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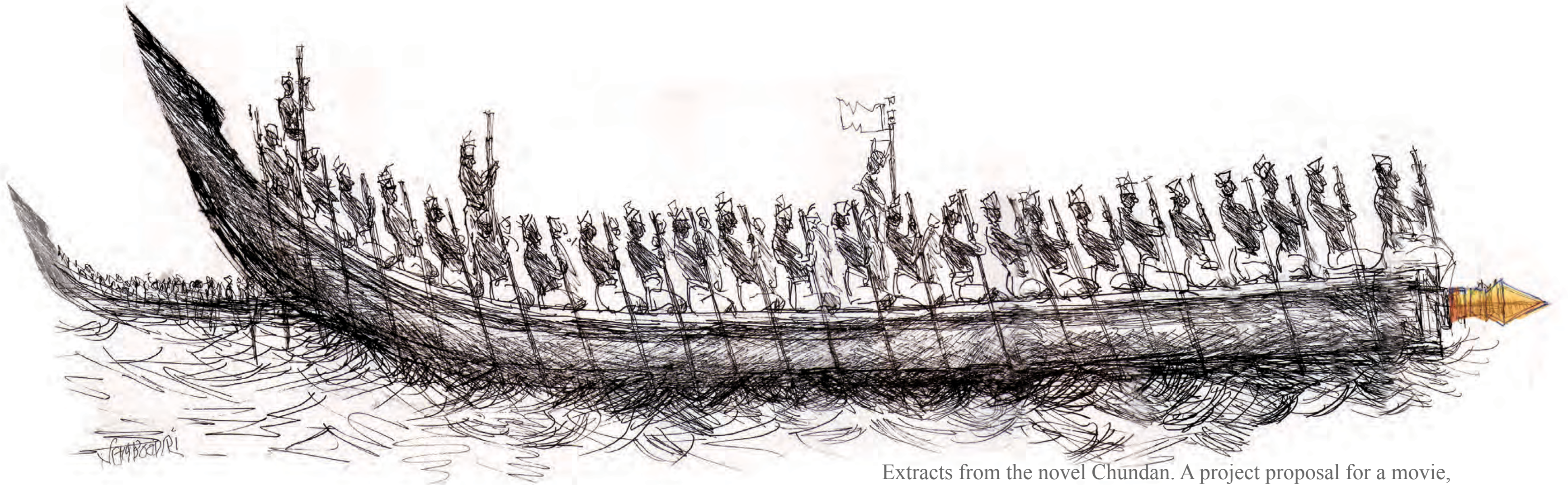
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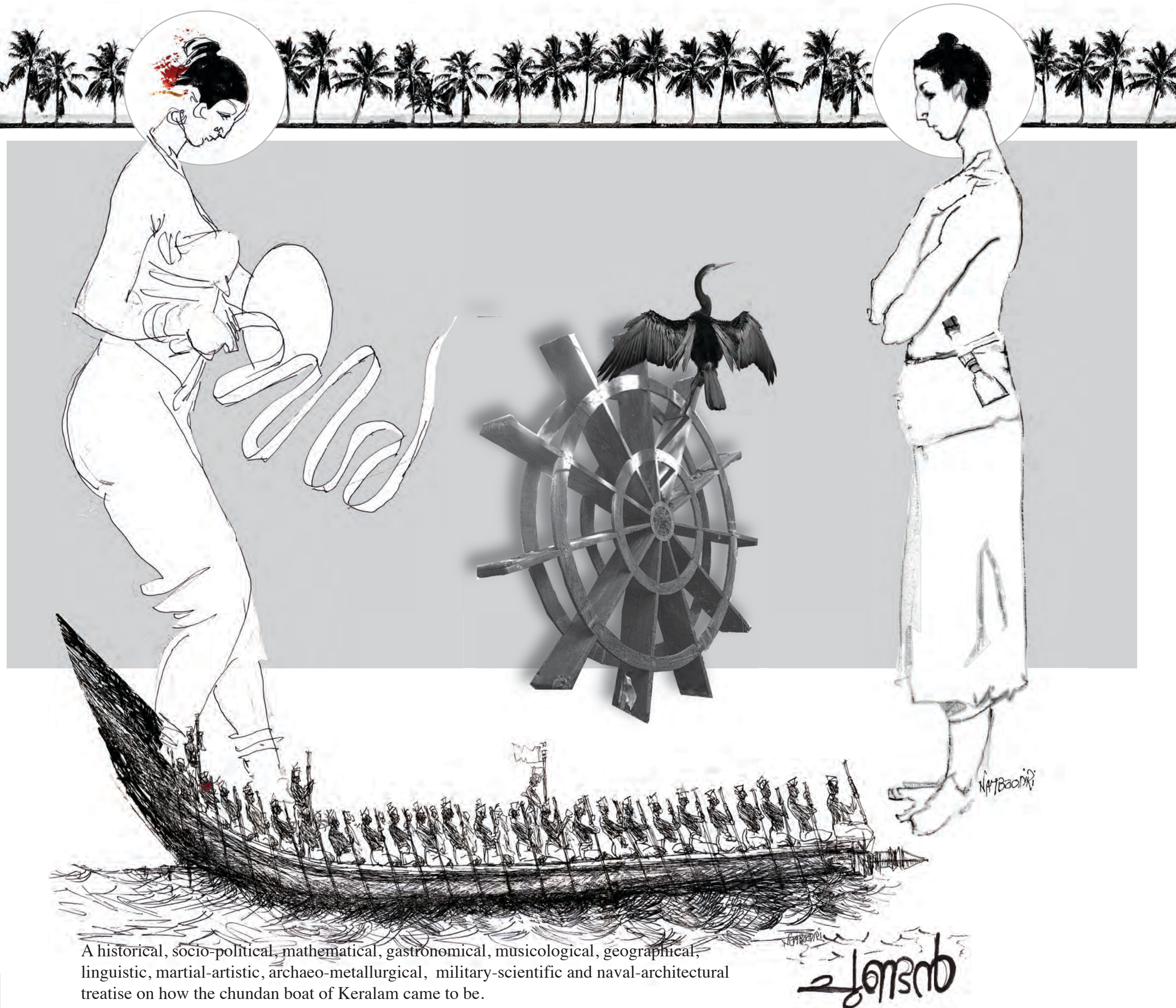
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ചുണ്ടൻ





# A Tribute to the Material Culture and Traditions of Pamba river basin



A historical, socio-political, mathematical, gastronomical, musicological, geographical, linguistic, martial-artistic, archaeo-metallurgical, military-scientific and naval-architectural treatise on how the chundan boat of Kerala came to be.

## Introduction

I wrote this story during the month of May 2004. It was out of my fascination for the *chundan vallam*. Chundan is a traditional racing craft of Kerala, which like me, has its origin in Kuttanad. Kuttanad, till recently, was a vast grey-green watery expanse upon which were scattered islands like Pulincunnoo, my father's place and Thayamkary where my mother was born.

As a child I kept hearing tales about the chundan. It was always said that this long boat was designed as a war-canoe for backwater battles. But nobody could convince me as to why, when and how it was deployed against the iruttukuthi (Oadi) canoe, the warhorse upon the waters those days. It is told that a carpenter of Kodupunna village is the originator of the chundan. The king of Ambalapuzha rewarded him for his feat and later had him punished for divulging the design secrets to the king of Kayamkulam. This ambitious royal tried to make a few chundans of his own and failed miserably! Other than this slightly intriguing piece of information little else is known.

First question: what makes the chundan a war machine?

In my teens my cousin Boban Kunchacko, with his large library of books, set me reading on weapons and military strategies. As I went through military science from prehistoric scrimmage to modern-day warfare, I started appreciating the purpose behind the chundan's design. It was one of the earliest examples of stealth. But I have yet to come across any academic validation for this premise.

The following chronicle is an attempt to establish the facts and also have some fun in the process.





Kayamkulam  
Kingdom  
കായംകുളം



“നമ്മു്ിരുട്ടുത്തി വള്ളത്തിച്ചാത്തന്റെ കുതികുതിച്ചാട്ടത്തിൻ കായലൂത്ത് - തന തന്ന തന്നതെയ്യാരതൈ...”

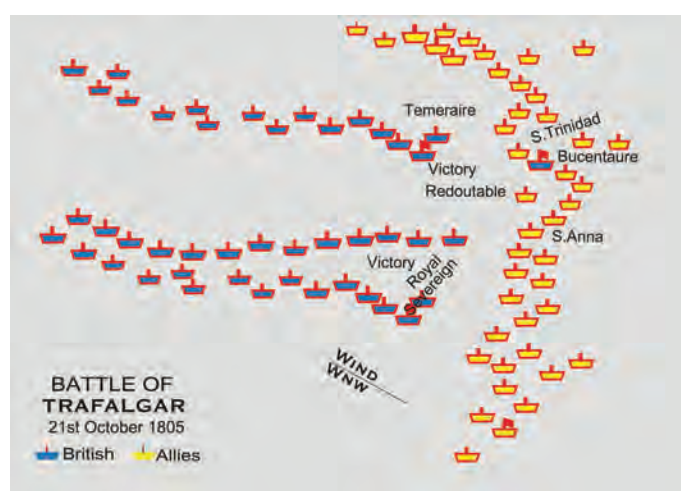
### IRUTTUKUTHY versus

Let us start by examining some earlier historic maritime battles.

