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Kalarippayattu- An Indigenous Martial Art Form Of Kerala

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Abstract: - The influence of Kalarippayattu in the development of various art forms in Kerala is great. It is the mother of all martial art forms of Kerala. It is the only form of the most ancient traditional systems of physical culture, self defence and martial techniques still in existence. This art form has secured much significance not only in Kerala but throughout the world. In the present world where tourism is a flourishing industry, Kalarippayattu has made its own contributions. It has attracted large number of people from different parts of India and abroad. It has proved to be a boon to Kerala. This article highlights the uniqueness of Kalarippayattu as a martial art form.

Keywords:- Kalarippayattu, Assimilate, Martial, Travancore, Kalari

Introduction

Kerala is a land of varied cultural art forms. It has rich cultural heritage. The heritage of art forms has developed through the ages into an indigenous style assimilative the ancient folk tradition. Many of the traditional performing art forms in Kerala like Kathakali, Koodiyattam, Mohiniyattam and Oppana had drawn elements from Kalarippayattu during their stage of evolution. These art forms where fostered by the Kings and Naduvazhis. They had arranged a separate stage for performing arts in the temples of Kerala.

The origin and evolution

The origin and evolution of every traditional art form of India could be traced back to the Vedic period and beyond. According to the legends, yoga, classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam and martial traditions like Kalaripayattu evolved from Lord Shiva. The physical exercise practiced by Lord Shiva and other divine beings, were put together to form the base of present day yoga, by the great sage Patanjali. The dance forms were derived from the Ananda 'Thandavas (Adana means happiness) of Lord Shiva and codified by sage Bharata in his famous work called Natyasastra from the War dance or Samhara Thandava of India. Sage Parasurama who retrieved the land of Kerala from the sea was a disciple of Lord Shiva and Parasurama learned all of the martial techniques and the use of divine weapons from him.

In the Southern system traditions would be traced back to sage Agastya one of the immortals according to Hindu mythology sage Agastya who taught many of the great mythological heroes to dedicate to the art of warfare. The disciples of Agastya like sage Pulastya and sage Bhoga spread the Thekkan or Southern system along with the Marma or pressure point striking treatment systems.

Kalaripayattu in Kerala

The martial arts like Kalaripayattu practiced by the people of Kerala through the centuries had helped in putting the state in the forefront of Indian circus. Slowly Kalaripayattu evolved in to three distinct styles that we could see at present. These were the Thekkan (Southern style), the Vadakkan (Northern style) and the central Kalaripayattu. The Kalari system had influenced many traditional folk art forms like Parichakali, Kolkali and Kambukali."

There were three arguments for the origin of the historical background of Kalari

1. Dhanur Veda was the basis of Kalaripayattu
2. Kalari existed in old Tamil classical period
3. The basis of historical approach of Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai.

For the arguments Kalari existed before the 11th century A.D.

In the changing political and economical circumstance of 20 century, the word Kalaripayattu was formed and also could be seen as institutional process of Kalari and created new models of folk arts and customs which were the core of Kerala culture. In reality, the artists or the dancers were trained in the Kalari system and taught the body exercise with severe discipline. In foot movements of the body, and the Tandava dance, which was both masculine and vigorous, the artist requires the dynamic skill imparted through the 'Kalaripayattu. Therefore, even a training center of Kathakali was known as 'Kalari', being devoted to the development of physical culture. The growing awareness for developing a proper physical culture through

Kalaripayattu' had really contributed to the expression and growth of the classical art forms. In the same way, the body training becomes an essential requirement for performing many of the folk dances of the region.

In the 1920's efforts were made by the later C.V. Narayan Nair Gurukkal and late Kottakal Kanaran Gurukkal of Tellicherry to promote and popularize Kalaripayattu. The C. V.N. Kalari (training institute) was a result of their efforts. The students of this institute after training moved to other parts of Kerala to establish similar institutes. At present there were 70 C. V. N Kalaries spread over the state.

