

# JALLIKATTU

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# Part-I

# Message from Marina

THE MORE recent Tamil Nadu protests over the continued ban on the ritualistic annual bull-taming game of Jallikattu took an unprecedented turn in January 2017. Over the past decade or so especially, the ‘bull game’ of the south-central Tamil Nadu’s martial farming community had faced opposition from animal-lovers, leading to political involvement of every kind. In turn, this led to administrative initiatives, for and against the continuance of the game, year on year, ultimately leading to a complete ban, ordered by the Supreme Court in 2014.

In between, the court had conceded the Tamil Nadu government’s request for approving a regulated and regularised game, which however, did not go as planned and promised. This led to the Supreme Court ban all over again, and in turn became a contributing factor for the State-wide protests of January 2017.

The surprising element about the 2017 protest against the ban related to the unanticipated levels it reached, and the short time it had taken to reach up to the zenith. The protests began peacefully, igniting curiosity and interest in prospective participants as in political parties and the State administration. The curiosity soon became infectious, with the Centre, the Supreme Court and the rest of India, not being able to comprehend—or, ignore—it any more. This in turn ensured that the early protestors captured the imagination of the larger population, leading to a mass of people gathering in different venues across the State, and for as long as five days. ‘Days’ included ‘nights’ in most cases, when only the elderly, women with children and some office-goers left the venues. Both the venues and the groups of protestors chose themselves, and included both urban and rural centres, and those where local people had seen Jallikattu only on the silver-screen. No, they were not whipped up sentiments by political or other groups, but an expression of a sense of denial that went beyond the issue on hand.

4 © *Jallikattu: New Symbol of Tamil Angst*

As it turned out, in all these venues, participants who had left the protests the previous evening owing to age or other reasons would return the next day, with food and water for the mostly youthful crowds that had stayed back. Noticeably, young girls and middle-aged women spent the nights in the protest venues through

the nights, sharing protest space with strangers belonging to the opposite gender, without fearing—or, having to fear—for their personal safety. Their numbers were relatively higher in urban centres. There were no lights or lanterns and they all had to do with whatever light that their mobile phones provided, if it was charged in some neighbourhood home, a kilometre or so away. So much so like the honking of car horns at a fixed hour in protest of something or the other in western countries, and the ‘candle-light vigil’ that got imported and became popular especially with the ‘Nirbhaya protests’ across the country, Marina especially, the lit mobile phones became a sign and symbol of the cause. What the participants ate, where they performed their ablutions, or just re-charged their mobile-phones did not matter, but they were still doing it all, nonetheless, possibly in neighbourhood homes, whose residents welcomed them with open hands.

Leave aside the owners and residents of those homes, reportedly neighbourhood fisher-folk in Chennai, even fellow-protestors were strangers, and the girls did not have to fear for their safety and security. This is contrary to conventional beliefs about Tamil Nadu, including the capital city of Chennai, which was still being considered orthodox and conservative, compared, to say, a city like Delhi, Mumbai or Bengaluru. This triggered a comparative discourse on the safety of women in other cities.

The second aspect of the protest was that it did not have any leader or leaders to pinpoint or project. Those that emerged at the morning of the day were replaced by another the next day, or that very evening. If the idea was to deny the hovering police personnel, in uniform or civvies, access to them, it seemed to have worked. Rather, it was also a choice of 24 x 7 television news channels, for a ‘quick byte’, accompanied by clarity of thought and in communication, rather than that of the participants, who were anyway not homogeneous in anyway whatsoever.

The only commonality among most was their Tamil identity—though after the first two days, there were reports of youth from neighbouring States, travelling especially to Chennai, to join the protest in solidarity with the local youth and their over-arching angst against the existing governmental system and scheme. It meant that the authorities did not know whom to talk to, or what solution would satisfy whom. Not long after the protests had commenced, especially in the sprawling sands of the Marina beach in Chennai, politically-conscious, self-styled groups of social activists began taking the lead, from within the larger gathering. Yet, there was none to call a leader, no group to claim ownership. This may have also been a cause for the avoidable, end-day violence.

