

Kalaripayattu: The Timeless Martial Art of Kerala



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Kalaripayattu is cited as the "mother of all martial arts." However, it is more than a physical combat tradition - Kalaripayattu is a profound synthesis of knowledge and weapons of ancient Dhanurveda and practices of Ayurveda imbibed with the social ethos of Medieval Kerala. Standing at the confluence of India's spiritual philosophy, warrior ethic, and cultural resilience - Kalaripayattu is the living embodiment of Bharat's journey.

With its unique blend of physical discipline, metaphysical understanding, and ritual practice - it stays rooted in Kerala's sacred geography and oral memory. Kalaripayattu is central to the subcontinent's civilizational self-defense - from resisting Islamic and Christian colonial incursions to sustaining nationalist pride during India's freedom struggle. Its survival, despite centuries of suppression, owes much to the silent tenacity of Gurukkals (masters) and traditions - in unbroken *guru-shishya parampara*. Hence, Kalaripayattu not just as a martial technique, but as a cultural force animated by *dharma*, memory, and resistance.

I. Dhanurveda Origins: Yajurvedic Science of Weaponry



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The term Dhanurveda is the Ancient Indian Scientific Text dedicated to the Art of War! Although, the word literally means "science of the bow" - in reality it is the Martial Upaveda alongside the Yajurveda. Some historians date Dhanurveda roughly between 1100–800 BCE, while others date it to at least 2000 BCE.

Dhanurveda includes instructions on five combat disciplines - chariots, cavalry, elephants, infantry, and wrestling. All of them give detailed instructions to their respective weapon systems: missiles, spears, noose, swords, and hand-to-hand warfare. Hymns given in Dhanurveda emphasize physical training and combat readiness - these indirectly lay the groundwork for Kalaripayattu's physical disciplines.

Dhanurveda also emphasizes a warrior's ethical conduct during combat and his dharmic duty. These are reminiscent of Kalaripayattu injunctions linking skill to spiritual discipline and self-mastery. Ashitha Mandakathingal's study on Kalaripayattu frames it as more than just a fighting method or technique. He frames it as a lived philosophy which allows a warrior or practitioner to transcend the mind-body divide through rituals and meditations. In his words, Kalaripayattu fuses physical prowess, ritual invocation through pooja, yogic discipline, and healing knowledge of marma points. Thus, Kalaripayattu reflects holistic Vedic wisdom that physical labor alone cannot fulfill human purpose.

II. Sacred Origins Of Kalaripayattu

A. Sacred Beginnings: Parasurama's Legacy and More



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Legend holds that Shri Vishnu's 6th Avatar, Bhagwan Parashurama - the axe-wielding Brahmin - created Kerala by throwing his axe into the sea and reclaiming the land back from the arms of the sea. This act was part of Parashurama's penance for taking lives, even though his actions rid the world of evil kings. He gave all the land he won by fighting the king to Rishi Kashyap. Thereafter, he promised to give "danam" to Brahmins to atone for the sin of taking lives. Hence, he sat in meditation to earn a boon from Bhagwan Varun. Thereafter, using his boon Parashurama reclaimed Kerala from the sea to complete his repentance by giving the reclaimed land to 64 Brahmin families that established 64 villages in the region. Legend states that to defend this reclaimed land, he taught Kalaripayattu to 21 disciples and established the first 108 kalaris also known as training halls.

Born as Parasuram Khstra, Parashurama established 108 Bhagwan Shiva and 108 Ma Durga Temples to bless the land he created. The Deity Sharika and sage Agasthya are cited as spiritual patrons of the art, firmly rooting Kalaripayattu, in Shaivite and Vishnuite tradition under the umbrella of Vedic metaphysics.

B. Sacred Space: Kalari Built by Vastu

Kalaripayattu is fascinatingly deep-rooted in Vastu Shastra as each Kalari hall embodies an architecturally sanctified space that is designed to follow Vedic flow of energy in a building. Every Kalari or training arena's construction meticulously abides by the principles of Vastu Gyan. All entrance faces east to greet the rising sun. The main training pit, where warriors train and combat with each other, is dug in the southwest for grounding energy. And each sacred space in the Kalari hall has deities placed with cosmic alignment in mind. Thus, Kalari halls become more than just training arenas - they become spaces which integrate ritual offerings, guru worship, spatial energy flow, and daily salutations. Thereby, making the practice of Kalaripayattu as much ritualized temple culture as a battlefield practice.

Such practices are not architectural superstition. Instead, they are based on the philosophy that the flow of energy in the space directly influences the flow of energy in the practitioner. As students leap, strike, and meditate within these thoughtfully designed walls, they're not just learning combat - they're attuning themselves to the subtle rhythms of the universe. Thus, proving that in Kalaripayattu, even the bricks and earth are silent teachers. The sunken pits with herbal sand and shrines to deities (Poothara, Ganapatithara, Guru-thara) are the silent strengths of each Kalari warrior.

