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Letterform As Image

Hand-Cut Malayalam Display Type on Cover Blocks, 1940 to 1970

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Abstract: Between 1940 and 1970 the display title on the Malayalam book cover passed through three states. It began as composed foundry type set beside an ornament drawn from the printer's case. It became, in the middle 1950s, a drawn and engraved relief surface carrying the entire design with no picture beside it. It ended, in the 1960s, as a letterform magnified and cropped past legibility into pattern, with a smaller legible title laid over it. This study reads seven dated covers against their imprints, two from every decade to 1970 and one from 1970 itself. The imprints of the last three, all published by Current Books at Trichur, print the production chain line by line, from the cover designer through the block house to the two printers and the size of the impression. The block house is the constant term. Sankar Blocks cut the covers of 1962, 1967, and 1970 under two different designers, while the covers of 1946 and 1947 name no maker at all. The account gives a periodisation for Malayalam display lettering grounded in objects rather than in the literary chronology of the books, shows that the decisive change lies in the letter rather than in the picture, and locates the authorship of the mid-century Malayalam cover in the studio that cut it as much as in the hand that drew it.

Index Terms - Block-making, Kerala, Malayalam typography, Display lettering, Letterpress, Book cover design, Print history.

I. INTRODUCTION

Malayalam book design has received little sustained scholarly attention. Existing accounts have largely centred on literary history, while discussions among artists and technicians have tended to focus on images. The landmarks of this history are therefore predominantly figural, including the cut illustration of the 1910s, the halftone portrait of the 1930s, and the modernist symbol of the 1960s. Within that account, the title is treated as something the picture accompanies, usually as a line of type set above or below the image and without any design intention considered worth recording. Yet the covers themselves do not support this account. Across the four decades from 1940 to 1970 the Malayalam display title changed from an assembled object into a cut one, and then into a pictorial element that had stopped being read as language at all.

The change has a technical basis and an economic one. A title set from foundry type was limited by the fount the press had bought, since the compositor could select a face and a size but could not stretch a letter, compress a conjunct, or bend a line of words to follow the shape of a design. A title cut as a relief block was drawn first and engraved afterwards, so that the whole line became one image and every constraint the type case imposed fell away. The cost of the second method was the engraver's time, paid once; the block then printed as cheaply and as identically as any cast sort. William Ivins put the point at its widest. The printing of pictures made possible, for the first time, pictorial statements that could be exactly repeated, and that repetition holds for the effective life of the printing surface [1, pp. 2-3]. A drawn title inherits that property in full, and it inherits the limit with it, since the block wears. The engraver's licence costs nothing per impression, and it lasts as long as the plate does.

Seven covers carry the account, two from the 1940s, two from the 1950s, two from the 1960s, and one from 1970. Six of the seven have been read against their own imprint pages; the exception is the earliest, the

1946 cover, whose date and press are taken from the field record made when the copy was examined. The sample is small and it is not statistical, and it cannot establish the proportion of Malayalam covers in any given year that carried hand-cut display type. It can establish a sequence of states, every one of them documented in a dated object, and a chain of production the imprints make explicit.

II. THE CAST SORT AND ITS LIMITS

Malayalam types were first cut in Kerala at the Church Missionary Society press in Kottayam, founded by Benjamin Bailey in 1821 [2, p. 469]. The founts that resulted made the printed language possible, and in doing so they fixed the letter. Through the century that followed, a press acquired its Malayalam type from the foundries at Madras and Bombay, in a stock of sizes and faces determined by the foundry's own catalogue rather than by the printer's need, and the display line at the head of a cover was assembled from that stock.

Two properties of the script make the constraint heavier in Malayalam than the corresponding constraint in a Latin fount. Malayalam letters do not join, and the vowel signs distribute themselves on four sides of the consonant, so that a syllable is a cluster rather than a sequence. Its conjunct consonants stack vertically, one form riding beneath another. Metal type resolves every one of these clusters into a discrete sort that has to be punched, struck, and cast, which means the number of conjuncts available to a compositor is a decision taken at the foundry and paid for in tooling. A large display size multiplied that cost, so display founts carried fewer conjuncts than text founts, and a Malayalam title in a big face was constrained twice over, by the sizes the press had bought, and by the clusters the foundry had chosen to cut at that size.

