



JALLIKATTU A SYMBOL OF ANIMAL SPIRITS

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INTRODUCTION

Jallikattu (or **sallikkattu**), also known as **eru thazhuvuthal** and **manju virattu**, is a traditional spectacle in which a *Bos indicus* bull, such as the Pulikulam or Kangayam breeds, is released into a crowd of people, and multiple human participants attempt to grab the large hump on the bull's back with both arms and hang on to it while the bull attempts to escape. Participants hold the hump for as long as possible, attempting to bring the bull to a stop¹. In some cases, participants must ride long enough to remove flags on the bull's horns.

Jallikattu is typically practised in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu as a part of Pongal celebrations on Mattu Pongal day, which occurs annually in January.

What is Jallikattu?

Jallikattu, in the simplest of terms, is a sport conducted as part of Mattu Pongal, the third day of the four-day-long harvest festival Pongal. The Tamil word 'mattu' means bull, and the third day of Pongal is dedicated to cattle, a key partner in the process of farming. Bulls get more importance over cows for bulls help farmers to plough their field, pull their cart loaded with goods, and inseminate cows, in turn resulting in production of milk, offspring and preserving indigenous species².

1. Temple bulls, usually considered the head of all cattle in a village, are readied for the sport. Temple bulls from different villages are brought to a common arena where the Jallikattu happens.

2. The bulls are then freed into a ground, one by one. Participants are to embrace the bull's hump, and try to tame it by bringing the raging bull to a stop, possibly by riding for as long as possible holding its hump.
3. The bulls that could be tamed are considered weaker, and are used for domestic purposes by the farmers and the untamable ones -- considered the strongest and most virile -- are used for breeding the cows in many villages.

HISTORY OF ETYMOLOGY

Ancient Tamil Sangams described the practice as *Yeru thazhuvuthal* (Tamil: ஏறு தழுவுதல்), literally "bull embracing". The modern term *Jallikattu* (ஜல்லிக்கட்டு) or *Sallikattu* (சல்லிக்கட்டு) is derived from *salli* (coins) and *kattu* (package), which refers to a prize of coins that are tied to the bull's horns and that participants attempt to retrieve. *Manju virattu* (மஞ்சு விரட்டு) literally means "bull chasing"³.

Through the ages

Nobody knows when Jallikattu began. Scholars who argue on a Dravidian origin to the Indus Valley civilisation argue that one of the seal stones discovered from

the site (2500 BC) actually depicts Eruthazhuval, a more traditional name for the sport. Numerous references have been found in Tamil Sangam literature (200 BC-200CE). In later days, Tamil kings used Eruthazhuval as a competition to recruit for their armies. And it is widely believed that the ancient southern kingdom of Pandyans, which had one of its headquarters in Madurai, took its name from Pandi, the Tamil word for a bull.

Hence, this is a debate in which many Tamils would refuse to see the other side. For them, it is all about culture, built around a veneration for the animal and held on the day of *Maattu Pongal*, a festival dedicated to cattle. Owning a prize bull is a badge of honour in the village. The male of the species, which would have otherwise quietly made it to slaughter houses in an age where tractors replaced draught animals, is proudly preserved and even strutted around.³

Jallikattu is believed to be a tradition practiced since at least last 2,500 years. Cave paintings, as old as 2,500 years, that depicts a man trying to tame a bull, have been found by archeologists. Jallikattu in the present form is believed to have played first between 400 to 100 BC.

A seal, dated between 2,500 - 1,800 BC, discovered at Mohenjodaro that shows bull-taming, is another reference to Jallikattu. There are references of people enjoying witnessing and participating in Jallikattu in Silappatikaaram, one of the five great epics of Tamil literature, and two other ancient literary works like Kalithogai and Malaipadukadaam. Several rock paintings, more than 3,500 years old, at the remote Karikkiyur village in Tamil Nadu also show men chasing bulls with big humps and long, straight horns.³



According to local folklore, during the rule of the Nayak kings, an arena – usually the biggest open space in the village – would be designated for the sport to be played. A makeshift entrance, or Vaadi Vaasal, would then be marked out for both competing bulls, which were decorated and garlanded, and for their owners, who would stand in line with them.

Gold coins, wrapped in a piece of cloth, were tied to the horns and the bulls were then released, one by one, onto the field. Excited by the gestures of those who trying to catch him, the bullock would then lower his head and charge wildly into the midst of the crowd, who would nimbly run off on either side to make way for him.

