

Kalaripayatt, kushti and the Indian warfare

Stanisław Tokarski

Polish Academy of Science, Warsaw, Poland
Institute of Oriental and Mediterranean Cultures Jagiellonian University,
Faculty of International Studies Head of Dept. of East and South Asia, Cracow, Poland

Key words: self-defense, india, martial arts, kalaripayatt, kushti, wrestling

Summary

The purpose of the present paper is not to provide the comprehensive review of the ancient roots of Indian martial arts. Nor it is intended as the introduction to old practices of the effective Indian warfare, to some reviewers and critics used mainly for decorative functions and therefore not fitting modern self-defence. Our aim is to present the background of the best known contemporary Indian martial arts in modern cultural contexts characteristic for one of the oldest civilisations of the world still nourished by a rich religious soil.

Although it is not seen at the first glance, our comparative approach has practical aims. The evaluation is based on access to Indian texts, but interpretative dimension may depend upon Author's practical experience in Polish National Judo Team and his active training (5 Dan) for about ten years. There is also important to add the experience of several visits to India, years of Oriental studies of the Indian background and meetings with some Indian experts in Bangalore, Delhi, Agra and Benares.

As travelling martial arts may loose in new cultural contexts their integrity and cohesive system of values important for the comprehensive understanding the sense and meaning of very highly specialised techniques, the study of Indian warfare in original background and traditional imaginative contexts may help to recapture the strong values important for technical progress in combat sports deriving from contexts deeply rooted in traditional images and symbols. Resistance to accept the effectiveness of most ancient methods of training is rare. Critique is usually born on theoretical level, comes from misunderstanding the fundamentals of yogic anatomy and the purpose of Ayurvedic treatments, not on practical grounds.

The Indian warfare

To some, the ancient art of Asian warfare may seem outdated, not applicable for the purposes of modern combat sports. Inspired by Western experts, the people of Orient may easily give a safe burial to their own heritage, culture and literature on this subject. But some important elements of warfare are immutable and the basic philosophy of war remained the same. Such thought has been presented in the introduction to R. C. Kulreshtra's translation of the more or less forgotten work Dhanurveda. As the head of the Department of Military Studies in Aligarh College, India [1] he considers the book as exemplary. This text of some unknown author about 1500 B.C. had been studied in the ancient India long before another political reflection has been made. This handbook of war and piece called Arthaśāstra was written by Kautilya, a ministry on the court of maharaj Chandragupta. It has been used as a sound philosophical and strategic weapon against the army of Alexander the Great invading India.

Although the famous praxiology of renown Chinese scholar reflecting on peace and war, Sun Tzu book on The Art of

War, is considered as a military Bible today, it has been written about the time when probably Kautilya was propagating and propounding his theories of war and peace in the court of Chandragupta. The sound foundations for theory of the Indian self-defence have been laid in Dhanur Veda. In 1958 professor Kulshrestha quoted the phrase of Indian Ministry of Defence, V. K. Krishna Menon, defining his policy "to live and let live but not remain the heard of quiet ship to be torn off by hungry wolves with atomic teeth and hydrogenic jaws". "Surprisingly enough, he stated, the author of Dhanur Veda laid down the objectives of the defence forces four thousand years ago – to protect law abiding citizens from the designs of the wicked, the thieves and the robbers and thus to attend to the welfare of the inhabitants of the state"[2].

The sanskrit word dhanur stands for English bow, and veda – for science, knowledge, wisdom. Written about 1500 B.C., Dhanur Veda is the oldest military treatise in the world.

The author debates not only on theory and practice weapon but also on selection of men for weapon use: "Only those who are wise, capable and noble, pure in thought, speech

and dee should bear arms and armour because the arm and the armour destroy the incompetent and unqualified. Only those persons, endowed with sufficient thorough knowledge to wield them accurately, should use them; the mediocre persons must not be permitted to use them" [3].

The use of weapon such as dagger, sword, spear and bow, teaching of weapon skills, all of this should be preceded by long training the hand to hand fighting. To begin with kata training, then a shadow randori, the future warriors should be tested. The guru – very experienced acharya – should select only pupils well-balanced, to test their moral strength, not only their physical abilities. For the reasons already known the recruitment should be selective. The usage and practice of weapon skill should be limited, the discipline not widely advertised and character being the attribute of excellency. Such standards have applied in the military training of the ancient warriors became their duty and religion, a part of dharma.