The drawn title answers both constraints at once. An engraver working from a pencil layout does not need a sort to exist before he can print a form; he cuts what the design requires. He can also do what no foundry supplies, compressing a tall conjunct into a shallow field, extending a terminal to close a composition, or setting a word to read downward instead of across.

III. READING THE SHEET: CUT AGAINST COMPOSED

The distinction on which the account relies must be readable on the printed sheet, since the blocks themselves survive in very small numbers and most of the evidence is the impression rather than the matrix. Four features separate a drawn and engraved title from one assembled out of the case.

The first is repetition. A composed line repeats its sorts exactly, so that two instances of the same Malayalam letter within one title are identical impressions of one matrix, down to the nick in a worn shoulder. A cut line repeats nothing exactly, and two instances of the same letter differ in the width of a stroke or the closure of a counter by an amount visible under a glass.

The second is the baseline and the fit. Foundry sorts are cast on a common body and set against a straight lead, so a composed line lies flat and carries the slightly loose, even spacing that a cast body imposes. A cut line curves, tilts, or steps as the design asks, and it closes the space wherever the shapes allow, so that a descending vowel sign passes under the shoulder of the following consonant.

The third is the relation of letter to ground. Where a title has been cut on the same plate as an ornament or a texture, the two are bitten to the same depth and print with the same edge quality, and a registration slip moves both together. A composed title locked beside a block is a separate element in the forme, and a slip moves the type against the picture.

The fourth is the repertoire. A press owned a small number of display sizes, and its covers of a given season show the same faces recurring across unrelated titles. A cover carrying two or three distinct display manners at once cannot have come out of any single case, since no Kerala press of the period held that range in large sizes.

None of the four is decisive alone. Ink spread on coarse stock flattens the differences the first depends on, and a heavily worn fount produces variation that mimics a hand. Taken together, and read against what a given press is known to have held, they carry enough weight to build a chronology on.

IV. ORNAMENT ASSEMBLED, TITLE COMPOSED: 1946 AND 1947

The two covers of the 1940s put their whole pictorial content into units bought from the foundry, and give the cut block, where they use one at all, to something other than the title.

Thakarnna Hridayangal by Vineethan, printed at the Arunodayam Press, Vadakkanchery, in 1946, is a single-ink cover on green-tinted board [3]. The title takes two lines of large display type with pronounced modulation between thick and thin strokes, set flat to a straight baseline with the even, slightly open fit that a cast body enforces. One small ornament stands below the centre, a foliate spray rising from a footed urn, its leaves cut as beaded stems. The author's name stands at the lower right in a smaller text-size fount. Every

element on the sheet came out of the case, and the ornament is a unit that any press holding it could set in any book. The cover identifies the book. It does not compose it.

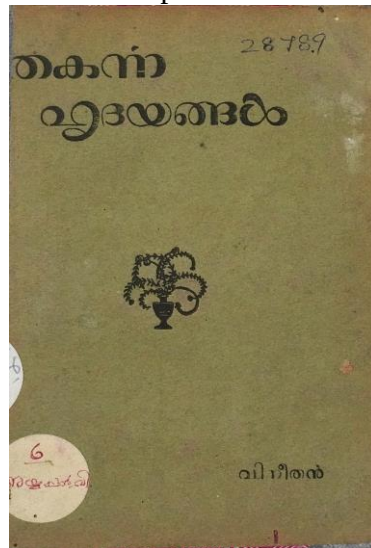


Fig. 1: cover, Vineethan, *Thakarnna Hridayangal*, Arunodayam Press, Vadakkanchery, 1946. Letterpress in one ink on tinted board, with a cast foliate ornament. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

Chandrakkala by Vidwan Gopalakrishnan Nair, a first edition from the Udaya Press at Punalur, dated Edavam 1122 of the Kollam era (1947), is more ambitious and makes the same choice [4]. Two inks work the sheet, an orange-brown for the ornament ground and a dark maroon for the lettering and the device. The entire field is tessellated from a single cast ornament unit, a strapwork lozenge repeated in close rows across the whole cover, and the tessellation is interrupted by three reserved panels: the title across the head, a publisher's device at the centre, and the author's name at the foot. The device is a monogram, the letters UPH drawn as a reserved white line within a maroon square with cusped corners.

