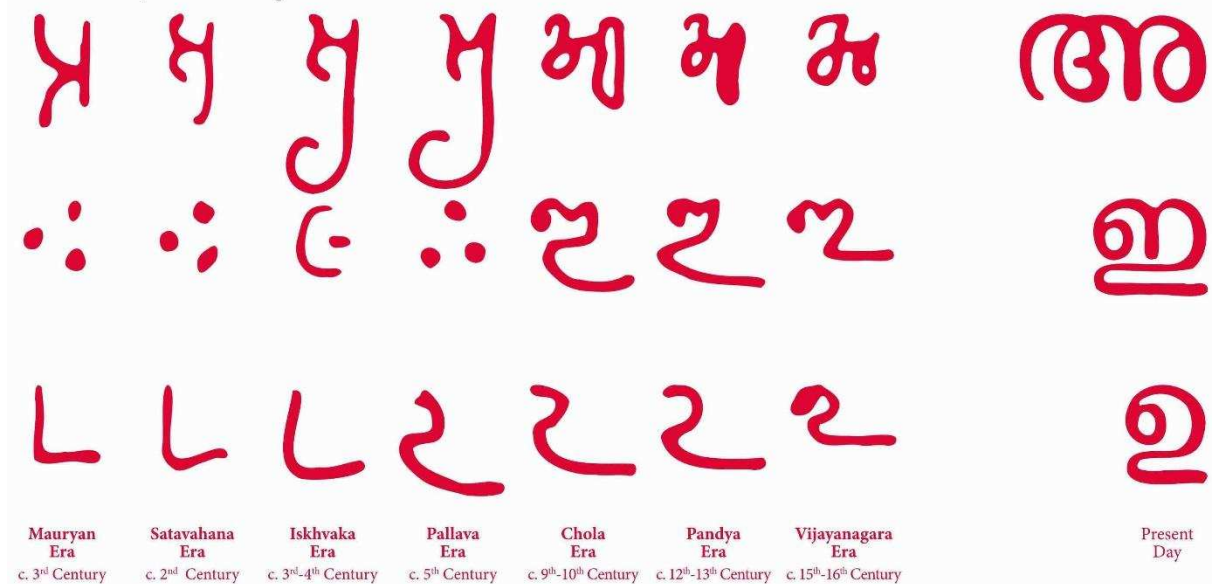


Figure.2 Evolution of Malayalam letters 'A', 'E' & 'U' through different ages.

2.1. Brahmi Script

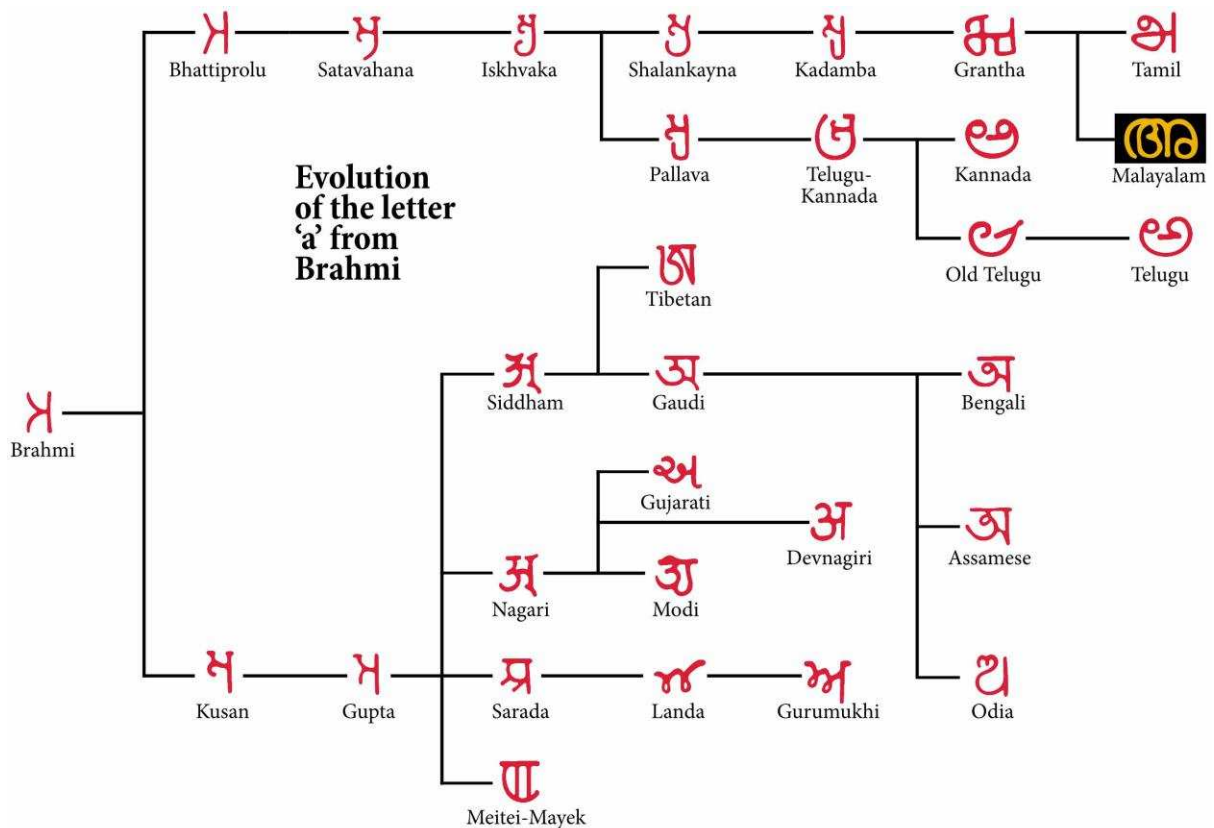


Figure.3 Evolution of Brahmi into regional languages.

Emperor Ashoka's edicts (c. 3rd-4th century BCE) were the earliest written records from South India with the script having stylistic regional variations. Mauryan Brahmi

evolved into Bhattiprolu, then Ikshvaku and by 6th century, its derivatives transcribed Prakrit and Sanskrit with regional adoptions. Telugu and Kannada originally shared a script while Tamil matured independently. Grantha characters influenced Tulu and Malayalam. By 7th-10th centuries CE, Tamil and Malayalam adopted more retroflex fricatives within the Dravidian linguistic tradition (S.J.Mangalam, 1988).

2.2. Grantha Script

The Pallavas developed the Grantha script from 7th century CE to transcribe Sanskrit as local scripts like Vattezhuthu and Tamil lacked necessary phonetic elements. Under the Cholas in 11th century, Grantha adopted rounded forms (Figure.2). Regional scripts were influenced over time, leading to Eastern Grantha (Tamil Nadu) and Western Grantha (Malabar, Karnataka). Whilst Eastern Grantha remains in limited use by Vedic scholars, Western Grantha gradually evolved into the modern Malayalam script (S.J.Mangalam, 1988; Nair, 2017).

2.3. Tamil Script

Ancient Tamil made use of two scripts: Chera-Pandya (which evolved into Vattezhuthu) and Pallava-Chola (Tamil/Grantha-Tamil). Used for palm-leaf inscriptions, Vattezhuthu had a rounded, cursive style and Pallava-Chola contained linear forms linked to Grantha and Malayalam. Tamil script replaced Vattezhuthu through reforms by Chola Emperor Rajaraja I and was standardized as a more readable style across his territories (S.J.Mangalam, 1988).

