



International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

A Socio-Economic Study on Kalari Centres in North Kerala

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (QJIF): 8.4

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 25/May/2026

Accepted: 01/June/2026

Abstract

Kalaripayattu is a testament to human resilience and the desire for self-optimization through the teaching that the greatest victory is the mastery over one's own self. Human resilience and self-optimization have deep economic implications. Both play significant role in aiding human beings in allocating resources efficiently through upgrading human agility. Now, Kalaripayattu, the ancient martial art of Kerala, stands at a crossroads. Despite its global popularity, practitioners struggle with the lack of a sustainable economic model for its viability, the major challenge being its economic invisibility. The present discussion attempts to see the art form through an economic lens and tries to bring forth the failure of ensuring economic viability and social incorporation for Kalaripayattu despite its cultural worth. The study finds that the economic sustainability of the art form remains indeterminant on account of irregular income and fluctuating and uncertain operational costs. The discussion tries to bring into attention, the measures suggested by the respondents to preserve the heritage and pride of the art form along with the upgradation of the same as a means of economic empowerment.

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Keywords: Kalaripayattu, Martial art, Gender role, Social empowerment, Social capital.

Introduction

Kalaripayattu is not merely a martial art; it is a profound intersection of culture, spirituality, and physiological mastery. Often hailed as the "Mother of All Martial Arts," its influence stretches across the Asian continent, supposedly providing the foundational blocks for disciplines like Shaolin Kung Fu. Emerging from the lush, tropical landscapes of Kerala, the art form is a holistic system that seeks to harmonize the body, mind, and spirit through a rigorous regimen of physical training and medicinal practice. Unlike modern combat sports that focus primarily on the "knockout" or the "score," Kalaripayattu is a way of life. It is governed by a philosophy that views the body as a temple and a weapon simultaneously. In the traditional Kalari (training hall), the practitioner (the Gurukkal or student) does not just learn to fight; they learn to heal, to breathe, and to exist in a state of heightened awareness. Kalaripayattu is a testament to human resilience and the desire for self-optimization through the teaching that the greatest victory is the mastery over one's own self. Human resilience and self-optimization have deep economic implications. Both play significant role in aiding human

beings in allocating resources efficiently through upgrading human agility. The art form brings together the elements of different streams of economic thought such as behavioural economics, resource economics, labour economics, development economics and others when we delve deep into the economics of the art form. Economic resilience is a characteristic feature of a productive asset and it has implications for a resilient macro economy that maintains stability in economic and social fronts even at times of adversity. Self-optimization that makes an individual to strive continuously for upgrading capabilities assume great importance to the market economy and emerging digital capitalism. In this way, the martial art form under discussion is economically significant to the state of Kerala in a micro sense. When the micro aspects are viewed in the larger canvass of macro economy, its contribution to the tourism sector, wellness economics, labour market and others makes it all the more an activity of economic pursuit.

Problem or Significance of the Study

Now, Kalaripayattu, the ancient martial art of Kerala, stands

at a crossroads. Despite its global popularity, practitioners struggle with the lack of a sustainable economic model for its viability, the major challenge being its economic invisibility. Traditionally, the operational reliance was on the principle of Dakshina, or voluntary offerings. However, in today's market economy, struggle to balance the increasing operational costs such as maintaining traditional earthen pits, purchasing medicinal oils, and crafting high-quality, handmade weaponry with unpredictable revenue streams is escalating. Secondly, though Kalaripayattu is theoretically a holistic system for society, its actual contribution to social capital remains poorly documented. The potential of the art form to alleviate the burden on the public health system through traditional orthopaedics and physical therapy remains underutilized due to a lack of formal recognition. The role of gender aspects in the Kalari as a way to women empowerment is overlooked in the name of complexity involved due to socio-cultural hurdles despite historical precedents of female warriors. Yet, there are numerous challenges such as lack of institutional support, social security, and the commercialization of the art by fitness tourism against the philosophical essence of the art makes it more vulnerable and poses a significant threat to the survival of this ancient art form. The mentioned issues require utmost consideration and warrants that regulatory, financial, and social challenges needs to be addressed without fail for keeping Kalaripayattu in its status as a living heritage.

Objectives

The present discussion attempts to see the art form through an economic lens and tries to bring forth the failure of ensuring economic viability and social incorporation for Kalaripayattu despite its cultural worth. A case study method has been adopted for the collection of information needed for discourse. Four actively functioning Kalari centres from North Kerala, particularly in the Kasaragod region and nearby areas were selected as the cases. The choice of the study area is justified as traditional Kalaripayattu practices are still actively followed in the region. The information is collected in the year 2026. A closer examination of the financial structure and the real-life struggles of the personnel involved seeks to suggest a framework for maintaining the art form as a thriving institution in the modern era. Specifically, it is attempted to look into the cost and revenue of the Kalari centres, contributions to gender development and health and the challenges generally happens in the Kalari centres.