III. Historical Evolution: Feudal Context and Medieval Codification

Kalaripayattu's journey is inseparable from the legends of feudal Kerala. Shifting alliances, local chieftains, and warrior clans shaped both politics and this art of war in Kerala for a long time. Kalaripayattu went from being a mere collection of fighting techniques to the lifeblood of the region's feudal order. In the medieval era, every Kerallite feudal lord - called a Naduvazhi - maintained a private army of Nair warriors. These warriors became a weapon themselves in the fields of war though the crucible of Kalari training ground where loyalty, discipline, and martial prowess were forged. During the era of intense rivalry between Chera and Chola rulers, Kalaripayattu practitioners were often the supreme weapons in the war fields. Thereby, proving that kalaris weren't just gyms; they were sacred institutions, blending rigorous physical training with spiritual and ethical instruction bred unbeatable assets in the form of warriors.

Under the watchful eye of the Gurukkal, or master, each warrior learned to hone their body and mind to a sharp tool useful to the lord of the land. Legends tell that in medieval Kerala, most feuds were resolved through lethal rituals: *Ankam* and *Poithu*. These were structured duels conducted under the Kalari discipline where combatants were allowed years to prepare. Sometimes, proxies could also be hired - to train and fight on their behalf. These rituals institutionalized martial arts as a lawful, regulated form of conflict resolution. By the 15th century, Kalaripayattu developed a structured curriculum: *Meithari* or training of the body, *Kolthari* or training with wooden weapons, *Angathari* or training with metal weapons, and *Verumkai* or unarmed combat using marma points. The northern style of Kalaripayattu

emphasized dance-like aesthetics and flexibility. While the Southern style adopted animal-inspired approaches and hard combat with pressure-point techniques.

As Kerala's political landscape grew increasingly fragmented, kingdoms like Travancore, Cochin, and Calicut began vying for supremacy. Consequently, Kalaripayattu underwent a process of codification. Techniques, weapon forms, and healing practices were systematized for efficient transfer of knowledge. In the beginning, Kalaripayattu followed the oral tradition of passing down knowledge to the next generation. Later, the Gurukkals started to record the immense wisdom of Kalaripayattu in palm-leaf manuscripts. The art grew as it absorbed influences, even from foreign martial traditions, to evolve into the current form of Kalaripayattu - a sophisticated discipline that balanced agility, strategy, and knowledge of the body's vital points.

IV. Kalaripayattu and Kerala's Foreign Invasions

Kerala has a long and tumultuous history of foreign invasions. Be it Islamic sultanates or colonial powers - Kerala was a quick ticket to wealth through spice trade. However, the locals repelled these forces using Kalaripayattu. Hence, this martial art became the living shield of the land of Parshuram. And its practitioners became the silent sentinels who stood between Kerala and its invaders - whether they arrived with swords, scriptures, or muskets.

A. Confronting Islamic Sultanates

Direct textual evidence on resistance to Islamic invasions is sparse. However, Keralite folklore and regional stories - like the Vadakkan Pattu ballads - document the valor of many Kalari-trained heroes. Thacholi Othenan or Unniyarcha and their battles with Muslim raiders are a well heard lore in Kerala. The centuries of trauma of conflicts in the Malabar region implies that Kalaripayattu skills were deployed in the defense of Parshuram Kshetra.

When Muslim sultanates, like those of the Deccan and Mysore, turned their eyes to Kerala - Kalaripayattu-trained warriors became the backbone of local resistance. During the 18th century, groups of Nair and Thiyyar warriors, schooled from childhood in Kalaripayattu, defended their villages and temples against the Islamic forces of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. Unfortunately, they were ultimately outmatched by modern artillery and military tactics. However, their determined resistance delayed invasions and preserved local autonomy. Martial discipline, Strategic use of Kerala's dense forests in guerilla wars, and mastery of weapons like the urumi or spear became the symbols of resistance against Islamic invaders or rulers.

B. Battles Against European Colonials

First, the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British - brought new threats of Christian powers to the land of Parshuram. The Portuguese, arriving in the 16th century, found themselves facing not just the monsoon but fierce local fighters adept in Kalaripayattu. Even the Dutch had to contend with these warriors as they vied for control of spice-rich Malabar. However, it was the British who recognized the true threat posed by Kalaripayattu.

