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Men to fight bulls again in India

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on JANUARY 10, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, INDIA

Once the Romans threw slaves into huge arenas where ferociously hungry animals tore apart the men. In Spain, matadors fought bulls in what was certainly an unequal fight, man clearly having an edge over the beast. In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, several youths take on a bull under the pretext of taming it, if only to exhibit their own valour. But in this bloody sport called Jallikattu, the bull is often wounded, sometimes even killed. And men too.

Force fed alcohol, and teased, taunted, pricked and poked into a state of frenzied anger, the bull gets into a uncontrollable fit — which is precisely what the men want, as they try to grapple with the animal, aiming at subjugating the poor helplessly confused beast.

Bowing down to the pressure from groups like the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the federal government in New Delhi banned Jallikattu some years ago. However, last week, the proscription was lifted to allow Jallikattu in Tamil Nadu — a sport that is held during the harvest festival of Pongal on January 15 in and around the temple town of Madurai.

A notification issued last Thursday by the Environment Ministry in New Delhi modified its own 2011 order which included bulls in the list of animals that “shall not be exhibited or trained as performing animals”. A Supreme Court order in 2014 endorsed the ban on Jallikattu.

Thursday’s notification said: “Bulls may be continued to be exhibited or trained as a performing animal — at events such as Jallikattu in Tamil Nadu and bullock cart races in (other Indian states such as) Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab, Haryana, Kerala and Gujarat — in the manner by the customs of any community or practised traditionally under the customs or as a part of culture, in any part of the country”.

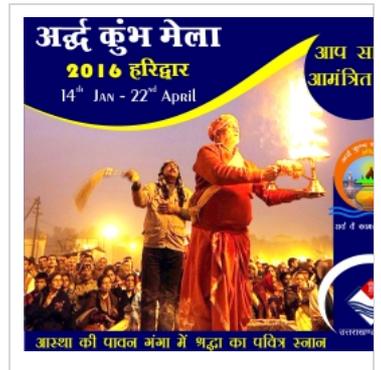
The notification added that this exemption was being given on condition that bulls were not treated cruelly.

This development has encouraged the western Indian state of Goa to renew its appeal to allow the game of Dhirio, which was banned after a court order in 1997. Dhirio involves two bullocks, which prodded by their handlers, fight each other. A huge betting goes on as well.

Last year, the Goa administration instituted a panel to examine the feasibility of restarting the



Youth try to tame a bull during Jallikattu at Palamedu village near Madurai in India’s Tamil Nadu state



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sport, given the popular sentiment and the tourist attraction.

One finds it hard to believe that a visitor from especially the West will arrive in Goa seeking the distasteful pleasures of watching two beasts gore each other in a dance of death. Come on, Goa offers amazingly pleasant splendours: its scenic beaches, architecturally magnificent churches, great cuisine and a delightful people whose life itself is one big celebration. Where do two ugly bullocks fit into to this picturesque frame?

Much like the bloody bouts in medieval Rome and the Catalonian bull fights in Spain, Jallikattu is an awfully cruel pastime that has killed countless bulls and at least 200 men in their prime of life as well as wounded or maimed thousands in the past two decades.

In what seems to be the beginning of another tragic phase in Tamil Nadu, the revival of Jallikattu comes three months before the state assembly elections and is clearly seen as a political move by the government in New Delhi run by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The party, which has little or no presence in Tamil Nadu, is hoping to get a foothold there by striking an alliance with the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which is now in office in the state, or the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a regional political organisation.

The BJP state president, Tamilisai Soundararajan, said the decision to lift the ban would help them in the polls. "There was a view in Tamil Nadu that only regional parties understand regional sentiments. The BJP (which has a pan-Indian presence) has proved otherwise," she added.

Every political party in Tamil Nadu, including the main opposition, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), has been demanding that Jallikattu be allowed.

But beyond the political game lies the fact that Jallikattu has always been celebrated in Tamil cinema with every big hero from M G Ramachandran (who went to become the chief minister of the state) to the currently reigning superstar, Rajinikanth, having fought a bull on screen at some point or the other in their career.

And in a state where actors and actresses (the present AIADMK chief minister, Jayalalithaa, was once an alluring movie heroine) are venerated and worshipped like gods and goddesses, Jallikattu obviously has a mass appeal — fuelled though by false bluster and illiteracy. So what if human lives are lost, and bulls are crucified on the battlegrounds of Madurai in a fight which is clearly unequal.

And what is equally regrettable — even shameful — is the duplicity involved in revoking the ban on Jallikattu. The BJP has been trying to ban cow slaughter in India and stop people from consuming beef citing religion reasons. How can it then justify Jallikattu — which brutalizes the bull and even kills it?

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and The Seoul Times.

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