Of the Indian martial races, castes and tribes at the times of the British Raj, among the best were the Gurkhas [4].

They have been building the core of the subcontinental colonial army of sepoy [5] until the Indian Mutiny, the military uprising of some Indian regiments shaking the foundations of the British Empire in Asia [6].

Kushti – the Indian wrestling

Though the labour and constant practice leads sometimes to the divine skills in chosen weapons, the great Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata describe how rarely their heroes found the right warrior gurus for it. But the greatest Indian religious festival Kumbha Mela has been famous for that of sacred wrestling. The ritual performances have also been a part of the Krishna festivals, in the region of Vrindavan they evoke the deeds of legendary wrestler Balarama, brother of Lord Krishna. Besides, in some temples situated close to Ganga river the Brahmins perform sacred wrestling of Hanuman style – monkey friend of Lord Rama – until today. There are many other legends begud ut. We read in Ramayana epics that King Vali wrestled with mighty demon Ravana, and won the mythic struggle with this ashur ruling the ancient Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Many other events have been revoked in Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture edited by D.C. Majumdar [7].

Before the times of Mogul rules in India the wrestling bouts were often fought to the death. For that reason techniques were well guarded as a secret. Wrestling skills have been giving the experts the special status in the courts; the demonstrations were performed before royalty who were its patrons. They were later incorporated into the program of military training [8].

Over the centuries, these performing arts have been modified into sport of pahlavans. Dangerous techniques were prohibited and the rules were established for the safety of wrestlers. These steps widely increased the popularity of the Indian wrestling, building the reputation of some castes as very brave fighters. As the schools of pahlavans were developed all over the Indian subcontinent, named as a rule after

their founders or deities, they brought the fame to three styles –Jarasandhi, Bheemaseni and Hanumanti.

Such tradition has been continued until the modern times. Among the Indian warfare, the wrestling (kushti) rose today to the status of the national sport, performing art and form of amusement. It is believed competitive, especially in the most remote districts of India, to the popularity of cricket. Tales and legends telling of matches between gods as well between famous mortals can be found in the earliest sacred scriptures as well as in the modern media. Kushti is thousands years old. Some Indian scholars believe it is the earliest form of wrestling [9].

Such training is so rigorous that the pahlavans have often been considered not only among the world's strongest athletes but possibly those with the most endurance. Pahlavans achieve such characteristics following special diets, give and receive massages, practice club swinging and lift hundreds of water-filled buckets from a deep well. They also use a special device called malla-khamb (wrestler's pillar) – two pillars imbedded in the ground, good to practice special acrobatic skills. They also practice wrestling several hours everyday. Even the huge fighters are suprisingly quick and experienced in various techniques.

Among the greatest Indian wrestlers of modern times was Gama (1878-1960). After the first world war he made a tour to Europe where he won all battles with the most outstanding world champions of the professional wrestling. In 1926 he has beaten the Polish world heavyweight wrestling champion Zbyszko Cyganiewicz (both in Greco-Roman style and in American Catch-as-Can styles) and then invited him to India for a training in Asian style.

With the end of the British rules, the popularity of kushti visibly declined replaced by cricket, to bring the new interest and progress in the Indian wrestling with the Independence in 1947. It cannot be compared with the growing in the third millennium multi medial popularity of cricket. But the Indian wrestlers won international fame also in last century. Legendary champion Gulam went to Europe with the leader of Independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, where he won with the best world wrestler Cour Derelli, the pride of Turkey. Gobar Goho, the kushti master, won the world championships in San Francisco.

As the Indian kushti may be a cheap sport (it can be trained in villages in traditionally formed square earthen-filled pits called akhada) it has become very popular even in the most remote districts. Before the fight wrestlers rub their hands with earth to have better grip. The winner of a tournament (rustam) is usually awarded a large wooden vase that may be ornamented with silver or golden patterns.