2.4. Malayalam Script

The origin of Malayalam is a point of contention. Broadly, there are three linguistic phases:

- **Old Malayalam:** Developed distinct traits around 10th century and became an independent language by 12th century. Made use of Vattezhuthu and Kolezhuthu scripts, incorporating Grantha for Sanskrit Phonemes (Figure.5).
- **Middle Malayalam:** Heavily Influenced by Tamil until 12th-13th century. Manipravalam (a combination of Sanskrit and Old Malayalam) period that followed, showed a Sanskrit influx; the influence waned leading to 16th century (Figure.5).
- **Modern Malayalam:** Beginning with Ezhuthachan (father of modern Malayalam), from 16th century, arya-ezhuthu script aids in the eventual standardization of the Malayalam script (S.J.Mangalam, 1988)(Figure.6).

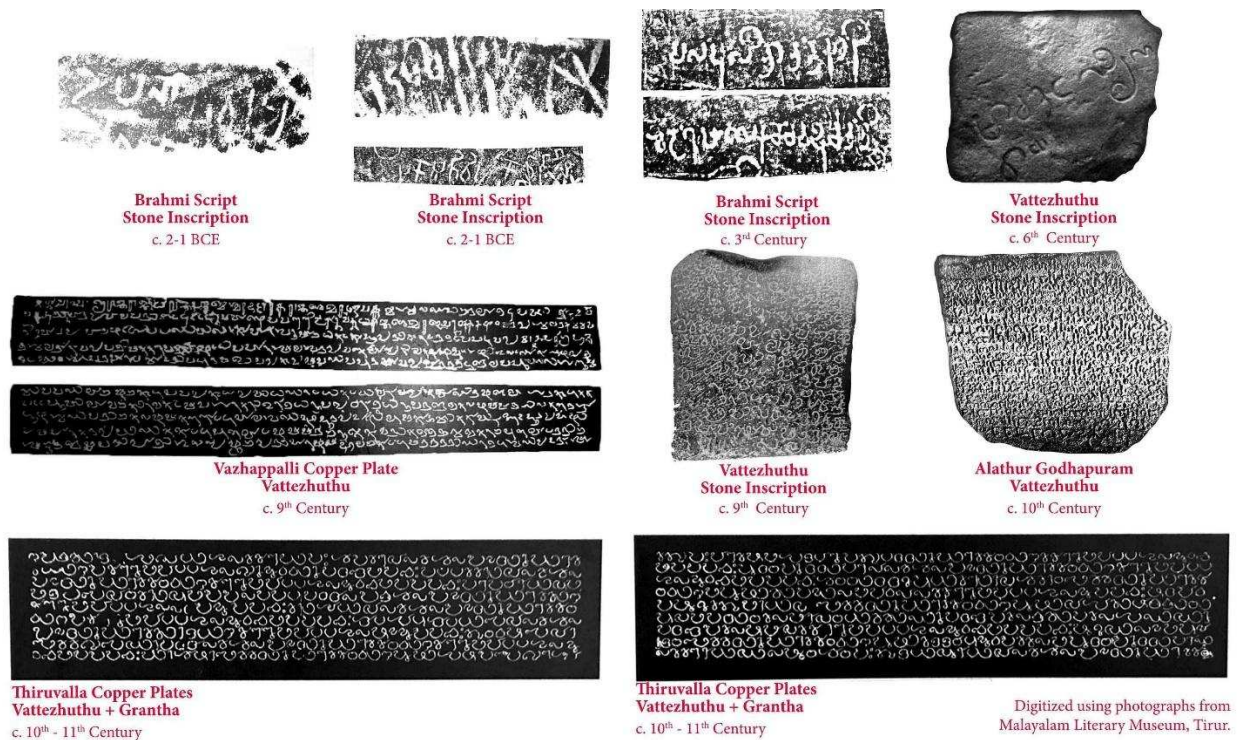


Figure.4 Evolution of script from Brahmi to Grantha to Vattezhuthu.

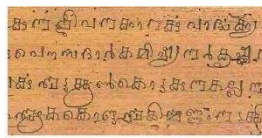


Figure.5 Evolution of script from Vattezhuthu to Kolezhuthu & Manipravalam.

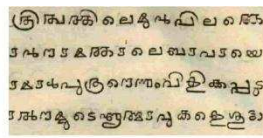
2.5. Artistic Evolution of Malayalam

Stylized writing in Kerala is tied to the tools used for writing. Vattezhuthu, inscribed on copperplates and Kolezhuthu, written on palm leaves with an ezhuthaani (stylus) resulted in mono-linear/mono-weight letterforms. Ink pens maintained this effect. Modulated and ornamental writing emerged with calligraphy (Ramakrishnan, 2023). Yet

Calligraphy is a recent development of visualizing Malayalam (Bhattathiri & Bhattathiri, 2020).



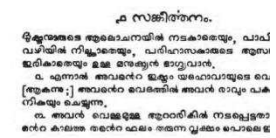
Squarish characters arising due to the stylus-on-palm-leaf medium.



Samkshepavedartham (1772) an early printed book emulating this characteristic



Ezhuthachan's manuscripts in aryazhuthu showing rounded characters.



Benjamin Bailey's Bible (1820) bringing this characteristic to print.

Selected Movie Titles from 1920-1949



Selected Movie Titles from 1950-1959



Selected Movie Titles from 1960-1969



Selected Movie Titles from 1970-1979



Selected Movie Titles from 1980-1989



Selected Movie Titles from 1990-1999



Selected Movie Titles from 2000-2009



Selected Movie Titles from 2010-2020



Figure.6 'Expressing' Malayalam.

Early Malayalam books employed inscribing on palm leaves, resulting in the letterforms having a squarish look. ‘Samkshepavedartham’ (1772), the first printed book in Malayalam, imitated this squareness (Ramakrishnan, 2023). In 1820, inspired by arya-ezhuthu manuscripts, Benjamin Bailey introduced a rounded type, shaping modern Malayalam typography (Ramakrishnan, 2023).

Early designers in the graphic/printing fields were primarily artists and calligraphers (Bhattathiri & Bhattathiri, 2020). Anoop Ramakrishnan’s collection of movie titles was used to understand the script’s graphical evolution (Figure.6). 1920s show heavily modulated letters, often misaligned and lacking standardization (P.M., 2011), which took place in 1940s when some deconstructivism was seen in matras. Stylized forms emerged in 1960s with calligraphic experimentations in 1970s. 1980s brought denser forms: blockiness, shadows and outlines. 1990s contained constructed organic forms with 2000s-2010s bringing back deconstructivism and introducing grunge and figurative lettering.

3. The Historical and Cultural Context behind Political Graffiti in Kerala

Kerala’s tradition of visual and political expression is paralleled by hand-painted political graffiti. It serves as both public discourse and a record of grassroots activism, having evolved with the state’s socio-political fabric. Political graffiti has developed its own aesthetics over time, shaped by regional nuances and ideologies of many movements.

3.1. Political Fabric of Kerala

Shaped by caste reforms, class/economic struggles and high literacy, Kerala; India’s “Political Laboratory” (Pillai, 1987) has a unique socio-political evolution. From early 20th century, moments like tenant uprisings and land reforms led to the Communist Party’s rise and the Congress’s factionalism (Fic, 1970). Interests of minorities were reflected by smaller parties that played important roles in coalition politics (Pillai, 1987). Political imagery: leader portraits to digital campaigns, reinforces loyalty towards ideologies (Anil, 2025).

3.2. Political Graffiti in Kerala

Kerala’s streets have long served as arenas for political expression, challenging social hierarchies through protests like Ayyankali Procession (1893) and Vaikom Satyagraha (1920s) (Harikrishnan, 2023). Political graffiti aligns with this legacy, transforming walls into spaces of defiance and dialogue.