In 480 BC a large, attacking Persian fleet was forced to narrow their spearheading columns when negotiating the narrow Strait of Salamis. They sailed straight into an ambush. The waiting Greeks quickly bore in from both flanks and boarded the Persian vessels. Once onboard the superior sword skills of the Greeks proved decisive.

The construction of the Greek ships and their naval strategy reminds me of the purpose behind our own chundan’s design.

In 1805 A.D. at Trafalgar, Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, in a dangerous move that would cost him his own life, daringly cleaved into the much larger Franco-Spanish armada. As his ships cut through, the audacious Nelson broadsided the enemy firing from both his flanks.



അമ്പലപ്പുഴ  
Ambalapuzha  
kingdom

“ഇരുട്ടുകുത്തി വാളെങ്കിൽ ഉറുചിയിവൻ, ചുറ്റി ത്തിരിഞ്ഞു വെട്ടീടും, പോക്കിൽ കുതിപ്പൊട്ടു കുറഞ്ഞാലും.”



### CHUNDAN

In 1912 A.D., off Tsushima archipelago, Admiral Togo approached the larger Russian armada head-on. He then did an about-turn just out of range of the Russians' guns and used the better range of his projectiles to devastate the enemy.



That my compatriots deployed the chundan in much the same way to win their backwater wars is what forms the subject of my story.

	No. of oarsmen	Strokes per minute	Speed in knots
Chundan	85	90	17.4
Irukkuthi	60	90	19.1

Another important fact that merits our attention in this story is the chundan - iruttukuthi rivalry. How could the iruttukuthi, a celebrity those days in the theatre of backwater battles, be upstaged by an upstart chundan?

The answer is simply a matter of battleground reality (I mean, a battlwater reality); the speed of a vessel doesn’t really matter during the actual combat. Because, almost always, when hand-to-hand fights take place, the combatants are relatively stationary. In 1971 during the second Indo-Pak war it was established that supersonic fighters don’t hold much advantage over their slower adversary during dogfights that occur at subsonic velocities.

The chundan is slower than the iruttukuthi. Pushing the case for a slower chundan, a designer in the 18th century would have had lot to argue against the faster iruttukuthi that had been around for many centuries.

Jijo, May 2015.





The great backwaters.  
Tranquil, soothing and calm. Right?

Well, you couldn't be more wrong.

These are the shallow waters where for the first few eons mirthful laughter of splashing children suddenly turned into shrieks of alarm when crocodile jaws sprang open in their midsts.

These are the vast expanse of waters which for the next few eons resounded with screams of inland pirates whenever they marauded island settlements.

Subsequent to such turmoils, when civilization arose to bring governance to these troubled waters, it seemed that tranquility had finally come.

But the very kingships which brought law and order also brought something kingdoms are known to engage in .... rivalry, supremacy .... war!

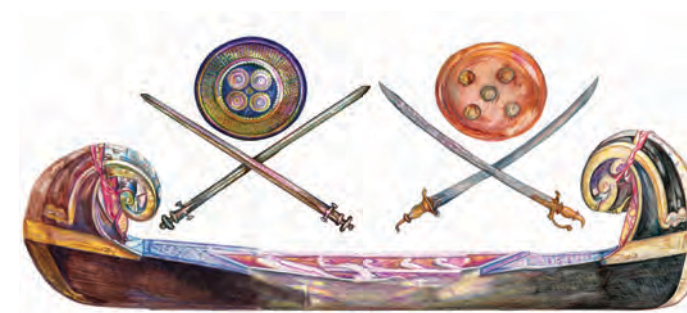
Hence came a few eons when battle cries frequently broke the calmness of these waters".

## THE DESIGN

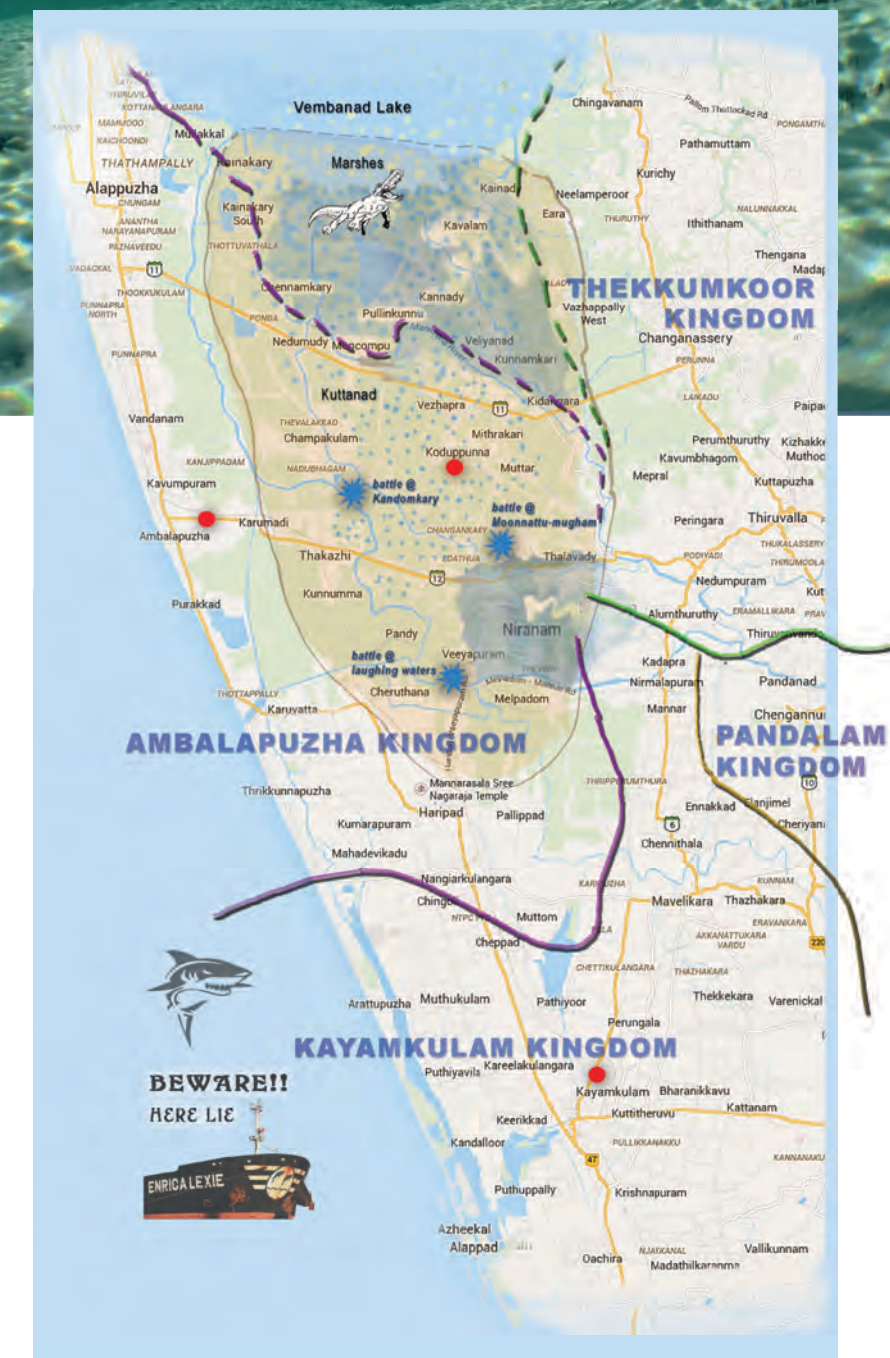
(extracts from the chapter)



Once upon a such a time, in this watery place the kings fought now and then over harvests and fishing rights.



Their weapon of choice was the *Iruttukuthi*.







(Extracts from the chapter - The Design)

In those times, deployed by pirates as well as navies for its stealth, the sleek and fast iruttukuthi war-canoes ruled these backwaters.

The Iruttukuthi is also called Oadi.

The superiority of his iruttukuthi boats won victories for the King of Kayamkulam during three consecutive years in his kingdom's harvest skirmishes with neighboring Ambalapuzha.

The kingdom of Ambalapuzha was also known as Chembakassery after the ruling family.

For the King of Ambalapuzha and his subjects, the last defeat at the battle of *Moonnaattu-mugham* meant three harvests plundered from their paddies: vast rice fields that stretch into the marshes of a no man's land called Kuttanad.

It is here that our story now begins with a trickle of events.





## Ambalapuzha. The woodworking yards.

When summons arrived from the desperate king's palace to the woodworking yards, the elderly *Perumthachan* — Royal Carpenter cum architect, was taking one of his junior apprentices to task.

This time *Chellappan*, a mere twenty-six-year-old, had crossed all limits with his latest practical joke.

An upper caste *Namboothiri* lord had contracted the Royal Carpenter's workforce to construct a shrine for his clan.

Young craftsman Chellappan added an irreverent tweak to the final design. Strong gusts of wind kept blowing upwards through floorboards of the shrine.

The princely worshipers experienced huge embarrassment. The men found their dhotis billowing and their proud women folk who coyly carried palm leaf umbrellas found their sunshades flying away. The Namboothiri lord was of course scandalized at this very undignified spectacle that was played out before the divine as well as the mortals.

A most serious misdemeanour. But, for all his authority as master to the *Aasari* (carpentry) clan and head of the royal school of craftsmen, the Royal Carpenter, as usual, found himself hesitating to crack down on Chellappan. For, the wily rascal, as always, took refuge behind the carpenter's childless wife. She, as always, took on the role of protective mother to him.



