

Traditional Caturanga as Preserved in Kerala

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In the reconstruction of the history of chess, comprehensive documentation of all the available facts related to its practice in different parts of the world assumes immense significance due to a variety of reasons.

First of all, we do not possess any traditional account of the origin and evolution of the game from which we could ascertain the course of its development down the ages and speculate on the manner in which it was played in its original form. Instead, we only get patches of information of the game at different periods of time and even here all the sources of information have not been tapped enough.

Speaking of India, which is generally taken to be the birth place of *caturanga*, documentation of literary sources has been done more or less satisfactorily and some earnest attempt made to explain these references. But many other sources remain unexploited, and the facts, related to the game as played in remote parts of India like Kerala, are not recorded properly.

Thus one finds that no mention is made of the *Caturangastaka* of *Melputtur Narayana Bhattathiri* in the list of Sanskrit works on *caturanga* prepared by modern scholars. This small work, fragments of which are available, throws light on several aspects of traditional *caturanga*, such as the pieces, their movements, and some key positions in the game as it was played in the 16th century in Kerala. A diligent search would yield in much more information of the traditional *caturanga* of Kerala, which is now on the verge of extinction due to the invasion of modern chess.

The present paper aims at the documentation of all the available data related to *caturanga* as traditionally preserved in Kerala which will be of great significance in tracing the history of the game in India, since Kerala has meticulously preserved various other cultural aspects of ancient India like the sacrificial tradition, herbal medicine, Sanskrit theatre and architecture.

In view of the fact that we do not find any direct reference to the game of *caturanga* in ancient literature of *Tamilakam* of which Kerala was a part, it is safe to assume that *caturanga* found its way to Kerala in the process of Aryanisation characterised by waves of influx of Brahmin settlers in the West coast. This must have been before the 12th century AD.

The earliest available reference to *caturanga* in Kerala seems to be that of *Payyannur Pattu*, which is assigned to

the 13-14th centuries by literary historians like *Ulloor*.¹ This long song, now preserved in Tübingen University from the collection of Dr. Hermann Gundert, deals with the extraordinary story of revenge by the heroine *Nilakesi* who avenged the death of her brothers at the hands of her husband by killing her own son. In the invocatory verses called *Anchati*, seen in the beginning of this work, all the pieces of *caturanga* are mentioned like the king (*mannava*), horse (*kutira*), elephant (*varana*), chariot (*ther*), footmen (*natakkum chekavan*) and minister (*mantri*). There is an allusion here to a tradesman (*vaniyan*) being defeated in the game and forfeiting everything he possessed as a result. In the *Nilakesipattu* also, which seems to be a continuation of *Payyannur Pattu*, there is a reference to *Nilakesi* defeating *Tariyaran* who is none other than her son. An interesting feature of these references is that the word *cutu* (dice) is used along with *caturanga*, but the copious references to various pieces mean that the game is classical *caturanga* itself.

The *Ramayana Campu*² of *Punam Namboodiri* written in the 16th century also contains a very interesting reference to *caturanga*. Here, when *Hanumat* is about to burn the city of *Lanka*, he encounters demons engaged in the game of *caturanga*, oblivious of even the death of their mothers, and exclaiming words like *aracu* (checkmate), *vaccaracu* (checkmate by a chariot), etc. The passage also refers to the unblinking glance of the players, absorbed in the game and the arrangement of pieces immediately after the end of one game, suggestive of the degree of the typical addiction of the players to the game.

The anonymous *Candrotsava*, assigned to the 16th century AD, contains an interesting verse (II.62) which refers to several strategies of *caturanga*. Here the author refers to the deliberate sacrifice of an unwanted piece (*tinituka*) when convinced of its uselessness. The footman becoming a minister through his movements is also clearly mentioned. Another move mentioned is the strategic placement of a minister to support a chariot, which is sacrificed to get rid of the opponent's horse. The author also refers to the strategic retreat and the ensuing onslaught to create a defeat in the game. The verse is of some sociological significance also since *caturanga* is here seen as the accomplishment of a young courtesan, who inflicts a checkmate on her opponents within 'half a moment'.³

¹ *Payyannur Pattu*, Ed. by P. Antony, Centre for Kerala Studies, St. Brechman's College, Changanacherry, 1994.