That monogram is the one element on the sheet that had to be cut, because no case holds a monogram. The design's ambition lies entirely in the arrangement of bought units, and the single commissioned block is spent on the publisher's identity rather than on the book's. This is the ordinary economy of the 1940s cover, and it explains the absence of the drawn title better than any argument about taste. A cut title is a block, and a block is a charge on a title that has already paid for its ornament or its picture; a publisher who had paid once had no reason to pay again for words the compositor could set for nothing.

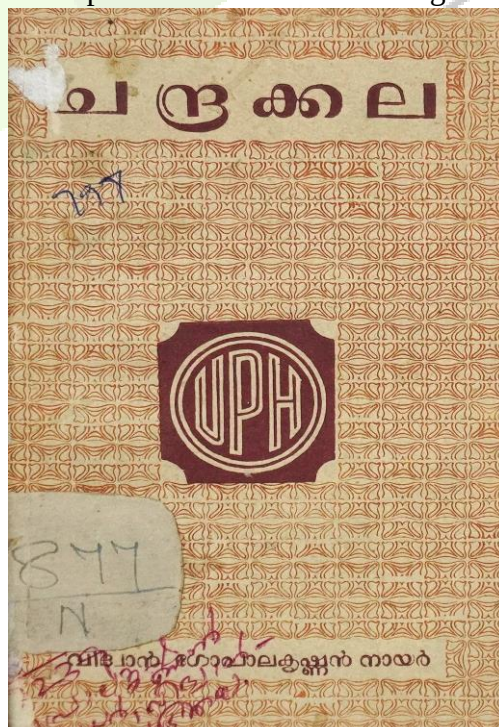


Fig. 2: cover, Vidwan Gopalakrishnan Nair, *Chandrakkala*, 1st ed., Udaya Press, Punalur, Edavam 1122 ME (1947). Letterpress in two inks, the ground tessellated from one cast ornament unit, with a cut monogram block at the centre. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

V. THE LETTER BECOMES THE DESIGN: 1956 AND 1959

Malayalam print entered a different phase by the early 1950s, with advances in technology and less interference from the state than the colonial decades had allowed, and the circulation and readership of *Mathrubhumi* improved markedly in the years after independence, on the ground of rising literacy and a politically charged public [5, p. 44]. The book trade expanded on the same ground, and a publisher's list that had once absorbed the cost of one block per title could absorb a second.

Kalyanam Kaliyalla, a play by Nagavalli R. S. Kurup published by the Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society through National Bookstall at Kottayam, first impressed in April 1954 and reissued in April 1956 at one rupee, carries no picture whatever [6]. The title is set as two vertical columns of enormous drawn letters, one word to a column, reading downward. The letters print black over a red ground that is worked as a coarse mottled stipple in the upper half and as a ruled grid in the lower left, the grid lines converging towards a point outside the sheet so that the letters stand in a shallow receding space. The greenish-grey tinted board reads as the third value.

The drawing is unmistakable at close range. Every stroke of every letter is built from four or five parallel scored lines, so that the letter is a bundle rather than a solid, and the spacing of the scoring varies from stroke to stroke and from letter to letter. The two instances of the initial consonant at the head of the two columns differ in the width of the bowl and in the number of lines that fill it.

The vertical setting is the decisive move, and it could not have been made from a case. To read a Malayalam word downward, the compositor would have to break every cluster onto its own line and abandon the horizontal fit that holds the word together, and no Kerala press of 1956 held a display fount cast for vertical composition. Drawing the title dissolves the problem, since a drawn word has no body and no line, and can be turned through a right angle without loss. The cover spends that freedom on a composition in which the reading direction of the script and the depth of the ruled ground do the work an illustration would otherwise have done.

The copy examined is the second impression of April 1956, and the cover design may equally belong to the first impression of April 1954. Without a copy of the first, the design can be dated only to the interval.