### The Shrine of Gusts — Chellappan's design feature inside the temple causing dhotis and umbrellas to fly.

Dismissive though his master the Royal Carpenter was about it; there was a rationale behind Chellappan's prank. The lord who had the shrine constructed was an upper-caste Namboothiri and he did what Chellappan, who was from the lowly aasari caste, took as an insult.

The feudal lord's clan worshipped the wind god, *Vaayu*, as their deity. This god has no physical form. It was Chellappan's idea to have a large unmoving central lamp flame to represent the invisible god of the winds. Surrounding this were rings of smaller lamp flames perpetually fluttering around it. This he achieved with air ducted through pipes laid underneath the smaller lamps.

The Lord was suitably impressed. Yet, what Chellappan found infuriating was that the lord performed *shudhikalasam* — a ritual purification, of the shrine. This was to remove the pollution Chellappan had imparted to the sacred shrine while building it, low-caste aasari that he was!

Thanklessness of the highest order. Chellappan had merely boosted the air-drafts to extend the ritual cleansing to the lordship and his folks by blowing away their dhotis and umbrellas.



അമ്പലപ്പുഴ  
(ചെമ്പകശ്ശേരി)

*Panicker* — the fleet Commander, attempted to acquit himself before the king.



"Every time their helmsman shouted

*Everybody. 3 ... 2 ... 1.*

*About turn!*, the Kayamkulam oarsmen spun around in their seats and paddled in the opposite direction ... we were barely able to duck as they came in reverse. They rowed in slashing at us with those cursed double-edged\* blades".

കായംകുളം



It did not help things for the Royal Carpenter that the enraged Namboothiri lord was dragging Chellappan to the king's court when he was himself being taken there to explain the inadequacy of the iruttukuthi fleet he had built for Ambalapuzha.

## Ambalapuzha. The King's courtyard.

On that day of national humiliation, at the procession ground between the vast temple and the equally vast governing offices of the royal palace, there was a large agitated gathering. Chellappan listened intently as disgruntled citizens did a postmortem of their defeat at the battle of Moonnaattu-mugham.



"The Iruttukuthi boats of Kayamkulam are built longer to hold more combatants ... they are built tougher, .... much tougher. Their boats don't break or capsize as easily as ours", said a sullen Commander.

The oarsmen re-enacted to the Royal Carpenter a turnaround maneuver they had seen the enemy execute. Helmsman *Raman Pillai* was all admiration for the Kayamkulam battle drill. He described it,



playable track on .html page.

\* Like the Roman sword, a Kayamkulam sword is sharp on both sides. {Because iruttukuthi boats are designed for speed, it is quicker for all oarsmen to turn physically around in their seats and then row in the opposite direction. You can't get more maneuverable than this. - Ed}

The soldiers told an inconsolable public that if their boats could have been held in position during hand-to-hand combat, their fighting skills could have found better use.





As these discussions, arguments and lamentations were going on, Chellappan got into action. He caught hold of a piece of wood and quickly carved what looked like a long thick arrow. Its bottom was like that of a canoe and it curved away and upwards towards the stern. Chellappan looked at it and thought he had something.

Chellappan yelled, "Got It! ... I got it!!"  
The crowd turned to look at him.  
They could not share his excitement.

To his growing horror, Chellappan too realized that the pièce de résistance he was holding had until a few moments ago been the princely staff conferred by the king on the Namboothiri lord!



As he bend sheepishly to retrieve the gold shavings from the now- mutilated staff, Chellappan heard a crash.



The landlord had fallen down senseless.  
The complaint could not come up for hearing because the plaintiff was indisposed.



"കണ്ടോ കണ്ടോ കുണ്ടാമണ്ടി  
അമ്പലപ്പുഴക്കല കൊയ്യാത്ത മണ്ടി  
നാലാമതും വന്ന് ഞങ്ങളെക്കും ...  
ആരാന്റെ പാടത്തെ പൊൻമണികൾ."



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[AUDIO]. The people of Ambalapuzha stood listening helplessly as the fruits of their labor got plundered. Harvest songs from distant paddy fields wafted over Karumaadi, a village near Ambalapuzha. The victorious Kayamkulam harvesters were singing triumphantly as they carted away the spoils of war.



Of how  
Chembakassery of Ambalapuzha,  
a dynasty of ruling brahmins,  
a rarity in the Indian subcontinent,  
came into existence. A legend.  
**Refer side story # 1.**

## THE PAST

(extracts from the chapter)



### Kodupunna Village

"Chellaa ...what do you most wish for?"  
The toddler, as always, told his mother promptly,  
'..nni!'

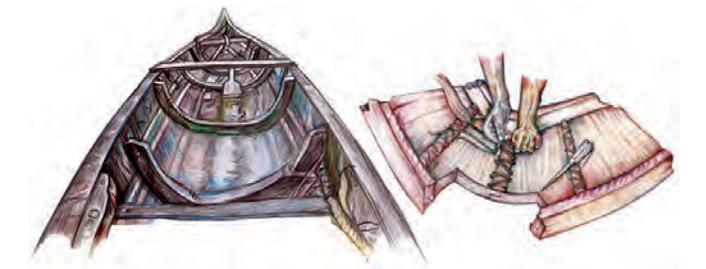
Chellappan meant unni, his favorite sweet bread.

{The boy's official name was Venkitan. But since he was called 'chella' (darling) by his mother, the name stuck. He became Chellappan to all : - Ed}

Unni meant unniappam — the sweet bread. All the other children of Kodupunna village would have said 'paal-payasam' — the sweet rice porridge. But Chellappan always chose unni. However his mother Kaarthyani couldn't always satisfy him. Kodupunna was an isolated area within the Kuttanad marshes where an impoverished low-caste, widowed Aasari mother could seldom afford such luxuries as unniappam or paal-payasam. That was the limitation of the geography. Unni was ever in short supply. But mothers always find a way.

Kaarthyani got her chance when a family of her kinsmen, Asaari kettuvallam boat repairers accompanying harvest raiders for a raid in Kuttanad, docked at Koduppunna. She befriended them.

{Veppu vallam & Kettu vallam - used for transport and habitation in the backwaters : - Ed}



One day Kaarthyani led her son gently to the water's edge where the kettuvallams were moored. She pointed to the boats, "Chellaa, ... where they are going, there's lots and lots of what you desire most"

Chellappan "...nni?"

Mother "Yes!, lots and lots of unni .... shall we go along with them?"

Without thinking, Chellappan clambered into the boat ... then he realized that his mother hadn't. As the distance separating them widened, Chellappan saw his mother, on the shore, crying. Terrified, he started bawling, 'I don't want ..nni, ... I want amma'. He cried all the way as the kettuvallams slowly made for Kayamkulam ... to his new home where he would grow up with his new parents.

There was a silver lining, of course. It was no mere coincidence, but surely providence, for our Chellappan that Kayamkulam was famous for its unniappam. Because if it were Ambalapuzha, ... there they took pride in their paal-payasam.

### Kayamkulam Township



Growing up at Kayamkulam, the young urchin caught the attention of Cheykutty Aasari, the elderly carpenter. Cheykutty gave the boy a six-rafters-interlock puzzle to play with ... and turned to sharpen his chisel. Before the man had finished pouring sand on the polishing block, the boy had taken apart the six pieces. By the time Cheykutty finished sharpening his chisel, Chellappan had put the pieces back together!

{The six-rafters-interlock puzzle is modeled after one of the joinery techniques employed in traditional architecture of Kerala : - Ed}

Chellappan by the time he was eighteen had devised an apparatus to mass-produce his favorite unniappam for the royal cuisine at Krishnapuram palace of Kayamkulam.





(Extracts from the chapter - The Past)

In Chellappan's heart, by then, following the rhythms and seasons of Nature, another Unni had displaced unniappam as the most desirable object. It was Unni-Chirutha, the daughter the Asaan — guru, of the Kalari — school of martial arts, at Kayamkulam.

Now, this Unni was no mere lass. She was skilled in 5th century Dhanurveda stratagem — martial tactic of sage Bodhidharma, to use one's opponent's strength against him. In hand-to-hand combat, she could beat any fighter in their Theeyya kalari clan or any Nair warrior in the king's army! This successfully kept away from the young woman all potential suitors of Kayamkulam.

But then, our Chellappan was no ordinary suitor, as we know very well. Our young genius knew exactly where his strength lay. So when other suitors at her father's kalari bit the dust before two rounds against Unni-Chirutha, Chellappan had only just begun. Chellappan's unniappam breached all the young tigress's defenses. Chellappan was the only one who could get near enough to her to offer her unniappam. And that was the utmost liberty she allowed anybody to have with her.

When the Ambalapuzha soldiers were acting out the maneuvers of the Kayamkulam fighters and oarsmen for the benefit of their King, Chellappan had recognized Unni-Chirutha's artistry in their movements. Kayamkulam's nayar pada were trained by her father. While designing the Chundan, Chellappan channelled Unni-Chirutha's sinuous maneuvering into his remarkable creation.

In fact, when the Chundan delivered her coup de grâce — ramming into the enemy's flank, it was a re-enactment of how he had once seen Unni-Chirutha fell a bull at the Oachira kaala — bull, festival in the month of Vrishchikam — Scorpio. She saved festival goers from a berserk bull by delivering a nishchara praharam — a stunning blow, to the head of the crazed animal felling it instantly.





