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## Gender Roles in Martial Art: A Comparative Analysis of *Kalaripayattu* Practices in India

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### Introduction

76-year-old [Meenakshi](#) from northern Kerala, South India, grabbed national headlines in late 2017 when the nation honored her with a *Padmashri*, one of India's highest civilian awards for her lifelong contribution to preserving and keeping alive the *Kalaripayattu*, a martial art of that state. For several decades, she has not only been practicing this male-dominated and physically demanding art form through daily practice, but also performing and teaching this martial art. *Kalaripayattu* is a martial art that involves many dance positions and ritualistic movements. It is deeply ingrained in Kerala's rural society from the cultural, religious, mythological, and historical perspectives. Moreover, it is a traditional psycho-physiological discipline that cultivates mental, physical, and spiritual control as well as also being a practical combative art. Each of the *Kalaripayattu* postures is linked by deeply interwoven social, military, and cultural relationships to the history of Kerala. The massive media coverage the septuagenarian Meenakshi received after her national recognition placed *Kalaripayattu* in the limelight in national headlines and discourse, as well as making it a popular talking point in Kerala state. This even spawned discourses on other martial arts in the state as well, leading to the revival of *Kalaripayattu* in contemporary Kerala.

Although the immediate catalyst for the momentum to revitalize this ancient sport is centered on an elderly woman, there is nonetheless a deep-rooted gender gap as regards practicing, performing, and teaching *Kalaripayattu* in Kerala, as this is a male bastion. There are only a handful of women out there in this field even today despite the state's much-talked about gender liberation more than a century ago. Unlike in Kerala, the mushrooming of *Kalaris*<sup>1</sup> and the large numbers of women practitioners and performers in the metropolitan cities in south India such as Chennai and Bengaluru are noticeable. The healthy numbers of women performers in the *Kalaris* in these metropolitan cities challenge the conventional idea that this

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<sup>1</sup>In Malayalam language, the word *Kalari* idiomatically refers to the special sacred place where martial exercises are taught.

martial art is inherently masculine and not suitable for women. This paper is a comparative analysis of the gender differentiation seen in *Kalaripayattu* in the Kerala society and the metropolitan spaces of Bengaluru and Chennai. It seeks to demonstrate how gender differentiation in *Kalaripayattu* is related not merely to the nature of the practices of that institution, but is rather the result of the continuing influence of social and geographical spaces on masculine and feminine roles.

There are many studies that question the conventional understanding of the construction of the gendered body in the practice of martial arts in a Western context (Martinez 442–52; Kavoura et al. 135–52; Maclean 152–71; Vertonghen et al. 172–86; Guerandel and Mennesson 167–86). However, the gendered practices of martial arts in the Indian context are left unexplored. In the Western context, scholars have noted that the martial arts became popular among Western women when second-wave feminism reframed the martial arts in terms of their political activism. They also perceived the martial arts as a means of embodied resistance (Looser 3–19; Thrasher 226–48; Searles and Berger 61–84). Though the feminist movements have not perceived martial arts as a tool for their activism in India, the rape discourses in India after the Nirbhaya rape case<sup>2</sup> highlighted the importance of training women in self-defense. This discourse encouraged the schools and colleges to introduce martial arts training classes for female students to protect their bodily integrity. *Kalaripayattu* was one among such martial arts introduced for female students, especially in the Kerala state of India. However, such initiatives in the schools and colleges have failed to maintain this martial art as a physical training, and it had limited impact. On the contrary, the self-defense movements in metropolitan cities such as Bangalore and Chennai in south India successfully popularized the *Kalaripayattu* practice among women while Kerala *Kalaris*, the birth land of *Kalaripayattu*, has failed to attract women as a self-defense art.

## Methodology

There are two ways in which *Kalaripayattu* is studied: one focuses on its philosophical, spiritual, as well as the physical or bodily realms (Zarrilli 1–245; Pati 175–89; McDonald 143–68) and the second analysis comprehensively focuses on its practical side (Vijayakumar 10–280; Nair 5–260; Balakrishnan 3–149). However, both these ignore the representation of gender in the practice and performance of this art. This article is precisely located in this gender gap and tries to unravel the culturally modulated gender practices in this martial art that in fact is engendered by its male

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<sup>2</sup>Gang rape and murder of a twenty-three-year-old student (later known as "Nirbhaya" which means "fearless") in a moving bus in Delhi, India, in 2012, followed by massive protest across the country against sexual violence in general and rape in particular, impelled the Indian government to pass the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013.