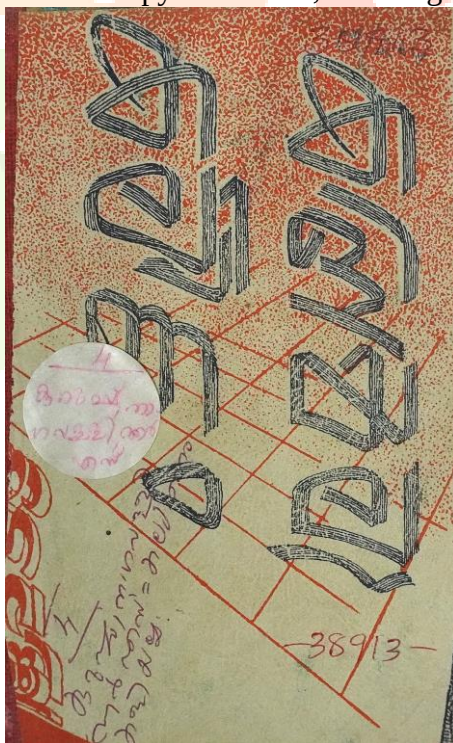


Fig. 3: cover, Nagavalli R. S. Kurup, *Kalyanam Kaliyalla*, 2nd impression, Sahithya Pravarthaka C. S. Ltd. and National Bookstall, Kottayam, April 1956. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

Daahikkunna Matsyangal, the play published at Kozhikode in March 1959, printed at the Saroj Press in an impression of one thousand copies with all rights reserved to the playwright and enquiries directed to N. Govindankutty at Fort Cochin, takes the same position further [7]. The cover is lettering and nothing else, in three registers. A line at the head is drawn in a fluid connected script, reserved in white out of the red. A second line below it takes condensed angular letters with squared counters, white with a heavy black outline. The third is a single word at enormous size in a looping brush script, white with a black outline, its final stroke drawn out into a long figure of eight that fills most of the lower sheet. A small drawn flourish stands at the lower right, in a position and a manner consistent with a designer's mark, though nothing on the sheet confirms the attribution.

The red ground is not flat. It is worked with a dry, striated texture of close broken lines that leave the paper showing through, so that the field has grain and the reserved letters lie within it rather than upon it. Two inks and the paper produce three values.

Three distinct lettering manners on one sheet settle the question of technique without any need for a glass. No press held three display founts of this character in these sizes, and none held the brush script at all. The whole cover was drawn, and the drawing carries the differentiation that a designer working from a case would have had to get from size and position alone.

