

# A HISTORICAL STUDY OF GENDER PERFORMANCES OF KALARIPAYATTU; A MARTIAL ART OF KERALA

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## Chapter 7

### CONCLUSION

This study has tried to analyse the role of body in the construction of gender in Kerala society by looking at the historical and gender practices of *Kalaripayattu*, a martial art form of Kerala. *Kalaripayattu* can be defined as a body performance and marital art; a ritual form and every day healing practice and cultural icon of contemporary Kerala. This study looked at *Kalaripayattu* and its evolution and its various roles in both medieval and contemporary Kerala society. As an active art form, *Kalaripayattu* has been significant in both in medieval and contemporary Kerala society though it played different roles in both periods. It is found that the practice of *Kalaripayattu* has been gendered in nature as the presence of male practitioners and relative absence of other genders in the past as well as the present is noticed. The role of *Kalaripayattu* has been varying in its evolution from medieval to contemporary period. As a body practice, *Kalaripayattu* deserve a detailed study in terms of relationship between gender and body. *Kalaripayattu* is not only a marital art but it reflects the nature of various phases of Kerala society. As a body performance form, *Kalaripayattu* required a gender analysis in its transformation from an agency of power apparatus from the medieval period to a spectacular art on stage in contemporary time.

The origin of *Kalaripayattu* goes back to the medieval period. As shown by many scholars, the medieval Kerala society was feudal in its social structure because of the powerful centralized monarchy and it was politically divided in to small principalities called *Nadus*. These *Nadus* were under the control of *Naduvazhies*.

Absence of the centralized monarchy led perpetual strife between the *Naduvazhies* and which made it difficult to maintain peace and provide security to the people and property. In this society, people used to maintain troops who were well trained in *Kalaripayattu* in order to protect their life and property. These troops were known as *Kaval Changatham* who were appointed by the wealthy individual for protection of his property and family. *Nuttonnuval* or hundred and one and *Anjuttonnuvar* and *Ayirathonnuvar* were the terms used to denote the martial army of *Naduvazhi* based on their numbers to protect them from enemies.

Apart from this kind of martial troop, some individual fighters known as *Chekavor* were also appointed to settle the problems between the upper castes Nair feudal lords. These individual fighters were known as *chekavor* who were trained in Kalari and fight each other in a duel called *Anakam* to settle the dispute between the feudal lords. There were other kinds of duels between the families such as *Poith* and *Kudippaka* between the feudal families. *Poith* was a duel among upper cast fighters to settle the quarrel between the two upper caste Nair lords. *Kudippaka* or blood feud was the term denotes the permanent enmity between the two families transmitted through the generation to generation. These kinds of particular practices of medieval Kerala nourished *Kalaripayattu* as a military art and *Kalari* became an institution for supplying soldiers to the society. Thus, *Kalaripayattu* became an agency of power apparatus of the society of the medieval Kerala society.

During the medieval period *Kalaripayattu* acted as a platform for an individual to gain status. *Vadakkan Pattukal* shows that the heroes such as *Aromal Chekavar* and *Aringodal*, *Kannappanunni* who belonged to the lower caste called *Thiyya* were conferred upon the title ‘*chekavor*’ and was respected by society and

even feudal rulers. As it is mentioned above, the presence of caste was not absent in *Kalaripayattu*. These *chekavor* fought for the upper caste feudal lords to settle their disputes and they were not selected in to the military troop of the local rulers. Once a man become *chekovor*, he cannot remove his title and come back to his individual life and his *Kalari* body became a property of upper caste. Here permanent ‘transformation’ happens in the case of a *Chekavor* and coming back or ‘transportation’ to his ordinary life does not happen. However, this *chekovors* were also considered as ‘companion of honours’.

Coming to the colonial period, *Kalaripayattu* lost its significance mainly due to the colonial interventions. In 1804 British banned *Ankam* by law and the disarmament laws led to the disintegration of *Kalaripayattu* during colonial period. Introduction of new war technology like gunpowder and other laws during the British period adversely impacted the practice of *Kalaripayattu* in the society. Colonial government banned the use of weapons and closed *Kalaris*. *Kalaris*, then was protected in the form of temples and practiced and learnt secretly by some *Gurukkal*.