കുന്താണ്ടം

## THE MAKING

(extracts from the chapter)



Ambalapuzha woodworking yards

Pachilakkudukka — white cheeked barbet, announced daybreak from somewhere within the Njaval — black currant, branches. Perumthachan, the Royal Carpenter, was in despair. This was the seventh day of the week he had been given to come up with a better design for a longer, stronger iruttukuthi boat. Chellappan, subject of a royal reprimand, was nowhere in sight. Even the other apprentices were nowhere to be seen. What was he to do, wondered Perumthachan.

As the roof shadows marked the third hour of the morning, the only sounds heard in the yard were the wooden mallets, chisels and planes.

A helpless Perumthachan watched as the technical committee led by Commander Panicker strode into the woodworking yards. Tongue-tied with remorse, the Royal Carpenter bowed low to tender a tearful apology.

Suddenly the mallets, chisels and planes fell silent. All eyes turned to the source of the silence. They were looking at a long, dark thatched shed large enough to house a fallen coconut tree.

Even as they watched, rows of reed screens fell noisily away from all four sides of the shed. Their eyes beheld a most amazing creation.

Here was this thing twenty-eight kols (about 60 feet) long and fifty angulams (palm measures) wide. It was almost twice the length of the then standard iruttukuthi boat. But most of it was a long solid log of kadampu (burflower tree) wood with a jutting nose and dug-out cavities. The stern was a gracefully ascending blade rising up more than twice the height of a man, reinforced by chiseling and iron riveting. Hastily put together without the traditional lengthy curing processes the thing mesmerized the awestruck audience.

This was the first Chundan prototype.



\* an academic note on curing process  
- camphor heating,  
golden wax bending, alum dehydration,  
.... glistening egg-white application  
to skip over the waters, .....  
protective fish oil coating

{\* In Malayalam language, the term  
'chundan' apparently suggests the craft's  
jutting nose which resembles a banana  
inflorescence : - Ed}









There is something unsettling about it. It evokes a snake with its hood raised .... a horse with its forelegs frozen in mid-gallop. There is tremendous visual tension in its lines ... as if the next moment it's going to roll over.



It was an ancient, time-honored aasari tradition that if a craft on launch was found unstable, the craftsman would forfeit his honor by throwing himself to death into the waters. Chellappan now found himself about to jump even before his craft was launched!!

The laughs and hoots reached a crescendo. Chellappan suddenly blurted out in anguish, “My contraption is not a boat!!”

The royal inspectors were taken aback. “Not a boat? Come again?”

Here, somebody had to assist the stuttering Chellappan to explain himself.

"... This was not a boat ... it's a device ... to defeat the enemy. ... If you want to have a long thing that can carry lots of combatants on water, .... if you want a thing that is strong and won't capsize or sink, .. if you want something that turns quickly around ... so that your swordsmen get a second chance to slash ... then ... then ... whatever you call it, .... my kunthrandom is it!!

Silence crept over the crowd.

They wanted to hear more. But Chellappan was in no mood to speak. All this mocking had made him nervous. He looked around wild-eyed seeking some assistance. It came in the shape of a friend who was a resourceful poet who had cut his teeth in the king's court.

Punctuated by rhythmic poetry, in bits and pieces the versifier made the following known to the audience ....

(Extracts from the chapter - The Making)

There was a long silence. Then the committee started snickering and later broke out into derisive laughter. Scornful dismissals, for which all Malayalees are justly famous, flew thick and large.

“Aiyyaey! ... Nobody makes boats out of solid wood.”

"This is going to sink like a brick. "

" ... This kunthrandom (contraption) is too top heavy! ..”

"Yeahh .... like its blockhead inventor."

"This kunthrandom is going to keel over the moment it touches water."

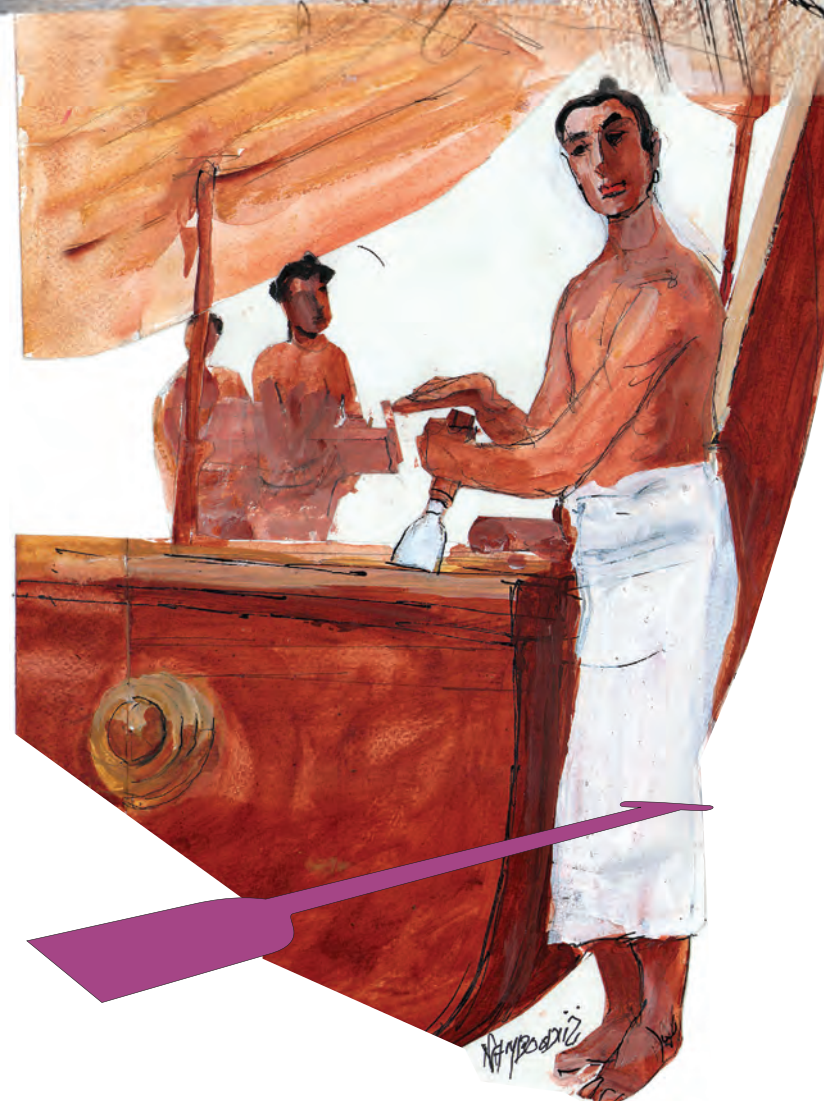
Behind the laughing royal committee members helmsman Raman Pillai's group of oarsmen also started snickering.

“We asked for a boat..... but see what we get!"

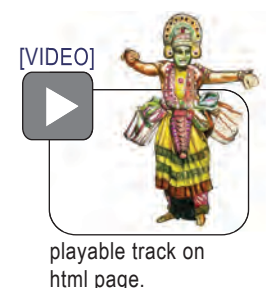
"Don't you know ... .. a votive for Lord Varuna — god of water. It will reach him on no time. Ha! Ha!!”

One cannot blame a committee whose members had come armed with many preconceptions. Moreover, even today the chundan looks very different from any other boat. It doesn't look like it will comfortably traverse the waters. Though graceful, there is something unsettling about it. It evokes a snake with its hood raised .... a horse with its forelegs frozen in mid-gallop. There is tremendous visual tension in its lines ... as if the next moment it's going to roll over.

At a distance from the raucous crowd along with the group of apprentices who put together the thing was standing the chundan's creator. Chellappan had been floating on a cloud of creative bliss for the past one week. He was rather pleased with himself for coming up with a method which locked erect the *yearavu* — vertical beam, of his vessel over the *maathavu* — horizontal beam; a crucial balancing structure which held the chundan upright on water. But now here he was having to see his genius design being ridiculed by the royal cackling herd. They couldn't even wait till the boat was set afloat. One wouldn't, of course, know the stability of a vessel till after launch.



“ചെമ്പകശ്ശേരിയാം നാടുവാണീടുന തമ്പുരാൻ കൽപ്പിച്ച കുന്താണ്ടമാണെടോ.... ഏറെപ്പടയാളി കേറിത്തുടയുന്ന വേറിട്ട വള്ളമൊന്നുണ്ടാക്കി വെച്ചു ഞാൻ.... ശത്രുത്തലകളെ വെട്ടി വീഴ്ത്തിക്കുവാൻ എത്തിക്കുതിക്കും ഇടിത്താളമൊത്തവൻ.. ദുരേക” കാണുമ്പോളോരില്ലൊരുത്തരും നേരൊത്തിതിൻ നീള മാളെത്രയെന്നതും..”



[VIDEO]

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(Extracts from the chapter - The Making)

Unlike the standard Iruttukuthi, this is made out of a wood that floats on water. Being mostly of solid wood, the Chundan is way stronger than an Iruttukuthi. Long and sleek it holds more combatants and hence more sword-power.

Question — “How fast is this?”

The answer — “ Er .. well .. ahem; sorry, even with more oars on board, this contraption will be slower than an Iruttukuthi.”

Groans of disappointment.

“ ... hold it, hold it! ... it is not speed that you need for combat. What you need is ... maneuverability” - protested Chellappan.

His witty friend added “ Speed is for men who flee from combat”. (Chuckle, chuckle).

