

# THE KALARI, GYMNASIUM OF KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

In ancient Kerala the Kalari was a school where instructions were given both in warfare and letters. But with the dominance of the Namboothiris with their superior learning the Kalaris were forced to concentrate of importing military training. Namboothiri land lords and local chief or rulers maintained suicidal squads or warrior groups for the protection of their life and property and this tendency paved the way for the growth of warriors in society. Kalaris had existed all over Kerala and training was given in the Kalaris for the usage of stick, sword, dragger and spear. A Kalari is generally attached to the Bhagavathy temple of each village. Almost all northern ballads mention the institution of Kalari.

The Kalari was one of the most important institutions of the medieval period in Kerala History. In ancient Kerala, the Kalari was a School where instructed were given both in warfare and letters. The Kalari helped to impart military training and discipline of the Spartan type of the youth of the land, irrespective of caste, community or sex.(1) Each Kara or village had its Kalari,presided over by the guardian deity called Kalari Paradevatha or Bhagavathi. Its Guru was the Panikkar or Kurup,who gave training to the youth in the use of weapons and also such martial feats as fencing,boxing nd wrestling. Children who finished their course of studies in the village Schools, joined the Kalari for getting trained in the gymnasium and the use of arms. The training was known as Kalaripayattu. Almost all the northern ballads mention the institution of Kalari and the training in the use of arms imparted therein(2) The cardinal principle of Kalaripayattu is that the knowledge of the art should be used only for the promotion of worthy causes and not for the advancement of one's selfish interest. Aromal Chekavar and Thacholi Othenan and the heroines like Unniarcha were the finished products of the system of physical education imparted in the Kalari.(3)

The word Kalari is also found in Sangam literature.The Akananuru and Purananuru describe the use of spears,shields,bows and silambam in the Sangam Era.(4)

Existence of Martial arts in India for over 3000 years can be proved by the mention of martial arts in the Vedas. According to ancient folklore, Lord Vishnu's disciple Parasurama who was an avatar of Lord Vishnu is believed to be the founder of martial arts in India. Kalaripayattu, which is the most popular amongst many martial arts practiced in India, is believed to have been founded by Parasurama. Kalaripayattu is probably the oldest form of martial arts in India. The word kalaripayattu is a combination of two words, namely, 'kalari' and 'payattu' which mean training ground and fight. Kalaripayattu is an ancient art form and is considered to be one of the oldest forms of martial art in Indian and across the world. During the peak of its popularity, kalaripayattu was used as a code of combat by the South Indian dynasties. Kalaripayattu reach its zenith during the hundred years of war between the

Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras. The constant fighting between the princely states helped the fighters in refining the art into a martial art form.

Many martial arts in India have been forgotten due to neglect and lack of proper documentation of their existence but kalaripayattu has stood the test of time. During the 13th and 16th centuries, the art gained dominance and was incorporated into many religions as well. It was customary in Kerala to have all children above the age of seven to obtain training in kalaripayattu. Martial arts in India were considered as a code of life for many. However, during the British occupation, martial arts in India suffered major setbacks. The ruling British objected to the tradition of training with and carrying arms. Laws were passed and were implemented with zest to prevent the people from practicing and training in kalaripayattu. These laws were put in place by the British to quell the chances of any form of mutiny or rebellion among the natives. But the British had underestimated the love of martial arts in India and kalaripayattu was secretly practiced and kept alive during the colonial occupation of India by the British. The art was practiced by people in rural areas to avoid any confrontation with the authorities. Thus, one of the main martial arts of India survived the dark times where curbs were imposed on its practices. On being declared independent, martial arts in India were in vogue again as they could now be practiced without hesitation. Lost glory of kalaripayattu was regained slowly and steadily. Many movements and postures in the art of kalaripayattu are believed to be inspired by the raw strength of animals and are also named after them. There is a strong belief that this art was developed in the forests when hunters had observed the fighting techniques of different animals. Kalaripayattu is now practiced widely across Kerala, fringes of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and also in Sri Lanka. Kalaripayattu is also a source of living for many people in Kerala as performances are now conducted for tourists. Kalaripayattu has been stood the test of time unlike many other martial arts in India. Historically, kalaripayattu has proven to be one of the most ancient martial arts in India and is still being practiced by many in Southern India.

Shiva was said to have taught Parasurama, the art of Kalaripayattu, which arised itself out of Shiva's war with his Father-In-Law Daksha, one of the Prajapatis or 'Lords Of Creation'. Later, Parasurama taught his 21 disciples the art of Kalaripayattu, and then opened 108 Kalari (school's/gymnasiums) around the Kerala region, Southern Indian state.(5)

There are no records that chronicle the historical origins of Kalaripayattu, only narrative accounts formatted as myth and legend. Most of these credit Kalari's origins to Lord Shiva, one of the three principle Gods of the Hindu pantheon. Shiva has many aspects, he is depicted as moral and paternal, also called, the Lord of Time (mahakala), the 'Destroyer' of all things. He is the Yogeshwara who dwells in Kailas, deep in the meditation that maintains this very existence.

In Sanskrit, the word KHALOORIKA denotes a place where weapons training is practiced. It is believed that it was from the Sanskrit term Khaloorika, that the word KALARI came into use in Malayalam to mean: an institution for imparting knowledge of and training in the martial arts. The term KALARI denotes a gymnasium

for proper training or exercise, but in the present context it means training in the traditional style of combat. Till the middle of this century, Kalari was the place for all sorts of education. It was the next important establishment in any Place in Kerala, next to the temple. The master of Kalari, better known as Gurukkal was one of most respected man of the society. Apart from physical training, he taught Languages, Science and Art. He was the local doctor, especially for the treatments of nerves and bones. Kalari has a separate system of Medicine & Treatment. This is the only Martial Art that contains rituals, education & Treatment.