Interviews with artists revealed graffiti's early role in political communication when radios and televisions were scarce. Gopal (74) attests its left-wing origins, adopted later by other parties. Mathew (56) corroborates that the scene was dominated by communist content. Many young, curious observers became participants, learning ideologies whilst assisting artists.



The entrance to a communist party office in Ernakulam depicting posters and murals of Karl Marx, Lenin, Castro and Che Guevara circa 2018.
Courtesy: Getty Images



Promotional material for a state conference in Alappuzha circa 2017.
Courtesy: Getty Images



A glimpse of 'Kottikalasam' in Kozhikode concluding the 2021 election campaigns.
Courtesy: Mathrubhumi



Remnants of a 2024 NDA election campaign along with BJP's digital posters.
Courtes: Author



An artist at work for the 2016 election campaigns.
Courtesy: Outlook Magazine



Digital flexes used in the 2021 election campaign by LDF.
Courtesy: Hindustan Times

Figure.7 Various instances of political visual culture within Kerala.

Now, graffiti has shifted from revolutionary expression to electoral promotion. With digital media's rise, engagement and traditional apprenticeships are on the decline. Yet, political graffiti persists reflecting an enduring culture of dissent and discourse even with shifting roles/visibility.

4. Artisans' Perspectives

Interviews with artisans across generations revealed insights into the evolving political graffiti scene. Artist Gopal (74, active) from Kozhikode, Mathew (65, inactive) and Janardhanan (56, active) from Ernakulam, became graffiti-artists through exposure to communism in school. Two pursued graffiti alongside other jobs owing to political commitment and one relied on it for livelihood. There exists a district guild dividing artisans into regional branches.

Artists exclusively working for a party were ideologically committed. Those dependent on graffiti for income undertook commissions from any party. Mathew treated graffiti as a hobby, Gopal flexibly worked for ideologies/client needs and Janardhanan ensured uniqueness as graffiti is his livelihood. Inspirations were cited as imagination, print-media, figurative calligraphy and film posters.

Traditionally, crushed bamboo sticks were used as brushes. Chunnam (lime plaster) was used for outlines. Early colour palettes were limited to black, yellow and red achieved using stainer paints. Later, gorilla paint mixed with resin gum was used and now modern wall paints and distempers are used. Regionally, calligraphic styles evolved organically with artists influencing each other's works and creating distinct local styles when radical deviations were avoided (Bhattathiri & Bhattathiri, 2020). Training was informal with artisans often learning on the job. The tradition of both apprenticeship and public engagement with graffiti are fading.

The artisans were divided on digital media's impact: Gopal believed in the persistence of hand-painted graffiti, Mathew foresaw decline and Janardhanan noted the struggles of artists due to fewer opportunities, changing sentiments and limited wall space (he himself has adopted assisting with digital posters). It was also noted that there are also younger artists that use social media to promote graffiti, express ideologies and experience dimensions like internet-virality.

5. Documentation and Methodology

Field visits were conducted across six districts in Kerala with residents assisting in documenting two additional districts. Data was collected from Kannur, Kozhikode, Malappuram, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kottayam, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram.

Documentation primarily included photographs that emphasized graffiti in its natural context - letterforms were later isolated. Collected material was constrained to urban areas, focusing on city centres, suburbs, highways, civil stations, transport hubs and tourist spots. All places were surveyed for 2-3 hours capturing both hand-painted political graffiti and digital flexes.

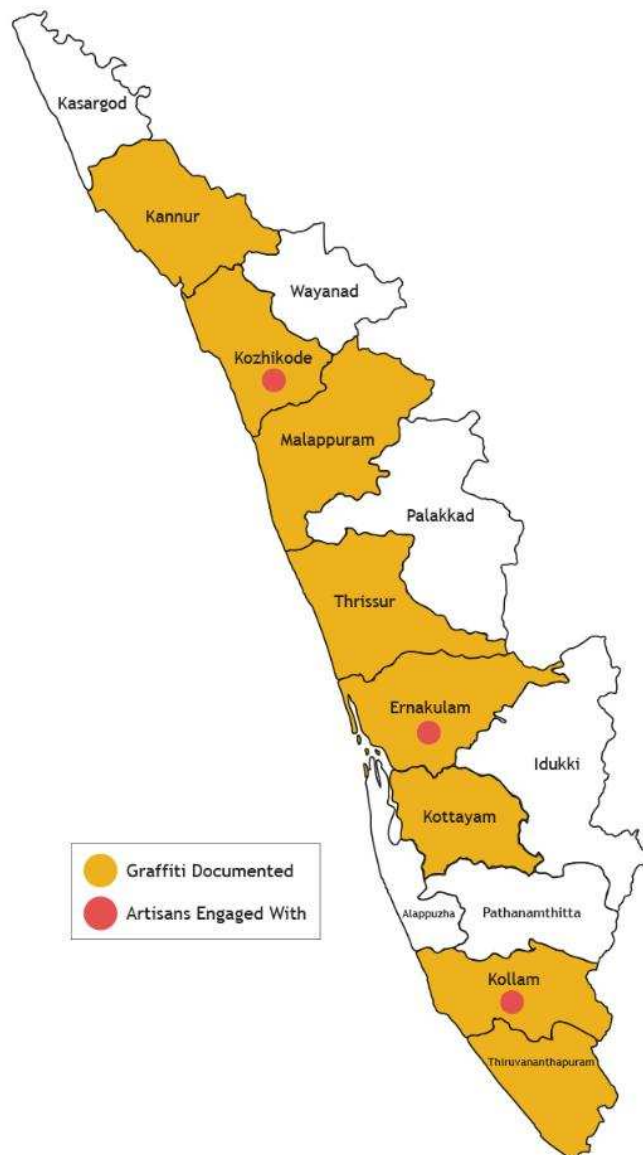


Figure.8 Map of Kerala with Documented Districts.

6. Letterform Analysis

It was inferred by sampling the letterforms that political graffiti Kerala could be broadly categorized into modulated, mono-linear and ornamental as corroborated by previous research done on street lettering styles (Kotecha & Shingre, 2018). Niche

categories were further observed within these broad categories with an emphasis laid on the ornamental categorization. Further, unique regional characteristics could be observed within each district. Political graffiti has been classed and defined as follows within the scope of this research:

- **Modulated Letterforms:** Those letterforms which possess a formulaic variation across its strokes often achieved with the aid of a tool or in other cases, the simulation of a tool being in use. (Figure.9)

The modulated letterforms observed during the documentation could be further grouped and subcategorized as **(a) Weight:** 1. Bold/Black 2. Thin **(b) Contrast:** 1. High Contrast 2. Low Contrast **(c) Proportion:** 1. Compressed/ Extended 2. Short/Elongated **(d) Shape:** 1. Rectilinear 2. Rounded **(e) Type of Tool:** 1. Broad-Edged Tip 2. Slanted Broad-Edged Tip 3. Brush Tip **(f) Structural Details and Embellishments:** 1. Serif/Spur 2. Inline/Outline **(g) Expressive:** 1. Handwritten 2. Organic 3. Decorative/Stylistic.

- **Mono-Linear Letterforms:** Those letterforms that have equal weight across their anatomy. They can also be called mono-weight letterforms. (Figure.11)

The mono-linear letterforms observed during the documentation could be further grouped and subcategorized as **(a) Weight:** 1. Bold/Black 2. Thin **(b) Proportion:** 1. Compressed/ Extended 2. Short/Elongated **(c) Shape:** 1. Rectilinear 2. Rounded **(d) Edge Treatments:** 1. Angular/Fillet **(e) Embellishments:** 1. Inline/Outline **(f) Expressive:** 1. Organic 2. Decorative.