It was for maneuverability that the new vessel had such a solid superstructure at the stern. A single stroke of the helmsman's long steering oar will whip the vessel around to the desired position. The heavy, towering head did the trick. It was like a man pivoting and turning on his heel.

The experts were not quite convinced. Commander Panicker asked, “What else does your 'not a boat' do?”

Chellappan answered with a question, “Sire, during a siege what would you use to break open a fort door - say for instance; that big waterfront door right across from her bow?”

“I'll use an ‘ulakka thadi’ — battering ram”, answered the Commander.

Now Commander Panicker was given an awesome demonstration of what else a chundan could do.



A few quick cuts to the cords restraining her. Off she went bounding over the inclined ramp towards the waiting waters. Chellappan's contraption smashed the door latches open and launched herself into the water.

With a few tentative rolls the first prototype came to a majestic, balanced stance on the water.

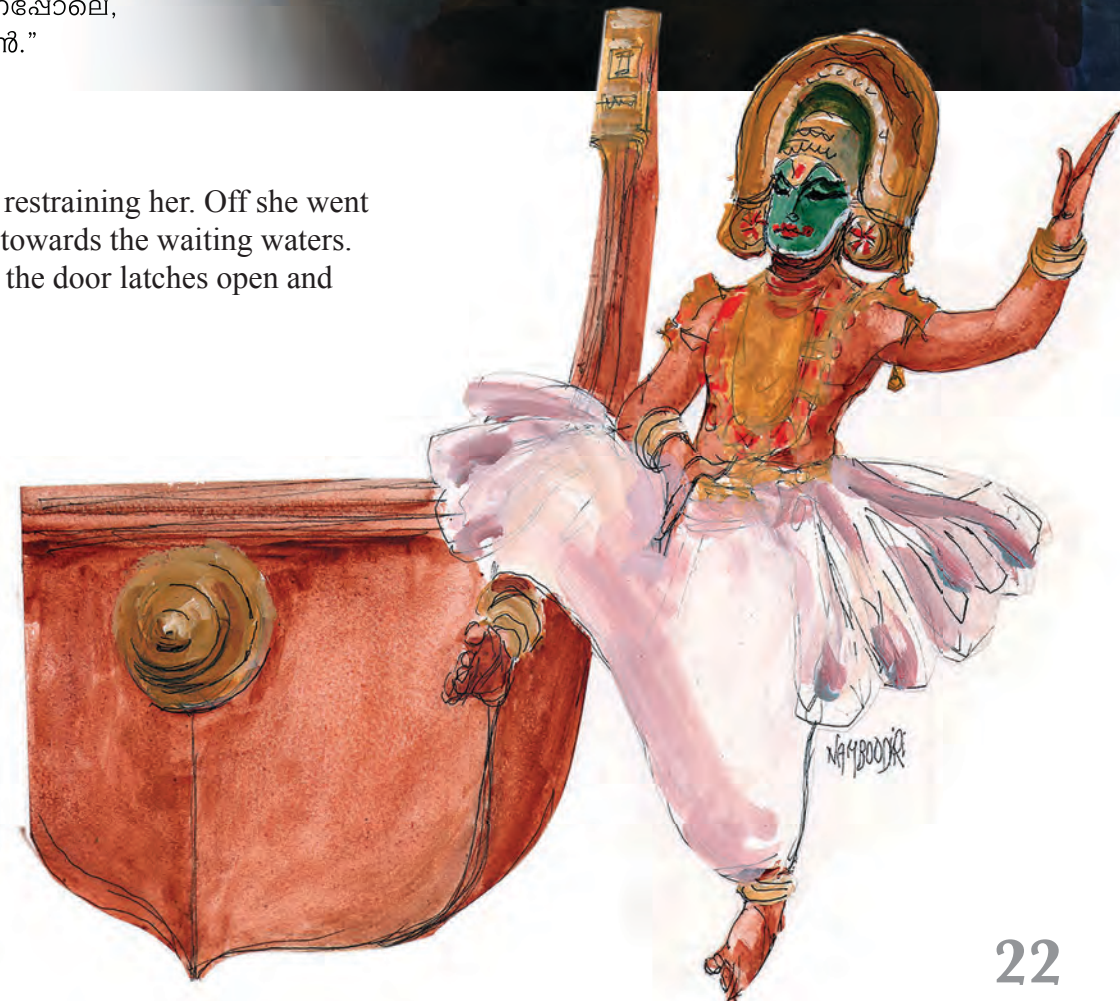
Its posture was such, also their instinctual nature was such, that with spontaneous shouts of ‘aarppooy ..... aarppoy’ the onlooking oarsmen couldn't help from jumping into the water. They boarded the vessel with rapturous joy and started rowing.

“Yes, that's what my kunthrandom — contraption, is. .... a battering ram on water”, Chellappan shouted in triumph.

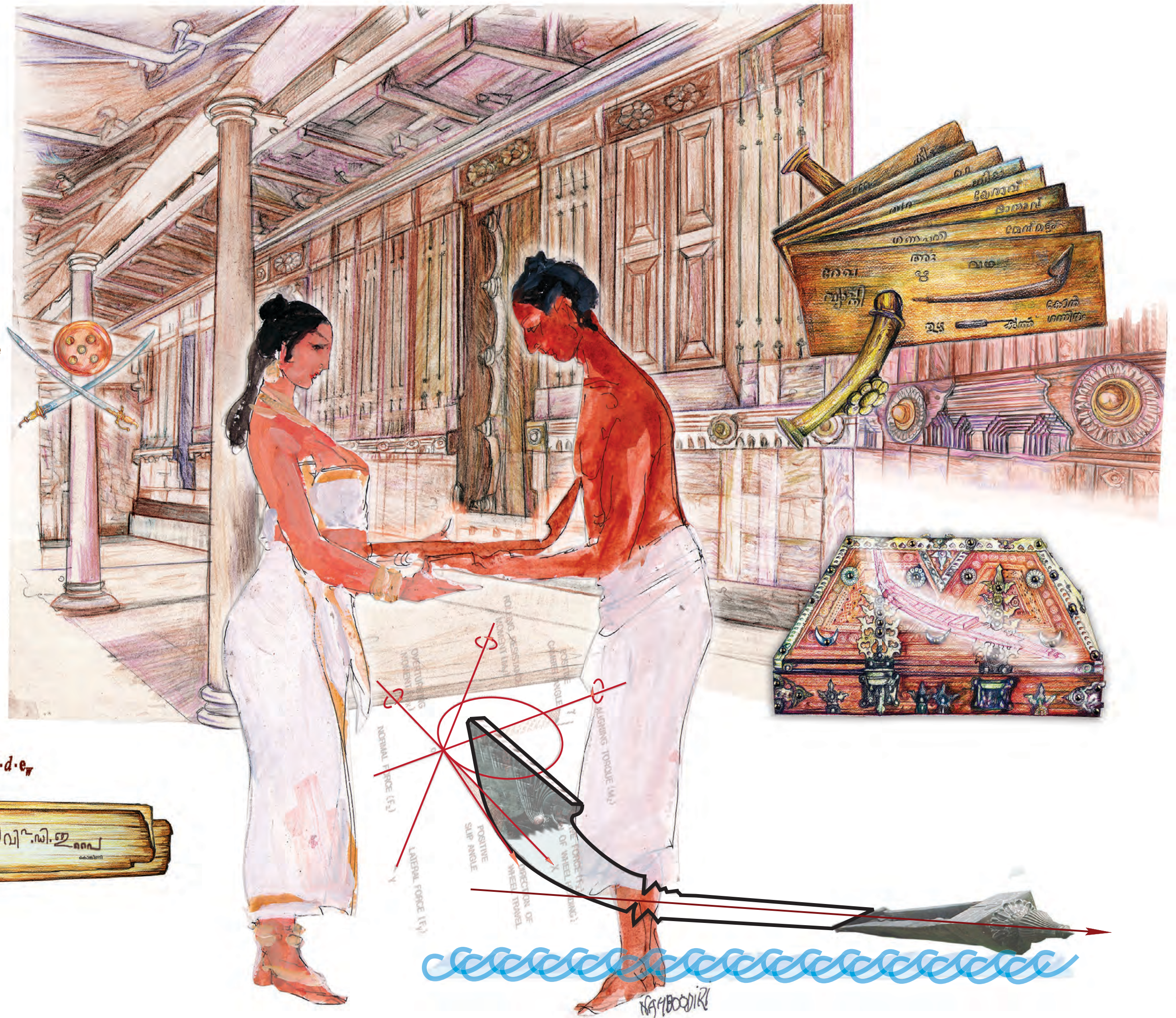
“പടനടുവിലൊരു കുതിര  
മുൻകാലുയർത്തി നി-  
ന്നടരാടിടും പോലെ  
തലപൊക്കി നിൽപ്പവൻ  
നെടിയ ഫണമുയരുമൊരു  
നാഗേന്ദ്രനെപ്പോലെ  
തലയെടുത്തുശിരോടെ  
ചീറുന്ന വീര്യവാൻ.”

“തുള്ളൽക്കല തന്നിലുറച്ചൊരു  
കാൽപദമിങ്ങനെയുണ്ണീ  
ഉള്ളിൽ വളരുന്നൊരു ഗർവ്വാടുതൻ  
മറുകാലുയർത്തി  
ഒറ്റക്കെ മുകളിലുയർത്തി ഞെളിഞ്ഞു  
വിടർത്തി വിളങ്ങീ  
ഉഷ്ണാഗ്നിയിലുണിയമർന്നു കറങ്ങിന നാട്യം  
പോലെ.”

