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## Jallikattu as a Spectacle of Patriarchy

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A youngster attempts to tame a raging bull during a Jallikattu in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu. File photo: M. Moorthy

*Jallikattu has become a contentious issue wherein cattle protection and rights are interwoven with human identity politics in India. In this article, **Yamini Narayanan** writes that the bull-subjugation competition, which has been promoted as a celebration of cattle during the Pongal festivities in Tamil Nadu, is in reality only an extension of one of the most enduring oppressions — speciesism.*

The landmark Supreme Court ban on the Jallikattu bull-taming sport in Tamil Nadu in 2014, and the subsequent stay on the Union government's attempt to overturn this decision, has provoked resentment and outrage among large sections of the population in Tamil Nadu. Along with the recent beef bans and the Dadri beef murder, Jallikattu has become yet another volatile issue wherein cattle protection and rights have become intricately interwoven with human identity politics in India.

The objections to the ban on Jallikattu primarily are that international animal welfare organisations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), acting in consonance with the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI), are essentially vehicles of Western cultural imperialism that have set out to wilfully destroy an ancient Tamil tradition by engendering the extinction of the Kangayam breed bulls that are used in the sport. Without the sport, farmers will be discouraged from breeding or protecting the Kangayams, which will instead be slaughtered. This way, the indigenous breeds used in Jallikattu will be replaced by foreign and exotic crossbreeds through animal and semen import for profit to Western agricultural economies. Kangayam owners also argue that unlike other breeds, male cattle are not slaughtered if deemed useful for Jallikattu or traction work <sup>1</sup>. The considerable photographic and video footage of violent cruelty to the bulls documented by the AWBI and PETA during previous Jallikattu events have been dismissed by supporters as 'exceptions' rather than acts inherent in the domination of large untamed animals. These objections do not adequately address the core question of why post-harvest domination of cattle is enacted, or the strong attachment to such sports.

### **Man over bull: enactment of patriarchy**

Akin to numerous traditions in India that have historically subjugated women in the name of culture, the Jallikattu is deeply mired in intricate intersections of oppressive patriarchy. Professor of Natural History, Yuval Harari, describes the domestication of cattle — and especially the bull — as humankind's singular civilisational achievement that contributed to the *homo sapien*'s extraordinary leap from low on the food chain to the apex position <sup>2</sup>. It is no coincidence that a bull-subjugation mega-event is regarded as an integral part of a harvest festival like Pongal where cattle in particular are celebrated — and also ritually oppressed. It is on *Maatu-Pongal*, a day dedicated exclusively to agricultural bovines, that Jallikattu is played.

The greatest impetus for the subordination of cattle was the milk of the cow. However, to access this, it was necessary to bypass the fiercely protective bull that watched over its herd of cows. In his *Sacred Bull, Holy Cow: A Cultural Study of Civilization's Most Important Animal*, Donald Sharpes offers a cultural and evolutionary analysis of the subjugation of the bull across cultures through bull-taming sports, bull-racing, bull-fights, and rodeos, among others <sup>3</sup>. No other animal has come close to the cow and the bull in sharing a viscerally intimate relationship with humans, or possibly suffered more for it. The domestication of the cow involved the maximum risk of death for humans who needed to get past ferocious, angry, and virile bulls to gain proximity to the cows. The spectacular rituals around bull sports involve young men who sought to demonstrate their virility, masculinity, and ultimately, their sexual domination of the raw potent power of an angry bull. Bull domestication spectacles were somewhat similar to symbolic demonstrations of military victories or prowess by nation-states, except that there was nothing tokenistic about this exhibition of 'victory' of man over bull. Harari notes that humans have nothing but cruelty as a defence or attack against large untamed animals, and the activists' footage of Jallikattu as well as the long period of bull-training testifies to this. Donald Sharpes writes,

The bull represents virile strength and awesome power in a way that a larger animal, like a lumbering elephant, does not. Nobody really domesticates a virile bull, but each can be sedated with drugs and castrated to remove most aggressiveness. Before domesticating the cow, as our ancestors learned quickly, it was necessary to subdue the bull, and not be gored in the process.

The outcry against 'foreign' interference through PETA is also eerily reminiscent of Hindutva patriarchal insecurities during colonial times around the unravelling of oppressive gender relations through the ideas of secularism and democracy — a legacy that has endured. While Hindu men could take advantage of 'surrendering' to the secular and egalitarian principles that they were exposed to through colonialism, Hindu women became more trapped

within the rigid discourse of Hindu nationalism as propagated by right-wing political parties <sup>4</sup>. The pure Hindu woman was to be the guardian of Hindu culture. Women's rights and freedoms thus heavily retrogressed in response to patriarchal fears of losing domination due to foreign influences. Oppression has too many benefits for the oppressor to yield control too easily.