Such popularity gives the chance to try in Greco-Roman and free-style wrestling. The Indian experts won the Asian Games in Jakarta (1962) taking nearly all golden awards in every weight category, and also in Commonwealth Games held in Delhi (1967). Some of these experts are also well-known in the Olympic Games. But these events are of secondary importance for the traditional Indian wrestling with somehow magical and secret aura, taught by pahlavan gurus, deeply rooted in the local cultural and religious contexts.

Vajramushti and lathi

Although another forms of combat sports (for example taekwondo in Bangalore) have been developed after Independence, the first Judo Club was established by famous poet Rabindranath Tagore (Nobel Prize 1913) soon after the First World War, in his International University Visva-Bharati founded in Siantiniketan near Calcutta. His travel to Japan resulted in bringing to Bengal province of the British Raj the Japanese coach, the pupil of Jigoro Kano.

Among the Indian forms of self-defence surviving the challenge of modern times we should note lathi (named also as danda or gulli-danda). A staff used a bamboo sticks thousands years for defence and sport has also been applied by police and army in India and Pakistan today. It is usually hand made from bamboo or cane, but also from wood and fire-hardened, burnished and treated with herbal medicines. Usually kept in both hands, average lathi is usually five feet long, one to one and half in diameter, and weights two pounds. It has been considered and widely recognised as a very effective weapon in the traffic jams during rush hours.

More limited is the knowledge of vajra-mushti: when fought to death it gave the pahlavans the possibility to hit their opponent with the knuckle-duster called a vajral has been made of steel and nowadays – from horn. To be very effective it should be combined with some knowledge of anatomy and the art of armlocks. Mushti means fist, vajra means thunderbolt, also used as a name for knuckle-duster.

Kalaripayatt

Kalaripayatt is the self-defence system very popular in the South, especially in Kerala State. It can be helpful for the whole life, mainly for fitness and good health. It also consists of a part of actor preparation for the classic theatre Kathakali and for this reason it happened to be a part of religious festivals in India.

The training begins with learning of basic movements. The steps and turnings mixed up with yogic meditation were aimed at the splendid control of the body of martial art experts. That has been connected with the basic knowledge of anatomy and the visible progress in balance. The knowledge of kicks and blows has been bound with the increasing studies of vital spots of the body (chakra) and deadly spots (marman), combined with the control of breath, awareness and self-conscience [10].

Attacks and defences of specific marman were learned as a part of all weapon training, but very often these skills have been used not only for fighting. They were a part of old Indian medicine cures. Besides, for the reasons of maintaining the special position in the classical Indian theatre Kathakali – moving on outer blades of the foot – the famous actors recruited from Nair knight cast were former experts of self-defence.

Recently, the masters of Southern Indian styles of self-defence became famous for healing some anatomic disfunctions and for their massage based on Ayurvedic balsams. They also provided dancers for rituals and religious festivals. Nowadays present in Bollywood movies, they became the famous stuntmen. But the gurus are not eager to popularise

the knowledge of marman. They observe the pupils for quite a long time before they teach about vital spots.

The old European accounts go back to pre-colonial era. "At the age of seven – wrote 16th century traveller Duarte Barbosa – Nair knights go to war schools to acquire the incredible agility skills. They learn the dance of war, sidesteps, turnings, kicking and royal leaps there. Training twice a day they become so supple that their bodies transcend the laws of nature. Then comes the time to get acquainted with weapons. They practice the art of bow, spear, and sword – for the life long" [11].

Although war dances of Malabar are still performed during religious festivals [12], such kind of fighting has very ancient roots. The Western oriental scholars such as Luis Frederic [13] derive the Indian hand-to-hand and weapon practice from pre-Buddhist times. With famous monk Bodhidharma founding Shaolin, these skills might have come to China. The Indian professor R.C. Kulshrestha in his Introduction to Dhanurveda places the beginnings of such war skills much earlier.

The ancient Indian martial art roots remained unchanged in the Southern India mostly unaffected by early Western and Muslim invasions. The best known is the system popularised if not originated from Kerala province. In the language malayalam kalari meant place, open space or battlefield. Even today it refers to the special place where sacred education has been given, such as in old Japan was dojo. This kind of education refers to therapeutic or dramatic practice (payattu).