- **Ornamental Letterforms:** Those letters that possess a flamboyant decorative quality in summation, with a tendency to be of deconstructive nature - possessing irregular stroke modulations, proportions, axes, etc. (Figure.10)

The ornamental letterforms observed during the documentation could be further grouped and subcategorized as **(a) Anatomy:** 1. Bubble Letters 2. Block Letters 3. Straight Letters **(b) Architecture:** 1. Constructed 2. Deconstructed **(c) Form:** 1. Rounded 2. Sharp/Angular 3. Techno-Angular **(d) Weight:** 1. Heavy 2. Light **(e) Structural Details and Embellishments:** 1. Serif/Spur 2. Swash 3. Outline 4. Inline 5. Shadow 6. Hollow **(f) Expressive:** 1. Illustrative/Complex 2. Script **(g) Dimensionality:** 1. 3D 2. Perspective **(h) Colour:** 1. Monochrome 2. Polychrome **(i) Technique-Based:** 1. Stencil

Classifying Modulated Graffiti Letterforms

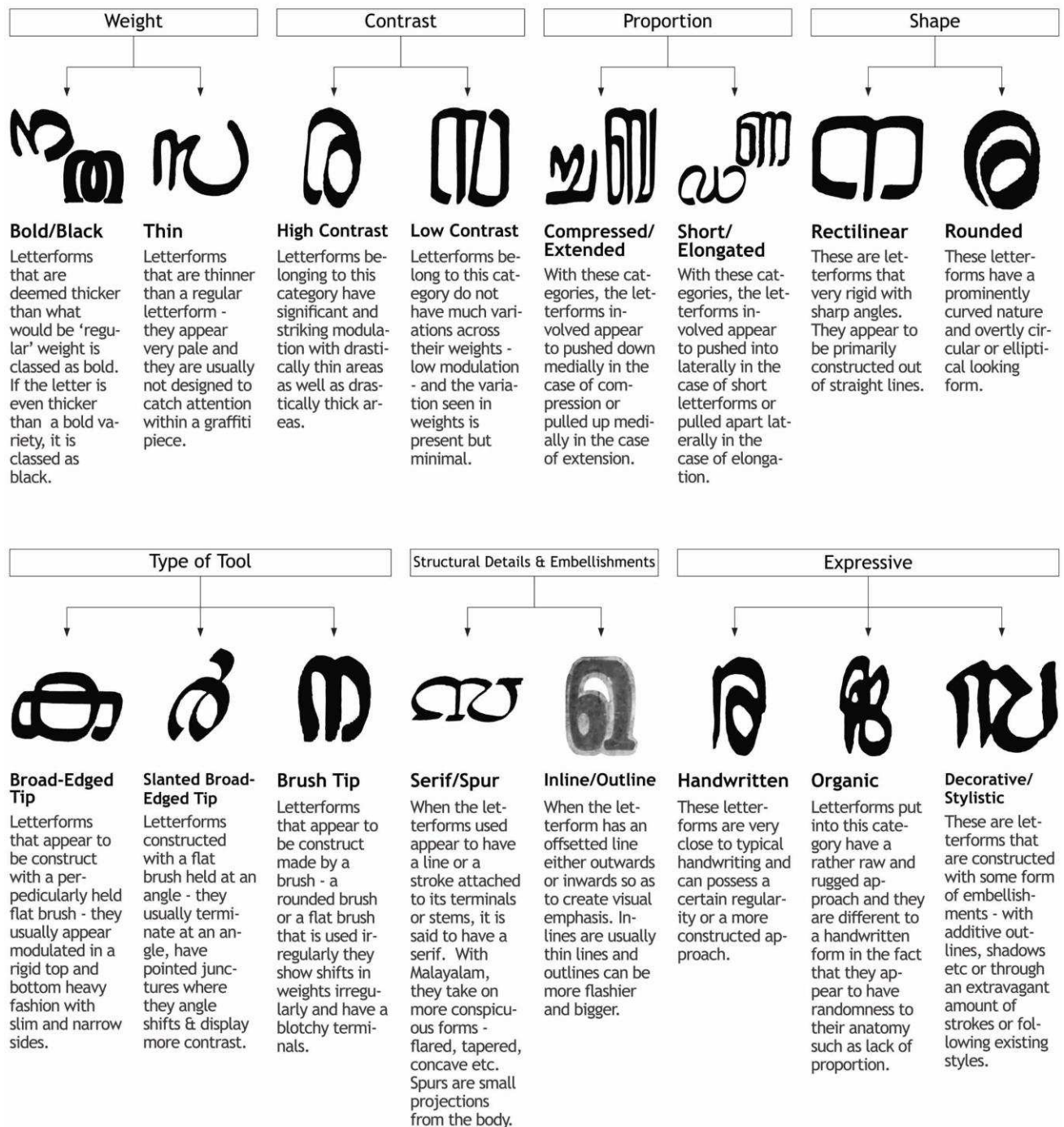


Figure.9 Modulated Graffiti Letterforms.