Willing young men would then grapple with the bull in an attempt to untie the knot and get at the prize — they either successfully managed to hang on for dear life, or were simply tossed around like rag dolls, bouncing off the bulls' muscular body. Winners were greatly admired as the sport required quick reflexes and a fleet foot to tame the recalcitrant bull, which would try to get away, shake off the fighter and, at times, stamp or wound fallen participants



An inscription on Eru Thazhuvuthal at Government museum in Tamil Nadu.

Traditionally, Jallikattu was played to judge a man's virility; it was seen as a way to win a woman's hand in marriage. The men who held on to the bulls, usually reared by the object of their affections, were declared winners. Kalithogai, a classic Tamil poetic work of Sangam literature, speaks of how the bulls were women's best friends, in that they selected the right partners for them.³

IMPORTANCE OF JALLIKATTU AND WHY TAMILS ARE SENTIMENTAL ABOUT IT

Jallikattu is key to the farmers. It is a chance for them to flaunt their personal strength, the strength of their bulls, love for their cattle and how well they have looked after them and a chance to find out the most potent bull to breed with their cows.

Jallikattu is not a leisure sport for Tamils, but a tradition that establishes the identity of hard-working, self-sufficient, powerful Tamil. Jallikattu also symbolises a cordial man-animal relationship, reads the op-ed. "For the owner, the bull was a member of the family. Native breeds used in bullfights ensured biodiversity and acted as geographical indicators,"⁴

TYPES OF JALLIKATTU

1. Jallikattu/Manju Virattu – Chasing the bull
2. Eru Thazhuvuthal – A race between a man and a bull wherein a man tries to climb the bull with an aim to win the prize.
3. Vaeli Virattu –The bull is set free in an open space without any limitations on the distance.
4. Vadam Manjuvirattu –The bull is tied with a 50 ft long rope and is set free to move within the ground. The crowd is expected to control the bull with half an hour.

HOW IS JALLIKATTU ORGANISED?

Jallikattu has its own set of rules which is strictly followed, especially after the enactment of Jallikattu Act in 2009 by the state government of Tamil Nadu. In Jallikattu, participants must not hold anything other than the hump of the animal. At a time, only one person should hold the bull. Before starting the game, the health of the bull and that of the players is checked by the government veterinary doctors in the presence of district collector. The player arena and the spectators stands are clearly demarcated and separated from each other. Bulls were never injured, though the

participants got injured several times. If a bull is injured, the whole event would be called off. The whole event is video recorded and submitted to the government. Spectators think that the bull is enraged by players, but the truth is that it is trained to run towards its owner who stands on the other side of the arena. The total time that a bull spends in the arena is just a few minutes⁵. Therefore it is clear that Jallikattu is not cruel to the bulls. As far as players are concerned, they must be given protective gear. Thus, blanket ban of the game must not be enforced⁶.

BENEFITS OF JALLIKATTU

Bulls that are able to participate successfully in the Jallikattu event are used as studs for breeding. This practice ensures that only the strongest and most virile bulls are used for breeding, thus effectively making the offspring of such bulls stronger, less susceptible to diseases and able to produce higher quality milk⁷.

Jallikattu is the traditional and only practical way by which farmers in Tamil Nadu are able to preserve the genetic strength and traits of the indigenous cattle breeds. Jallikattu also serves a secondary purpose of providing farmers to hold onto their bulls.

The bulls which are able to perform well in Jallikattu fetch higher prices in the markets, making the engagement of bulls in Jallikattu a valuable activity to farmers. Thereby the population of bulls, which apart from being used as studs and in events such as Jallikattu serve no real purpose, are preserved⁸.

CONCLUSION

Jallikattu is an ancient sport. It is a part and parcel of Hindu Religion as practiced in most villages in Tamil Nadu, and it involves the ancient 'Temple Bull System' which is still in vogue in these villages.⁹ It has socio-cultural connotations we denotes lives and livestock having co-existed and cultures having coined usages around them. So the every Tamilians support Jallikattu because of the following reasons;

1. It is the pride/tradition of Tamil culture.
- 2.If Jallikattu is banned, then farmers will lose incentives to breed native cattle breeds. So the breeds may become extinct.
3. Many believe the ban on Jallikattu is a western agenda to let native cattle breeds become extinct so that foreign breeds can be promoted.¹⁰

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