

Angampora: the Martial Art of Sri Lankan Kings

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“Ramayan”, narrates a war that was fought between Prince Rama and King Ravana of Sri Lanka. The “Mahawamsa” the chronicle of Sri Lankan kings, on many occasions narrates the swordsmanship and the combat skills of the Sri Lankan kings and warriors. Many a time the invaders of this land were driven back by locals practicing a fearsome martial art called “Angampora”.

Words Thejaka Perera **Photographs** Piumal Edirisinghe and Oliver Herrmann

According to the legends, this art dates back to the period of King Ravana and beyond. However the records of this art form surface from time to time in the chronicles of ancient Sinhala kingdoms as it was the fighting technique of the noblemen and the kings. It is also stated that the fighters belonged to two clans named Sudaliya and Maruwalliya who contested with each other, but together they served the king.

Legend has it that the small army that conquered Jaffna in 1450 AD, under the command of Sapumal Kumaraya (A Southern Prince) comprised of fighters skilled in this martial art.

Angampora was at its peak during the Kandyan kingdom. The native warriors time and again beat back the invaders. However when the British gained control over the entire Island, a law was imposed banning Angampora in 1817.

Those who breached this law were shot and their properties were seized. However, a few of the warrior clans went underground and continued to practice Angampora. They guarded the secrets of the art within their blood line but unfortunately this is one reason for its present low visibility in the country. Sometimes the techniques were transformed as dance routines in village temple processions.

The present capital of Sri Lanka, Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte was the seat of the

Kingdom at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505. Mirihana is a town that is just outside the ramparts of the Kotte Fort. Here lives a man, who has dedicated more than five decades to Angampora, and is determined to ensure that it does not vanish or become subjected to distortion. Considered to be the present day Panikkirala, the highest grade in

Angampora, equivalent to the Shihan in karate, he is guru Karunapala. The guru also runs an Angammaduwa (a school that teaches Angampora), in Mirihana along with Dr Wickremasinghe who has been his lifelong pal and a doctor in Ayurvedic medicine.

The ground of the Angammaduwa is made of crushed anthills mixed with sand. Guru Karunapala trains people from all walks of life. When a student first enters the school he or she has to light three lamps and make an oath. “I can judge a student’s mental preparedness by the manner in which the student makes the pledge. If I notice any skepticism in the student’s mind and feel he or she cannot cope with the discipline I don’t take them into the class”, he says. Students also have to produce a police report or a report from the Village Head before gaining entrance to the school. All these steps are taken to ensure that only people with a stable mind and good conduct follow the art.

Practice sessions begin with a session of meditation and an offering of pin (merit) to their guru and deities. This is followed by an exercise ritual designed to season one’s body and limbs for the art.

The first skill a student learns is the basic foot movement designed to sidestep an attacker and keep one’s balance. Then the student learns a more advanced foot movement known as Gaman Thalaya, which is structured around the movements of a lion in a cage.

Then there is the Ath Haramba, which is the use of one’s bare hands in combat, where the student is taught to take on the attacks of adversaries from all directions. An integral part of this is the learning of targeting sensitive pressure points in the body when striking an opponent. The punches and kicks targeting these pressure points may even cause fatal injuries. The art is now practiced without contests as that could be fatal and illegal under the country’s law.

“Angampora also teaches the cures for the injuries caused by the fights”, says guru Karunapala. “I have massaging techniques and herbal oil extracts that can reverse

the effects of most of the injuries caused during the fights” he added. The learning of Ayurvedic medicine is an integral part of learning this martial art.

A variety of weapons are used in Angampora. One of the most lethal weapons is the Velayudaya, a whip like instrument made of four to six double-edged flexible strips of metal. However only the most advanced students are allowed to learn to use this weapon, as one has to perfect the foot movement in order to avoid injury to oneself.

The combat sword or Kaduwa which is custom made for the fighter is another weapon. The length of the sword is usually the distance between the fighter’s fingertips and his armpit. A smaller sword, known as the Kota Kaduwa, is used together with a small shield or Paliha, which is approximately the size of a large dining plate.

It’s this art that guru Karunapala passes onto his students today. After five decades of training and practice, guru Karunapala, with the motive of further developing the art, established the Hela Kreeda Samajaya (Indigenous Sports Society).

Master Karunapala and the team were featured in Ranaviru Uttamachara Geethaya, a music video produced to salute and encourage the Service Personnel during the battle of Vanni. In 2008, guru Karunapala was involved in the movie “Aba” the epic story of the ancient King Pandukabhaya as its fight director.

In 2009 the Government of Sri Lanka recognised the service of guru Karunapala by awarding the title Kala Bhushana for his contribution to the advancement of the oldest and authentic Sri Lankan martial art: Angampora.

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

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