dominance in the larger cultural and geographical contexts. This paper brings forth the performance ethnography of *Kalaripayattu* by comparing the construction of gender and the performance of the body in Kerala's *Kalaris* as well as those in the metro cities such as Bengaluru and Chennai in south India. Performance ethnography hinges on the premise that a representation of what one discovers through participant-observation fieldwork provides a dynamic and textured rendering of cultural others (Pelias 3392). It is a method of investigation that privileges the "body as a site of knowing" and deploys the same methodological strategies available to all ethnographers in their fieldwork (3391–96). At a personal level, studying and performing this body art while remaining within the institution of the *Kalari* have helped me observe and experience the nature of gender relationships in *Kalaripayattu* as a particular martial art. My personal experience of learning and practicing this martial art in Kerala *Kalari*, in a participant-observation mode, has enabled me to experience *Kalaripayattu* in the same way as regular practitioners do. To provide more first-hand experience, this paper also scripts the lives of the women *Kalaripayattu* performers and practitioners from Kerala with first-hand accounts. This paper also uses the unstructured interviews carried out with the *Kalaripayattu* performers from Chennai and Bengaluru too. These women come from various economic and social backgrounds and different age groups.

### **Notions about women's sexuality and *Kalaripayattu* practices in Kerala**

The vast majority of contemporary women practitioners of *Kalaripayattu* are from families who claim a legacy in its practice and performance and used traditionally to own *Kalaris*. These women have also their own *Kalaris* and they practice and perform with male members of their families both in *Kalaris* and on stage. For instance, performers such as Hemelatha, Radhika, and Ajitha admit that social acceptance, coupled with encouragement from their families in continuing the practice and performance even after puberty and marriage, are due to their family legacies in preserving this traditional art (Ajitha; Hemalatha; Radhika). Radhika, a *Kalaripayattu* performer, narrates her story:

Without the support of my family members I could not have continued the practice of performing *Kalaripayattu* as a profession. Being an avid practitioner himself, it was my father Swami Gurukkal who taught it to me as a child. Continuing the family tradition, my brothers are also involved in it and have founded a *Kalaripayattu* performance troupe. My husband is an *Ayurveda* doctor and is also interested in *Kalari Marmani* treatment, which is a part of the Kerala *Ayurveda* tradition. We also have a *Kalari Marmani* treatment centre at our home.

Since we are a united family, when I am travelling with my troupe for performance, my sisters-in-law take care of my children, so I get much support from my family.

Since *Kalaripayattu* is performed with another person (*Jodi*) or in pairs, it is interesting to note that most women performers choose girl partners or boys younger than themselves or male family members. And the majority of girls drop out of the *Kalaris* after attaining puberty. This shows the deep-rooted fear of women's sexuality in the *Kalaris*, which is closely linked to the construction of women's sexuality in the public spaces of Kerala villages. The silence about women's sexuality and the abjection of the female body in the public space in Kerala has already been highlighted in academic works (Devika 21–46). *Kalari Gurukkal* or the *Kalari* teachers point out that though the girls are willing to continue the practice after they have attained puberty, they are forced to stop it after marriage due to the hostile attitude of husbands toward their wives practicing and performing *Kalaripayattu*. Women who stopped practicing and performing *Kalaripayattu* after marriage reported that their husbands would take too much "care" about their body movements but were not interested in watching their "bodily activity" in public (Sanusha).

This attitude toward the *Kalaripayattu* performance of women performers in the public space is linked to the abjection of the female body in the public space of Kerala which has been rooted to the concept of ideal womanhood in Kerala society. However, this has to be perceived as a continuation of ideal womanhood which emerged during colonial India. Chatterjee observes this formation of the "new woman" by nationalist discourse in the colonial Bengal context:

The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the "new" woman was quite the reverse of the "common" woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. (127)

He added that the idea of female education in India during the colonial period was mainly in terms of the preservation of the "spiritual" qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, and religiosity, centered on a domestic context (127–32). Forbes notes that the aim of modern education for women in colonial India was to make "professionalized house wives" (61). She also points out that the women freedom fighters who chose to join the revolutionary counterpart of the Indian national movement, instead of marriage, children, or a home, are not considered "respectable" women and the representatives of Indian womanhood, even though they were valorized (155). Scholarship on vernacular women's magazines published in colonial India also reveals how these magazines have repeatedly portrayed notions of

the ideal woman as one who should be “educated” on the one hand and perform the “domestic duty” on the other hand ([Abraham](#) 283–310; [Minault](#) 2–9, 137–60; [Pande, Bindu, and Viqur](#) 148–72; [Shukla](#) 63–67; [Sreenivas](#) 58–82; [Talwar](#) 254–65; [Ramakrishna](#) 80–87). The research studies on gender and society in Kerala demonstrate that there is a deep-rooted notion of the ideal woman, which is a domestic woman, strictly confined to home and fully denied her freedom over her own body and mobility ([Devika and Thampi](#) 1147–75; [Mathew](#) 203–14; [Devika and Sukumar](#) 4469–4475; [Osella and Osella](#) 117–133; [Chako](#) 52–59). [Devika](#) evidentially demonstrates how the notion of ideal womanhood based on domesticity and devoid of female sexuality has been shaped in colonial times and continues to influence society even today ([Devika](#) 24–28).