² *Bhasharamayana Campu*, Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1967.

³ *Candrotsavam*, II. 64 - continued next page

The *Caturangastakam* of Melputtur Narayana Bhattathiri also throws valuable light on the *caturanga* of Kerala, though only six verses of the work are extant now. The pieces mentioned by the author are footmen (*patti*), chariot (*ratha*), elephant (*danti*), horse (*turaga*), minister (*mantri*) and king (*deva*). The first verse of the work gives an account of the permissible moves for each piece, while the last five, somewhat obscure, discuss some types of strategic arrangements of chess pieces. According to the author, the horse is to move to the corners of adjacent squares. The king moves to the corners, by means of which the author probably means that the king moves to all the adjacent squares, vertically and diagonally. The chariot, described as *cakri*, is supposed to move to the near squares, but according to the actual practice it moves horizontally and vertically. The minister, described as *mantrin*, moves diagonally only to the next square. The elephant is supposed to move towards the squares at its corners. The footmen move straightaway and no mention is made of their capturing pieces on either side of the next row.

An important move mentioned by Narayana Bhattathiri is that of a footman who attains the status of a minister, even though the text is not very explicit about the movement by means of which this is effected. The practice in Kerala's *caturanga* in this regard is that the footman, reaching the other end of the board, becomes a minister in subsequent moves.

Melputtur also refers to some combinations called *vyuha* (array) involving the deployment of the king, minister and other pieces. The expression '*pattyaprakostha subalerita hastivaryah*' occurring in the *astaka* refers to an interesting array of the elephant which is supported by a pawn in an unassailable position. The author also refers to the combination of the king and minister (*nripamantrikam*). The word used to denote a square is '*kostha*' as in many other texts.⁴ The author refers to diagonal movement with the word '*kona*'. The word '*sataka*' is used to denote cloth. Interestingly, the term *Vithi* occurring in *Manasollasa* and *Vilasamanjari* to denote row and line occurs in the *Astaka* in the expression '*Vithikrtya vidaritam*' etc. in verse no.6.

A general review of *Caturangastaka* makes clear that *caturanga* as practised in Kerala involved all the pieces recognised by classical *caturanga*. Their movements also are more or less the same. Also significant is the fact that the text does not show any Persian/Arabic influence at all. Thus we do not find any reference to the camel (*ustra*) in the place of chariots, a feature which we also find in the *Manasollasa* of Somesvara, written at the beginning of the 12th century. This would mean that *caturanga* in Kerala did not come under any foreign influence. Again, the so

called four-armed *caturanga*, played with dice in other parts of the country was practically unknown to Kerala.

In traditional *caturanga* of Kerala, the movements of various pieces are as follows: The king moves to his adjacent squares, diagonally as well as straight. The minister moves diagonally to the adjacent square. The elephant also moves diagonally, to the third square. The horse moves around all the eight squares of the third square on all its four directions. The chariot can move in straight lines on all the four directions. In the case of the footman, the movement is to the immediate front square. *Caturanga* could be either played on a wooden board (*caturangappalaka*) or, alternatively on the board being drawn on ground (*caturangakkalam*).

The pieces in the game were distinguished on the basis of their size. Accordingly, in the place of black and white pieces of modern times, they were distinguished as 'big pieces' (*valiyakaru*) and 'small pieces' (*ceriyakaru*). It was the big piece which opened the game. The *caturanga* piece movement was called '*karunikkam*', which has now acquired the idiomatic sense of a 'strategic move'. According to the oral tradition, each move was accompanied by an oral description of it and the game thus had acquired the nature of a vocal war of wits. The checkmate, which was also of course orally announced, represented the climax of the game.