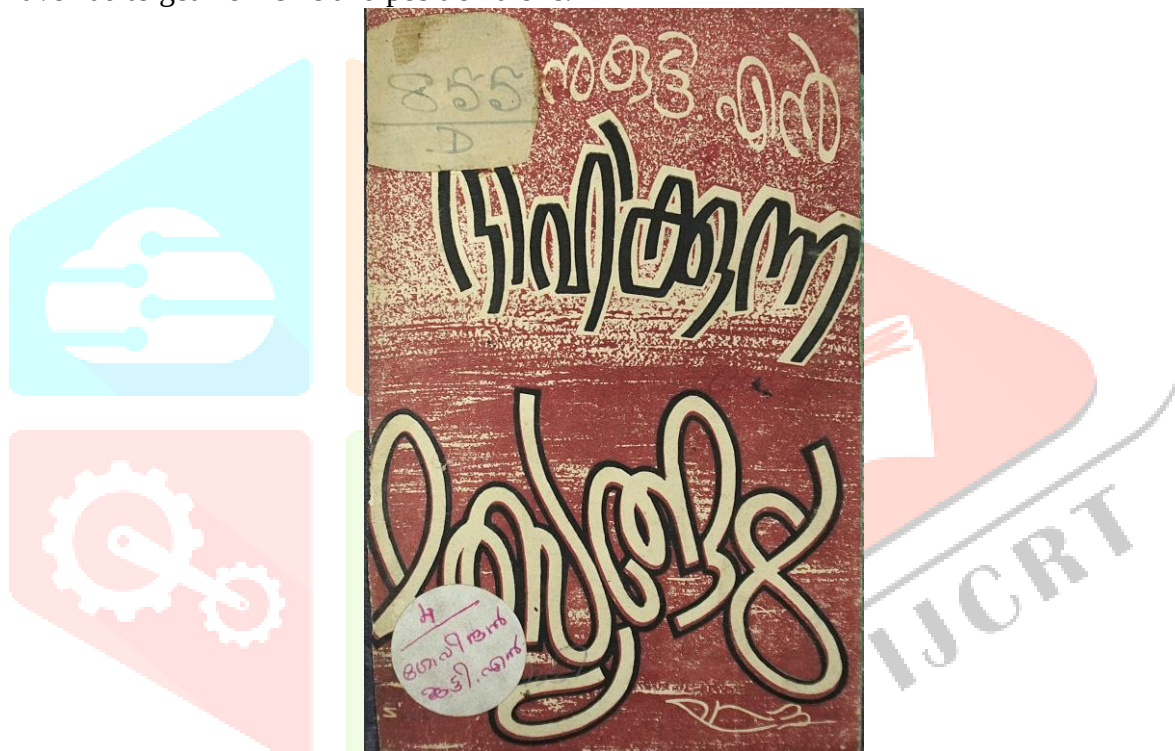


Fig. 4: cover, N. Govindankutty, *Daahikkunna Matsyangal*, Saroj Press, Kozhikode, first edition March 1959. Letterpress in two inks on board. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

VI. THE LETTER BECOMES PATTERN: 1962 TO 1970

The three Current Books covers of the 1960s take the drawn letter past legibility. They magnify it, crop it at the edges of the sheet, and use it as an all-over ground beneath a smaller title that remains readable.

Pramani, a novel by Azad first impressed in October 1962 in one thousand copies, carries a cover by Sankarankutty with blocks by Sankar Blocks, cover printing at the Guruvilasam Press and text printing at Current Printers, Trichur [8]. The author's name crosses the head in yellow in a compact rounded display; the title stands below it in white in a tall condensed display with long flat-topped verticals. The lower two-fifths is filled with Malayalam letterforms enlarged far past reading size and cropped by the edges of the sheet, printed in yellow against reserved black so that figure and ground exchange across the field. At this scale the letters stop signifying. The eye takes a bowl as a disc and an arm as a hook, and the ground becomes a pattern of interlocking curves and wedges whose origin in the script is legible only to a reader who looks for it. The publisher's emblem stands at the foot in white line.

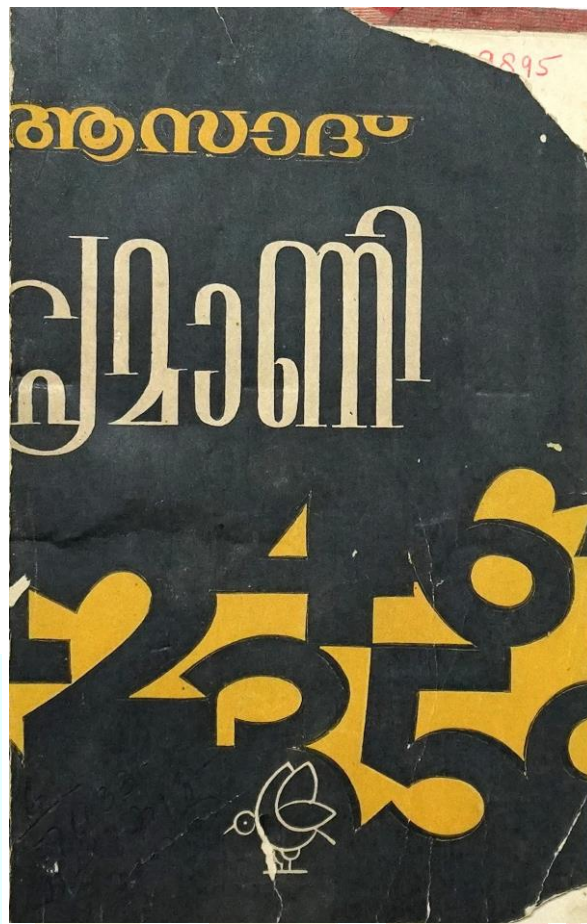


Fig. 5: cover, Azad, *Pramani*, Current Books, Trichur, October 1962. Cover by Sankarankutty, blocks by Sankar Blocks, cover printed at Guruvilasam Press. Letterpress, the lower field composed of magnified and cropped Malayalam letterforms. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

Party, a novel by Chandran first impressed in April 1967 in one thousand copies, again with a cover by Sankarankutty and blocks by Sankar Blocks, works the same principle through repetition rather than magnification [9]. The title word descends the green field four times in a staircase, alternating white and black, every repetition offset to the right and downward from the one above so that the last three overlap their predecessors. A black band across the foot carries the author's name in white, and the publisher's emblem appears again at the upper left.