Classifying Ornamental Graffiti Letterforms

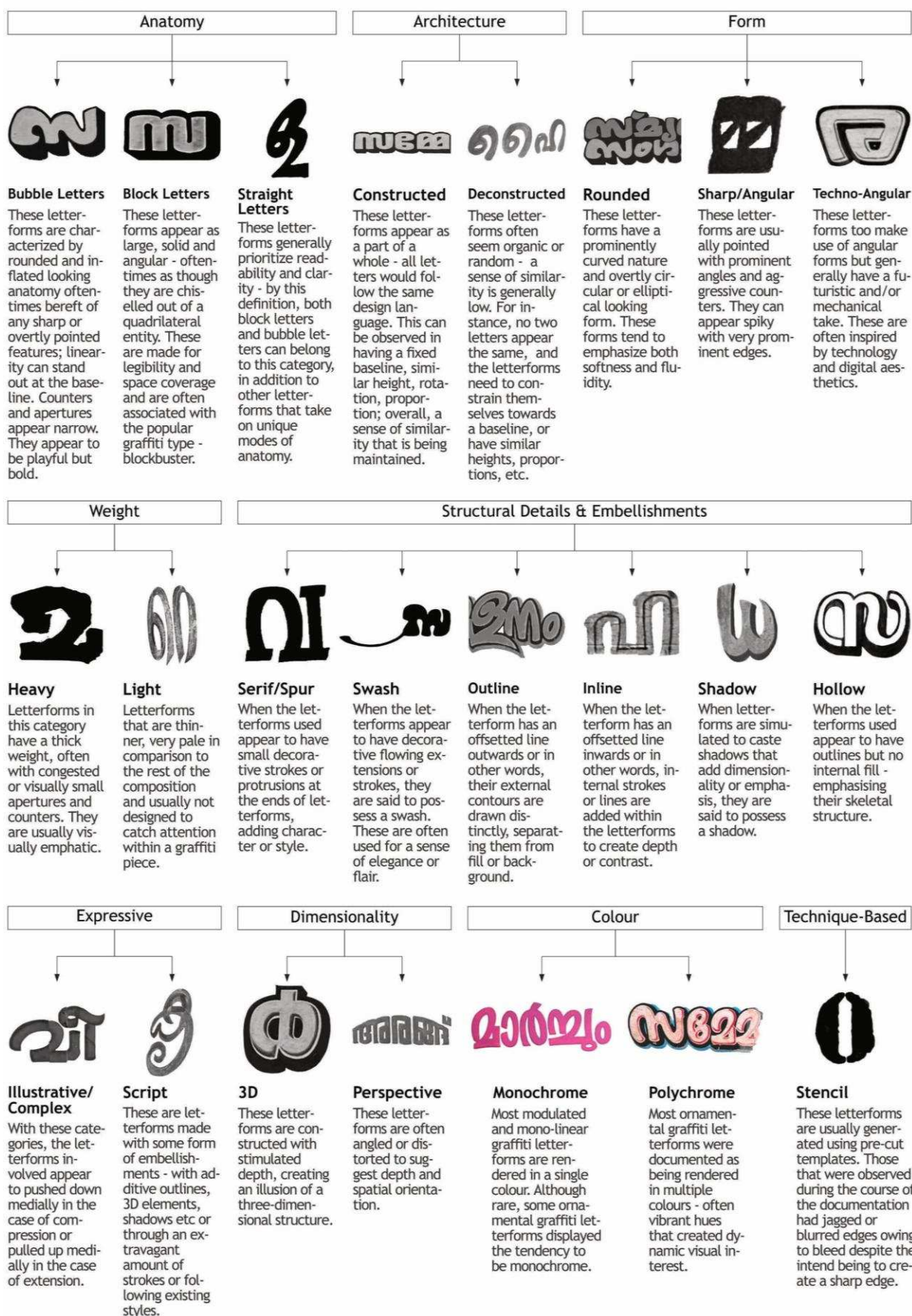


Figure.10 Ornamental Graffiti Letterforms.

Classifying Mono-Linear Graffiti Letterforms

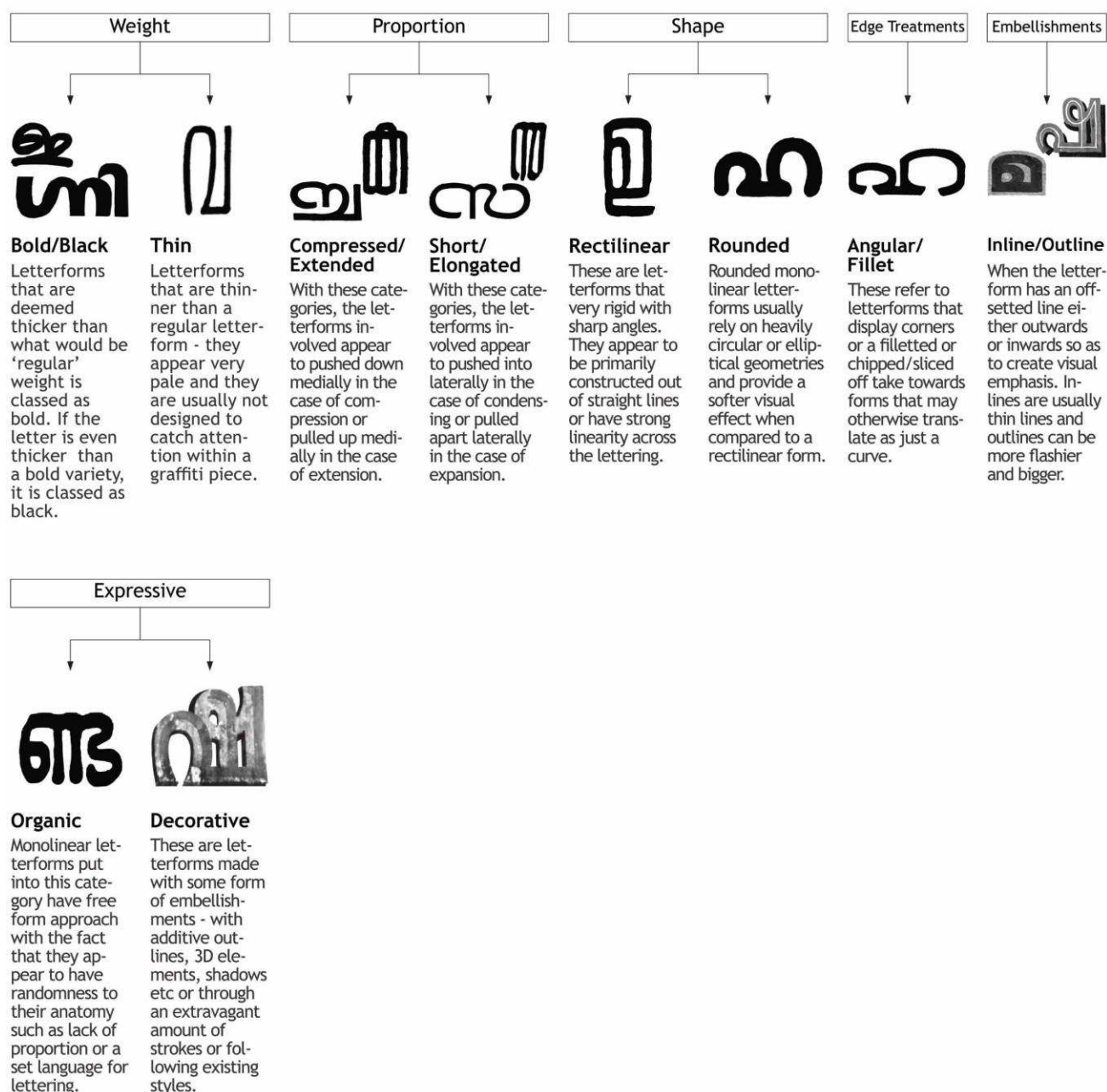


Figure.11 Mono-Linear Graffiti Letterforms.

Legend:

The following abbreviations are in use from Figure.12 - Figure.20:

BJP: Bharat Janatha Party (follows right-wing ideologies); **LFD:** Left Democratic Front (follows left-wing ideologies); **UDF:** United Democratic Front (follows centrist ideologies)

6.1. Kannur

Graffiti was found along the main roads with a thorough lack in residential areas with locals noting that elections brought an influx of flexes. Interestingly, majority of graffiti documented was non-political civil, education and religious content emulating the style of political graffiti. Graffiti observed was typically text-heavy/informational, with bold/black letterforms in dominance. A mix of modulated and mono-linear letterforms were prominent, often with heavily dense, condensed and rounded formats. High trafficked roads contained ornamental varieties often bubble letters. A rigid typology without slant employing flat brushes was prominent with scarce thin letterforms. Thin letterforms when found had a triangulated/rectilinear format.

