

Rights Versus Culture in the Jallikattu Debate



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Lead Essay

Rights versus culture in the Jallikattu debate

The revival of the debate over the legitimacy of Jallikattu has boiled down to a contest between the preservation of cultural norms and cruelty to animals. An added dose of the Jallikattu's essentiality to agrarian practices and preservation of indigenous cattle breeds contributes favourably to the position of the protagonists of this practice. However, what the debate on both the sides fails to address are the hierarchies inherent in the social system that perpetuates a practice like Jallikattu and its relevance to the present discourse.

The existing rights versus culture discourse

The tradition of Jallikattu – an event where bulls are used as performing animals and their strength tested – has been a part of the Tamilian culture since ancient times, practised by early Tamil tribes. Seals depicting the Jallikattu trace it to the Indus Valley civilisation. The use of bulls as performing animals, involving a contest between humans and the animals, has resulted in a widespread public outcry, spearheaded by the PETA and the Animal Welfare Board of India, over the years. The injuries sustained by the animals during the event and the mental torture and manipulation they are subjected to prior to the event, such as inebriation, have mobilized a discourse of animal 'rights'.

Despite the ban imposed on it by the Environment Ministry in 2011, the practise continued under the state government regulations. The intervention of the Supreme Court, in 2014, entirely banned the practise, bringing it under the ambit of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. The judgement delineated a clear discourse of animal rights, attributing agency to the animals, elevating their rights to constitutional rights.¹

The view, however, has not held ground with the protagonists of the practice, with equally strong counter arguments of culture and scientific rationale being bandied about by the other side. Moreover, as recent events show, the ban was flouted with impunity in a Tamil village and a bull-race was held in a village in Andhra Pradesh,² despite warnings by the police.³

For the cultural protagonists of Jallikattu, the event is not a mere practise, but a part of the cultural traditions of the state, tracing its origins to the practises of the Indus Valley tribes. It is not an imitation of, they argue, the Spanish bull-fights, whose intent actually entails cruelty to the animal, and cannot be viewed from a colonial narrative⁴ of uncivilized ritualistic torture of animals. They argue that Jallikattu does not espouse as its intent the use of violence on a living creature, but the sustenance of livestock diversity, without which the bulls would be sent to slaughter. It becomes one of the modes of affirmations of the identity of marginalised Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu, like Thevars and Maravars.⁵

An alternate perspective

If we delve deeper into the issue, it becomes clear that there is no clear-cut answer to be found within the culture versus animal rights matrix. The question is not of whether and, if at all, we should condone, violence and its violation of rights, because we cannot contextualise rights of the nature in an apolitical manner, divorced from the human context. If we look at the human context, we would be in a much better position to contest the practise of Jallikattu and the arguments advocated by the cultural protagonists.

¹ Lal, 2016.

² The Hindu, 2016.

³ Deccan Chronicle, 2016.

⁴ Neelakandan, 2016.

⁵ Lal, 2016.

Lead Essay

While admitting the current conceptualization of Jallikattu as a representative of Tamil pride, Dalit nationalism and ancient tribal culture, we need to become aware about how such practices have become potential sites of injustice against the Dalit communities. Not only has it become a seasonal event, especially with the approaching Tamil Nadu assembly elections, where all political parties try to gain electoral leverage, while doing little all the year round, betraying a lack of sincerity on the issue and pandering to majoritarian clamour, but even the cultural representations of Jallikattu are not without their grey corners.

The state of Tamil Nadu, despite its anti-Brahmin movement, remains a site of caste pride and divisions. The anti-Brahmin rhetoric, as pointed out by a Dalit scholar, has failed to yield material gains in terms of Dalit rights.⁶ It has remained confined to recognition and representation, but has not translated into material redistribution. Today, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu suffer from the highest percentage of rural landlessness at 73 percent. Even though the Dalits or Scheduled Castes account for 21 percent of the Tamil Nadu's population and constitute 25.5 percent of the rural households,⁷ being excluded from the urban centres, their rural status continues to be confined to life as agricultural labourers, at the mercy of the intermediate communities –the middle and lower castes – that form the major landholding class.

To, therefore, equate Jallikattu with Dalit nationalism and pride becomes problematic, given the existing class reality. Even if the practise is equated with identity of indigenous communities, it cannot be said to hold an equalizing force, but has become an expression of caste pride –albeit lower-caste pride on the surface – propagation of vested interests of rich landowners and farmers and competitive instincts to secure the bag of coins locked to the horns of a bull. How can the interests of the Dalits be said to be protected under an economic system of which Jallikattu has become a symbol?

The lower caste pride that Jallikattu, by default, appears to be fostering has dual implications. On the one hand, it gives an illusion of caste pride in the absence of any substantive material improvement. It also incorporates the Dalit nationalism within the fold of mainstream religions, by associating it with the 'temple' tradition. On the other hand, the fight for welfare gains for the Dalits has also been set back by the economic interests of the rich landowners and farmers.