The Rituals include the worship of certain Hindu Gods inside the Kalari. The arena has to be in the area of God. Inside the arena, in the southwest corner, an altar is built for the presiding deity – a solemn concept. Alongside, a platform is constructed for Ganapathy, the remover of obstacles. The divine serpents also find their place in this arena. One seat is arranged for four traditional masters and twenty-one subsidiary teachers. In addition, deities like Veerabhadra, Bhadrakali Kali, and Vettakkorumakan are also invoked in astrologically designated corners like those of Meena [Pisces], Dhabi [Sagittarius] and Methuna [Gemini]. There are no other seats assigned for other individuals.

For the sanctity and safety of the Kalari, on an auspicious day, purificatory rituals such as Vastuhoma, Sudarshanahoma, and Ganapathyhoma etc. are carried out. Outside the Kalari, sacrificial offerings are made to the horde of Lord Shiva, in the eight directions, starting from the east. Next follows installation of the presiding deity, and worship at the altar. Then the master enters the arena paying his obeisance and lording the scene. This god-figure should clean the arena every dawn, prior to worship.(6)

A lamp is lit before the altar and flowers beautify the scene. On a plantain-leaf, rice, betel nut, betel-nut leaves, beaten rice flakes, puffed rice, jigger, banana etc. are kept as offerings. Then with acceptance of the customary fees from the novices, the training commences. Before stepping on the arena, the learners turn their eye eastward in a symbolic obeisance to the traditional customs and rituals that have been incorporated for moulding mature minds, creating a generation who will grow up well-acquainted with traditions. Devotion, discipline, veneration and faith are all integral to Kalari.

The novice enters the Kalari putting his right foot forward, he bows and touches the sacred earth respectfully and prays to the presiding deities. He touches the master's feet reverentially. These routine customs are followed both before and after the practice. The present generation, used to the superfluous teacher-student relationships of modern society may marvel at the strong and sincere master-disciple bonds in the Kalari system. In today's hi-tech educational scenario, the teachers guides only in specialised areas, working merely on a contractual basis. The contract is valid only until the completion of the designated course of study, at which time the teacher-student bond also expires. In contrast, the master-disciple reciprocates a lifetime relationship which can extend across generations.

The education provided at the Kalari includes both physical & mental training. A Martial Art unique to Kerala, Kalari reigns above all other martial traditions in its scientific discipline. A graded daily practice results, not only

in blooming physical health, but also in excellence in an outstanding martial style. It ensures the defence of oneself and of the nation.

It is believed that this most ancient martial culture evolved from Dhanur Veda, a subsection of Yajur Veda. Its roots are widespread in the Agnipuran [the fire scripture], Natya shastra, Hastanga shastra, Ayurveda [the science of life] etc. Kalari was an inevitable part of the medieval socio-political scene in Kerala where the provincial rulers patronised this for self-defence. Well trained Kalari youths formed the commandos of each principality.

Kalarippayatt is structured with rituals and tradition. An integral part of the Vedas, it mirrors the ancient Indian vision. Reflecting super human strength and brilliance, it is rooted in deep faith.

Kalari has come a long way since the times when it was used defensively to the modern perception that it is conducive to an individual's physical and mental growth. Modern man is a prey to many diseases, thanks to a libertine life style. Diabetes, blood pressure, heart and abdominal diseases are all common. Despite the strides in science and technology there's no light at the end of the tunnel for many diseases mostly precipitated by intense mental tension, the primary causative factor. Here Kalari comes to our rescue, whereby we can control the mind and keep the diseases at bay to a great extent. The scientifically structured arena is as sacred as a place of worship. Manners and customs are solemnly adhered to and physical purity is a pre-requisite for entering the Kalari. A certain diet and lifestyle are essential. Intoxication is to be avoided, as are extreme feeling like desire and anger.

The training is imparted in two phases: basic exercises consisting of a combination of pranayama and different yogi postures form the bulk of the first phase. The various steps and movements are all attuned to the various body parts. The excess fat can be removed and blood circulation regulated through such practices. The perfection attained thereby forms the starting point for the second phase when dangerous weapons [like the sword, the knife etc.] are wielded. Intense concentration, swiftness, muscular strength and exactitude can be developed by this art. A moment out of focus may cost one's very life. The limbs must move along with the eyes. A firm mind in a firm body enhances our defence system.

This is only one side of the coin. The other aspect of the treatment of the diseases affecting our vital parts, such as fractures, bruises and wounds etc, can be easily attended to. The extent and degree of damage is determined. Treatment using different kinds of oils is imparted for three, four, seven or forty-one days (in that order). Diseases deserted by the allopathic stream have been treated successfully. It is pertinent to remember that the contemporary ideal 'Health for all' can be fulfilled to a great extent through Kalari.

The initiation usually starts at the age of seven. The most important teaching method of Kalarippayatt is by verbal commands. In Malayalam it is known as Vaythari['Vay' means mouth, 'Thari' means telling]. The golden age of Kalarippayatt was from 13th century to 18th century AD. It was with the arrival of the British that this traditional military practice was forbidden by law and gradually become virtually extinct.

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