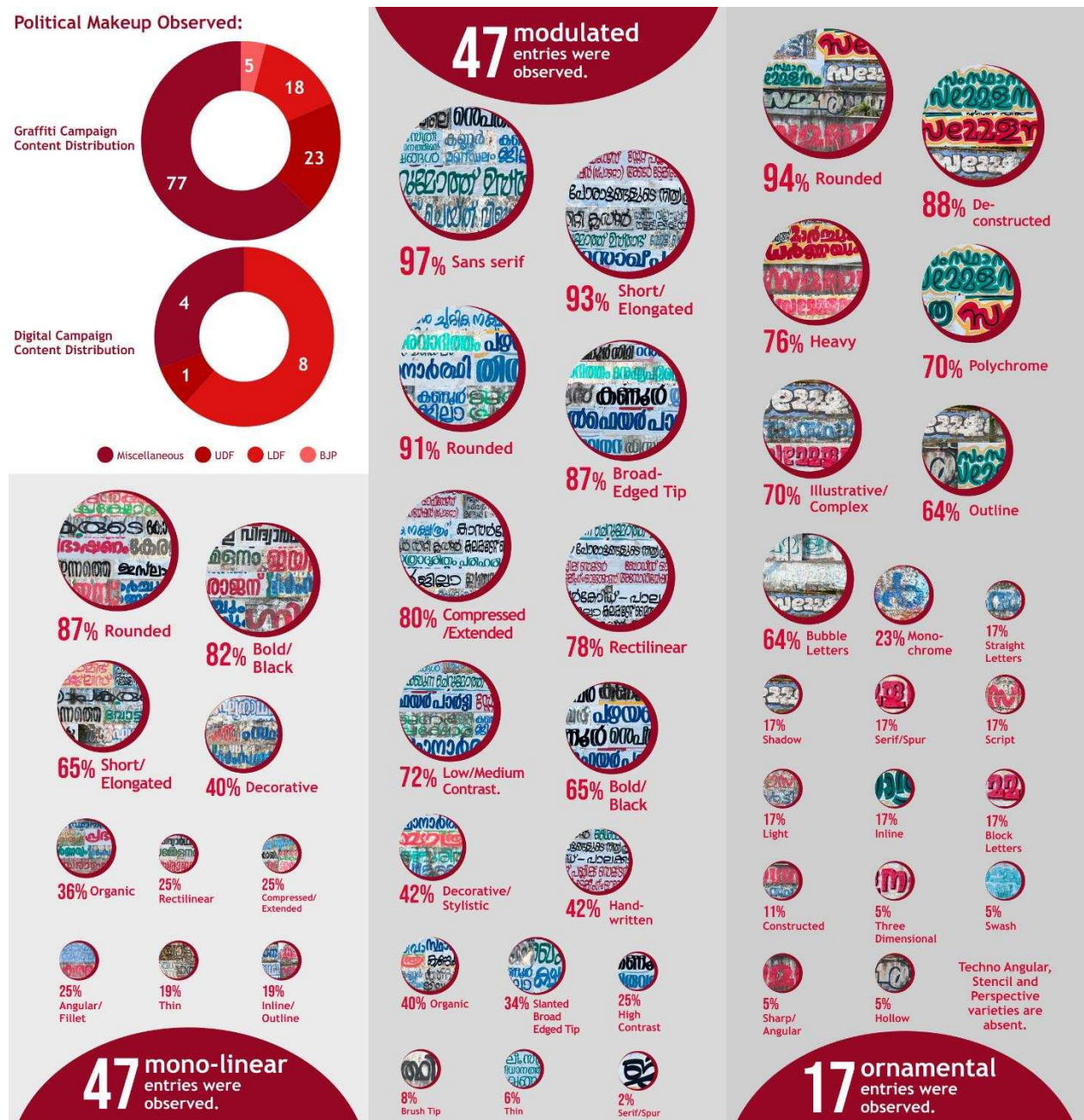


Figure.12 Kannur: Overview

6.2. Kozhikode

Graffiti was in abundance at most locations in Kozhikode. The letterforms were fun, experimentative and playful with a nostalgic edge.

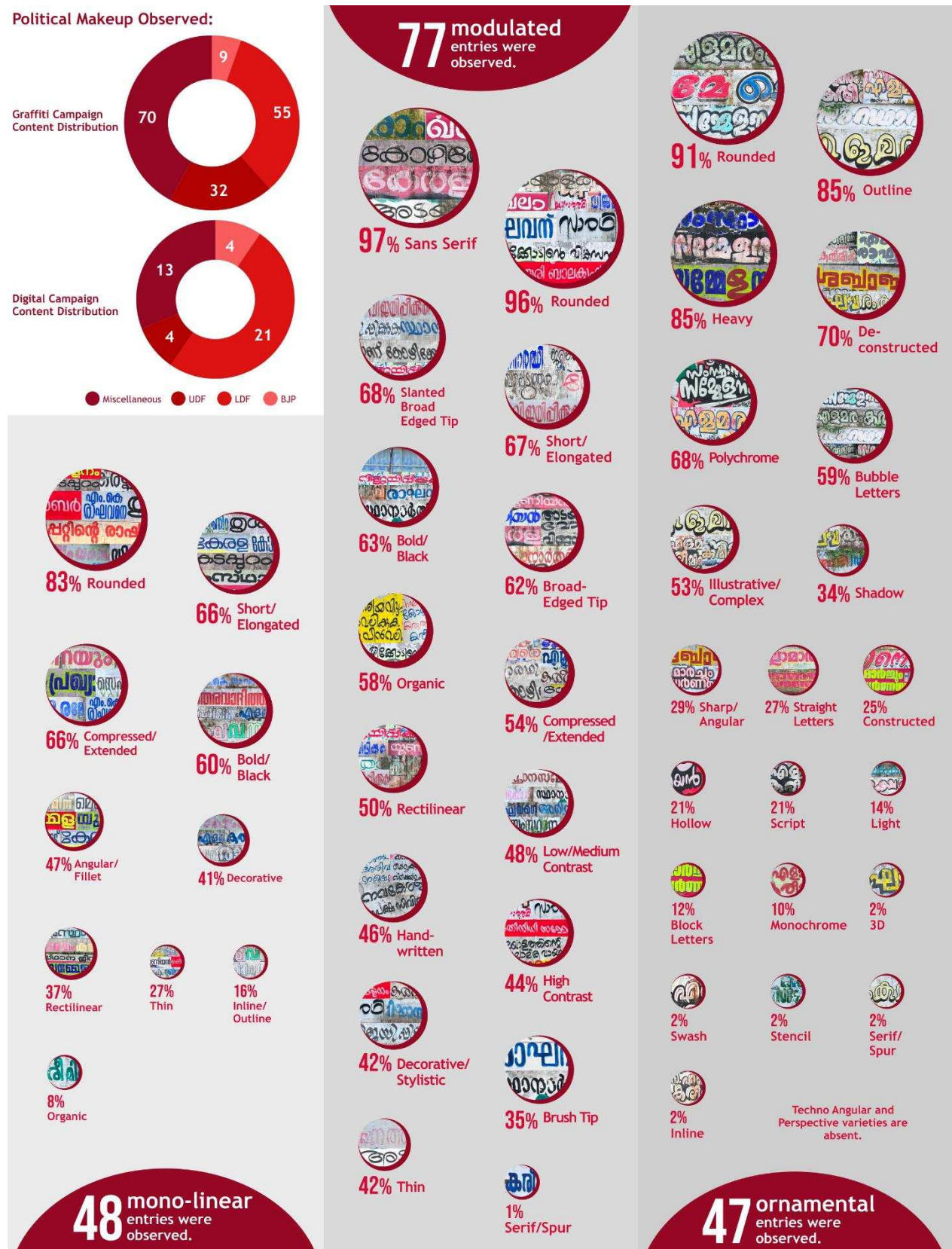


Figure.13 Kozhikode: Overview

Modulated letterforms were most common followed by an equal split between mono-linear and ornamental variants. Regular proportions were rare: most letterforms were axially/medially manipulated. Roundedness, higher weightage and decorative quality were common. More thin varieties when compared to Kannur. Black and polychromatic palettes were common. Hollows and abstracted varieties were higher. There was consistency in the usage of a flat brush, slants though rare, tended to the left for thin varieties and right for ornamental. Flexes are well-used aren't replacing hand-painted graffiti. Hand-painted cloth banners were frequent. Graffiti content tended to be miscellaneous, with digital flexes being left leaning.

6.3. Malappuram

In Malappuram, graffiti was scarce, primarily found on old, decrepit walls. It was learned that locals were unwilling to offer space for political graffiti - dense urban landscape and commercial clusters and storefronts add to this trend. Flexes were the dominant form of political expression consisting of centrist and left-wing content, often from labour unions. No ornamental varieties were found. All samples had a handwritten, organic quality with some decorative inlines in mono-linear forms and a few chiselled modulated scripts. Locals consider graffiti as a forgotten tradition.