Jallikattu, thus, in its current form, perpetuates the economic and sociological interests of the rich landowners in the state. The bull-rearers are almost always the rich landowners, while those who participate in the field to tame the bull come from poorer socio-economic background.⁸ Since the major landholding classes in the state possess major political and economic clout, Jallikattu has come to represent a system of subjugation for the poorer sections. The latter sees the fulfilment of their interest in participating in the sport for upward mobility, while the actual bull-owners are the rich farmers, in whose interests runs the real economic case for Jallikattu. The economically-weaker sections, mainly the Dalits, have, thus, been effectively co-opted in supporting the event with its existing class divisions, rather than challenging it.

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⁶ Rajangam, 2016.

⁷ The Hindu, 2015.

⁸ The Economic Times, 2008.

Lead Essay

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Headlines

Expelled by University, Dalit Scholar Commits Suicide in Hostel Room

(The Wire Staff, *TheWire*, 18 January 2016)

The entire chain of incidents can be traced back to August 1, when the ABVP disrupted the screening of a documentary on the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, allegedly for being 'anti-Hindu'. The ASA students then claim that a small, non-violent confrontation followed, with the ABVP President tendering an apology letter in the presence of security, and everyone is said to have stepped back. However, after this, BJP MLC Ramachandra Rao met the Vice-Chancellor along with some of his party cadre and insisted for action against the 'Dalits', terming them as 'anti-national'. Five of these Dalit students were then suspended from the University. Rohit Vemula, a PhD scholar at the University and one of the suspended students was found hanging in a hostel room on Sunday. An extract from his suicide note:

The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In very field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

Read More: <http://thewire.in/2016/01/18/expelled-by-his-university-dalit-scholar-commits-suicide-in-a-hostel-room-19514/>

Accessed on 18.01.2016

Governance & Development

GOVERNMENT

BJP's Bulls for Tamil Nadu's Polls Tamed

(*Teelka*, January 23, 2016)

Among the several reasons it has given for the [beef ban](#), the [Sangh Parivar](#) has often cited cruelty towards animals as a major one. The irony is that the same Sangh does not have any qualms in treating the bulls cruelly. This apart, by invoking a festival of the feudal era, the Modi government is mocking the modern value system which prohibits cruelty towards animals. The central government's notification granting permission to conduct the festival has given the regional parties and caste organisations a chance to whip up regionalism in the run up to the polls.

Read more: <http://www.tehelka.com/2016/01/bjps-bulls-for-tamil-nadu-polls-tamed/>

Date Accessed: 15.1.2016

EDUCATION

Open Text Book Exam Plan

(*Shriya Mohan*, *Catch News*, January 13, 2016)

The Union Human Resources Development Ministry is planning to introduce open textbook exam in schools. The ministry has argued that this scheme will curb rote learning, and trigger more conceptual application. "The ministry is making a push to convince state and central boards to have open text book examinations at the secondary and senior secondary level."

Read more: <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/open-text-book-exam-plan-five-questions-smriti-irani-must-consider-1452659452.html>

Date Accessed: 15.1.2016

HEALTH

The Future Isn't Private

(*Virander Singh Chauhan*, *The Hindu*, January 17, 2016)

Financial resources of a nation are best directed towards interventions that have an inherent potential to maximise social benefits. In this regard, access to quality health care to the population is a prerequisite to creating a just and equitable society.

India contributes to 21 per cent of the global disease burden, but has one of the lowest public health spending in the world. Although there has been rapid economic growth in the country in the past two decades, funding to public health care, surprisingly, has not been a priority for successive governments. Currently, India, one of the fastest growing economies in the world, spends only 1.3 per cent of GDP on public health. This is the lowest among the BRICS nations.

The draft National Health Policy 2015 document highlighted the need to increase public health funding to reach 2.5 per cent of the GDP by 2020, a much needed and welcome step, which however may not be sufficient, given the magnitude of the problem.

Instead of subsidising private companies, the government should look to strengthen existing systems and encourage people to avail the services. The inability and ineffectiveness of the public health care system is indirectly encouraging the privatisation of health care services.

Read More: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/public-health-care-system-better-alternative-in-developing-country/article8114441.ece>

Date Accessed: 17.01.2016

Governance & Development

URBAN

The Hardships of Delhi's Street Vendors

(Showkat Shafi, *Al Jazeera*, January 05, 2016)

An estimated 10 million vendors sell goods and services on the streets of India. A Street Vendors Act aimed at regulating these vendors and to protect their rights has been passed by parliament, but the New Delhi High Court says the local government has failed to implement the law. The court ordered it to present a clear policy on Tuesday to regulate the number of vendors and help others find new jobs.