## **Spontaneity and More**

Deliberately, every one of those groups was careful not to claim authorship or ownership lest the rest should feel upset and agitated. By conservative estimates, about 300,000 had gathered at the Chennai venue at the peak of the protests. Other figures put it variously between half a million and one. No preparatory rallies had been held, no organisation set up at different localities and different levels to mobilise people for the purpose. There were no posters and blaring audio- campaigns through the streets in any of the towns and villages, where the protests began to take shape, all within the first 24 hours of commencement of the rally at Chennai, where it all began. Who gave any cue, to whom, when and how remained a mystery even after it all had ended successfully. But there were enough indications to what could be in store under circumstances of the kind, if an occasion and a cause presented itself was known to those who should have known them—but nothing much seemed to have been done to assuage the hurt, or otherwise assess the futuristic situation all through the previous months and years, when sentiments were welling up on such diverse issues such as reintroduction of prohibition or protection of natural resources, to which the Establishment continued to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear.

What was known, however, was that a group of youth—or, so it seems until it is contradicted with evidence—had triggered it all through a series of social media messages to friends and others on their ‘Contacts’ list. The coincidence of a private sector telecom launch with free messaging service is said to have provided an initial impetus, if any, but there was no motive whatsoever. In hindsight, it can be said that even without such free SMS service, the protest would have happened, and at the same levels. Many among the front-liners were young professionals drawing decent salaries in the IT/IET sector, and they were said to be spending from their pockets to make it happen first, and make it a success, later on. Once the momentum had caught on, it is doubtful if anyone would have cringed on spending a little more, to send out those messages, updates and other campaign material.

## **Bandhs and Protests**

Tamil Nadu has had its last serious series of street-protests spread across the entire State way back in the mid-Sixties. The anti-Hindi agitation of the mid-Sixties was a localised affair, barring the handful of university campuses, where students from across the State mingled. There were not as many professional

colleges and deemed universities then, nor were there as many private sector jobs employing educated and highly talented youth. The post-Independence Industrial Revolution of the Fifties and Sixties had generated semi-skilled manufacturing jobs and agriculture labour, not as in IT and related sectors, in the more recent years and decades. Later on too, the State had witnessed mass movements and protests, but they were again mostly localised, or/and had organisers preparing for the event for days and weeks together. Against this, the anti-Hindi agitation of the Sixties had a history of its own, with the Opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) giving the call against ‘Hindi imposition’ and also organising itself and the local students across the State for the success of the protest.

Later, the State’s farmers, and also various caste groups would organise protests, on specific demands—at times covering substantial parts or regions. On issues like the Cauvery water dispute with neighbouring Karnataka or on the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, or the Sri Lankan fishing problem, there were State-wide *bandhs*, protests and fasts. Some turned violent, most of them remained peaceful. They all had experienced political parties or other powerful organisers sponsoring them, and at times funding them, too. The organisers of the recent Kudankulam protests against the nuclear power plant in the southern Tamil Nadu village too were not totally inexperienced. It was the third in a series, launched at intervals of about 10 years. In comparison, the Jallikattu protests did not have an author or owner, yet its width and reach in comparison was unprecedented. It was more so in the eyes and experience of GenX Tamils.

Yet, none of these earlier protests was in the same league as the Jallikattu protests. Even the equally peaceful and awe-inspiring fortnight-long ‘*dharmic* agitation’, or *Satyagraha (Ara Porattam)* that the late former Chief Minister, K Kamaraj, in turn reduced to being the high-priest of the Congress Party in Tamil Nadu against being the party’s national chieftain earlier, launched against the DMK State government in the early Seventies should pale into insignificance for the same reason. It was as massive as the Jallikattu protests in some places, and was even more peaceful—that there was no end-game violence, either. It was again organised by a political party, and all its resources had been commissioned to make it a success and peaceful, at the same time.

The Congress’ protests were planned for a full fortnight. As per instructions, the respective district party leadership obtained police permission for the procession and protest. They also submitted to the police a day in advance, the names and addresses of cadres who would be courting arrest the next day, at the earmarked venue. All other party cadres and members of the public were advised to avoid

getting mixed up with the identifiable agitators, who would not resist arrest or involve themselves in any violent act of any kind. The idea was to revive fading memories of Gandhiji's *Satyagraha* method of political protest during the freedom movement, and contrast it to the violence that had topped the anti-Hindi agitation only years ago, a reversal of roles for the main political players.

It was also possible that Tamil Nadu was still recovering from the after-effects of the anti-Hindi agitation for the new-generation students to be motivated to jump into the fray at the time of the Congress' protest. The ruling DMK had by then split. The local focus was on the up and coming breakaway Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), founded by charismatic actor-politician, M G Ramachandran, or MGR as he was/is popularly known. In Tamil Nadu, the Emergency was marked also by the death of Congress stalwart K Kamaraj (to natural causes) and the first of the two dismissals of the Karunanidhi-led DMK government, accompanied by indiscriminate arrest of party second-line leaders under the draconic MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) and the institution of the Justice Sarkaria Commission, to probe the alleged misdeeds of the regime.