The pieces were sometimes made of wood, but in the more popular version of the game, prepared from the trunk of the plantain leaf cut into pieces. The big pieces were made of the thick part of the trunk and the small pieces out of its tapering portion. The manner in which these were cut and placed would indicate their identity. Thus the big horses, would have the concave surface on the front, and the small ones the other way round. The king and the minister of the 'big' variety were slanted on the top from front to back and those of the 'small' variety from back to front. The cut trunk of the plantain leaf placed with concave surface on top indicated the 'big' piece and the reversely placed one the 'small' piece in the case of footmen.⁵ (Ill. page 23)

The *caturanga* board was imagined to be north-oriented like a map and the two kings were to be placed face to face.⁶ There is always some scope for the confusion of the place of the king and minister on the board, especially when the squares are not distinguished into black and white. The principle "the King should not be placed either on the North or the East of the Minister" (*Vatakila Arasu Vala*) was used to avoid such confusion.

The main differences in the movements of the traditional *caturanga* from the modern form of chess can be summarised as follows:

Tinittu palkaruti vannoru mantrina kal
mutticcu nalkutirakontaniter kalannu
Alappiticcu caturangavidhau tatuttu
Mulpporukontatiyarukkumaraksanena.

⁴ Dr. C. Rajendran, "A Note on *Caturangastaka* of Melputtur Narayana Bhattathiri", paper presented at the International Symposium "Approaching the Roots of Chess", Pondicherry University, Pondicherry, November 1996.

⁵ See Dr. A. Bock-Raming, "The Gaming Board in Indian Chess and Related Board Games", paper presented at the International Symposium "Approaching the Roots of Chess", Pondicherry University, Pondicherry, November 1996.

⁶ "Caturanga", C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiri, *Keralavijnanakosam*, p. 1036.

- (1) The elephant of the *caturanga* can move only to the third square on its corners; but the bishop of modern chess can move diagonally everywhere provided there is no impediment. In *caturanga*, the elephant can ignore any impediment.
- (2) The minister in *caturanga* can move only diagonally to the adjacent square but the queen of modern chess can move diagonally, horizontally and vertically to any square if not impeded by another piece.
- (3) Only the first footman can move two squares forward in *caturanga* in the first move, while in modern chess, this facility is available to all pawns in their initial movement.

In the case of the king, chariot (rook) and horse (knight), there is no difference between *caturanga* and modern chess.

The word denoting checkmate in the Malayalam language is 'atiyaravu'. A characteristic feature of Kerala's *caturanga* is the distinction it makes for the checkmate on the basis of the piece with which it is made. Accordingly, the checkmate made by a footman is called *untarasu*, that by an elephant, *pottarasu*, by the minister, *kuttarasu*, by the horse, *istarasu*, and by the chariot, *veccarasu*. The types of checkmate effected by footman and elephant are deemed to be the most humiliating ones. Thus *caturanga* players would even postpone an immediate checkmate with other pieces and wait for a checkmate with footman or an elephant, which are relatively minor pieces.⁷ The condition of stalemate is known as *itaravu*.

Another important feature of Kerala's *caturanga* is the types of special combinations called 'koppu', which represent some well-defended and unassailable positions. There are such combinations as *mantrikkoppu*, *anakkoppu* and *anamantrikkoppu*. Thus in a typical *mantrikkoppu*, the minister will be supported by a footman and when he is removed, the footman can destroy the piece which has been responsible for the removal of the minister.

It is interesting to note that some of the technical terms used in *caturanga* have become idiomatic phrases in Malayalam, just as in other languages like English. Thus 'atiyaravu parayuka' which means conceding a checkmate now means conceding a defeat. The expression 'nilkakalli illatavuka' similarly means that a piece does not have any safe square to move, but now it has also come to mean that a person has no recourse left.