But vendors say they have little hope for the act's implementation. Most come from rural areas where declining agriculture production forced them to move to the Indian capital to earn their livelihoods. Their lives are insecure as they are routinely harassed for weekly bribes called "hafta" in Indian parlance.

A vendor selling clothes said he regularly pays bribes to police and local authorities. "For so many years I have been hearing about this act, but frankly speaking nothing seems to move on," said Vinod Kumar, 69.

"With the license, at least my hard-earned money will go to the government treasury. I have reasons to believe that the ring of brokers will never let this happen because they have strong contacts."

Prabhu Shah, 35, who sells candy from a bicycle, was also sceptical.

"I have been carrying on the trade for the past 10 years and I am always on the move to avoid getting caught... The well-off people will get the licenses - and then they will sell it to us to earn big money," said Shah.

Read More: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/01/delhi-street-vendors-160104150045592.html>

Date Accessed: 17.01.2016

LAW AND JUSTICE

The Constitutional Case against India's Blasphemy Law

(Gautam Bhatia, *The Wire*, 18 January 2016)

Section 295A penalizes insulting the religion or religious beliefs of any class of citizens, if such insult is offered with the deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of that class. If the correct test is one of incitement to lawless action, then it is very clear that the terms of Section 295A are far too broad. Under no interpretation can it be said that intentional insult to religion, or to religious feelings, is necessarily equivalent to 'incitement'.

Read More: <http://thewire.in/2016/01/18/the-constitutional-case-against-indias-blasphemy-law-19508/>

Accessed on 18.01.2016

DEFENCE

Laser Walls for Riverine Areas of India-Pakistan Border Soon

(*The Times of India*, January 17, 2016)

More than 40 vulnerable unfenced stretches along the India-Pakistan border will be covered by laser walls soon with the home ministry giving it a top priority to check any infiltration of terrorists in the wake of the Pathankot attack.

All these riverine stretches located in Punjab will be covered by the laser wall technology developed by Border Security Force to completely eliminate the chances of breach of the international border by Pakistan-based terror groups, a home ministry official said.

A laser wall is a mechanism to detect objects passing the line of sight between the laser source and the detector. A laser beam over a river sets off a loud siren in case of a breach.

Governance & Development

As of now, only 5-6 out of around 40 vulnerable points are covered by laser walls. The suspected infiltration point of Ujj river in Bamiyal used by the six Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists before storming the Pathankot air base was not covered by a laser wall.

Read More: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Laser-walls-for-riverine-areas-of-India-Pakistan-border-soon/articleshow/50610376.cms>

Date Accessed: 17.01.16

Society

COMMUNALISM

The Reluctant Fundamentalists: How News Channels in India are Manufacturing the Muslim Identity

(Sandeep Bhushan, *The Caravan*, January 15, 2016)

However, the problem runs deeper, and is related to the manner in which news content is generated. It is no longer dependent on field reports by reporters or morning newsroom editorial meetings but on what Twitter says. It is to the Twitterati that most networks seem to be pandering to. It is a self-contained media ecosystem that relies, at most, on generic visuals—buses burning, women crying, or shots of arson—to tell a story. News that is driven by Twitter works in this manner—the lack of a proportionate “sickular” response to the Malda incident as opposed to the national outrage over Dadri is pronounced anti-Hindu online, following which Hindutva trolls work overtime towards making this sentiment trend, in some cases, even posting photo-shopped pictures to inflame passions. This train of thought is soon picked up by an articulate right-wing commentator such as Swapan Dasgupta and from here, the specious binary finds its way into prime time discussion. Those anchors, editors or journalists not falling in line are harassed and abused. The Twitterati serve as the new measure for Television Rating Points (TRP) in town.

When it comes to thriving on stereotypes, the spectacle of prime time news television is no different from the make-believe world of Bollywood. Central to this caricature of communities, is the search for “Muslim-looking” and “speaking” guests to aggressively counter the Hindutva trolls-turned-studio guests word for word, rhetoric for rhetoric. An amalgam of sorts of what the Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure calls the “signifier”—the language—and the “signified”—the image the language evokes.

Read More: <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/news-channels-manufacturing-muslim-identity>

Date Accessed: 17.01.2016

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Forest Rights Act is Being Diluted

(Vishakh Unnikrishnan, *Catch News*, January 11, 2016)

According to some media reports the Union government has allowed Maharashtra government to violate the Forest Right Act. “The Union Tribal Affairs ministry has re-interpreted the Forests Rights Act that would pave the way for forest department of many states to gain substantial control over their forests in their states.” Two influential minister from Maharashtra in Union government namely Prakash Jawdekar and Nitin Gadkari persuaded the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry to re-interpret the law.