[Varun](#), a resident of Kerala whose sister was a *Kalaripayattu* practitioner, made her discontinue it after her marriage, and explains here why he did so:

*Kalaripayattu* is only suitable for small girls and unmarried women, because often practicing *Kalaripayattu* on stage is considered contemptuous and is thus a shame to the family. Some people may tease her husband saying “Oh, can you control your *Kalaripayattu* wife? Or can you not manage her as she is physically stronger than you?”

[Manoj](#), whose wife Nitya was a *Kalaripayattu* performer, has also stopped her after their marriage, saying,

This audience is not as good as what you think them to be, as they say good things in front of us but mock behind our backs. Most men come not to watch the art of performing *Kalaripayattu* by women but their bodies. I do not want other men to enjoy watching the movements of my wife.

Most women *Kalaripayattu* practitioners, however, consider their everyday practice as an esthetic activity rather than a fitness exercise. They acknowledge that, apart from building a healthy body and mind, *Kalaripayattu* provides them with immense freedom in their body movements which is normally limited for women by society. Those women who have been forced to end the practice admit that they all miss this esthetic element in their lives now ([Manju](#); [Neena](#); [Rasheedha](#)).

[Devika](#) argues that the concept of the “ideal modern Kerala womanhood” limits her to purely domestic chores such as procreation and managing the household affairs in addition to being the guardian of all family values. She also criticizes the Kerala model of development discourse as restricting itself to elite women but stripping them of the esthetic side of life, which is the sole prerogative of the male/husband ([Devika](#) 27). In effect, women do not have any control over what they might choose to do in their own leisure time.

[Sreekumar](#) also agrees that domesticity continues to occupy a considerable amount of the energy of women in present-day Kerala (84). [Lindberg](#), in her

study on female cashew workers in Kerala, observes that lower-caste and lower-class women workers are interested in arranging marriages for their daughters to make a “happy nuclear family” centered on a breadwinner husband. Her study reveals how lower-class and lower-caste women aspire to see their daughters as housewives rather than as workers in cashew factories (Lindberg 180). This shows that women across caste and class are attracted to the notion of ideal womanhood in their own ways and try to attain such a status. This is very much reflected in the narratives of women Kalaripayattu practitioners who come from different social strata.

To sum it up, it can be argued that those women who were forced to take a break or stop practicing and performing *Kalaripayattu* against their wishes, so as to be a modern ideal domestic woman and protect the honor of their families, have surrendered the rights over their own bodies to their husbands. This is in spite of the fact that most audiences also include the women that this researcher has spoken to, and who have admitted to being very surprised to witness women performing *Kalaripayattu* as they felt that it was not a part of the traditionally ascribed feminine quality of the female body.

Kerala’s societal notions about ideal womanhood with its attendant feminine attributes play an important role in discouraging women from performing *Kalaripayattu*. The teenage girls *Anju* and *Irin* who are *Kalaripayattu* performers recalled their horrible experiences and the derisive comments they have faced for being what they are. They told me that *Kalaripayattu* helped them to be confident, bold, and secure. However, they shared that the boys in their schools and colleges used to keep a distance from them and hesitated to mix with them as did others of their female classmates. The boys considered that these girls were physically stronger and did not fit with the notion of an ideal woman which is always founded on submissiveness and a lack of self-reliance. For most audiences, witnessing women perform this physically taxing martial art does not comply with the traditionally ascribed feminine qualities of the female body. The women performers openly shared their experiences about how the audience was filled with wonder and curiosity about their performance (*Anjana*). I also have faced the same expression from the audience toward my performance in *Kalaripayattu*. When my friends and I began practicing *Kalaripayattu* in our early twenties, in the village of Kalari situated in the Kozhikode district of Kerala state, it seemed to the villagers to be an unusual act.

The discrimination does not end there. There are stark differences between the dress codes for boys and girls at the *Kalaris* and this is something significant to analyze. Various cultural, economic, social, political, and local factors determine the dress code for women among different social groups in Kerala (Devika 461–87). In the *Kalari* class,

generally boys wear a small loin cloth tied around the waist, while the women students and even small girls wear long *churidars*<sup>3</sup> with *dhuppatta*.<sup>4</sup> *Kalari* teachers say the *lankoti* or the loin cloth is a suitable form of clothing for practicing *Kalaripayattu*, and it is very difficult for women/girls to practice the art with the form of clothing assigned to them. *Meenakshi*, the Padmashri awardee, says she wears pants under the *saree*<sup>5</sup> while performing on stage and admits that the *saree* is not a suitable dress code for women performing on stage. This reveals the degree of social control over gender identity. Societies adopt particular dress codes as a gender norm to reinforce the existing power relations. Dress codes act as a cultural window, and generally the female body is more strictly controlled when men are responsible for setting the rules for dress code. The form of clothing used in the Kerala *Kalaris* reflects the attitude of society toward the female body.