The four instances appear congruent within the tolerance of the photograph, which suggests two likely methods. The designer may have drawn the word once and repeated it photographically on the negative, a process made possible by the line block and economical because it required only a single drawing. Alternatively, the four repetitions may have been conceived and cut together as one carefully planned block, either by tracing and arranging the word in sequence or by etching the full group as a single unit. A composed display fount is unlikely, since the letters have a refined, near-Helvetica quality in their clarity and proportion, and such forms were not available in Malayalam type at the required scale during this period. The cover therefore achieves not simple repetition but rhythmic displacement, as a single word is repeated, shifted, and overlapped until it functions as a visual pattern. The overlap of the black and white forms gives the sequence a stylized, coherent movement rather than a mechanical repeat.

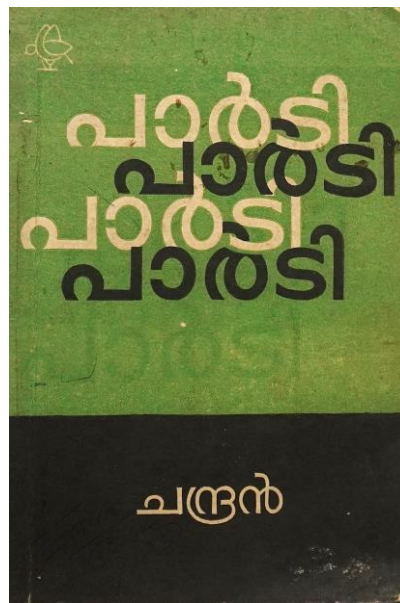


Fig. 6: cover, Chandran, *Party*, Current Books, Trichur, April 1967. Cover by Sankarankutty, blocks by Sankar Blocks, cover printed at Guruvilasam Press, Trichur. Letterpress, the title word repeated four times in two colours. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

Sooryan, Punathil Kunhabdulla's novel, first impressed in January 1970 in an edition of two thousand copies, carries a cover by Rajendran, with blocks once again made by Sankar Blocks and the text printed at Current Printers, Trichur [10]. The surface is a yellow field pressed edge to edge with dark red Malayalam letterforms enlarged beyond ordinary reading and cropped on every side. These forms are cut in reverse, so that the author's name, Punathil Kunhabdulla, becomes both partly abstracted and emphatically present. It hovers between inscription and image, between name and ground, between a readable identity and a visual texture. The cover stages an unusually experimental collaboration between artist and blockmaker, one in which a writer's public presence is assembled through scale, pressure, reversal, and typographic density. Authorship enters the design as a physical condition of the surface. The name is not placed on the cover so much as embedded into its field, stretched into pattern, and returned to the reader as atmosphere. Across this crowded field the title *Sooryan*, meaning the sun, crosses the centre in solid black, set in a bold rounded display. The black title against the yellow ground produces a deliberate semantic disturbance. The sun appears as a dark body, a black sun produced not through illustration but through the handling of lettering itself. In this sense the cover turns a text-only treatment into a layered optical field. Letter becomes atmosphere, authorship becomes pattern, and the page becomes a charged surface where reading and looking repeatedly interrupt one another. The device already visible in *Pramani* has now expanded from the lower two-fifths of the sheet to the whole cover. The legible title floats over this patterned ground without panel, rule, or reserved space, refusing any fixed separation between foreground and background.

Across these three covers the letter completes its passage. In 1946 it named the book from the case. In 1956 and 1959 it was drawn, and it became the design. By 1962 it had become the ground as well, at a scale at which it no longer functions as script, and the cover reads its own alphabet as ornament.

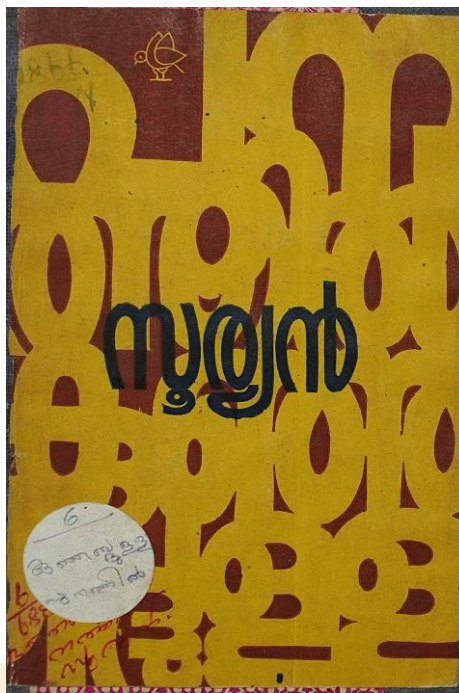


Fig. 7: cover, Punathil Kunhabdulla, *Sooryan*, Current Books, Trichur, January 1970. Cover by Rajendran, blocks by Sankar Blocks. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

VII. THE IMPRINT AS EVIDENCE OF AUTHORSHIP

The three Current Books imprints do something the earlier covers do not. They print the production chain in full, line by line, in English, on a single page at the front of the book.