The story of the genesis of the poem *Krsnagatha* of Cherusseri Namboothiri is also related to *caturanga* play. The famous poet was once playing *caturanga* with King Udayavarman of Kolattunadu. The King was about to lose the game and his wife, who was standing nearby, realised that by simply pushing a footman, he could save the game. She conveyed the idea to the king through a song, a set *manjari* verse, ostensibly singing a lullaby to her child.

The king got the message and after making the suggested move, emerged victorious from the game. The story goes that the King asked the poet to narrate the story of *Krishna* in the metre used by his spouse on the occasion, and *Krsnagatha* was thus composed by the poet in deference to his wishes. According to another story, when King Martandavarma conquered Ambalappula, he saw the king was engaged in *caturanga* game and this story shows the extent of addiction the play creates in a person.⁸

From all the above, it is reasonable to conclude that traditional *caturanga* was preserved intact in Kerala at least from the medieval times. It is remarkable that even though there was a significant Arab presence in Kerala from the distant past, this in no way resulted in Arabic chess influencing the indigenous *caturanga*. The reason seems to be that *caturanga* was a part of the larger cultural preserve of the Aryanised society which was more or less insulated from outside influence.

Another interesting point to be noted is that side by side with the Sanskrit terms used in *caturanga*, Malayalam words have also come to be used to denote pieces and characteristic movements, and they seem to have gradually superseded the former. Thus *caturanga* came to attain a local flavour, just like the Sanskrit theatre or the Ayurvedic medical system, other cultural manifestations that took root in Kerala. The accent on simplicity, a characteristic feature of Kerala's is manifested in the manner in which the game was played with make-shift pieces and the board drawn on ground. All these features assume great significance in the reconstruction of the history of *caturanga* in India, because Kerala provides us a continuous tradition of the game.

⁷ A.R. Rajarajavarma, *Sahityasahyam*, p. 63.

⁸ P.V.N. Namboodiripad, "Some References and Chess Literature in Malayalam", paper presented at the International Symposium on "Approaching the Roots of Chess", Pondicherry University, November 1996.