Read more: <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/forest-rights-act-is-being-diluted-what-does-that-mean-for-millions-depending-on-forests-1452510382.html>

Date Accessed: 15.1.2016

India and World

INDIA IN THE WORLD

Sushma Swaraj Arrives in Palestine, Holds Talks with Top Leaders

(Harinder Mishra, *The Huffington Post*, January 17, 2016)

External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj today held talks with her Palestinian counterpart as she began first visit to the West Asia region with meetings here aimed at reaffirming India's longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause.

Soon after her arrival here, Swaraj held talks with her counterpart Riyad al-Maliki. She also paid a floral tribute at Mahatma Gandhi's bust here.

Swaraj's visit comes three months after President Pranab Mukherjee's historic trip to the region, the first by an Indian Head of State to the region.

After her engagements in Palestine, Swaraj will head back to Israel for her two-day visit there during which she will hold discussions with the top Israeli leadership to review a whole range of areas of cooperation between the two countries.

Read More: http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/01/17/sushma-swaraj-palestine_n_9002366.html?utm_hp_ref=india

Date Accessed: 17.01.16

EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Stopping North Korea's Nuclear Threat

(*The New York Times*, January 8, 2016)

Many serious dangers come with being a nuclear power, and the North Koreans seem to recognize few of them. One is the temptation to transfer weapons, fissile material or technology to other states or terrorist groups. North Korea has a history of selling its traditional weapons systems. But the government must recognize that selling its nuclear technology could compel the United States to respond in ways that would bring an end to nearly 70 years of Communist rule.

Read more: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/08/opinion/stopping-north-koreas-nuclear-threat.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=2

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MIDDLE-EAST

Nuclear Success to Intensify Iranian Infighting but Moderate Foreign Policy

(Parisa Hafezi, *Reuters*, January 17, 2016)

Iran's success in winning an end to international sanctions will only intensify a power struggle among the faction-ridden elite, and President Hassan Rouhani cannot count on domestic political support from the supreme leader before two critical elections.

However, Tehran's leadership has now decided on a less confrontational foreign policy than in the past, although a restoration of full ties with the "Great Satan" - the United States - remains out of the question, officials say.

The scrapping of most U.S., European Union and United Nations sanctions on Saturday under a nuclear deal with six major powers should strengthen both the economy and Shi'ite Iran's hand in a Mideast region torn by sectarian strife.

Rouhani, a pragmatist whose 2013 election cleared the way for the thaw in relations with the outside world, owes his success to Iran's top authority: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei endorsed the nuclear agreement, overriding hardliners who oppose dealing with Washington.

But hardliners, wary of Rouhani's growing influence and popularity, have already taken off the gloves to display the limits of the president's power at home where they oppose any political liberalization.

Read More: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-politics-insight-idUSKCN0UV0JC>

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India and World

EUROPE

Migrant Men and European Women

(The Economist, January 16, 2016)

Rather than succumbing to moral panic especially after what happened in Cologne on New Year's Eve, Europe needs to work out how to manage the flow of refugees and help them assimilate. A good place to start would be to insist that they obey the law. Police in Cologne clearly failed to take on the harassers. Perhaps they did not recognise what was going on quickly enough, or were afraid of being accused of racism. Or it may have been simple incompetence. Women have complained for years that German police are slow to stop sexual harassment in the drunken crowds at the Munich Oktoberfest.

Read more: <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21688397-absorb-newcomers-peacefully-europe-must-insist-they-respect-values-such-tolerance-and>

Date Accessed: 15.1.2016

Opinions/ Books

OPINIONS

Lack of Funding for Top Health Research Body

(*Down to Earth*, January 14, 2016)

Scientific achievements are often publicised by governments as their own. However, backing scientific institutions with resources, it appears, has been out of most Indian administration's priority list. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the apex body for biomedical research in the country has received only half of the fund needed, reveals Saumya Swaminthan, director of the institute. ICMR is responsible for the formulation, coordination and promotion of biomedical research in the country. The body is funded by the Government of India through the Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Read more: <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/apex-research-body-for-health-suffers-lack-of-funding-52459>

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Start-up Boom 2.0

(*Vinod Dham, The Economic Times*, January 15, 2016)

In this age of an internet-connected world, a healthy start-up ecosystem requires three inputs: an entrepreneurially driven culture, competitive sources of venture capital, and investor friendly policy framework. India's tech-savvy millennial, unlike their parents and grandparents, are no longer satisfied with just a well-paying job and the promise of lifelong employment. They increasingly want to try more fulfilling entrepreneurial roles and are showing the willingness to take risks. The recent success of Snapdeal, Ola and others has created visible role models for the future generation of homegrown entrepreneurs.

Read more: <http://blogs.economictimes.indiatimes.com/et-commentary/startup-boom-2-0-what-india-needs-to-create-the-next-wave-of-flipkarts-and-olas/>

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