Figure.14 Malappuram: Overview

6.4. Thrissur

Graffiti is commonplace in Thrissur though defaced by local corporation along main roads. A range of weights were observed; among thin letterforms, even hairline varieties were found. Mono-linear styles were rounded while modulated and ornamental varieties were more angular/sharp and rectilinear. Ornamental letterforms had a distinct pointed/spiky and deconstructive quality. Modulated and mono-linear varieties were mostly constructed. Hand-painted graffiti and digital flexes were of equal importance, often co-existed. A blend of centrist and left-wing content was in prominence.

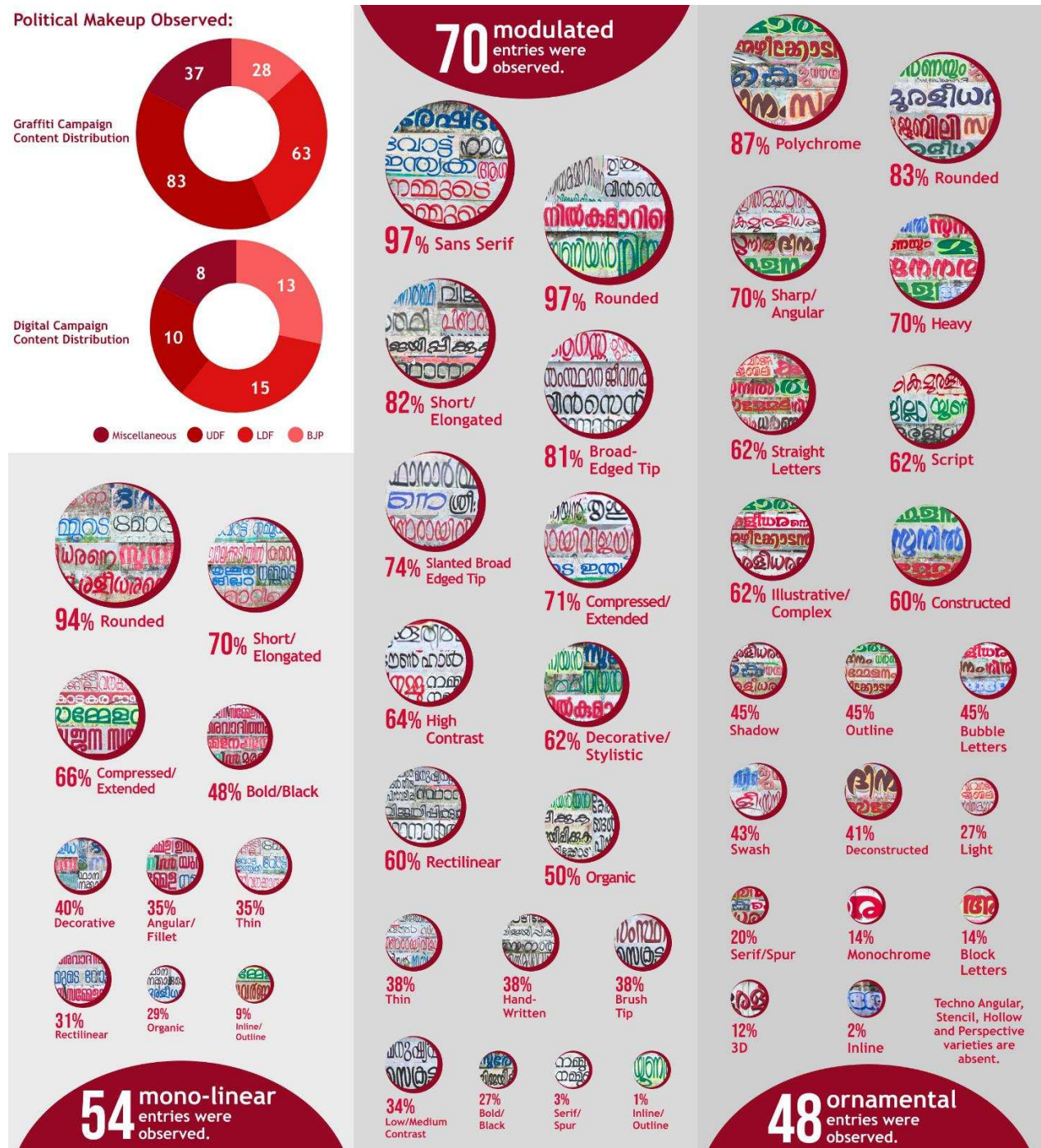


Figure.15 Thrissur: Overview

6.5. Ernakulam

Graffiti is present along main roads, civil stations, by-roads but it's absent in tourist/commercial zones. Intricate designs are found along main roads and landmarks.



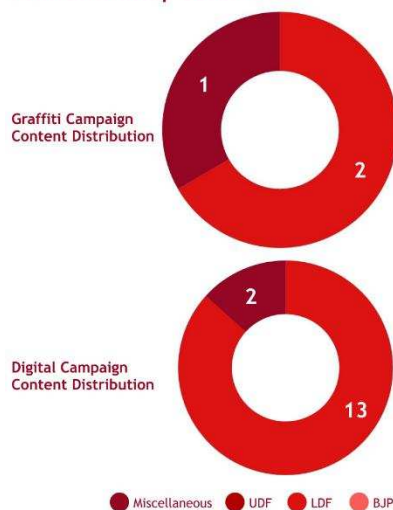
Figure.16 Ernakulam: Overview

Letterforms are mainly modulated followed by mono-linear and ornamental styles: almost all tending towards a handwritten/organic quality. Modulated letterforms tend to be rectilinear and include a wide range of weights. Mono-linear variety tends to have a vertical stiffness. Most graffiti are text-heavy/informative and lacks experimentation. Left and centrist parties' graffiti closely mirror their digital campaign styles. Inter-party similarities exist too. Left wing graffiti dominated the scene although there appears to be an equilibrium in terms of content. Graffiti is employed more than flexes.

6.6. Kottayam

To maintain the district's visual appearance, local corporation encourages the use of flexes and their timely removal. Campaign space is limited due to regulations on graffiti and flex placements. Since 2021 elections, political graffiti has declined tremendously, remaining on old/unused walls. No ornamental samples were found within the few samples. Majority were mono-linear forms: rounded and heavy featuring outlines and shadows. A single modulated sample was bold, low contrast and slanting right. Content observed was mostly left leaning.

Political Makeup Observed:



Digital Campaign Observed:



Figure.17 Kottayam: Overview

6.7. Kollam

Graffiti here displays a meticulous hierarchy with striking colour contrasts and a non-text-heavy approach. The letterforms are experimental and ornamental, showcasing a range of weights and innovative usage of counter spaces: they are oftentimes emphatically small. Modulated letterforms are prominent like other districts but there are more ornamental varieties than mono-linear ones. Roundedness is commonplace and ornamental styles include both bubble and straight letters. Mono-linear forms are often decorative with an organic edge. The content is mostly left leaning and there is preference for graffiti over flexes.