*Kavoura et al.* show in their study on female judoka performance (2018) how identities are constructed around a female biological inferiority discourse and the notion that females are inherently not apt to perform martial arts (239–52). They closely observe how female judoka make sense of their own sporting success.

They differentiated themselves from ordinary women by performing the self-image of exceptional beings, born with masculine qualities, such as competitiveness, tolerance to pain, and the ability to fight. The participants constructed themselves as naturally born fighters who never complain and are dedicated to their sporting goals. Although this naturally born fighter identity may be empowering for female judoka (allowing them to justify their position in judo, to gain a sense of superiority over other women, and to become accepted in the male domain of martial arts), it also assists in reproducing the belief that fighting and competitiveness are innate male qualities and judo is a manly sport for which few women are capable. (*Kavoura* 248).

In the context of Kerala, women performers of *Kalaripayattu* become conscious of the societal notion that what they practice is an unusual act as they are seen as masculine women and thus the “other” of ordinary women. Unlike Judo performers, *Kalaripayattu* performers constantly attempt to transcend the image of this notion of masculine women as they strive to prove that they are ordinary women acceptable to society.

<sup>3</sup>A traditional two-piece garment with a long knee-length top and pants which are close-fitting on the thighs and ankles as well as on the hips, assigned to women in the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>4</sup>A long piece of material worn in two folds over the chest and thrown back around the shoulders typically with a *churidhar* by women from South Asia.

<sup>5</sup>A traditional female garment in India consists of a length of cloth varying from five to nine yards. The *saree* can be draped around the body in different ways. Generally, women wear this cloth wrapped around the body with the end left hanging. The women in this study follow the same style in draping the five-yard-long *saree* over the blouse and skirt.

## Gender bias in training and practices

The basic principle of *Kalaripayattu* is that regular and intensive physical training builds a *Kalari* body, irrespective of the gender of the participant. However, close observation of various *Kalaris*, *Kalari Gurukkal*, and their different training methods for girls and boys shows that some of the *Kalaris* demonstrate gender bias in how they train their students. The *Kalaripayattu Gurukkal* justify this bias by citing the fundamentally different physiologies of men and women, claiming that the male body is physically stronger and fit for doing more strenuous tasks, including using the weapons of *Kalaripayattu* (*Ankathari*), while the female body is fragile especially after having given birth to babies and is only fit for some easier physical techniques (*Maipayattu*). While these arguments have not been scientifically substantiated by evidence, such gendered training adversely influences and affects the confidence of the female *Kalaripayattu* performers besides acting as a barrier to continuing their practice. Women practitioners acknowledge that these taboos and the myths around the body construct a false consciousness and affect their performance. *Latha* and *Ranjitha* state,

Our *Gurukkal* never treats us as equal to our male mates. He did not show any interest in teaching us the most important and difficult part of the *Kalaripayattu*, called *Otta*. He used to say, "You are women, your bodies are weak and you cannot continue the practice after your pregnancy, and anyway you have to stop this practice in your life. These words discourage us from continuing our practice of *Kalaripayattu*.

Another performer; *Deepthi*, reports,

I have learned *Kalaripayattu* from two *Kalaris*. My first *Gurukkal* told me that pregnancy would affect the speed and level of my jumps. Fortunately, I married a *Kalaripayattu* practitioner, so I could continue my practice even after my pregnancy. In the beginning, I found some difficulty in jumping, but after the regular training I regained the same energy and the level of jumping as I had before my pregnancy.

Generally, religions consider women to be spiritually impure because she has a body that becomes periodically unclean due to menstruation and childbirth (*Dhruvarajan* 274). Kerala is also no exception to this notion of purity related to the female body. Spiritual or ritual codes serve the function of regulating and controlling the female body within a society (*Cregan* 12). Menstruation is associated with various taboos and restrictions as women are then seen as being in a state of pollution and thus are restricted from entering Hindu temples, and these notions are reflected in the *Kalaris* too. While Hindu *Kalari Gurukkanmar* strictly follow religious principles that do not allow women to practice *Kalaripayattu* for seven days while they are menstruating, practitioners from other religious communities such as Muslims and

Christians also admit that they consider the *Kalari* as a sacred space. They also perceive menstruating women as impure and prevent women from entering the *Kalari* for seven days (Khadar; Thomas). The *Kalaripayattu* practitioner Geethi shares her experience in her book, *Kalaripayattutum Njaanum (Kalaripayattu and Me)*, and says that a woman does not suffer from any problems in performing *Kalaripayattu* while she is menstruating; and that taking an enforced break for seven days will prevent the female practitioner from performing the art perfectly (34).