In the Post-independent Kerala, *Kalaripayattu* has transformed into spectacular performance to appeal audience in the stage. After 1980’s *Kalaripayattu* gained a new momentum in the changed socio-economic circumstance. In 1980s, Kerala witnessed a high rate of gulf migration and it changed Kerala society in to a consumer-oriented society. Cash became a prime thing in the society. Dowry became more powerful and money began to play an important role in determining masculinity. New middle classes emerged with a new kind of gender relationship in the family also. New life style and food culture created an awareness of health

consciousness among the people to think about the gym culture in Kerala. Here people started to practice Kalaripayattu as an indigenous gym. The awareness of the health conscious gave a new impetus in the realm of *Kalaripayattu*. People are recently more attracted in to the practice of *Kalaripayattu* as an indigenous health practice.

After the globalization and the development of tourism in Kerala, *Kalaripayattu* became cultural symbol to attract the tourist. Here *Kalaripayattu* is used as a medical practice also to appeal the people with the performance of *Kalaripayattu* on the stage. Simultaneously *Kalaripayattu* received the larger audience as a Kerala traditional art form both inside and outside Kerala. Contemporary dancers are attracted by the power and beauty steps of the *Kalaripayattu* and incorporated it into the theatre production. This new invention took *Kalaripayattu* to metropolitan cities and became popular among the dancers and common people. Movies also took this synchronization of body, mind and foot movements in the choreography of dance and in the combat scenes, which invited international acclamation to *Kalaripayattu*. *Kalaripayattu* also became a way of Sanskritization by using religious symbols in the practice.

This study tried to analyse the gender dimension of *Kalaripayattu* by locating gender in the above described scenario of history and change. To understand the gender dimension performance theory and theories related to gender and body theory are used in the study. This study argues that *Kalaripayattu* is a performance art as it is a locus of the sequence of relationship linking history, genre, gender and embodied practice.

Coming to the history, there are not much written sources available on the construction of gender history of medieval Kerala. It was important to depend on the oral sources such as folk songs to look at various practices, which prevailed during medieval Kerala, in order to depict the gender relationship in both Kerala and *Kalaripayattu* during the medieval period. Historians and travellers noted different cultural practices prevailed in Kerala such as various marriage systems such as polyandry and fraternal polyandry and system of inheritance called *Marumakkathayam* and matriliney and the caste practices related to the notion of purity etc. Polyandry was also practiced among most of the caste group. Matriliney was another practice that was noticed by the scholars. Matriliney was the backbone of the despotic rule of medieval polity. Matriliney was the base for the *Marumakkathyam* system in which the lineage of family went through the sister's daughters. When this is considered as egalitarian, the practices related to the caste and notion of pollution restrained the women during the medieval period. The notion regarding the impure body related to menstruation was widely prevalent during the medieval period. *Pulaya pedi or Paraya pedi* was the important practice related to the pollution of woman. According to that system women of *Nair* caste would be outcaste if they were touched or seen by men belonging to lower caste such as *Pulaya and Paraya* caste on a special day called *Karthika*.

Moreover, the folk songs narrate the restriction on women to enter public space. There was a fear about female body as their entry into the temple festival is considered as an impure act in the public place during medieval period. Coming to *Kalaripayattu*, though *Vadakkan Pattukal* describes the participation of few women, the relative absence of female warriors and female *chekavors* shows how the gender

inequality made *Kalaripayattu* a male practice. However, narratives of women who struggled against caste and patriarchy depicted in *Vadakkan Pattukal* shows that the women were the main victims of the caste and untouchability that controlled and excluded the women from the public space especially in the realms of the power. *Vadakkan Pattukal* illustrated the story women like Unniarcha and Mathilerikanni who were well versed in *Kalaripayattu* challenged the existing male supremacy for entering in to public affairs. Here these ‘heroines’ used *Kalaripayattu* as a tool to fight against the men force to protect themselves and questioned the male power. However, these women heroines were not recognized by the society as soldier or *chekavor* like their male counterparts in the society. Women practitioners during the medieval period were not honoured as *Chekavor or Chaver* like their male counter parts.