Literature Review

Kalaripayattu can drive local economic growth and employment with proper planning and policy support in alignment with the tourism sector via promoting these art forms to attract visitors (Raj, 2018). Kalaripayattu can play a role in community livelihoods and local economy through direct and indirect economic opportunities such as including jobs in tourism, transport, and local trade, while strengthening social cohesion and community identity for sustainable development (Sreekumar, 2019, Vinodan & Meera, 2018). Kalaripayattu revitalizes the cultural economy of Kerala through integration of body with mind and social values wherein the cultural economy complements formal sectors of the economy (Zarrilli, 2013). Kalaripayattu among women can be an effective empowerment strategy through building up of physical strength, self-confidence, and security conscience among women, challenging traditional gender roles. Kalaripayattu promotes gender equality and empowerment, making it significant for socio, economic and

cultural analysis in Kerala. (Nair, 2021, Ashitha 2020). Kalaripayattu acts as a way for cultural exchange to and fro of foreign economies by taking the martial art to different social contexts while retaining their original identity amounting to socio-economic transformation of economies (Brown and Jennings, 2013).

Results and Discussion

The cases chosen are of the working age ranging between 38 and 48. The three case have an experience in the field for more than ten years ranging to a maximum of 25 years while one among them has an experience of only 7 years. One Kalari centre is said to have different branches and the chosen centres have branches ranging from more than one to twelve. Different Kalaris offer different types of Kalari practice such as Nelakalari, Nalpatheeradikalari and Kuzhikalari.

Expenditure Side

Regarding the operational cost of the Kalari centres, it is seen that there are both fixed cost and variable cost components. The acquisition of land, construction of the Kalari and the purchase of weapons and materials for the centre constitutes the primary fixed cost of the Centres. The cases reported an average amount of three to four lakhs as the primary cost of operation of the centres. The amount is influenced by the value changes in money at different time periods.

The maintenance of the training area and that of the weapons constitute the major share of the variable costs. Those Kalari centres offering treatment and performances apart from training have recurring costs of purchase of oil, medicinal items and other necessary items. The centres having more branches have to do the maintenance at every branch incurring big amounts ranging upto 2 lakh including expenses other than maintenance. Some centres manage to carry out the maintenance works by volunteering services of the trainers and trainees themselves. All the cases have cited the difficulties on the expenditure side on account of rising cost of materials and maintenance.

Remuneration to the trainer staff of the Centres is yet another cost component of the Kalari centres. An average of amount ranging from Rs.7000 to Rs.12000 is given to the training staff per month. The amount is subject to variation according to workload and amount of student fee.

Revenue Side

The primary source of income in most Kalaris is training fees which ranges from Rs.300 to Rs.500 per day. Innovative methods such as grading systems in training contribute significantly to revenue. Additional income is generated through Kalari Marma Chikitsa (treatment) and performance programs, which are often seasonal in nature. The annual revenue out of the treatment if undertaken by the centre is said as around one lakh on an average. Some Kalari centres undertake sale of oil to trainers and others which adds to the revenue of the centre. Regarding the performance programs, the Kalari centres are reported to have an average revenue of around 2 lakhs annually, with an amount of earnings ranging from Rs.15000 to Rs.40000 per program. The annual income of different Kalari centres vary according to the number of branches and intensity of operations. The linkage of Kalari centres with tourism also generates revenue. But the location specific factors such as place of existence, ease of travel etc., exerts great influence over the revenue generation. Among the chosen cases, only one Kalari centre has favourable situations in this regard while others could raise only a meagre amount

out of tourism. This emerges as one of the strategic areas where potential remains to be tapped off. Online classes for Kalari training are yet another way that can be used for popularising the art form on an economic basis. But the lack of super-efficient infrastructural facilities that emerges as a requirement for training by the very nature of the art form limits the scope of the same.

Altogether, the discussion on expenditure revenue dynamics of Kalari centres can be concluded with the observation that though the centres can generate income from different sources, the sources lack stability and regularity rendering uncertainty over income generation for those who solely depend on it as a livelihood occupation. Student retention, the high maintenance costs and lack of marketing are also cited as issues impacting the income generation capacity of the centres. The chosen cases have no major other sources of income except one who does other art works. The income generated by the other family members is also relied upon for meeting up the general expenditure of the household. Overall, the economic sustainability of the centres remains indeterminant on account of irregular income and fluctuating and uncertain operational costs.

Contribution to Social Capital

Kalari centres can be seen as a major contributor to the building up of social capital in terms of labour efficiency, women empowerment and enhancement of overall economic and social wellbeing of the people. There is a noticeable increase in female participation in Kalaripayattu training, especially among younger age groups. This enhances the capability of the women labour force of the economy by empowering them with social networking, inclusiveness, decision making power along with physical and mental wellbeing. Gender empowerment is visible as women are increasingly taking up the roles as trainers and performers in the centres. One aspect to be noted here is that the art form remains mostly as a cup of tea for women from well off back grounds. It should be popularised and adjusted in such a way that it is accessible to people of every economic condition so that a wider impact can be created in the society. Here, recently academic pressure remains as a major reason for discontinuing practice and training.