This study shows big gender gap in terms of the absence of female *Kalari Gurukkal* in the field. Lujendijk who studied *Kalaripayattu* reveals that his research contains input from as many as 64 male *Kalari* teachers and not a single woman *Kalari* teacher (63). The principle of *Kalaripayattu* allows a person with 18 years of experience in *Kalaripayattu* to become a *Gurukkal*. This again disadvantages women as this makes it difficult for a woman to continue her practice without taking any break. Most women practitioners admit that they have had to take a break at puberty, marriage, and then when they were pregnant. There is, however, some positive news as today some women run family *Kalaris* and are also the *Gurukkal* there and are happy to report that they get more girls compared to the *Kalaris* run by men. Similarly, these girls are also happy to attend the *Kalaris* run by women and say they are inspired by their female instructors who make them more confident and comfortable (Vanaja; Varsha).

### **Globalization, tourism boom & women *Kalaripayattu* performers**

Like many other facts of life which have undergone radical changes and have become commercialized with the economic liberalization of 1991 and the resultant entry of India onto the globalization bandwagon, *Kalaripayattu*, which is purely a traditional martial art, also could not defend itself from the influence of this onslaught from all around. As a result, this art too has been commercialized as there has been an upsurge in demand for stage performance, spawning a mushrooming of *Kalaris* across Kerala, especially in the northern districts since the beginning of the last decade of the past century. This has led to a surge in demand for women performers as well. Another attendant reason for this spike in demand is the pressure to develop tourism in the state by wooing high-paying foreign travelers. One key marketing tool of the tourism department has been the huge focus on everything traditional, such as the *Kathakali*,<sup>6</sup> *Bharatanatyam*,<sup>7</sup> *Ayurveda*,<sup>8</sup> and *Kalaripayattu*, among others. Though originally *Kalaripayattu* is a martial art, in

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<sup>6</sup>Classical dance drama form of India that originated in Kerala.

<sup>7</sup>Classical dance form of India that originated in Tamil Nadu.

<sup>8</sup>Science of indigenous healing practices in India.

contemporary Kerala the performance element of it has come to be valued more for the physical prowess demonstrated. This has brought immense fame to the performers across the state and even outside. Some of them have begun to receive invitations to perform in various places outside the state and also even overseas. This has created an interest among the youth to take up *Kalaripayattu* as a profession and they have accordingly formed various *Kalaripayattu* troupes and received recognition on local, national, and also international platforms. Moreover, this has helped to attract recognition to the importance of women performers as they encourage large audiences. Here the comment of the *Gurukkal Rajan* about the return of his wife *Ajitha* to the stage after a long break is significant: “I was finding it very difficult to get women to perform on stage. This forced me to encourage Ajitha to practice and perform *Kalaripayattu*” (*Rajan*). Another *Gurukkal, Sajil Kumar*, also echoes the same thought when he says, “I want to marry a woman who is a *Kalaripayattu* practitioner which will help to increase the strength of our *Kalari* troupe.” The fact is that male *Kalaripayattu* performers cannot ignore the enthusiastic attitude of the audience toward the female performers. Padmashri Meenakshi also recalls the excitement of the audience when she is on the stage: “The audience clap and cheer when I perform on the stage. Many come and meet me after the performance to express their appreciation.”

*Paul Bowman* has shown that the globalization process had exponentially increased the dissemination of martial art across the globe (435–520). *Appadurai* argues that mass media, especially the electronic media, transforms everyday discourse and extends the imaginaries of ordinary people in the world by disseminating information and culture at a global level (22). In the context of Kerala, the rise of the mass media, especially the electronic media, is another vehicle for the commercialization of this art. Round-the-clock television channels have given a big boost to the popularity of *Kalaripayattu* by presenting it as a symbol of the state’s cultural heritage. Most of these channels present the women *Kalaripayattu* performers as the descendants of the female warriors of medieval Kerala. The rising media coverage has also inspired many young people to try their hand at learning this art. During my interactions with the students including boys and girls, most of them sounded optimistic about also performing in front of the camera and going live on a television channel. “We will also be on the television, one day,” chuckled many of them (*Meera; Mini; Nayana; Nikhil*). Of late, the *Kalari Marmani*, a local medical practice, has also become very popular. Most villages in Kerala *Kalari Gurukkal* also have experts in this medical practice. As part of the development of health tourism, *Kalaripayattu* has regained its popularity as an indigenous martial art form in the state. Various government and non-government agencies, especially educational institutions, today promote *Kalaripayattu* as a self-defense

tool for girls/women to protect themselves from violence. Also, several organizations today organize seminars/workshops to encourage their female colleagues/students to learn *Kalaripayattu* for self-defense. As it is very short-term program, the girls cannot continue their practice.