Under the Governor's Rule, Tamil Nadu did not have to suffer as much as the North, and in fact there was popular acclaim for trains running on time, officials disposing of commoner's papers without fail, and benefits accruing from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's 'Twenty-point programme'. The intervening Governor's Rule initiatives such as the 'Janata meal' at Rs 1 in restaurants came up in the estimation of the Emergency in common view against the perceived lawlessness, price rise and shortage under the Karunanidhi rule.

Without reference to Emergency and its benefits or shortcomings, the post-Emergency scenario witnessed the arrival of the '10+2+3' pattern of education. Tamil Nadu was among the first States to adopt the scheme. In the succeeding era of economic reforms, Tamil Nadu was also among the few States to catch up with the market-driven need for professional education. Coupled with the fear psychosis that the Emergency had instilled on the campuses in the State, the education-related changes soon ensured that school, college and university campuses in the State forgot what protests and agitations of the anti-Hindi days looked like. Nor was the new-generation students even inspired to imagine the scales and levels of any past protest.



## **Keeping Politicians Out**

If, however, any street-protest of the kind succeeded in the decades after anti-Hindi agitation and up to the Jallikattu protests, it mostly related to the pro-reservation agitation of the Vanniar Sangam, a caste grouping, predominant in the northern districts. The Sangam was the forerunner to the present-day Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a political party identified still with the Vanniar community. During the Sangam's protest, demanding 'most backward class' status for the Vanniar community, the North-South traffic and transport across much of the State was affected badly in the late Eighties. There was unprecedented violence, mostly unilateral, as protestors would cut down massive trees along the national and State highways, and at times burn them, to stall traffic. Once again, there was an identifiable leadership and organisation, though they were still honing their skills.

Through the Nineties, and even during the succeeding decades, protest calls on the 'Cauvery water dispute' had elicited much support and sympathy, especially in the affected districts. In comparison, the support for Mullaperiyar-centric protests was not as big, but it was slowly gaining greater recognition, nonetheless.

Periodically, fishermen across southern Tamil Nadu coast protested the intervention, arrests and killings by the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN). On occasions, mostly ahead of elections, Opposition parties took it to other parts of the State, too. Political parties from Tamil Nadu continually raked up the issue in Parliament, at times bringing the proceedings to a stand-still for days together. All through, agitations and protests over the 'Sri Lankan fishing issue' were peaceful. All those protests were definitely non-violent, wherever, whenever. Closer to the Jallikattu agitation, the State had witnessed a series of protests for years together, in support of the Sri Lankan Tamil cause. In most cases, political parties, and at times the State government or the party heading the State government, gave the call for the protest. In the early Nineties, demanding 'Cauvery waters' from Karnataka, then AIADMK Chief Minister Jayalalithaa went on an indefinite fast, until the Union government, under Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, intervened. In his time, Jayalalithaa's political mentor, M G Ramachandran as Chief Minister also called for a dawn-to-dusk fast, over the 'Sri Lankan ethnic issue', which was yet to capture the imagination of the State, enough.

On one occasion, after the conclusion of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka and the decimation of the fearsome LTTE in May 2009, young professionals especially cornered a part of Chennai's Marina, to press their cause. For the first time ever, the protest-leaders who had not been known anywhere earlier shooed away

political parties and leaders, saying that they had politicised the ethnic cause for their own electoral benefits—and had done nothing meaningful. Soon, some of these leaders became prominent in their own right, both as annual protest organisers for the cause. Some appeared frequently on Tamil TV talk-shows. Going beyond the immediate Sri Lankan Tamil issue, they argue a larger pan-Tamil cause. Some of them, with their relatively dwindling following, were seen at the Jallikattu protest venues, too.

### **Kudankulam and After**

In between the anti-Hindi protests and the PMK agitation on the one hand, and the PMK agitation and the Jallikattu demonstrations in 2017, there had been intermittent issues and protests that impacted on the State. One such was the State-wide farmers' protests when the united DMK was in power in the early Seventies. After 17 farmers had lost their lives in police-firing, as party treasurer, MGR taunted their memory, asking, 'You cannot fire rose petals from police guns. They only fire bullets, and bullets kill'.