1. Pazhassi Raja and British

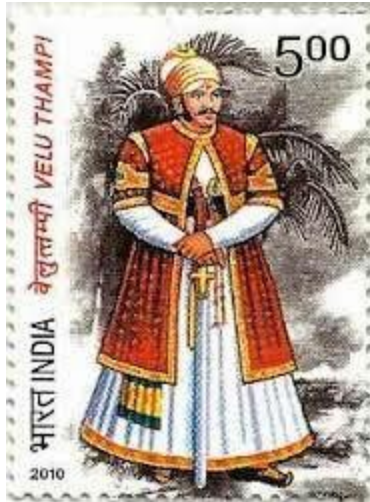


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During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Pazhassi Raja's guerilla insurgency against the British East India Company utilized Kalari-trained warriors. The losses caused by these brave men forced the British to impose a ban on Kalaripayattu and its practitioners in 1804. The British were deeply afraid of the potential of an arms-based uprising against their control after the Cotiote War or Kottayathu war. Thus, to contain the threat they banned the art.

Yet, the art refused to die - Gurukkals continued to teach in secret, preserving not just techniques but the very spirit of resistance. Gurukkals like **Kottackkal Kanaran Gurukkal** (1850–1941) covertly preserved and revived the art. Nearly 60% of existing Kalaris trace lineage to his teaching - earning him the epithet "Dronacharya of Kalaripayattu"

2. Velu Thampi Dalawa's Rebellion



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Velu Thampi Dalawa, the Travancore Dewan, mobilized Kalari-trained soldiers during his anti-British uprising of 1808. He was unhappy with the interference in internal matters of Travancore and the imposition of the Subsidiary Alliance system that forced Velu Thampi Dalawa to pay for the presence and maintenance of British troops on his territory. Thus, he used his private army of Kalari warriors to fight with the British. Unfortunately, he lost the rebellion.

However, while ultimately unsuccessful, it demonstrated the role of indigenous martial practices in armed resistance. Thus, Kalaripayattu's resilience was not just against swords and guns, but also against cultural and religious erasure. The art was practiced across castes and even by women, as celebrated in the ballads of Unniyarcha, who fought both invaders and social norms. The Kalari became a sanctuary where Kerala's youth—regardless of background—were trained to defend not only their land but their way of life, their deities, and their stories.

Until independence, Kalari remained subversive even when criminalized, and when caught its practitioners would face imprisonment. In every leap and strike, Kalaripayattu carries with it the memory of centuries of resistance - against Muslim sultans, Christian colonizers, and all who sought to subdue Kerala's fiercely independent spirit. Even as modern warfare rendered the old arts less effective on the battlefield, the Kalari endured as a crucible of identity and quiet defiance, ensuring that Kerala's legacy of resistance would never be forgotten.

V. Kalaripayattu and the Freedom Struggle

When the British East India Company tightened its grip over Kerala in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Kalaripayattu - the pride of Kerala's warrior clans - was treated as a threat by the colonial state. The British were extremely wary of the martial prowess and rebellious spirit of the local population in Kerala. After the two skirmishes, a sweeping ban on Kalaripayattu imposed not just a legal edict but a cultural assault: weapons were confiscated, Kalaris arenas were shut down, and the very memory of the art was pushed underground.

Yet, the spirit of Kalaripayattu did not die. Gurukkals taught this martial art and passed on its techniques & values under the guise of folklore, ritual, and even traditional healing. The art's survival became a quiet act of defiance - a way for Keralites to keep their identity and resistance alive during the darkest days of colonial rule.

A. Revival in the Swadeshi Movement

The early 20th century saw a new chapter: the Swadeshi movement, which ignited a cultural renaissance across India, also sparked a revival of Kalaripayattu in Kerala. Freedom fighters like K. Kelappan—himself a trained Kalaripayattu artist—recognized the art's potential to foster unity, discipline, and self-confidence among the youth. Kalaripayattu demonstrations became part of nationalist gatherings, and the reopening of kalaris was seen as an act of reclaiming cultural sovereignty. The art's revival was not just about physical training; it was about restoring pride, self-reliance, and a sense of belonging to a heritage that colonialism had tried to erase.

B. Post-Independence: Continuation of Spirit

By the time India achieved independence, Kalaripayattu had transformed from a feudal martial tradition into a symbol of resistance and resilience. Its journey through suppression, secrecy, and revival mirrored the broader struggle for Indian freedom. Today, every leap, strike, and healing touch in the Kalari is a living tribute to those who refused to let their culture—and their courage—be conquered. The Padma Shri award to Meenakshi Amma (2017) and the launch of the Kerala Kalaripayattu Academy (2021) signal institutional recognition of Kalari's role in national heritage and freedom.

VI. Preservation: Temple Tapestry and Oral Tradition

A. Rituals of Transmission

Kalaripayattu's survival owes much to its deep interweaving with Kerala's temple culture and spiritual life. The Kalari halls are not just gymnasiums but sanctified spaces, often constructed with the same reverence and ritual as a temple itself. Traditionally, the Kalari is oriented according to auspicious directions and houses shrines to deities like Bhagavathy, Shiva, or the guardian spirit of the land. Before every session, practitioners bow before the puttara or altar and seek blessings. Thus, reinforcing the idea that martial training is a sacred duty, not mere combat. This temple-like atmosphere fostered a sense of discipline, humility, and respect for life, making the Kalari a crucible for both physical prowess and spiritual growth.