Globalization has created a new link between the female body and *Kalaripayattu*. Here, her body is an object. The narratives of the contemporary male practitioners affirm this when they say, "People are much enthusiastic toward the female practitioners so it is easy to get bigger audiences if we have female members in our team," ([Haneefa](#); [Lakshmanan](#); [Prathap](#)). Most *Kalari* troupes are organized and headed by male practitioners and female performers do not have much freedom in their performance. Here female performance and body image are valued as an object in the entertainment industry and also by the audience. The audience is always amused by watching the *Kalaripayattu* movements of women performers because what they do is regarded as predominantly a male body performance art form. This also puts pressure on women performers to appear as pretty as possible on stage. However, the role of the female team member is less as a performer of the art but more as a helper to their male family members in general and more specifically in obeying their husbands. In this sense, even performing a martial art like the *Kalaripayattu* has also become part of the continuing domesticity of women. It is noticeable that female practitioners learn *Kalaripayattu* from their fathers and continue their practice in the family *Kalaris*. It is very difficult to find women practicing with men outside their families or with whom they have no family ties. [Devika](#) notes that men and women generally do not mingle publicly in Kerala (38). Husbands of women performers say that it is a risk to find women performers, as their families do not agree to send their female relatives to perform on stage. If the male practitioners' wives perform, it helps them get a bigger audience on the one hand and reduces these risks on the other; both advantages help their troupes. ([Chandran](#); [Rajan](#)). In principle, *Kalaripayattu* is a spiritual art and it is supposed to generate union between the body and mind ([Zarrilli](#) 211; [Nair](#) 30). But this is absent when it comes to female practitioners as women do not have any freedom to make decisions about their own bodies because their role in their team is reduced to that of menial laborers in their husbands' troupes. This is a paradoxical situation, because although the audience likes to watch the performance of women performers, at the same time the female practitioners do not have the same status as their male counterparts in their performance team. The leaders of their troupes are usually men and the women are compelled to perform and accept the dress code according to the wishes of their male counterparts in their performance team. The female performers also do not have any bargaining power to assess their performance in economic terms. Most of the women performers do not get any payment as they are family members of the male performers of the

team. In that sense, their performance is perceived as a continuation of their domestic role at home.

In fact, masculinity can be expressed through various representations of the female body in various societies. Basing her views on Western theater, [Rebecca Schneider](#) points out that female performers are compelled to perform for male audiences and satisfy male desires, thus indirectly representing masculinity on stage (99). Even though this study is concerned with the south Asian context, the same phenomenon is evident. Women *Kalaripayattu* performers cannot perform for themselves or represent their desires on one hand, and meet the interests of the male audience on the other. It is significant that the women performers represented by particular dress codes on stage have their bodies controlled by the male performers in their troupe who not only decide their costumes but also assign them the roles or the moves of *Kalaripayattu*. In short, female performers cannot decide on their stage performance, because they are on stage only to help the male performers and to perform for male audiences.

### ***Kalaripayattu* women performers in the South Indian metropolitan cities**

In theory, *Kalaripayattu* is a union of the body and the mind of the practitioner. [Zarrilli](#) elucidates this well when he describes the performance ethnography of *Kalaripayattu* and the *Kalari* as a complex nexus of experience and self-formation which are crucial for an individual's experience and the embodied practice that helps to shape a self (9). This union of mind and body in *Kalaripayattu* is well emphasized in the health tourism focused on *Kalaripayattu* which has paved the way for a mushrooming of *Kalaris* in the two large metropolitan cities of Chennai and Bengaluru. Globalization has created new forms of dance expression by combining the elements of the modern with the traditional, the urban with the indigenous, and the secular with the spiritual ([Sherry](#) vii). Though the influence of performance elements and the postures of hands and feet in *Kalaripayattu* are used by other performance art forms of Kerala such as *Kathakali*, *Theyyam*, *Parichamuttukalai*, *Thirayattam*, and *Kolkali*, *Kalaripayattu* sadly has failed to use the market wisely to position itself as a performance art in its home state of Kerala. Though *Kalaripayattu* succeeded in becoming a heritage performance art of India as regards tourism, the village *Kalaris* in Kerala failed to reap the full benefits of it due to a lack of digital knowledge in marketing. Besides this, they are hesitant to explore other possibilities of using *Kalaripayattu* for choreographing dances. Unlike the situation in Kerala, contemporary dancers in these cities recognize the power and strength of *Kalaripayattu* as a spiritual and bodily performance art to choreograph their dance forms, which has led to a resurgence in

*Kalaripayattu* and *Kalaris* in these cities where other contemporary dance forms also flourish. Interestingly, the number of women *Kalaripayattu* practitioners is also noticeable in these cities. Bowman has shown that traditional martial arts have been uprooted from their historical locations and new hybrid forms have emerged in new locations (436–37).

