

MUMBAI FOR KIDS

Kids put up a good fight with Kali, Iaido

New Martial Arts Are Giving Old Styles A Beating

Mahafreed Irani | TNN

The Karate Kid has serious competition from the new sword-drawing, stick-fighting kids on the block. Exotic martial arts you may never have heard of are being taught in Mumbai and some children are opting to learn these over karate. Esoteric styles like Ninjutsu, Escrima and Iaido are fast gaining popularity among those who want self-defence with a difference. Think Matt Damon-style Filipino stickfighting, ninja-style bonebreaking and Japanese swordsmanship, which aim to maim, or at best, impress. We break it up for you.

ESCRIMA, KALI, ARNIS | FILIPINO FIGHTING

An innocent-looking comb, pen, deodorant can, newspaper, magazine, foot ruler or even chappal can become a deadly weapon. Some students are learning just how under the expert tutelage of Escrima master Radhika Shaikh. Unlike karate, where basic punches, kicks and breathing exercises are taught first, kids are directly introduced to weapons in Escrima. “The youngest kid in my Escrima class is a five-year-old,” says Shaikh. “All my students first learn how to strike, parry or thrust weapons and are then taught empty-hand techniques. Escrima is a soft art that removes the fear of weapons if studied at an early age. Defang the snake without killing it,” she counsels her students, most of whom belong to lower economic backgrounds. Shaikh vouches that this art, which was used by tribal Filipinos to protect themselves against foreign invaders, will help students build self-confidence and increase concentration. Even the burqa doesn’t impede enthusiastic Muslim girls from learning the art. Shaikh holds classes at the National School of Combat Art in Worli twice a week and the fees are Rs 550 per month. Shaikh and her fellow teachers already train students from ten Mumbai schools in martial arts like Escrima, Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing) and Pankration (Greek wrestling).

NINJUTSU | NO HOLDS BARRED

A few seven-year-olds from Mumbai can seriously dream of becoming master ninjas for they have already started learning Ninjutsu in a Khar dojo (training space). The martial art of stealth, invisibility and espionage is being taught by India’s ninja grandmaster and 9th degree black belt holder, Cyrus Rustomji. “The golden rule of Ninjutsu is that there are no rules,” he says. Rustomji imparts lethal training in stick arts, blades, chains and projectiles to his students. On an average, it takes around seven years of training in Ninjutsu to earn a black belt. “Since young students are more flexible and have better stamina, they can grasp the art faster than most adults,” he says. The training imparted to a child and an adult is the same. Legend has it that rich Samurai landlords were tackled

by poor peasants using various martial art techniques, which have now been combined to form the Ninjitsu method. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evening, Ninjitsu classes are held in Khar from 7pm to 9pm. As students advance to higher levels, they are trained in lethal striking and throwing techniques, locks, chokes, nerve and pressure point attacks. Besides these, disguise and impersonation are taught as well.

IAIDO, KENJUTSU

| DRAWING SWORDS

A Vile Parle-based martial arts teacher trains students in a sacred and obscure Japanese art called Iaido. The youngest students in Mehul Vora's class are 13-year-olds who have no martial arts background but have come to the master to learn the exotic form after watching films like *The Last Samurai* or *Kill Bill*. Iaido is the contemporary Japanese art of quickdrawing a katana (singleedged sword) and striking an imaginary opponent. "The most useful space in a bowl is its emptiness," he says pointing out that kids are the best students of the art because they are enchanted by the sword and can fully concentrate on it. Iaido or moving meditation helps them improve their concentration too. At three, Mehul was sent to karate class because his mother thought he was a sickly child. Today, at 32, after having learnt karate and sword martial art techniques in Hashimoto, he trains hundreds of students in Iaido, Karate, Krav Maga (Israeli mixed martial arts) and Kenjutsu (Japanese sword art) all over India. Vora's Iaido classes are held eight times a month for a fee of Rs 1,000 in Mumbai. It takes around 15 to 20 years to master the art. Parents worried about these forms inculcating a combative attitude in their children ought to know that none of these are without their attendant lessons in discipline, self-control and patience, and of course, personal safety. It's not karate, but it's got more kick.

Mehul Vora's Iaido class: 9820055730

Radhika Shaikh's Escrima class: 986973374

Cyrus Rustomji's Ninja class: 9821075735



PACKING A PUNCH: Radhika Shaikh teaches children Escrima at Gamadia School, Princess Street