Kalaripayattu plays a crucial role in the health sector through Marma Chikitsa, offering traditional treatment methods for physical injuries and health issues. The post-COVID period has witnessed increased interest in Kalaripayattu due to growing awareness about health, immunity, and physical fitness. Kalaripayattu acts as a source of social capital, fostering discipline, trust, cooperation, and strong community relationships among practitioners. Thus, Kalaripayattu contributes not only to physical well-being but also to social cohesion and empowerment, thereby paving way for social capital formation.

Institutional Support

The cases reported a mixed response regarding any form of institutional assistance to the sustenance and popularisation of the martial art form. Among the four chosen cases, three have registered under the Kerala Sports Council and receive some sort of grants. The association of Kalaripayattu members is Kerala Kalaripayattu Association which is registered under Kerala Sports Council. Only the registered centres can receive grants and the grants range from Rs.5000 to Rs.50000 for district and state level competitions respectively depending upon the submission of solid proof of expenditure. But it is

understood from the enquiry that a good number of Kalari centres still remain outside the ambit of support due to lack of awareness, timely procedural lacking and deficiency of resources. The area of government and institutional support remains an area that needs to be immediately dealt with for the revival of the art form to its lost pride and significance.

Issues and Challenges

A number of issues and challenges that affects the growth and sustainability of Kalaripayattu art form. The major issue faced by the centres is financial instability due to irregular income and over dependence on traditional fee system. Many Kalaris are not registered under official bodies, limiting their access to competitions and benefits. The lack of awareness and accessibility regarding government schemes and financial support is the main reason for this. The stringency in the conditions for gaining financial support and grants also is cited as an important issue.

There exists a continuous conflict between commercialization and preservation of tradition with regarding to Kalaripayattu with differing opinions among Gurukkals or trainers. Generally, commercialization happens at the cost of traditional heritage and culture of the art form, despite commercialization can bring in more revenue.

The rising cost of land, construction, and maintenance increases the burden on Kalari centres. The lack of integration of the activities of the Kalri centres with the formal healthcare system reduces the potential of Marma Chikitsa and other health related services.

Student retention and continuity remain challenges due to academic pressure and changing lifestyle patterns. As most of the Kalari centres rely on student fee largely for its working, the uncertainty adds to the issue of fund crunch for the centres.

These identified issues collectively threaten the long-term sustainability of Kalaripayattu as a socio-economic institution.

Opinion on Ways to Improve

The first and foremost opinion placed by the centre owners and trainers is regarding the institutional support towards the art form. The cases opined that the registration procedures directly to the Kerala Sports Council must be eased and all the competitions must be brought under the Kerala Sports Council so that the art will get a more appealing effect from the general society as other sport items. The inclusion of Kalaripayattu as part of curriculum will help the benefits of the art form to flow into the student population of the economy that helps a resilient social capital in the long run. It will also help the popularisation of the art form. Opinion also came with regard to the institutionalization of scholarships for the art form such as folklore scholarship. The institutional support through provision of insurance, pension schemes and social security of the Gurukkals or trainers in the centres also is considered as ways to improve the situation. Some sort of financial support to the Kalaripayattu centres also was mentioned which will help reducing the maintenance burden of the centres. Institutional support in the direction of maintaining professionalism of Kalaripayattu in terms of integration of the health wise benefits with the other streams of health care systems also was cited as a way to help the existence of the art form in the long run.

In addition, adoption of a balanced approach to ensure commercial viability without compromising traditional values, standardisation of training and certification systems

with due respect to regional diversity and conduct of promotional and awareness programs for enhancing female participation to achieve gender equality in Kalaripayattu will help the martial art form to carry its purpose and mission in the wider society. An orientation of the policy initiatives in the mentioned directions can undoubtedly help the art form to create far reaching impacts in the economy.

Conclusion

Kalaripayattu is a unique blend of tradition, culture, and physical discipline that holds significant socio-economic importance in Kerala. The discussion reveals that while Kalaripayattu centres contribute to income generation, health, and social development, they face considerable challenges in terms of financial sustainability, institutional support, and modernization. The art form of Kalaripayattu has the potential to evolve as a viable economic and social institution if supported by effective policies and strategic interventions. Strengthening its economic base, promoting its health benefits, and preserving its cultural essence are essential for its future growth. It plays important role in social capital formation especially in the context of women's empowerment, labour efficiency, and the state of wellness of an economy through the network of social relationships, trust, norms, collective participation, and institutional support that enable individuals to access opportunities, improve productivity, and enhance overall wellbeing in society. In conclusion, Kalaripayattu is not to remain merely as a martial art but it should be hailed as a living heritage. The realisation of the sustainability of Kalaripayattu depends on the synchronization of the tradition with modern economic realities wherein it acts as an intangible economic resource that strengthens cooperation, reduces social and economic barriers, and promotes inclusive development.

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