Contemporary dance theaters are known for philosophically fusing classical dances and martial arts with therapeutic varieties of dance. They are attracted by the martial elements of *Kalaripayattu* and have extensively used it in their fusion dances. Celebration of the human body is the central theme in their inventions of these dances. Chandrakha, a well-known contemporary dancer, is considered to be the main exponent of fusing classical dance forms with *Kalaripayattu*. Today most contemporary dance theaters offer *Kalaripayattu* lessons to their students. Interviews with the contemporary dancers show the importance of the relationship between *Kalaripayattu*, the body, and the mind. Dancer Hemabharathi from the *Attakkalari* Center for Movement Arts<sup>9</sup> narrates her experience:

*Attakkalari* introduced me to *Kalaripayattu*. As a dancer, I am very interested in the idea of body memories. How we remember our body movements is not through the brain, but by how beautiful they make you feel. The amount of strenuous movement which one goes through while being trained in *Kalaripayattu*, creates the body memory. *Kalaripayattu* has some similarities to the postures of *Bharatanatyam* and *Kuchipudi*.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning I found it difficult to practice *Kalaripayattu*, which as a performance art not only changes the body but also changes the notions you have about your own body such as what you are and what you can do with your body. I consider this a body performance art and body training. Following a severe back injury during my dance training sessions, the doctors suggested I stop the dance practice. But then I decided to join *Kalaripayattu*, which is more physically demanding but which has surprisingly helped me cure myself and return to the world of dance. I am very grateful to *Kalaripayattu* for my present health. My teacher used to tell me that *Kalaripayattu* is a dynamic yoga as it helps generate energy from my body. Ironically, the therapeutic value of *Kalaripayattu* is not properly understood or discussed enough. My Gurukkal Satyan from the C.V.N. *Kalari* used to tell us that mainly men join *Kalaripayattu* but he has found that when we look at the body, *Kalaripayattu* is more suited to the female body because women have more spinal curves. It has done wonders for my body and I owe much to *Kalaripayattu*. It is by the very body experience we get when we do *Kalaripayattu* that we become mentally transformed at the studio into the embodiment of the concept of *Kalari*. It is also very spiritual (Hemabharathi).

*Gurukkal* or the teachers point out that *Kalaripayattu* is a dynamic yoga that brings huge benefits to both the body as well as the mind. Narratives of contemporary dancers substantiate this. The dancers of *Attakkalari*,

<sup>9</sup>Is a registered, public charitable trust formed by artistes from different disciplines to help create contexts for contemporary art movements in Bengaluru.

<sup>10</sup>A classical dance drama that originated in Andhra Pradesh, a southern state of India.

a contemporary dance troupe in Bengaluru, tell us that they look at *Kalaripayattu* as a body meditation and that it has helped them discipline their bodies and minds by developing better concentration which helps one to focus on the stage performance with vital energy. They perceive *Kalaripayattu* not as a gendered knowledge learning process under the instructions of the *Gurukkal* even though these *Gurukkal* have migrated from Kerala. Their experiences show that the martial elements of *Kalaripayattu* never become an obstacle, while its spiritual element helps in developing the endurance needed to perform better.

The *Kalari* teachers also speak about the self-defense side of *Kalaripayattu*, saying more and more women are taking to this armed form to defend themselves, given the increasing number of rape and molestation cases in the metropolitan cities. Kumudam and Rani from Bengaluru are happy that *Kalaripayattu* has made them bold and helped them gain physical strength to overcome any dangerous. According to Kumudam, “*Kalaripayattu* has made me more energetic and has helped me develop a cognitive equanimity toward the vicissitudes of my life.”

The glory of *Kalaripayattu* as a holy and indigenous art form invites women in the metropolitan cities to become its practitioners. One performer, Uma from Chennai, says that earlier she used to go to a gym for fitness, even though she knows that the modern concept of gymnasium is a Western import. When she heard about *Kalaripayattu*, a traditional martial art, she decided to quit the gym and join a *Kalari* forthwith. According to her, martial arts are always better and more effective than sweating it out in a gymnasium.

Significantly, most metropolitan women in *Kalaripayattu* at the *Kalaris* do not face gender inequality, whether in terms of practice or from the *Kalari* teachers, whom they describe as “very friendly and treating them without any discrimination.” Though most of these women have other professions, they are also the members of their *Kalari* performance troupes. Though the metropolitan *Kalaris* are also traditional in their structure and in following the rituals, they are economically independent and have their own notions. Compared to the Kerala villages, these cities also do not strictly follow the conventional notions regarding the female body such as menstruation taboos, dress codes, et cetera. To some extent, this also makes the *Kalaris* and the *Kalari Gurukal* from Kerala rethink the reconstruction of the gendered thoughts at the *Kalaris*. Most of the women practitioners in Chennai and Bengaluru are married and receive support from their husbands and the family in continuing the practice. They acknowledge that resources in *Kalaripayattu* such as the indigenous knowledge systems, traditional gyms, and contemporary dance forms in these cities are unavailable in their villages back home.