Diagram I; CH=Chariot

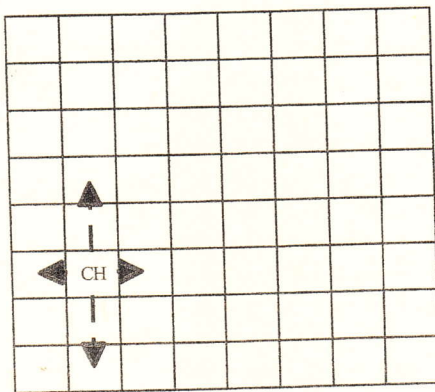


Diagram II; H=Horse

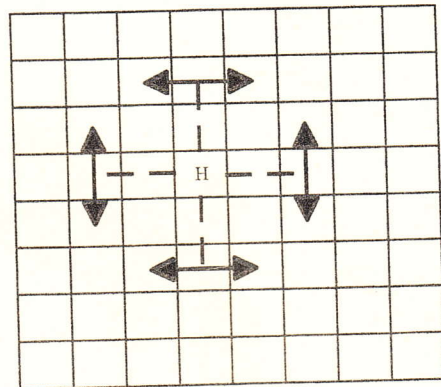


Diagram III; E=Elephant

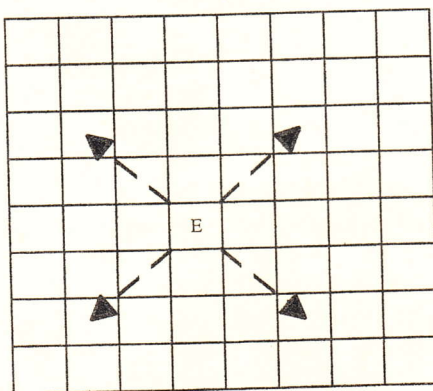


Diagram IV; M=Minister

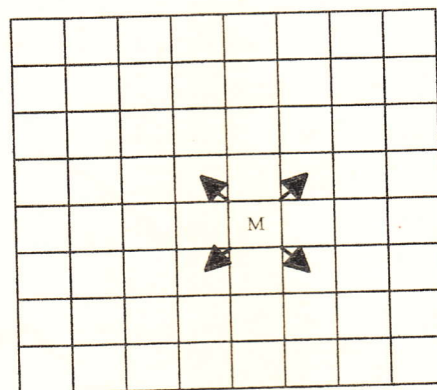


Diagram V; K=King

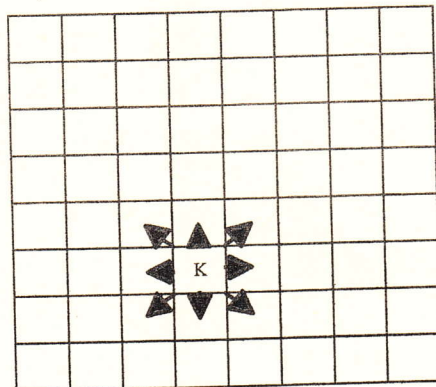


Diagram VI; F=Footman

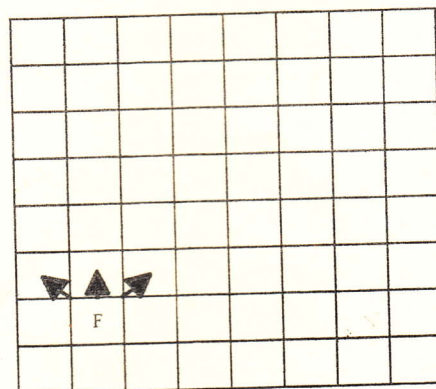


Diagram VII; M=Minister/F=Footman
Mantrikoppu: a reinforced deployment of minister

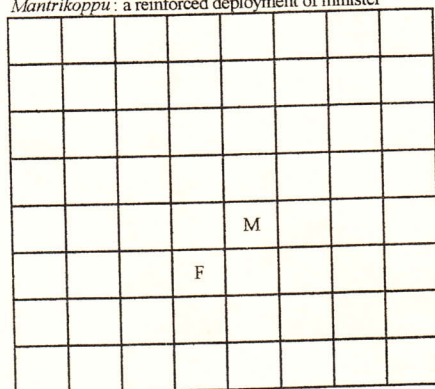


Diagram VIII; Piece arrangement
Big Pieces'

CH	H	E	K	M	E	H	CH
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
CH	H	E	K	M	E	H	CH

Small pieces'

Appendix - A

References to *Caturanga* in *Payyannur Pattu*

*Mannavanerum kutirakalum muvatiyotina varanavum
Kannikalerum terotum kuruvikel nuppattu rantumata
Munnel natakkum cekavarum mantiri muvarumottukuti
Ennumenikke jayamaka elilar kaccil pattine*

Appendix - B

Glossary of Technical Terms

A. Board, Drawing

- I) *Kalam*: Drawing
- II) *Palaka* (from Sanskrit *Phalaka*): Board
- III) *Satakam*: Cloth

B. Squares

- I) *Kalli, Kostha*: The *Caturanga* Square

C. Pieces

- I) *Padati, Patti, Kalal, Natakkum Cekavan*: Footman
- II) *Cakri, Ther, Ratha*: Chariot
- III) *Asva, Ghotaka, Kutira*: Horse
- IV) *Devan* (from Sanskrit *Deva*), *Mannavan*, *Nrpan* (from Sanskrit *Nrpa*): King
- V) *Mantri*: Minister
- VI) *Danti, Kari, Ana*: Elephant
- VII) *Karu*: Gaming-piece
- VIII) *Ceriyakaru*: Small piece
- IX) *Valiyakaru*: Big piece