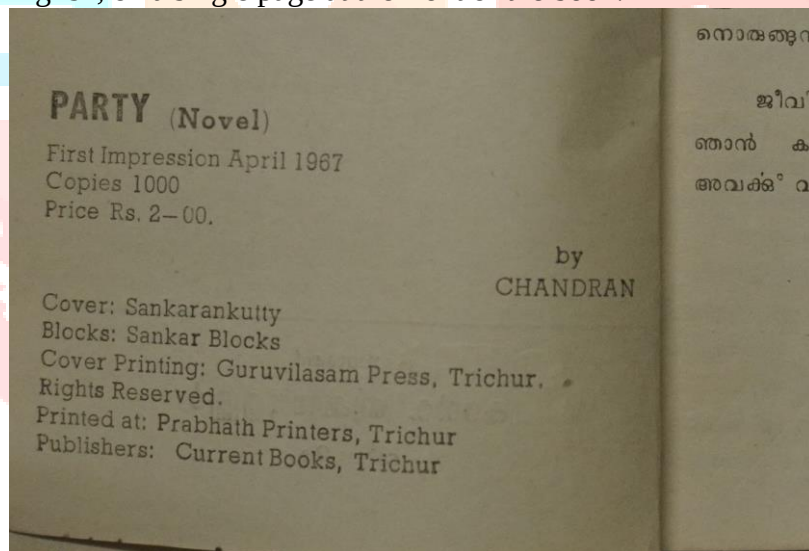


Fig. 8: imprint page, Chandran, *Party*, Current Books, Trichur, April 1967, recording cover, blocks, cover printing, text printing, publisher, impression size, and price. Kerala Sahitya Akademi collection. Photograph by the author.

Read through the three books the lines yield a table of the trade. The cover designer changes, Sankarankutty in 1962 and 1967 and Rajendran in 1970, and the block house does not change at all. Sankar Blocks cut every one, across eight years and two designers.

That constancy is the paper's evidence for a claim about authorship that would otherwise rest on assertion. A designer's drawing reaches the reader only in the form the engraver gives it, and the qualities on which these three covers depend are the engraver's before they are the designer's. A magnified letterform holds a clean edge against a flat ground only at the right depth of bite. Two large colour areas stay in true across a whole sheet only if the plates are cut to align. Whether a reserved line survives the press or fills with ink is a judgement made at the bench. A design of this kind fails visibly when the bite is poor. That two designers over eight years produced covers of consistent quality through one block house is a fact about the block house.

Set beside this, the silence of the 1940s or earlier covers is the point. *Chandrakkala* names its press, records its copyright, and prints its price, and names nobody who made its monogram block. Bengal had begun naming its engravers some hundred and thirty years earlier. Mukhopadhyay and Das give the earliest signed printed illustration in India as the two metal-plate engravings in *Oonoodha Mongol* by Bharat Chandra, published by Ganga Kishore Bhattacharjee and printed at the press of Ferris and Company, Calcutta, in 1816, which carry the declaration "Engraved by Ramchand Roy" [11, p. 7]. The Calcutta trade that produced those plates was large. Traditional metal workers and sculptors converged on the city through the nineteenth century and turned themselves into printmakers, and until the middle of the century their work was almost wholly small illustration for books, two-thirds of it cameo prints from engraved wood blocks. From the late 1850s the art school's British-trained products entered into competition with these craftsmen [12, pp. 44-45]. Kerala's cutters entered the printed record much later and much more sparingly, and when they did enter it, they entered it as firms rather than as men. The line on the imprint reads Sankar Blocks, not the name of whoever held the graver.

VIII. SCRIPT AND THE LIMITS OF THE COMPARISON

The freedom exercised in the covers of 1956 and 1959 is specific to the script, and the comparison with display cutting in the other Indic scripts of the period sharpens the point.