During periods of suppression after the British ban in 1804, temples became sanctuaries for Kalaripayattu's continued practice. When colonial powers closed down Kalaris, the art found

refuge in temple festivals, ritual performances, and the private courtyards of families with deep spiritual ties. The connection to temple rituals helped camouflage martial training as a religious observance, allowing the tradition to persist in the shadows. Temple festivals like Vijayadashami pooja are still held with great reverence during which weapons are blessed and formal student initiations (Vidyarambham, Dakshina) occur. Kalari's focus on vital-point anatomy connects to holistic systems like Ayurveda. Treatment of wounds with herbal oils (Uzhichil), prayer, and marma manipulation encapsulate the classic Hindu principle: Ahimsa balanced by duty and Kshatriya dharma. Even today, many Kalaripayattu demonstrations are performed as offerings during temple festivals, a living testament to the art's sacred roots and its resilience in the face of adversity.

B. Oral Chronicles: Ballads & Manuscripts

While the sword and staff are the visible emblems of Kalaripayattu, its true legacy has been carried forward by the spoken word. The art's techniques, philosophies, and ethical codes were rarely written down; instead, they were passed from Gurukkal to disciple through rigorous oral instruction and demonstration. This oral tradition was not just about memorizing movements—it was about absorbing the values, stories, and wisdom that shaped each generation of warriors.

The Vadakkan Pattukal or the Northern Ballads are a celebrated collection of 17th–18th-century songs that immortalize legendary heroes like Aromal Chekavar and Unniyarcha, embedding Kalaripayattu's principles in the collective memory of Kerala. These ballads, recited and sung in homes and gatherings, kept alive the ideals of courage, justice, and self-restraint even when the art was forced underground. During the darkest years of colonial suppression, Gurukkals continued to teach in secret, relying on oral transmission to keep the flame burning. Families such as the Alummoottil Channars became custodians of this knowledge, ensuring that the essence of Kalaripayattu - its techniques, healing practices, and moral code - survived for future generations.

In the modern era, the revival of Kalaripayattu owes much to those who preserved its oral tradition, often at great personal risk. Their dedication ensured that Kalaripayattu is not just a relic of the past, but a living, evolving art that continues to inspire and empower. While folk epics such as **Vadakkan Pattu** recount the heroic deeds of Kalari warriors, Kalari families preserved **palm-leaf manuals** that detailed lineage-specific styles and sacred geometry of temple-Kalaris.

Final Insights

In essence, Kalaripayattu endures because it is more than a martial art. It is a sacred tapestry woven into the temples and tales of Kerala, sustained by the voices and memories of those who refused to let it fade. Modern work by Mandakathingal bridges Western phenomenology with Indian martial ethos. It emphasizes that Kalaripayattu is a ritualized martial philosophy where

the body is the site of cognition and ritual. Posture, breath, weapon, and mantra integrate into a single embodied practice.

Kalaripayattu stands as a living testament to Kerala's resilience, ingenuity, and spiritual depth. Far more than a system of combat, it is a cultural legacy that has weathered centuries of invasion, colonial suppression, and social upheaval. Its roots run deep: nurtured in the sacred soil of temples, preserved through whispered ballads and the careful tutelage of masters, and revived in the fires of India's freedom struggle.

Today, Kalaripayattu is not just a relic of the past but a dynamic, evolving art form. It continues to inspire new generations, both in India and across the world, with its blend of discipline, grace, and holistic philosophy. Embedded in the ethos of Dhanurveda - it is the martial arts form that still practices righteous war, humane treatment of the vanquished, and moral discipline. Kalaripayattu absorbs all of this through ritualized restraint, ethical training, and spiritual invocations to ensure combat serves justice, not ego. With each strike and healing gesture, the martial art with a legacy of Bhagwan Parshuram echoes the stories of those who kept it alive - its warriors, its poets, its healers, and everyday people. Thereby, turning Kalaripayattu into a way of preserving local identity and indomitable spirit of Kerala and not just a way to defend their villages and families.

As Bharat steps towards rediscovering its roots, Kerala's ancient martial art steps confidently into the global spotlight. It reminds the world that Kalaripayattu's journey is far from over; it continues to weave a tapestry that connects past, present, and future in every movement. Kalaripayattu remains an astonishing blend: the martial Upaveda made flesh, the spiritual body turned weaponized yogic ritual and a tradition that has saved itself from extinction and inspired future generations. From the beaches of Parasurama to colonial battlefields and modern academies, it continues as a living testament to India's ancient martial wisdom and dharmic spirit.

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