The organization of administrative units like, Kalari and Kulam, the consolidation of different occupational groups in the semi-urban and urban specialized centers point to the differentiated forms of evolution in different geographical regions and social groups as a result of the fragmentation and lack of centralized authority. The Kalaries and their presiding deities occupied an important place in the daily life of every individual. The people used to swear in the name of Kalaries and their presiding deities to give force to their promises. Girls were also trained in Kalaries along with the boys and they continued their training till Talittukalyanam. Training of this kind gave women an important position in the society. In the first decade of the present century Kalari known as Vallabhata existed. Vellathu kings got training from the Kalari Gurukkal. Shankunni Paniker established a Kalari in 1950-51 in Elapally in Chittoor. In 1957 another Kalari was started at Chavakkad.

The traditional training of the Kalari Gurukkal included as could be seen in some other martial arts, specialization in indigenous medical preparations and techniques of treatment and health care. Based on the Ayurvedic system of medical practice the old masters of Kalaripayattu had indigenously developed methods of treatment for Kalari related injuries like bruises, fractures etc. known as Kalarichikilsa. The training of the Gurukkal also included the special system of full body oil massage to develop flexibility and muscular texture and also to stimulate circulation to maintain general health and blood.

The vital spots which his master could attack by looking or pointing were the "Yoga marmam" a set of 32 vital spots associated with subtle body. The Yoga marmam were part of the subtle body, they were connected to the influence of the mind. Just as the martial master gains access to other more subtle powers of practice through gaining accomplishment in a variety of meditational techniques, the power to attack these subtle Yoga marmam could only be generated through special meditation techniques. Yoga practice like specific exercise, medicines, good habits etc. will help from mental stress diseases.

Forms of arts were important proof of the cultural and traditional development of Nadu. The ancient Kerala Padasalas were also called Kalari. In Kerala Chavers were formed by the culture of Kalari. Human being cannot sustain without resisting attack towards him. In the world. each country had its own warfare to resist the attack from the enemies. Japanese "Okkinuvatta", Chinese "Kung fu", Kerala "Kalaripayattu" etc. show that each country's martial arts suited its own climate and physical structure of the people. Among them

Kalaripayattu contains not only the defence- attack strategy but also helped to resist diseases. Kalaripayattu practice included highly scientific treatment methods for injuries which occurred during practice time. According to Dr. Howard Reed No other martial art is as deep as Kalaripayattu.

Northern Kalaripayattu and Southern Kalaripayattu

There were several styles of Kalaripayattu which could be categorized in to three regional variants. These three main schools of thought could be distinguished by their attacking and defensive patterns. The best introduction to the difference between these styles was the book of Luijendijk which used photographs to show several Kalaripayattu exercises and their applications.

By oral and written tradition Parasurama was believed to be the founder of the Northern style of Kalaripayattu. This legend could not be substantiated but Kalaripayattu was generally believed to have originated in the North Kerala. What eventually crystallized as Northern Kalaripayattu combined indigenous Dravidian techniques like Chilambum with the martial practices and ethos brought by migrations from Saurashtra and Konkan. From the 11th to 12th centuries the right and duty to practice martial arts in the service of a ruler was most associated with specific subgroup of Nairs and Ezhavas, Theyyas. However, at least one sub caste of Brahmins as well as some Christians and Muslims were engaged to fight in Angam, public duels to solve disputes between his opposing rulers called Vazhunnor.

The historian Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai hypothesizes that Kalaripayattu was the product of the battle between the Cheras and the Cholas during the 11th century A.D. This theory was retreat by later writers without question. Today, as the concept of the war had been questioned and rejected, the theory of the origin of Kalari during this war had lost its ground. As stated earlier, the oldest suggested existence of Kalaripayattu date back to the 13th century A.D. The earliest recorded evidence of Kalaripayattu date from Portuguese descriptions during the latter 16th to 17th centuries and becoming less prominent after the British outlawed it during the 18th and 19th centuries. It had recently been reinvigorated in the last few decades due to the general worldwide interest in martial arts. There had been recent theories attempting to connect Kalaripayattu with Shaolin Kung Fu through the legend of Bodhidharma, considered in Shaolin mythology as the founder of the Shaolin Temples. The earliest reference to Kalaripayattu occurred in a description of the coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the beginning of the 16th century A.D. by Duarte Barbosa indicating that Kalaripayattu had already developed by this time.