D. Movement

- I) *Karunikkam*: Movement of piece

E. Checkmate

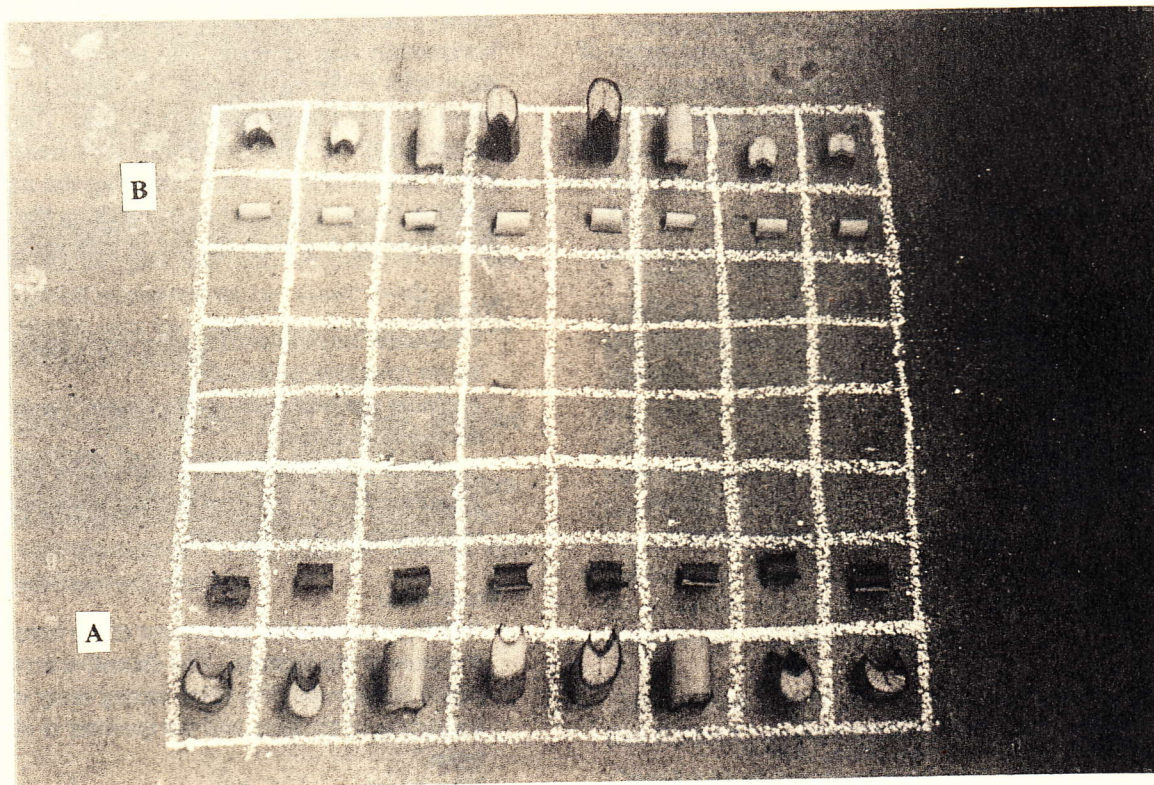
- I) *Atiyaravu*: Checkmate
- II) *Arasuparaka*: Declare that enemy King is in danger (check)
- III) *Veccarasu*: Check by Chariot
- IV) *Istarasu*: Check by Horse
- V) *Pottarasu*: Check by Elephant
- VI) *Kuttiyarasu*: Check by Minister
- VII) *Untiyarasu*: Check by Footman

F. Stalemate

- I) *Itaravu*: Stalemate

G. Arrays

- I) *Koppu*: Reinforced position
- II) *Anakkoppu*: Reinforced position involving Elephant
- III) *Anamantrikkoppu*: Reinforced position involving Elephant and Minister
- IV) *Mantrikkoppu*: Reinforced position of Minister



Chess-Pieces made of Plantain Stems