The stark differences between the experiences of women practitioners and performers in Kerala *Kalaris* and those from their metropolitan peers in the form of training, attitude, and perspectives about the family and society reflect how the performance of gender within the *Kalaris* is interrelated to how the body is constructed. Devika argues that Kerala society has been silent on the female body and women's sexuality and points out the invisibility of the female body in the Kerala model of discourse (21–46). Traditional *Kalaris* resemble Hindu temples in their structure, ritual, and practices. *Gurukkal* are the gods of the *Kalari* hierarchy as demonstrated by the *Guru-Sisyaa* or the teacher-student relationship, which is the basis of the traditional ideology of *Kalaripayattu*. My research has found that *Kalaris* headed by women *Gurukkal* today have comparatively more female students than those run by males, reflecting the importance of the female *Gurukkal* in maintaining gender equality and challenging the male hierarchy in the world of *Kalaripayattu*. The prejudices of the male *Gurukkal* toward the female students are noticeable in a number of ways. *Chavitti Uzhichal*<sup>11</sup> is an absolute requirement to develop a boy's body for *Kalaripayattu*. But this element is absent in the case of girl students. Geethi remembers that once when she asked a *Gurukkal* about the *Chavitti Uzhichal* for women, she retorted with the question: "What is the need for *Chavitti Uzhichal* for a woman?" (54). Some male *Gurukkal* adopt a gendered pedagogy to teaching and deny an opportunity for female students to be trained in the *Ankathari*, which is considered a more aggressive part of the *Kalaripayattu* curriculum, and *Verumkali*, which is the most powerful element of the *Kalaripayattu*. Women are only given the training in *Maipayattu* which is considered to be a method of making the body flexible. The only reason we can infer from this is that aggressiveness is not considered part of the concept of the ideal domestic woman in Kerala. Therefore, even a female student of *Kalaripayattu* does not have the choice in selecting her own part of the syllabus unlike their peers in Chennai and Bengaluru who enjoy complete freedom to do so. The women performers in Chennai and Bengaluru enjoy a mutual respect among the practitioners and their *Gurukkal* and they also keep a healthy professional relationship rather than emotional bonds.

Most women practitioners in these two cities are economically independent and are upper-middle-class. Though some of them are married with children, this does not act as a barrier to them in practicing *Kalaripayattu*. But, in Kerala village *Kalaris*, some of the women practitioners say they are unable to find time to practice after doing all the household chores. Most of these women are not in employment and they cannot use *Kalaripayattu* as a means of livelihood even if it offers income. While women in the Kerala

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<sup>11</sup>Foot massage (*chavitti* means stamping or pressing with the feet and *uzhichil* means massage) to help a person attain suppleness of body and ease of movement.

*Kalaris* are compelled to wear the traditional feminine dress while on stage, their counterparts in the cities do not face any such gender discrimination in the dress codes as most of them follow a unisex dress code for both men and women.

Richard Schechner defines performance through the process of transformation and transportation where transformation represents the performative world and transportation represents the ordinary world. According to him, the act of performance can transform both the performer as well as the spectator (Schechner 117–49). In contemporary stage performance, a male *Kalaripayattu* practitioner is transformed and becomes part of the performance world once and comes back to or is transported back to his individual life after the performance. But, in the case of women performers in Kerala, this process does not happen because of what women performers experience regarding the consciousness they have about their bodies while performing on stage. According to one female performer, *Sirisha*, “our male counterparts are acting freely but we are very conscious of our bodies and the audience.” Here, women’s gender position dominates their performance and the desired transportation is not taking place. Thus, transformation and transportation are not possible when it comes to female performers in Kerala. But this is not so in the case of their peers in the cities mentioned earlier, because on the one hand, they have the freedom to choose performance elements and their costumes, and on the other, their troupes follow a unisex dress code on stage. This is a clear indication of their freedom, which in turn helps their bodies and minds attain the desired transformation and transportation as a performer.

## Conclusion

The tendency to exclude women in the Kerala *Kalaris* is interlinked to the gendered practices of the village spatial settings of Kerala society. Ironically, this is despite the fact that Kerala women enjoy a high literacy rate and good health, as well as a favorable sex ratio. But none of these high social indicators help them break the multiple social and religious barriers which prevent them from marking their presence and participating in public spaces along with their male peers. Empirical evidence from Kerala *Kalaris* and metropolitan cities substantiate the fact that gender imbalance prevailing in Kerala *Kalaris* is closely associated with the various mundane acts which produce and perpetuate gender identity in the village setting of the Kerala society. Ethnographic evidence from the Kerala *Kalaris* and those in the metropolitan cities enables one to see that the prevalence of gender discrimination is much more intense in Kerala *Kalaris* than those in the aforementioned cities. *Kalaripayattu* of the contemporary era reflects the changes taking place in the public space in

general and in the performance art forms in particular, especially in relation to the way performance is influenced by gender. The construction of gendered body perceptions in performance occurs through a series of exclusions, denials, and significant absences in spaces, as is evident in the examples from the Kerala context.

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