Northern Kalaripayattu

Northern Kalaripayattu was practiced in North Malabar. It gave more emphasis on weapons than on empty hands. Parasurama, a sixth Avatar of Vishnu, was believed to be the style's founder according to both oral and written tradition. Masters in this system were usually known as Gurukkal or occasionally as Asan, and were often given honorific titles, especially Panikkar.

The Northern style was distinguished by its Maipayatt physical training and use of full body oil massage. The system of treatment and massage, and the assumptions about practice were closely associated with Ayurveda. The purpose of medicinal oil massage was to increase the practitioner's flexibility, to treat muscle injuries incurred during practice, or when had problems related to the bone tissues, muscle, or nerve system. The term for such massage was Thirumal and the massage specifically for physical flexibility Chavittithirumal which literally meant 'stamping massage' or 'foot massage'. There were several lineages of which Thulunadan' was considered as the best. In olden times, students went to Thulunadu Kalaries to overcome their defects. There were schools which taught more than one of these traditions. Some traditional Kalari around Kannur for example taught a blend of Arappukai, Pillatanni and Kadathanth styles. The Northern style of Kalaripayattu placed comparatively more emphasis on weapons than on empty hands.

Southern Kalaripayattu

Southern Kalaripayattu was practiced mainly in old Travancore including the present Kanyakumari districts of Tamil Nadu primarily by the Nairs and Ezhavas. Emphasizing empty-hand techniques, it was closely connected to Tamil Silambam and SriLankan Angampore. The founder and patron saint was believed to be Rishi Agastya rather than Darasurama. Masters were known as Asan'. The stage of training were Clhurvatu (soloforms), Jodi (partner raining/sparring), Kurunthadi (short stick), Neduvadi (longstick), Kathi (knife), Katara (dagger), Valum Parichayum (sword and shield), Chuttuval (flexible sword), Double sword, Kalari grappling and Marma (Pressure points) Zarrlli refers to Southern Kalaripayattu as Varmaati, Marmaati or Varmakalai (art of varma). The preliminary empty handed techniques of Varmaati were known as Adithada. Marmmati refers specifically to the application of these techniques to vital spots. Weapons include bamboo staves, short sticks and the double deer horns. Medical treatment in the Southern styles was identified with Sidha the traditional Dravidian system of medicine distinct from North Indian Ayurveda. The Sidha medical system, otherwise known as Sidha Vaidyam, was also attributed to Agastya.

Central Kalaripayattu

Central Kalaripayattu was practiced mainly in Kozhikode, Malappuram, Palakad, Thrissur and certain parts of Ernakulum district of Kerala. It was a composite of the Northern and Southern style that include Northern Maipayatt preliminary exercise, Southern emphasized on empty handed moves and its own distinctive were performed within floor drawings known as Kulam.

Conclusion

Kalaripayattu was the only form of the most ancient traditional Systems of physical culture, self-defence and martial techniques still in existence. The practice of Kalaripayattu was done in an atmosphere of sanctity and piety. This atmosphere was prescribed in Kalaris from very aim of training in early days probably because the ultimate aim of training in Kalaripayattu was to achieve maximum skill in the wielding of deadly weapons. The techniques of Kalaripayattu were used at one time in the battle fields. In the modern times Kalaripayattu has no role in battle fields. It is a good exercise to alert the body and mind and also a very good visual art and highly useful for self- defence. This art form has secured much significance not only in Kerala but throughout the world. Though it has transformed itself in its nature, its relevance has increased.

To conclude, Kalaripayattu has proved to be a boon to Kerala, which was emerged as a martial art form in ancient Kerala to benefit the success of kings in battlefield has transformed to be an art form for the sound development of a person as well as a State. In the present scenario where individual health has been a matter of concern, Kalaripayattu is sure to be a panacea. Kalaripayattu therefore occupies incomparable position in the history of a nation. It also assures its lasting influence in the coming generations.

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