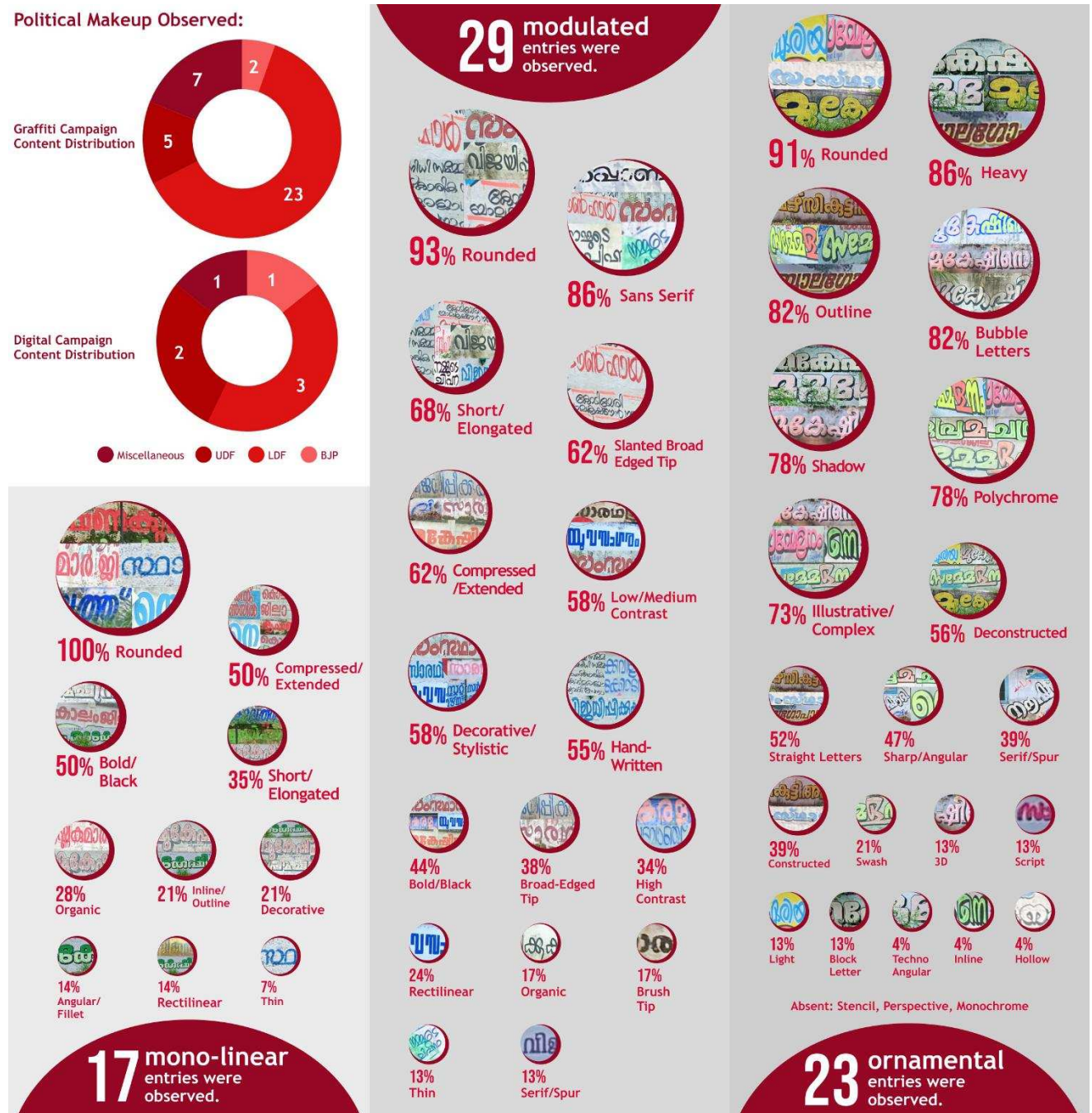


Figure.18 Kollam: Overview

6.8. Thiruvananthapuram

Graffiti was prominent along main roads and residential spaces. Graffiti on by-roads, whilst less colourful than those on main roads, still bore intricate details.



Figure.19 Thiruvananthapuram: Overview

A balanced distribution of modulated, mono-linear and ornamental letterforms exists, with an inclination towards roundedness. Thin and regular modulated varieties were often stylistically forward - including subtexts in some instances. Thin letterforms were generally in shortage and heavier letterforms with ornamental tones were favoured. The overall style in the district is bold, loud and experimental with a mix of heaviness, bold colouration and diverse influences including nostalgic/old-timer, futuristic and even oriental elements. Decorative aspects like serifs/spurs and swashes were included often. Both right-wing and left-wing content dominated with flexes tending more towards communism. Both graffiti and flexes had their own distinct purposes.

7. Conclusion

Compared to a lot of handwritten and hand-painted styles of lettering in the world, many Indic styles often go unstudied and undocumented (Kshirsagar, 2024). Kerala's hand-painted political graffiti is one such overlooked tradition. This study highlights regional variations in urban contexts, at times a confluence of tradition and the contemporary.

Case. A



Collage of Hibi Eden's campaign - digital poster (left) and graffiti (right) in Ernakulam

Case. B



UDF candidate Shashi Tharoor's Digital Posters and Graffiti campaign coinciding in Thiruvananthapuram.



UDF candidate Shashi Tharoor's Graffiti Campaign in Trivandrum.



UDF candidate Shashi Tharoor's Graffiti Campaign in Trivandrum.

Figure.20 Campaign approaches of UDF in two districts.

While graffiti thrives in some districts, changing times have altered how it is practiced and perceived. The dominance of modulated and mono-linear forms over ornamental styles suggests a shift towards functionality, dictated by time and skill constraints. Lettering styles also reflect political climates: the prevalence of attractive and loud letterforms in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital and North Kerala, with its historical left favouritism, attest to this fact. The urge to craft graffiti that parallels a digital campaign or the decision to have both hand-painted and digital campaigns follow distinct languages reveal dimensions to the visual approaches that politics demand regionally (Figure.20).

This study is but a step in the right direction when it comes to studying political graffiti/visualizations. A treasure-trove of information beckons to be decoded; an inspiration hub awaits to be tackled - this could mean various means of documentation or inspired typography/graphical trends. We can but speculate on this craft's history: chasing trends followed in the period or listen to the stories that old artisans would have to tell us, at times revealing interesting titbits such as the fact graffiti to this day, may share similarities to typography observed in children's comics!



Figure.21 Corroborations with Comics.

Beyond a political tool, graffiti in Kerala embodies artistic and cultural narratives, adapting to the region's socio-political landscape. As it continues to evolve, its future remains uncertain, shaped by the forces of time and technology.

Kannur:



Kozhikode:



Malappuram:



Thrissur:



Ernakulam:



Kollam:



Thiruvananthapuram:



Figure.22 Variations of “Sa”.

The Malayalam word ‘സ്ഥാനാർഥി’ and ‘സാധി’ meaning “Candidate” across the districts:

Kannur (Northern Kerala):



Kozhikode (Northern Kerala):



Malappuram (Northern Kerala):



Only the word ‘സ്ഥാനാർഥി’ is used in the north..

Thrissur (Central Kerala):



Ernakulam (Central Kerala):



Central Kerala mostly uses ‘സ്ഥാനാർഥി’ but ‘സാധി’ starts being used towards Ernakulam in the south.



Kollam (Southern Kerala):



‘സ്ഥാനാർഥി’ stops towards the south ‘സാധി’ becomes all but rampant in the southern-most district of



Thiruvananthapuram (Southern Kerala):



Figure.23 Observations.

The Malayalam Word ‘വിജയിപ്പിക്കുക’ meaning “ensure victory” across the districts:

Kozhikode (Northern Kerala):



Malappuram (Northern Kerala):



Thrissur (Central Kerala):



Ernakulam (Central Kerala):



Kollam (Southern Kerala):



Thiruvananthapuram (Southern Kerala):



Kottayam (Central Kerala):



Figure.24 Observations.

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