

# MARTIAL ARTS IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE

Miss. J. Sharmila

Southern Travancore covers most of modern day central and southern Kerala as well as Kanyakumari District of Tamilnadu. The present study deals with the martial arts in South Travancore.

Martial Art means various sports of self-defence and attack such as **Varma Ati**, **Kalaripayattu**, **Theyyam**, **Poorakkalai** and **Varmakala**. In general martial arts involve fighting techniques, mental discipline, physical exercise and various philosophical components. Most of them embody intellectual concepts as well. All properly practiced martial arts can bring about a number of beneficial physical and psychological effects. They are mainly practiced for various reasons such as self-defence, military and law enforcement applications, as competitions, physical fitness, mental and spiritual development. Ancient people were engaged in fishing and hunting. Thus each and every civilization is subscribed to a version of martial arts or combats all of their own.



‘**Varma ati**’ is a martial art practiced in South Travancore region of Kerala and Kanyakumari District. Traditionally, the art is practiced by Sambavars and Nadars who claim an ancient heritage as warriors. Its origin is ascribed to the sage **Agasthya** in antiquity. Practice takes place in the open or in unroofed enclosures made of palm leaves. Masters are known as ‘**Asans**’. Initial steps are immediately combined with attacks and defences aimed at the body’s vital spots (marmam in Malayalam). Some practitioners include fighting with sticks, especially long staff. It was closely related to the styles of ‘**Kalaripayattu**’ practiced by Nayars in the old Travancore region.

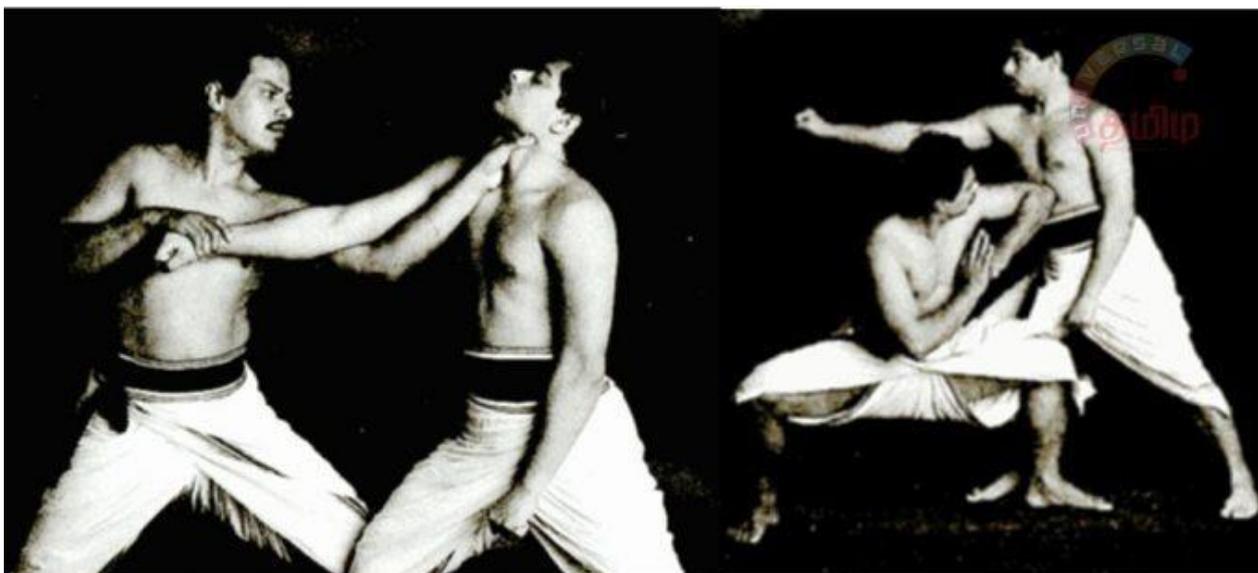
The ‘**Kalaripayattu**’ was the traditional martial art of Kerala. It was mastered by the people from time immemorial. It was closely related to the Tamil martial art ‘**Silambam**’. It is oriented towards self defence, empty hand fighting has always been important to **Kalaripayattu**, but more as means of disarming an armed opponent than as its sole reason. Only when a student is physically, spiritually and ethically ‘ready’, he is supposed to be allowed to take up the first weapon. When the student takes up the first weapon, it becomes an extension of the integration of the body and mind in action. In order to master the art of kalaripayattu one needs to have an excellent mind and body co-ordination.



**Kalaripayattu** is popularly called as '**Kalari**'. It is probably the oldest form of martial arts in India. The word '**Kalaripayattu**' is a combination of two words, named '**Kalari**' and '**payattu**' which means training ground and fight. Teachers were known as 'panikkars', now a surname among Nayars. The oldest reference to martial art is found in the Rigveda and Atharvaveda. It is today more prevalent in the South Indian State of Kerala. It is believed by the historians to be one of the oldest existing martial arts in the world. In the fifteenth century, Kerala was made up of small kingdoms of matrilineal Nair families called Tarawad. The leaders of these families constantly quarrelled with one other. In this context **kalaripayattu** probably attained its greatest flowering. It occupied an important place in the education of young Nair, and was a code of conduct and honor for this noble warrior caste of Kerala. The flexible swords, shield, maces, daggers, machete, swords, spears, the bow and arrow are some of the important weapons used in performing Kalaripayattu.

There are two main school of **Kalaripayattu**. They are i) **Thekkan Kalari** or **Southern Kalari** and ii) **Vadakkan or Northern Kalari**. The Thekkan Kalari is practiced in the Travancore area whereas the Vadakkan Kalari is associated with the Namboothiri, Nair and Ezhava communities of the Malabar region.

**Kalaripayattu** exercises and body mastery plays a large role in Ayurvedic medicine that is practiced in Kerala. This combination of Kalaripayattu, martial arts and medicine is unique in the world.



“**Varma Kala**” is yet another martial art of Travancore. It is also called as the art of pressure points. Training in the use of pressure points is seen as the most advanced part of the training. Varmakala training involves locating the points, striking the points, symptoms when struck and cure. Other popular martial arts include ‘**theyyam**’ and ‘**poorakkali**’. Both theyyam and poorakkalai is a traditional dance ritual performed by men. The dance involves masculine movements and acrobatic, martial art steps. The Panikkars are well-known names in the world of Poorakkali and have contributed much to the survival and expansion of this art form.

Learning martial arts lays emphasis on character building and the development of inner peace. All these shows that learning martial arts not only gives guaranty for self defence but also it leads to mental, physical and spiritual growth of an individual. It also reflects our glorious past. Therefore, it can be concluded that “Martial arts are worthy of preservation”.

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