Intermittently, there had also been caste and communal clashes in different parts of the State, especially in the North in the Eighties and the South in the Nineties. Again political parties or identifiable interest groups were behind them. The State also witnessed incidents of 'communal violence', including the anti-Muslim riots of November 1997 in the 'Cotton City' of Coimbatore, followed by the 'serial blasts' of 14 February 1998. The 'Rajiv Gandhi assassination' of 21 May 1991 and the 'EPRLF killing' of 16 Sri Lankan Tamil political leaders, both by the LTTE, was a blot on the State's fair image. But all of them belonged to different genre, compared to the later-day Jallikattu protests.

The decades after the anti-Hindi agitation also witnessed the Tamil film industry, a powerful public organ, joining the Cauvery or Sri Lanka-related protests in full bloom, drawing national attention. At times, as in 2016 and in the early Nineties earlier, the Cauvery protests did produce violent street reactions in Karnataka. In more recent times, the mass-protests against the Russian nuclear power-plants in the sleepy coastal village of Kudankulam evoked great interest and scientific discourse in many parts of the State and also elsewhere in the country. Whether the Kudankulam protests triggered later-day protests against the proposed Jaitapur nuclear power-plant in Maharashtra is unclear but then the issues had been debated across the country for other locales of the kind not to have been made aware of the 'issues and concerns' involved.

Two other major protests that were anticipated to become massive but ended up in a whimper related to political issues and political leaders—rather their arrests over allegations of corruption. Former AIADMK Chief Minister Jayalalithaa’s arrest by the successor DMK government in 1996 was expected almost since she lost power. So was a retaliatory arrest of DMK’s Karunanidhi when Jayalalithaa returned to power in 2001. But television news channels made more noise on, and or against the respective arrests than even the party cadres on the streets. Both arrests were marked by studied silence by the respective party cadres, who had correctly read the message from the election results and the mood of the voter that caused it.

### **Gender Revolution, too**

On the question of participation, there was no comparison between the numbers in the various venues this time and earlier agitations and rallies, including those spurting out from local/localised caste issues and class concerns, of whatever denomination. Heightening the holiday mood, especially on the third day of the annual Tamil harvest festival of Pongal, non-protestors came as families with food and soft-drinks for their own consumption as if they were on a picnic. Anyway, it is ritualistic to picnic on the day of Kaanum Pongal, the third day of the Pongal festivities. The word, *kaanum* in Tamil means seeing, meeting or visiting.

Traditionally, on that day, people visit their family elders, relatives and friends, and exchange greetings, wish one another prosperity ahead of the upcoming harvest season and beyond. They also gather as families in public venues such as the village quadrangle (*chaavadi*), temple grounds or river-banks, and spend the whole day together, sharing home-cooked food. In Chennai, traditionally, people visit the Marina beach, or the zoological park or such other places of relaxation, in large numbers. Many of them came from the suburbs, which again was expanding over the previous years and decades, in terms of area and population, making access to the city easier than earlier. Gone were the days when they came by bullock-carts and, later buses. While the latter practice at least continued, in most cases, the suburban youth came into the city venues, including the malls, in their swanky motor-bikes, which had become possible owing to the massive ‘installment schemes’ unavailable to their earlier generations. What was remarkable in 2017 was that they came every day after that with the same zeal. It was a different kind of zeal than in all these very many years.

Even on the day of Kaanum Pongal, people had come in large numbers despite anticipation of trouble of some kind or the other. That was because as fast as the news of the Marina protest spread, so did the added news that it was being organised by students and youth, keeping the political class and film personalities away. Even more impressive was the news that it was absolutely non-violent, hence safe for entire families, including infants and women, to be around. So much so it was common to see college girls and their siblings in school chatting and dosing alongside their male counterparts. Thus a quiet, gender-revolution was also taking place with full acceptance by parents and other family elders. They had shed their social inhibitions of the past, as everyone's daughter or son that they knew was there too, along with their own. Not only the female participants but also their parents on-site or back home had no anxiety about their physical safety or upright behaviour.

Nothing of this kind had happened before and on such a large scale. Tradition-ridden Tamil Nadu was breaking old social barriers and mindsets. It went mostly unnoticed nearer home and unacknowledged elsewhere. A 'new Tamil Nadu' had arrived and what a way to pronounce it, announce it!

The spontaneity did not stop with teenagers of both genders joining hands without any reservations, or their families not protesting. Nor did it stop with the large numbers that gathered in every district town, and every village where traditionally Jallikattu had been staged through past years and decades, generations and centuries. No other protest prior to this one, originating and focussed on Tamil Nadu and a 'Tamil tradition' had attracted so much attention, sympathy and support as the Jallikattu protests of January 2017. Again, they were equally spontaneous, responding mostly to whatever social media messages that local Tamils had picked up and local Tamil organisations were capable of organising.