During the colonial period, the British rulers pacified *Kalaripayattu*. Simultaneously gender inequality became more strengthened with the construction of new Victorian ideal womanhood under the reformist initiatives in colonial period. *Marumakkathayatam* and the joint family system declined and *Tharavadu* lost its power in the nineteenth century. Chastity of women became the main issue for the demand of the patrilineal system by social reformers. Construction of ideal womanhood in colonial Kerala is linked to the domestic role and wifehood of women. Polyandry reduced the status to promiscuity. Though the social reformers argued for women’s entry in to the freedom movement, it did not make any change in to the power structure of the gender relation ship in to the family. It is very evident in the magazines like *Mahila* edited by the women for women as these magazines

focuses on the ideal wifehood. During this period, women were completely excluded from *Kalaripayattu*.

Coming to the post-Independent scenario, commercialization of *Kalaripayattu* allowed women to enter into *Kalaripayattu*. It is found that the increasing participation of female *Kalaripayattu* performers is related to the consumer value of female body under capitalist transformation in society. When *Kalaripayattu* became a stage performance art, female performers became significant to appeal the audience. But performance and costumes of female performers are decided by male interests. Women performers now use body as a vehicle of aesthetic impression and satisfy the desire of men. This commodification of *Kalaripayattu* increased the number of female practitioners in Kerala's urban areas but it did not make many changes in the rural areas in the practice of *Kalaripayattu*. By using Rebecha Schneider theory it is argued that most of the female performance on stage is a 'female representation of masculinity' on stage. Here 'female representation of masculinity' is that females are performing for the male and his fantasies and they cannot possess to act and perform according to their wish. *Kalaripayattu* is also not an exemption from it in the case of female *Kalaripayattu* performers.

The reinforced, rigid patriarchal norms created gender imbalance in the practice of *Kalaripayattu*. In the realm of practice, discrimination like different dress pattern for male and female in the practice of *Kalaripayattu* is noticeable. While a man is practicing *Kalaripayattu* in a loin cloth, his female counterparts are forced to wear traditional dress such as sari or Churidar with Duppatta. Gendered practice of *Kalaripayattu* is visible in the strength of the practitioners and the every day practices of *Kalari*. Though girls are practicing *Kalaripayattu*, after a certain age

they cannot continue their practice. It shows the relationship between the gender performance of society and the gender practices of *Kalaripayattu*. Most of the women *Kalaripayattu* performers have their own *Kalaris* and their male member of the family is the teacher. The narratives reveal that the support from the family is very important to practice *Kalaripayattu* as the family acceptance and social acceptance are interlinked. It is related to the common practice of the Kerala that the women and men do not intermix together in the public sphere due to the anxiety exists in Kerala regarding the chastity of women. Marriage is another barrier to the women practitioners to continue their practice. Domesticity is the prime duty of a woman and wife is considered as a property of husband. The study found that male hierarchy of *Kalaripayattu* is perpetuated through the authority of *Kalari Gurukanmar* or *Kalari* teachers. *Gurukkanmar* underestimates the female practitioners and these gendered attitudes discourage women to excel in practice. The impurity of female body also operates in contemporary *Kalaris* in the form of menstruation taboos. Menstruated women are restricted in to the *Kalaris* for seven days that break the continuity of practice to a female practitioner. This break adversely affects the practice of women.

The study made a comparative understanding of the practice of *Kalaripayattu* in metropolitan cities and the practice of *Kalaripayattu* in Kerala. It is found that women in cosmopolitan cities share a different experience from women practitioners from Kerala *Kalaris*. Most of them shared that the indigenous martial nature of *Kalaripayattu* attracted them into it as *Kalaripayattu* provides fitness with self-defensive techniques. In the metropolitan *Kalaris* in places such as Bangalore and Chennai, women practitioners do not face any gender discrimination from

*Kalarigurukal* in the teaching methods. Contemporary performers who practices *Kalaripayattu* and uses the elements of *Kalaripayattu* in their choreography in metropolitans do not face any discrimination. Women of Kerala *Kalaris* are facing discrimination in terms of their dress pattern and methods of trainings; they do not have any freedom in their practice. But, in the case of metropolitan women, they have more freedom while practicing *Kalaripayattu*. The narratives of women practitioners in metropolitan cities shows that women are generally having more freedom and economic independence than women who are living in Kerala and it helps them to voice themselves out in all realms of their life including the practice of *Kalaripayattu*.

When looking at the history of the gender performance of *Kalaripayattu*, male partitioners dominate *Kalaripayattu* and women are denied equal participation on par with men. This study showed the relationship between the gendered practices of *Kalaripayattu* and various repetitive, mundane acts of the Kerala society which are producing and reproducing gender identity in Kerala society.