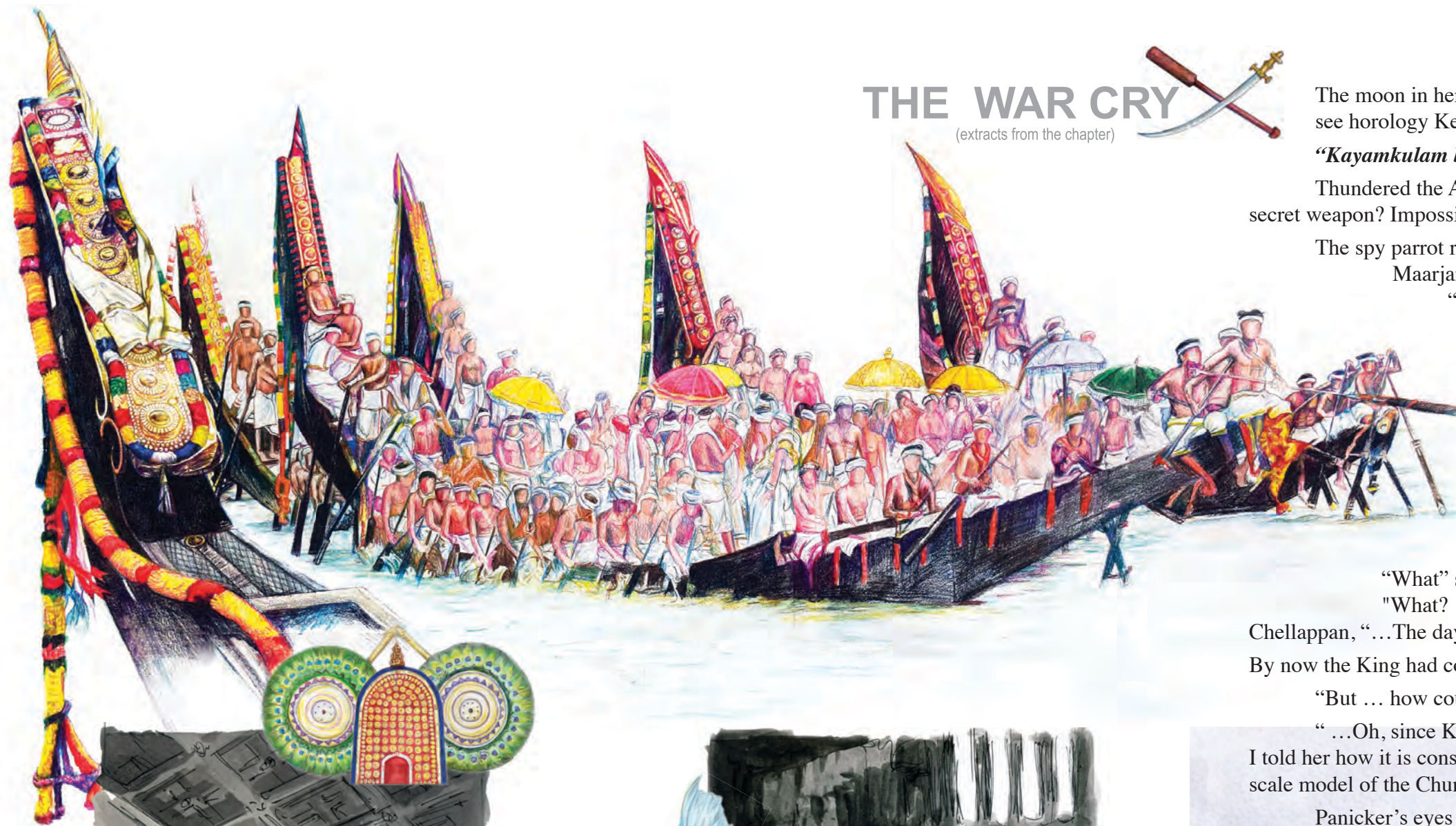
“കടുനെടിയ പകായമരത്തു  
നിന്നുടൻ  
പടുതയോടൊരു  
വശത്താഞ്ഞു കുത്തിടുകിൽ  
തിരിയുമൊരുനൊടിയിലിതു  
വാലിൽ ചവിട്ടേറ്റു  
കരിമുർഖനെപ്പോലെ,  
കാട്ടിത്തരുന്നു ഞാൻ.”





$$\frac{MV^2}{R} \blacksquare \text{ overturning couple}$$
$$M_w = \frac{\rho(p, T, h)}{2} \cdot A \cdot c_H(B, Ma, Re, \delta) \cdot v_w^2 \cdot d \cdot e_w$$






## THE WAR CRY

(extracts from the chapter)



The moon in her second quarter had brightly risen three mushti spans (fists\* see horology Keralam), above the Sahya mountains when Nangeali shrieked

***“Kayamkulam building Chundan ... Kayamkulam building Chundan”***

Thundered the Ambalapuzha sovereign “Kayamkulam carpenters building our secret weapon? Impossible!”

The spy parrot returned in a few days time from Kayamkulam, barely evading the fangs of Maarjaran - the Kayamkulam bordello cat. She screeched again .....

“I tell you, Kayamkulam is building Chundan boats ... yes, they are building dozens of them ... for the next battle”.

The King shouted,

“Aaravidey, ... Commander Panicker and Carpenter Chellappan, ... on the double”.

They rushed to his presence.

“How did Kayamkulam come to know the technique of Chundan building?” demanded the king.

“Because I told Unni-Chirutha” answered Chellappan innocently.

“What” screamed Commander Panicker unmindful of the presence of his sovereign.

“What? .... when? ... where?”

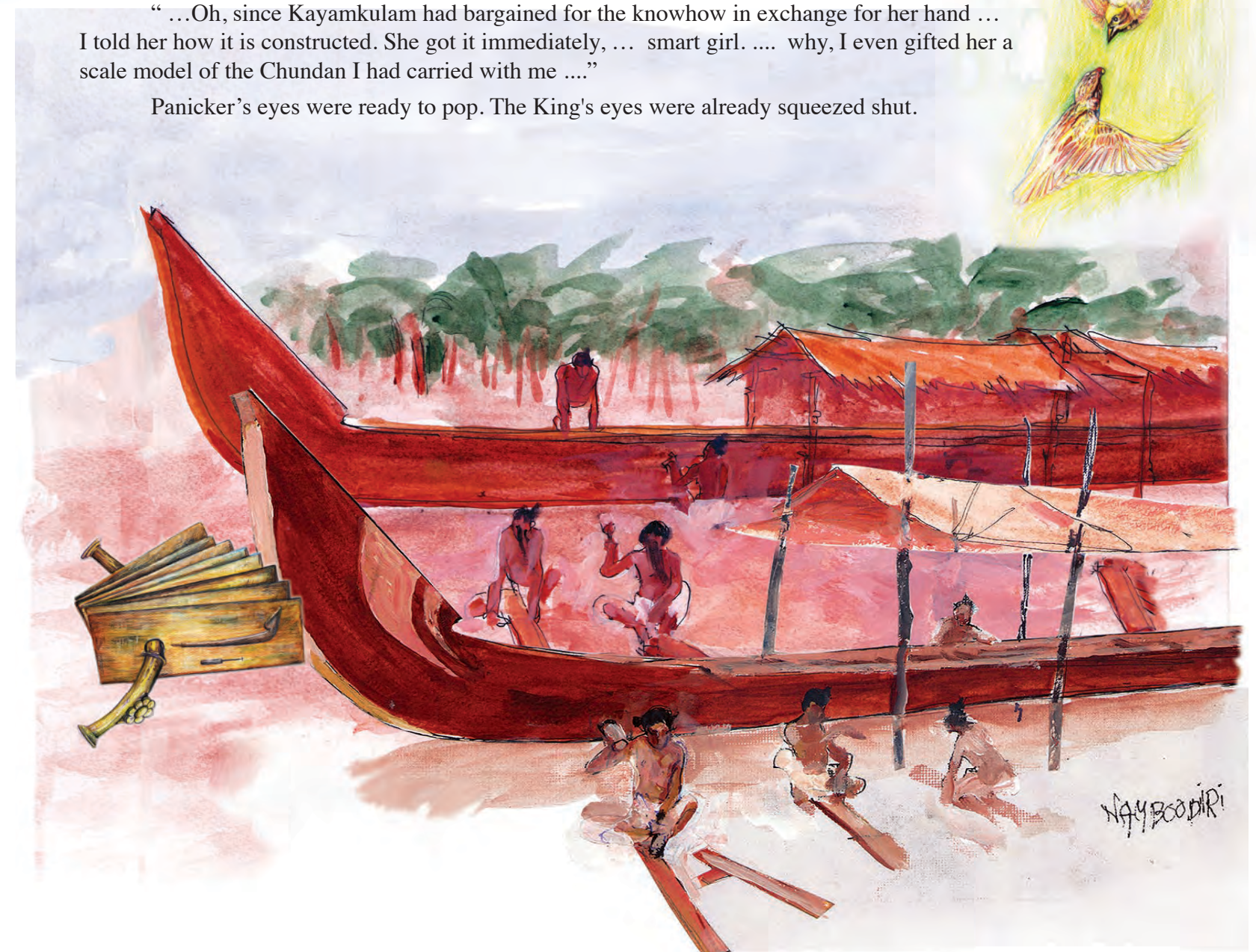
Chellappan, “...The day the betrothal broke down ... at Commander Nair's .... ”.