The mythic interpretation evolved such skills from the God of War. But it also has been attributed to the avatar of Vishnu, mythical creator of Kerala – Paraśurama. He learnt the art of archery (dhanur veda) from god Siva. After the Aryas invaded the Indus and Ganga valleys he came to Malabar coast with 3600 Bramins. They set up foundations for training in vedas and warfare. Four centres called kalakam have been the relicts of such war training – Payyanur, Parappur, Perikallur, and Chengannur. They have been believed to be the origins of 108 kalari schools in ancient Kerala and many village schools run by some local guru [14].

Historians place the beginnings of kalari training in the period about 200-600 B.C. According to Philip B. Zarilli the name has been well-known in Tamil literature of these times [15]. C.T. Sridharan writes about the ferocious Kerala tribals of that period, highly trained in sword and spear battles [16]. They travelled all over the country. Then this kind of art became popular wider. Irrespective of social status both young boys and girls trained kalaripayatt to improve and and maintain physical condition or to advance to graduated courses. In the 14th century the training became so popular that it served as the method to resolve dispute between two clans. Such ritual has been named ankam.

The decline of kalaripayatt as the warfare system came with fire arms. In 1788 Tipu Sultan invaded Malabar with the army using heavy guns. Then hand to hand combat became old fashioned. At the time of the British Raj it has been followed by a permanent ban on possession the traditional weapons and practising war training skills. Then the Nairs have transformed their martial arts into the training choreographies

for classic Indian theatre and religious dances. In such context many techniques and weapons survived.

The day of Independence marked the revival of kalaripayatt. It meant for resistant movement a part of swadeshi practice. In 1958 The State Kalaripayatt Association was founded. Today in Kerala the youngsters train in more than 1000 kalaris. The extraordinary skills of the best kalaripayatt gurus have been recorded by multimedias and some handbooks have been issued. But the traditional background of kalaripayatt is somehow misunderstood. The system as a whole seems to be a secret.

For Westerners it is still the legend. In some American encyclopedic accounts we find the statement that one of kalaripayatt masters chalked the tip of his sword during a demonstration and then whirled it around at the spectators. The result has been extraordinary, ten of them received a mark on their neck [17]. It is also believed that the experts can kill a person from far away by mere evil look (nookumarman). Such technique can be found not only in a classification of Philip B. Zarilli in his book *When the Body Becomes all Eyes* (New Delhi 2000, Oxford University Press) but also in Vedic sources, where god Indra kills demon Vrtra attacking his vital points with his vajra. About the same technique in sacred epic Mahabharata wrote Magda Zdrojewska in her unpublished paper delivered for Polish Academy of Science in 2009 [18]. She mentioned that practice of kalari has been strongly rooted with the temple rituals and training is a kind of prayer.

Conclusions

Studies of aesthetic, ecological, ritual and religious dimensions of martial arts not necessarily may me a waist of time. It

may be a part of strong motivation when practical revaluation of our everyday practice. It also may draw our attention to the simple fact that these dimensions were integral parts of the training to much and to narrowly specialised today.

Being aware about prevailing sceptical approach towards some details of yogic anatomy and ayurvedic treatments, we have to ask a question what is the use of such knowledge for some Olympic combat sports, such as judo, for example. This has been a question of long time debate [19]. It can be worth knowing that in the sacred language of ancient India yudh is 'to fight', and yuddha means "a struggle" in hindi or several modern Indian dialects. Some may also stress upon the question of widening the horizons in the dimension of medical treatment of injuries. Kalari gurus include massage as the part of everyday training, not only for the quick recovery from fatigue and for therapy but also for some prophylactics reasons. It also good to note the Indian emphasis for study our body, learning the power of movements combined with art of breathing (pranayama) but at the same time the aim to avoid building up muscles too much, better and wiser to develop their flexibility. Another question is the priority of a spiritual power before body power. This is a key problem to modern champions of martial arts, most often concentrated on body power or simply on studies of techniques and neglecting spiritual dimension in fighting. The most ancient oriental approach criticises such isolation of movement and reflection. Concentration techniques and learning dhyana (attention, zen, awareness) has been considered the crucial point for the progress of self-defence. That approach has a long tradition. For many centuries the Indians practiced techniques of warfare in a wider imaginary contexts of images and symbols [20], as animal skills or god wisdoms.