Cattle in India are even more oppressively enmeshed in the patriarchal foundations that have defined Indian social structures for millennia as the violence done to animals occurs at multiple intersections of sexism, racism, sectarianism, and one of the most enduring oppressions in planetary history — speciesism. It is entirely unsurprising that current right-wing nationalist parties should respond with identical insecurities and outrage to the idea of animal rights as they have historically done with women's rights.

The assertions of Jallikattu supporters that the bulls are regarded as “sacred” or “royal” should ring deafening alarm bells. Assigning animals a divine status —as with women —is a process of objectification. Objectification, regardless of process or purpose, is rife with violence as it denies moral personhood, agency, and the right not to be exploited for what is ultimately an economic profit.

Our cattle, especially the indigenous breeds, are burdened with the task of preserving a particular ‘glorious’ aspect of pure Hindu culture, even as it brings them extraordinary violence. The promotion of the indigenous breeds’ A2 milk, which is supposedly infused with medicinal properties, amounts to their exploitation to preserve a particular brand of Hindu cultural purity, even as these cattle experience the same horrendous transport and slaughter conditions as the crossbreeds once past their productivity. The selective criminalising of beef over milk in a purported move to ‘protect’ cattle is, likewise, a blatant political manipulation of sectarian politics, for it is milk production that sends cattle in India to slaughter, rather than beef. However, milk consumption forms a core aspect of almost every religious and mundane activity for Hindus, and is both a sacred and an economic resource <sup>5</sup>.

### **Native-breed extinction and single-issue campaigns**

The Jallikattu supporters have two valid anxieties, both of which must be addressed through creative and empathetic ways that recognise the moral personhood of animals. One is a concern that the Kangayam bulls may be rendered extinct if the sport is disallowed. Indeed, the diminishing patronage of the use of the indigenous Rajapalayam dog for hunting in Tamil Nadu has pushed this breed to the brink of extinction <sup>6</sup>. However, to suggest that the only way to preserve breeds and species is through violent oppression is akin to the absurdity of suggesting that the only way to address declining birth rates of human populations or the preservation of indigenous tribes in some regions is through the violent rape of their women. This sends an unthinkable dangerous message that the only response — indeed, even an ethical and honourable response! — to the violent exploitation of non-human animals is more violence rather than compassion and justice.

The threat of extinction only demonstrates the criminal failure of sound state-affiliated biodiversity conservation policies and priorities, as well as state-directed animal husbandry in India. These are chiefly preoccupied with wildlife conservation, or livestock breed upgradation, rather than the protection of the rights of multispecies to life and freedom.

India urgently needs an exclusive Ministry for Animal Rights and Justice, which is solely concerned with advocating and working for the recognition of the moral personhood and universal rights of all non-human species. The absence of such a clearly mandated department that looks after the animal citizens of India is the real threat to the bulls, and all other creatures. In the absence of such a Ministry, the Supreme Court and the Tamil Nadu state must

actively allocate budgetary and conservation resources for species and breed preservation. However, this is a short-term measure and cannot replace the presence of Central and State-level Animal Rights departments for non-human species.

A second legitimate objection of Jallikattu supporters is that single-issue campaigns such as the ban on Jallikattu is speciesist and sectarian. Why, they ask, are rooster-fights, horse races, religious sacrifice of animals, the parading of temple-elephants, and slaughter for consumption not likewise prohibited? Indeed, in line with the recognition that the exploitation of sentient animals is morally wrong, cruel and violent, *all* animal oppression must be actively resisted. The moral baseline and legislative frameworks for cow protectionism in India must be substantially expanded beyond its limited prohibitions on slaughter and beef bans. The ethic of cow protection has been pathologised from its original intent of standing for the protection of the entire universe and *all* living creatures. It has been rendered speciesist to privilege Hindu patriarchy whose identity politics is intimately intertwined with a politicised sacral objectification of the cow. However, as Mahatma Gandhi had interpreted cow protectionism,

The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man, through the cow, is enjoined to realise his identity with all that lives....Protection of the cow means protection of the whole dumb creation of God.  
The appeal of the lower order is all the more forcible because it is speechless...

Jallikattu offers yet another critical opportunity for more enlightened public and policy discourse in India, and to expand upon our understanding of animal rights and animal oppression. It illuminates another way in which cattle rights and human identity politics are intimately intertwined in India.

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***This article was corrected on January 18, 2016, for typographical errors.***

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