By now the King had collapsed into his throne.

“But ... how could you do that?” shouted the dumbfounded Commander.

“...Oh, since Kayamkulam had bargained for the knowhow in exchange for her hand ... I told her how it is constructed. She got it immediately, ... smart girl. .... why, I even gifted her a scale model of the Chundan I had carried with me ....”

Panicker's eyes were ready to pop. The King's eyes were already squeezed shut.





(Extracts from the chapter - The War Cry )

Chellappan was astute enough to realize that the situation was rapidly heading south.

“... Oh! Please try to understand Sire; I forgot to tell you ..... the chundan model was anyway my special gift to her ... she was so touched . She promised me that Kayamkulam shall keep its part of the bargain ...”

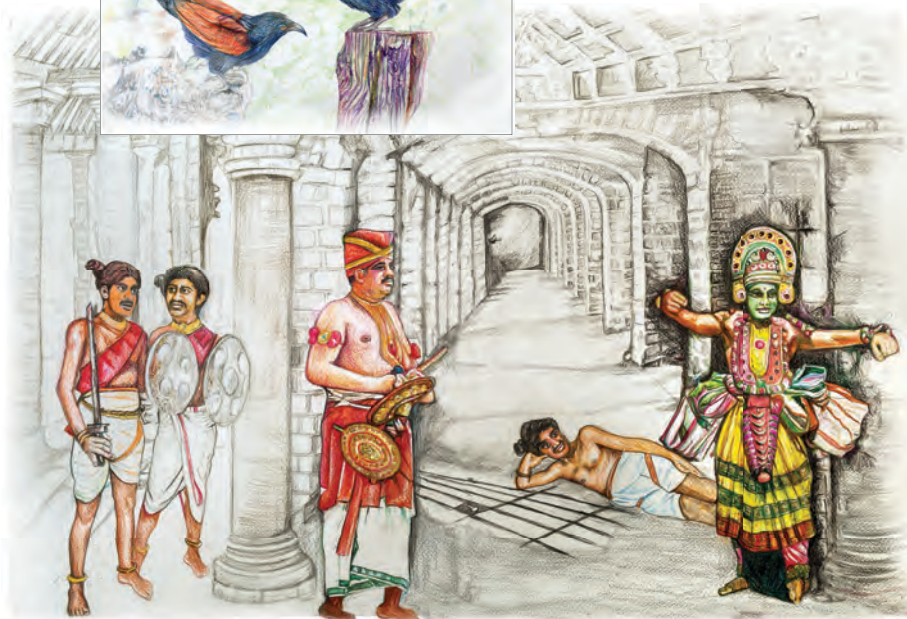
Panicker could only stare at him open mouthed.

“Do not worry sire”, assured Chellappan “Lord Commander, believe me; ... I will myself be at your side ... when their chundans come in !”

The King could just about manage a royal mutter “You are not going anywhere ... Lock him up!!”

**The month of Dhanu -- with Aries on the ascendant.**

On the sixth day of the month news came that Kayamkulam was launching an attack. On the seventh day their new chundan fleet was on its way!



"There they come ... the Kayamkulam chundans" Nangeali the parrot screeched.

It was a dispirited Commander Panicker who prepared to face the enemy with his vastly outnumbered chundan boats. Before he left for the battle, the Commander went to see Chellappan in prison.

Kunjan was the only visitor allowed in and he was there comforting his disgraced friend. One look at the Commander, ... and Chellappan and Kunjan realized that it was Panicker who needed comforting.

തകിട തകിടി തകിട തകിടി... 7/8

Suddenly the house guards were surprised to hear dance steps in the cell. Peeping in, they saw their Commander being given dance lessons.



With Kunjan rendering verses in rhythmic vanchi paattu — boat song, Chellappan was drumming and demonstrating some padayani chuvadu — martial parade steps, to Panicker. He mimicked first an elephant walking, then a damsel mincing ... and so on.

“തലപ്പൊക്കം, നടച്ചുതം, തിടമ്പേറ്റം  
കൊമ്പനാന, അടിയൊരണുവിട തെറ്റിയാൽ,  
തകിട തരികിട ധൂമിത ഭോം.”

That was an elephant walk being demonstrated. Even with one misstep, a pachyderm shall fall.

“കട കണ്ണും, മുടിക്കെട്ടും, നെഞ്ചുലയ്ക്കും  
കൺമണിയാൾ, തലയിലൊരു കനമേറിയാൽ,  
തകിട തരികിട ധൂമിത ഭോം.”

That was a woman trotting. Her head swollen with pride, she topples over.

“ഇരുട്ടുത്തീന്നുനിനച്ചി പായുന്ന കുന്തരാണ്ടം  
പടുന്നമ്പൊരു താടുതി കുത്തി -  
ത്തകിട തകിടി ധൂമിത ഭോം.”

That was the chundan boat. A wrong turn ... and it overturns!

In this dance step demonstrating a chundan boat capsize, Chellappan fell headlong towards Panicker ... to hit the ground .. barely missing the Commander's nose by a nose length. Realizing the joke, Panicker burst out laughing. Chellappan and Kunjan were gratified to see Panicker cheered up. But the soldiers were surprised see their Commander come out from the prison laughing. He laughed all the way to the battle front!

{To state a fact, it would not have been strange to see Commander Panicker taking a few martial dance steps. Mathoor Panicker, as he was known to his close acquaintances, is honored to this day as the choreographer of the famous Ambalapuzha velakali — a martial dance. Still, with the invasion coming, is this the appropriate time for entertainment? .... Panicker's soldiers wondered : - Ed}

**The Battlefront. Daytime.**

Ambalapuzha fleet reached the fork in the waterway, where river Pamba meets the Achankovil stream, and waited. The Kayamkulam fleet approached and slowed to a halt. While studying Panicker's battle formation, Commander Nair of Kayamkulam made sure there were no ambushes this time.

And then he entered into a time-honored battle ritual with Panicker ... an abusive verbal combat ensued. This was an essential prelude to the physical confrontation.

{Conflicts may be day-to-day occurrences in human life. But getting into actual tussle is a serious matter ... since the consequence involves bloodletting. To trace the evolutionary origins of what is going to be narrated here as *\*prelude to the battle charge*, we need first to look at how street dogs get into the business of canine melee. Once they agree upon the bone of contention, the canine rivals will work up their fury with abuses (in their mother tongue) before two dogs can physically engage in teeth to teeth combat.

Being primates and mammals, our conflicts also resemble this ritual .... but we take after our biological cousins, the chimpanzees, albeit with a higher degree of sophistication.

Down history, we find that the Normans rattled their sabers before the first slash. African warriors drummed up courage before the first spearing.

The Romans decurions promised great war booty to motivate their legions. Colonial cavalries screamed purpose-designed battle cries (Remember Cawnpore .... !) to work up courage before the charge.

Coming to the Indian peoples, the war-wailing Rajput women in Punjab and the breast beating Theavar women in Tamilnadu are examples for arousing their warriors to battle frenzy.

In modern era, this onerous duty has been wholly taken over by the media. They discharge this through impassioned reality shows, acrimonious contests, hyper-charged panel discussions and provocative interviews. It's no joke to overcome one's own survival instinct. To venture into a kill-or-get-killed situation, it takes ample hysterics & histrionics.



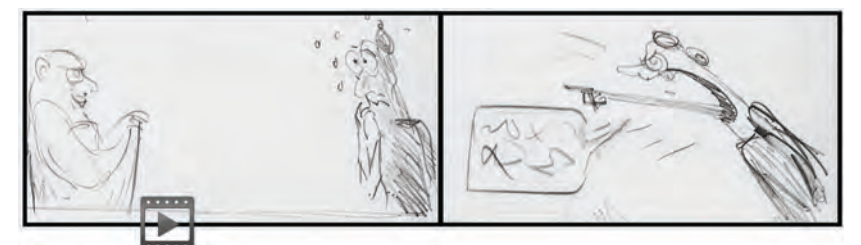
Now, among the malayalee denominations of Keralam, this ritual before shedding the first blood was always conducted in the manner of man's best friend : - Ed}

**\*prelude to the battle charge (1) PLAY VIDEO**



This exchange ideas and salutations went on for sometime between the contestants of Kayamkulam and Ambalapuzha with neither side becoming provoked enough to charge. That was when Commander Panicker of Ambalappuzha broke the stalemate with the ultimate malayalee insult! ..... silent, but most effective!!

**\*prelude to the battle charge (2) PLAY VIDEO**



At this shameful gesture by Panicker, an enraged Commander Nair charged forward with his fleet. But instead of confronting the enemy, Commander Panicker signaled his boats to retreat!



## THE FINISH

(extracts from the chapter)



Twenty chundan boats charging forward was an awesome sight indeed!

No wonder, Commander Panicker shrieked in what sounded like parrotting Nangeali  
"There they come ... the Kayamkulam chundans"  
Commander Panicker then shouted,  
"Retreat, retreat ..."

{Oh, Lord Krishna! ... such cowardice for a valiant war veteran! : - Ed}

And all Ambalapuzha chundans wheeled around and made quickly for home.

Naturally, a chase ensued. Kayamkulam's twenty chundans bore down with victory cries on the gutless fleeing Ambalapuzha chundans.

Both navies were going full ahead around the Cheruthana river bend. Then, on a signal from the lead boat, helmsmen of every Ambalapuzha chundan plunged their long steering oars into the water as a pivot.