### **Identification Overseas**

Outside of Tamil Nadu, wherever Tamils lived in the country, the protest motif caught on like hot-fire, in city after city. Many and at times most of the Tamils elsewhere might not have even seen the State once, after their forefathers had migrated over the previous decades and possibly centuries. Many of them might not have even heard or known of Jallikattu. Now they found their identification with the 'Jallikattu cause', in the land of their forebears, and it was spontaneous, so was their participation in local protests. It had not happened before, whether involving local Tamil communities in other parts of the country, or Tamil-

speaking people elsewhere in the world, wherever their origins could be traced to India. After the pan-Tamil protests of the Sri Lankan kind, a cause centred on Tamil Nadu, its people and their sentiments echoed on the streets of London and New York, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Canberra and Ottawa. True or not, social media even carried pictures of similar protests in some Russian and Chinese cities. Wherever Tamils from India, and more especially Tamil-speaking people lived in some numbers in Europe, they gathered to give vent to their angst.

True, such Tamil-centred and Tamil-organised protests, some even with local whites participating in numbers, had been held across Europe, Canada and Australia, in the none-too-distant past. Included in the list were nations such as Singapore and Malaysia, Mauritius and South Africa, where all Tamil indentured labour had migrated during the British Raj. But almost every one of them was organised by and for the Sri Lankan Tamils, with their Indian counterparts participating, putting their heart and soul into it, all the same. It was more so in the closing months of Sri Lanka's decisive 'Eelam War IV' of 2009, and at times afterward, too, demanding international, independent investigations into 'war-crime charges' against the Sri Lankan armed forces. That the LTTE propaganda machinery had experience, expertise and funding could not be overlooked, either.

However, it was for the first-time ever that Tamils from India, mostly first-generation migrants and at times those with permanent residency or citizenship in the host-nations, were showing an interest in a cause that agitated their brothers and cousins back home. Fair enough, local Sri Lankan Tamils did participate in substantial numbers, at times out-numbering their Indian brethren. There were also reports that in some places at least, Sri Lankan Tamils took the initiative, leading to their Indian counterparts demonstrating their own commitment to the cause before long. The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora was among the various motivating factors and initiators of the early social media calls for the Jallikattu protests in Tamil Nadu. Of course, this one can be verified and confirmed only by government agencies with equipment and information. But there is no denying the fact that at the height of the war-related protests in support of their Sri Lankan brethren in Tamil Nadu, the Diaspora pressure was visible. This time, though, the Tamils of India, wherever they were the organisers of Jallikattu protests, were not really known to be adopting such tactics.

On more than one occasion, Sri Lankan Tamil film promoters, producers, distributors and exhibitors, with their base in the West, would arm-twist highly-paid Tamil Nadu film actors and icons into adapting their line on the ethnic issue. After a point in the past, the Tamil Nadu film stars became as demonstrative as their larger Sri Lankan Tamil brethren, some of them feeling strongly about the

cause, having educated themselves on the issue, in between, some others not wanting to rub the rest on the wrong side, and yet others, without even having to wait for any cue from elsewhere. They joined industry-organised token fasts and other forms of protests, in the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Those that could not or did not participate had to pay a heavy-price, in terms of their film-releases, overseas collections and early pull-out from cinemas in those countries where Sri Lankan Tamils dominated the Tamil film viewership. There were occasions when a Tamil film-star who had missed an industry-organised protest would end up organising one of his own with full participation from his fans' associations. Whether or not such tactics of forced participation by Tamil film stars in relatively unrelated protests have continued afterward, the Sri Lankan Tamils' behind-the- scene presence in Kodambakkam, or 'Kollywood', the Tamil equivalent of Hollywood, continues and is obvious, too.

### **Violence Unexplained**

Yet neither the size nor the spontaneity attaching to the Jallikattu protests could explain the 'Marina violence' accompanying its successful conclusion. Questions remain as to why a section, or more than one section of the protestors—sections still, they were—did not want to disperse after then Chief Minister Panneerselvam had initiated convincing measures to have the martial sport back soon enough, remains unexplained. The Chief Minister had followed up his promises and initiatives with immediate legislative measures, which had the unqualified support of the political Opposition, too, in the 234-member State Assembly. For its part, the Centre implored upon the Supreme Court of India, to go slow on the enforcement of the ban that it had imposed earlier, for all practical purposes. The court too had been alive to the ground realities, and the final disposal of the case, where the new facilitating Tamil Nadu law, too, would be added as among those that needed to be heard and decided upon.

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