References

1. Kulshrestha RC. Introduction to Dhanurveda. Aligarh: Rama Krishna press; 1958.
2. ibidem, p.3.
3. ibidem, p.5.
4. See Mac Munn G. *Martial Races of india.*, Berkeley-London: California University press; 1933.
5. Candler A. *The Sepoy.* London: Oxford University press; 1919.
6. See Harris J. *The indian Mutiny.* London: Wordsworth Edition; 2001.
7. *Encyclopedia of indian physical Culture.* Baroda: ed. Majumdar DC; 1951.
8. Cohen S. *The indian Army.* Berkeley and London: University of California press; 1971.
9. Brown EG, Smith JF. (eds.) *The Martial Arts Encyclopedia,* Washington D.C. 1971: p. 96.
10. Rosu L. *Marman et les arts martiaux.* Le Journal Asiatique 1981: Vol CCLXiX.
11. Barbosa D. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa,* see J. Prokopiuk (ed.). Warszawa: Medycja 1980: p. 33.
12. *Martial dances of Malabar have been registered and performed in Catalogo di film sui teatri orientali.* Roma: ed. by Savarese nicolo; 1979.
13. Frederik L. *Dictionaire des Arts Martiaux.* Paris: Ed. du Felin; 1988: p. 138.
14. *Kalaripayatt, The Structure and Essence of an indian Martial Art.* D.H. Lujendijk. Lulu.com; 2008.
15. Zarilli ph. *When the Body Becomes All Eyes.* New Delhi: Oxford University press; 2000.
16. Sreedharan nair C. T. *Kalaripayatt.* Chennai: Westland Books; 2001.
17. *Martial Arts Encyclopedia,* Washington D.C.: Brown and Smith (eds.); 1971: p.73.
18. Zdrojewska M. *Kalaripayatt. An introduction to An indian Martial Art.* Warsaw: Centre for Studies on non-European Countries, Polish Academy of Sciences; 2009.
19. *Classical approach has been set out by Yesudian Selvarajan.* Sport et Yoga. Lausanne: Edition du Signal; 1980.
20. See Eliade M. *Images and Symbols.* New York: Shed and Ward Edition; 1969.

Address for correspondence:

Stanisław Tokarski
Nowy Swiat 72, Polska Akademia Nauk, Warsaw, Poland
Phone: 48 22 826 63 56, e-mail: s-tokarski@o2.pl

Received: 06.02.2010

Accepted: 26.05.2010

In India, the monsoon is seen as a season of rejoicing, giving relief from the scorching heat. Farmers cherish this season [Read more](#).
It is believed that Lord Shiva himself developed an art of warfare known as KALARIPAYATTU which was finally learnt by people in South India through his disciples. According to ancient folklore, Lord Vishnu's disciple Parasurama who was an avatar of Lord Vishnu is believed to be the human founder of martial arts in India. Lord Nandi: As lord Nandi is very dear to Lord Shiva and is always with him, so first student of this art of warfare was lord Nandi. Lord Karthikeya (Murugan) : When demon Tarkasura has spread evilness a lot, then to stop and kill him Lord Kartikeya (Murgugan), son of my dear Kalaripayattu is NOT a sport. It is a LETHAL method of fighting , which is 6000 years old and was introduced to Kerala by Lord Parashurama (an avatar of Vishnu). Quite often we have western fighters coming to Kerala to learn Kalaripayattu , and then after a week they want to fight. Gentlemen, be aware that this form of Kerala Martial art does not leave two men standing. Only one remains--the other is dead, or severely crippled. Warfare has been part of mankind's innate nature since the beginning of human existence. The art of war has undergone immense changes and developments over the ages. Yet, certain principles and teachings have always remained constant. Crack a dude's neck and he'll stop breathing; it's as simple as that. Granted that is a fairly watered down example of what I'm saying, but hopefully you get the drift. The first references to a form of martial arts and warfare, called Kalaripayattu, originated in southern India from the Sangam literature era between 300 BC and 300 AD. But, Kalari was first officially recognised as a martial art of Kerala in 1362 AD - the word kalari meaning, battlefield or combat arena. Source: en.wikipedia.org. Sage Agastya is considered to be the creator of Kalaripayattu.