High above the water, hovering kingfishers were treated to a remarkable sight. Twelve chundans were scribing semicircles of churning water. There go the prospects of a good lunch, the birds thought.

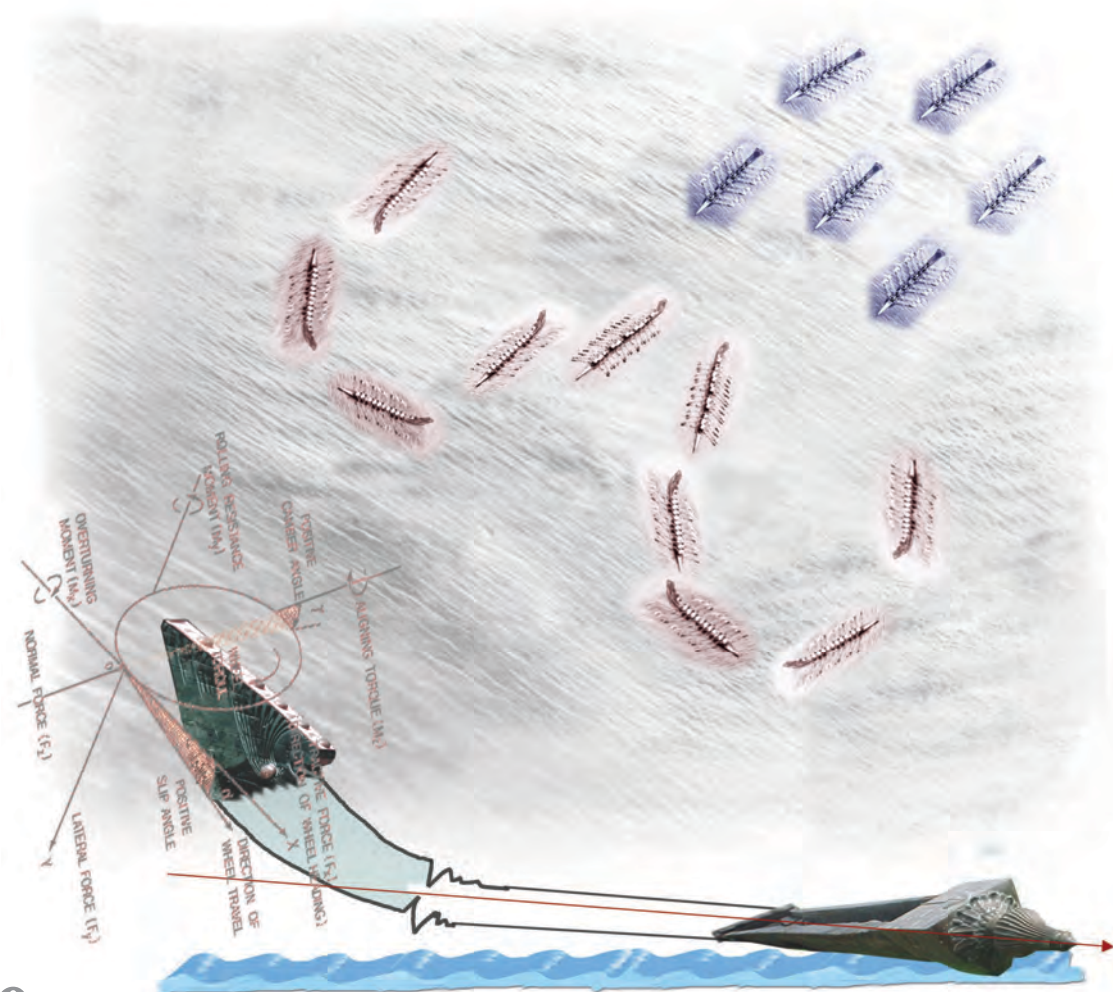
As the Ambalapuzha chundans completed their U-turns\* they were brought head-on to the oncoming Kayamkulam chundan boats.

{\*This is a time-honored naval maneuver for bringing one's craft into combat position - broadside to broadside. This enables the soldiers to board the opponent's craft and effectively deploy weapons in a hand-to-hand fight. - Ed}

When they saw the Ambalapuzha chundan boats fan around ahead of them, still cruising at full speed, bewildered Kayamkulam helmsmen caught off-guard, started to execute the same maneuver. This was a disaster.

All of the twenty Kayamkulam chundans started the pivoting turn. Only to realize that all chundans are not created equal. Like misstepping elephants, ... like swollen headed women, ... one after the other, the twenty Kayamkulam chundans started turning turtle. Their heavy heads could not regain stability at the completion of the U-turn.

Leading the pack, it was Nair's boat that did the first U-turn. On completing the capsize it was Nair who first tumbled into the water ... falling headlong towards Panicker .. barely missing his nose by a nose length .... and making an embarrassingly massive landing splash.



This action executed by the Kayamkulam Commander was followed by his faithful soldiers. Within seconds every combatant of Kayamkulam found himself in the water ... right in front of the enemy soldiers. The tumult of twenty capsizing chundans and their plunging occupants made the waters at Cheruthana river bend erupt and boil.

As the waves and the froth settled, Kayamkulam heads slowly started surfacing above the ripples. The first to emerge was Nair. Looking woefully at Panicker, he spat out a mouthful of water. Panicker once again burst out laughing. He was recalling Chellappan's prison cell performance demonstrating a chundan boat capsize. Soon the laughter spread to the Ambalapuzha soldiers. The sight of hundreds of dripping, pathetic, sheepish faces looking up at them cranked up their laughter. As they tried futilely to stifle their laughter, they had to let go their weapons. Swords and shields started splashing into the water. Soon, convulsed with laughter, Ambalapuzha soldiers were falling overboard. At this strange sight, Kayamkulam soldiers, despite their watery plight, also had to laugh.

The laughing match between the two greatest navies of the era continued till sundown. Finally, Commander Panicker, one hand holding his aching belly, extended the other to help Commander Nair out of the water. This signaled an end to the **Battle of the Laughing Waters**.

{It was our poet Kunjan who later christened the Cheruthana river bend, where the battle took place, as 'Laughing Waters'. This is pure Malabar sarcasm. Linguistic scholars should not confuse this with a similar sounding Apache Red-Indian name: - Ed}

Since humor and laughter had found the solution to the longstanding acrimony between Ambalapuzha and Kayamkulam, it was now time for the strangest of bridal processions that has ever navigated the waters between Krishnapuram and Ambalapuzha . Strange, because here was a proud Commander Nair of Kayamkulam, making towards Commander Panicker of Ambalapuzha who had just now defeated him in the battle! Nair was bringing the bride from Kayamkulam for the Royal carpenter of Ambalapuzha.

{I have a feeling that this invented pride, as exhibited by Commander Nair above, characterizes yet another psyche, defying logic, unique to the malayalees. The dichotomy of pride masking their shame : - other Ed}

{And I have a feeling that the above character signing himself as "other Ed" is a racist who holds grudge against all Mallus. I have been carefully analyzing his comments. If you had lost out on a job stint in Dubai against a Mallu, just shut up man! : - Ed}

It was a wedding such as the temple town Ambalapuzha had never seen before and would not, for some time to come. The warmest of weddings was that between Chellappan and Unni-Chirutha.

Royal representatives from both kingdoms were present. Both the kings had sent their 'royal staffs' through special staff bearers. Starting with unniappam, the sumptuous wedding feast worked its way through thirty-two exquisitely prepared malayalee delicacies rounded off by Ambalapuzha paal-payasam. Kunjan Nambiar\* officiated as master of ceremonies.

\* an academic note on Kunjan Nambiar, the favorite poet of keralites.

The guests were smiling, the hosts were content, the groom looked dignified, the bride looked coy enough (for a kalari Chekava pennu — warrior girl; that is).

All was fine till the topic of discussion, alas, once again came to the contentious issue - the chundan !

Kunjan was extolling the bride for her patriotism and her loyalty to her man; a mutually conflicting predicament that she handled with adroit diplomacy. Kunjan showered praises on the bridegroom for his love for his bride and the unique presence of mind he displayed when he withheld the crucial design secret of the Ambalapuzha chundan; whatever it was.

Even as he crooned his paeans of praise, a question suddenly popped into Kunjan's mind. How did Chellappan manage to withhold that secret?

"Eda, Chellappa ... how did you manage that"  
He asked him in mid-thullal-step, oblivious of a performer's primary duty towards his audience.

"Oo ... athu pinney ... enthu parayaan ?"  
scratching his head and thereby losing the recently groomed dignity, yet displaying disarming innocence, the bridegroom said

"No, really; ... I didn't withhold anything. I think it's the old saying come true ... 'Kayamkulam women are swollen-headed' ... the boats she made came out just as top heavy as she is!"

As laughter erupted all around, the coy bride turned into the furious martial artist. Ripping out a banana tree from the pandal alangaaram — stage decorations, she started chasing the bridegroom. She kept whacking at him with the leafy trunk *and its banana inflorescence* as he ran through the crowd seeking cover. Most of the blows landed on the royal guests who came to his rescue.

To be fair to the groom, it is to be recorded here that, as he went, Chellappan shouted out warning everybody to get out of the way.

"Make way, make way! .... Watch out ... she's a spirited girl, my woman ... make way. Let her vent her fury out ... let's wait it out!"

Our story ends here with the bridal chase at full speed.



{Oh! The story ends .... but the chase continues to this day .... the Chundan Boats are chasing one another to the finish line. - Ed}