

## Torture Through The Ages

### The Jallikattu, the Bull fight and the Fox hunt

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That there are two sides to jallikattu, those who are for and those who are against, only shows that India is both global and updated. If we walk back to the past, sensitivity to torture of any kind is a rather contemporary phenomenon, showing up first in the 19th century. Till then, worldwide, the torture of both humans and animals was taken as normal.

Between 1807-50, as if making up for past injustices, our collective consciousness suddenly woke up to ethically question the torture of all living beings. Is it just coincidence that around this time, in Britain for example, slave trade was abolished, the 1832 Reform Act was passed, and bear baiting, even dog fights, became illegal?

Conferring respect on ordinary electorates was accompanied by a ban on cruelty to animals and people, as if one entailed the other. Till then, voters were limited to a select few and hanging was a popular, town square event. Likewise, to set dog against dog, or bear against dogs, were huge draws often patronised by the rich and powerful. Elizabeth I, reportedly, could not tear herself away from such spectacles.

It would appear then that with the increase in democratic awareness, we also became mindful of animal life. Decades before Darwin came on the scene, 19th century attitudes were inclining towards accepting humans and animals as somewhat continuous creations. Therefore, what applied to us was now being extended to include other living creatures too. By this token, convicts, their wickedness notwithstanding, deserved consideration as well.

Again, it was in the mid-19th century that the hangman's rope was lengthened so that death would be quick; the earlier short drop left the condemned person dangling for long. Crucifixion, stoning, or the Chinese practise of Li Ching, where the convict's flesh was slowly sliced off (hence the phrase, death by a thousand cuts), were no longer considered civilised. Likewise, in 1839, Britain banned punishment by drawing and quartering as this involved the strewing of the dead person's body parts.

All of this is crazily off the charts today, but in the past they were seen as normal, even fun. Though we still continue with capital punishment, yet we strive to make it as pain free as modern medical knowledge will allow—enter the lethal injection. No more howling and cheering from a frenzied crowd; the sentence is now delivered within prison confines.

All these changes have happened in recent times as old fashioned torture is no longer acceptable. Humans and beasts, individually and singly, are not to be put in pain, and if they have to die because we must punish, or we must eat, let us

deliver the blow as softly as we can. Yet, when man and beast are performing together in acts that involve pain, sometimes death, there has been much stronger resistance against banning them. This is true of jallikattu, the bull fight and the fox hunt.

All these three were once banned and then un-banned. On these matters, the struggle between status quoists and change agents has been very contentious and bitter. The Catalonia region of Spain disallowed bullfights, but the Spanish Supreme Court ruled against it. The fox hunt likewise won judicial approval and, for the time being, jallikattu has also earned a reprieve.

Unlike dog fights or bear baiting, these are no longer instances of outright animal torture as humans are also involved. This is what makes jallikattu and bullfights appear sporty for now there is an aura of uncertain outcome, though highly controlled. Consequently, guilt is replaced by participatory euphoria and it is this that gives them the look and feel of being cultural and harmless.

If however, only the rich participate in the sport, as in the case of tiger hunts, then such acts do not become "cultural", deserving of popular approval. Fox hunting was never passionately defended as long as it was limited to the aristocrats. From the 1950s on numerous fox hunting clubs, with middle class membership, sprang up all over Britain lending this activity a democratic character.

The Spanish bullfight has always been a spectacular public sport, not just because it entertained large crowds but also because matadors came from the ranks of ordinary people. It is this as well as their skills that together made bullfighters like Antonio Ordinez, Luis Dominguin, and Manuel Benitez (also known as El Cordobez) such superstars.

Jallikattu still does not have its home bred heroes, but it too is a popular sport that has become culture as it pits man against beast, rather ordinary men against ordinary beasts. It is almost as if we compelled to demonstrate our mastery over nature at regular intervals. But because we are blessed with cunning, a trait that animals do not possess, we pick on four-legged creatures that are not carnivores, nor are naturally dangerous to us. We hunt foxes, that attack poultry, or we fight bulls that have no quarrel with humans. Nobody would like to take on tigers or grizzly bear and then call it culture.

As humans we need to show off our cultural might and we do this best by fighting the weak, never the strong, not even those who are our equals. This is what prompted the anarchist Peter Kropotkin to remark that nature is not "red in tooth and claw", but people are.