Devanagari carries a continuous headline, the *shirorekha*, which extends across the top of every word and binds its letters into a single horizontal unit. A display cutter working in Devanagari works beneath that line and must respect it, so the room available to him lies in weight, condensation, and the treatment of the vertical stems rather than in the free deformation of the word as a shape. Commercial Devanagari display cutting of these decades tends accordingly towards heavy condensed forms and towards ornament hung from or built onto the headline. Bengali is governed by the same principle through its *matra*, with the additional constraint of a large repertoire of vertically fused conjuncts that a cutter cannot simplify without losing the word.

Malayalam has no headline. Its letters are closed, rounded, and separately formed, its vowel signs distribute themselves on four sides of the consonant, and its conjuncts stack downward rather than fusing sideways. The result is a script whose words hold their legibility under stretching, compression, rotation, and magnification, because the reader identifies the cluster by its internal shape rather than by its position along a binding line. The vertical columns of *Kalyanam Kaliyalla* depend on precisely this property, and so, at the other end of the sequence, does the pattern ground of *Pramani* and *Sooryan*, where a cropped fragment of a letter remains a satisfying shape after it has stopped being a letter. A Devanagari cutter could set neither. Turning a Devanagari word through a right angle severs the headline that constitutes it, and cropping a Devanagari letter removes the one feature by which its family is recognised. Tamil, which shares much of Malayalam's structure, presents a comparable though not identical latitude, and a systematic comparison of Tamil and Malayalam display cutting in these decades remains to be made.

There is no evidence that the Trichur studio knew the display work of the Bombay or Calcutta trades, and the case does not require it. Two engravers solving the same problem, the demand that one relief surface carry both the name of a book and its visual identity, arrived at different solutions because their scripts allowed different things.

IX. CONCLUSION

Three findings follow from the seven covers. The first is a periodisation for Malayalam display lettering that does not borrow its dates from literary history. Through the 1940s the title is composed and the cover's pictorial content is assembled from cast ornament, with any commissioned block going to the publisher's mark rather than to the book. By the middle 1950s the title is drawn and cut, and it carries the design alone, in compositions that no case could have set. By the early 1960s the drawn letter has been magnified and cropped into a ground that has stopped signifying, and the cover reads its own script as pattern. The sequence is continuous, and it turns in the 1950s rather than the 1960s.

The second concerns authorship. The imprints of 1962, 1967, and 1970 name the designer, the block house, the printers, and the publisher, and of these the block house alone is constant. Sankar Blocks cut for Sankarankutty and for Rajendran across eight years, and the covers hold their quality across that change of hand. Where the earlier covers name nobody, the later ones name a firm, and the recovery of the individual cutter behind the firm remains to be done from the objects, by the manner of the line rather than by the imprint.

The third concerns technology and the end of the practice. The hand-cut display block survived because the Malayalam type case could not do what a publisher by 1956 wanted to be done, and it was set aside when photo-typesetting and the offset plate made a drawn letter cheap to reproduce by other means.

The argument advanced here relies on a larger survey of more than five hundred Malayalam covers in which the title is not simply named but worked, distorted, enlarged, repeated, or otherwise made to carry visual force. That larger body of material shows that the seven covers discussed in this paper are not isolated curiosities, but concentrated instances of a wider typographical field in which cover design was negotiated between the limits of the type case and the freedoms of the block. A dated repository coded for lettering strategy, number of colour passes, scale of impression, and the presence or absence of designer and block credits would make it possible to measure the reach of this practice beyond the presses represented here, and to trace more precisely how the shift from composed title to cut title entered ordinary visual experience. Such a corpus would also move the discussion of Malayalam book covers away from a history of pictures alone and toward a history of letterforms as designed images, encountered repeatedly by readers at bookstalls, libraries, circulating collections, and domestic shelves. The abundance of typographical experiment in these covers suggests that blockmakers, artists, and engravers possessed a degree of creative autonomy greater than the surviving imprints usually acknowledge. Rather than reproduce lettering conceived elsewhere, their work translated script into surface, pressure, edge, and repeatability. The later profusion of Malayalam display fonts may therefore be understood not as a sudden digital expansion, but as the continuation of a visual intelligence first rehearsed in the hand-cut block, where the alphabet was already being treated as image, ornament, and field.

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