

## Jallikattu as Heroic Sport and Temple Tradition: Its Association with the Mariamman Festival at Narththamalai in Pudukkottai District

M. Jeyapathi, Dr. M. Gayathri Devi

Ph.D. Scholar in History, K. K. Government Arts College for Women (A), Pudukkottai

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, P.G. and Research Department of History,

K. K. Government Arts College for Women (A), Pudukkottai (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

### I. Abstract

Since the early formation of Tamil pastoral and agrarian society, cattle have served as sources of wealth, labour, status, and ceremonial value. The bull in particular came to embody strength, valour, fertility, and public prestige in the cultural life of the Tamil region. This paper deals with Jallikattu as a heroic sport and studies its association with the Mariamman temple at Narththamalai in Pudukkottai district. It traces the historical background of the sport through Sangam literary references, early Tamil traditions, inscriptional materials, and local ritual practice. In addition, it looks at the role of the bull in the Mullai landscape and in the life of the Ayar community, where cattle shaped livelihood, honour, and kinship. The paper also examines the cultural meanings attached to bull-taming, especially in relation to courage, masculine worth, marriage, and communal recognition. It further studies the incorporation of Jallikattu into the annual Mariamman festival cycle at Narththamalai, including Puchchoriyal, Kappukkattu, and the car festival. This paper attempts to trace the continuity, adaptation, and ceremonial survival of Jallikattu as a living expression of Tamil heroism, village religion, and regional cultural memory.

### II. Introduction

Tamil culture has traditionally been understood through two major dimensions: heroism and love. Sangam literature presents the life of the Tamil people through these two interconnected aspects. In the early period, the heroic sport of Jallikattu was closely associated with love, courtship, and the selection of a bridegroom. *Mullaikkali* in Sangam literature gives a detailed account of the life of the Ayar, the pastoral cattle-keeping community. According to *Tholkappiyam*,<sup>1</sup> the Tamil region was divided into four geographical landscapes: Kurinji (hilly tracts), Mullai (forest tracts), Marutham (wet agricultural lands), and Neythal (coastal region). Later, *Silappathikaram*, the first Tamil epic, introduced a fifth landscape, Palai. It states:

“Mullaiyum Kurunjiyum Muraimayil thirunthu

Nalliyalbu illanthu nadunku thuyar uruthu

Palaiyen pathor padiman kollum.”<sup>2</sup>

According to *Silappathikaram*, Palai emerged from the transformation of Mullai and Kurinji into a dry and desolate tract. Among these five landscapes, Mullai was the dwelling place of the Ayar, the cattle-herding community. Their lives were deeply dependent on cattle, and even the games and sports of their young men and women were centred on them. Cattle formed an inseparable part of their social and economic existence.

Over time, sport involving bulls came to represent the heroism of young men. Success in taming a bull became a mark of bravery and a qualification for marriage. This idea appears in many poems of *Mullaikkali*:

“Kolerruk Kodu anjuvanai marumaiyum

Pullaley aya makal.”<sup>3</sup>

This suggests that unmarried girls would never choose as husbands young men who feared the fierce bull or hesitated to face its wounds. The life of the Ayar thus reveals a close relationship between cattle, love, and heroism. Virgin girls were prepared to embrace the man who successfully tamed the bull:

“Vilai ventaar, emminathu thayar makalir

Kolaiyerrak kottidaith tham veelvar marbin

<sup>1</sup> Tholkappiyam, Porul Athikaram, Akathinaiyiyal-3.

<sup>2</sup> Silappathikaram, Madurai kandam, kadukan kathai, verses-64-66

<sup>3</sup> Mullaikkali, 103 song, verses-63-64.

Mullai yidaip pola puken.”<sup>4</sup>

These lines show that girls did not demand dowry; rather, they expected courage. A bridegroom had to face the deadly horned bull and bear injury on his chest. Such references provide strong literary evidence for the existence of Jallikattu, or bull-taming, in ancient Tamil society.

The Indus Valley Civilization, which flourished roughly between 4000 BCE and 1500 BCE, has been identified by some scholars, including Iravatham Mahadevan, as Dravidian in character. More than 2,000 clay seals with pictographic motifs have been unearthed from this civilization. One of these appears to depict a hero taming a vigorous bull, and it is often considered an early reference to Jallikattu in ancient India.<sup>5</sup>

When *Tholkappiyam* describes the early life of the Tamil people, it refers to cattle raids in which cattle were seized from one settlement and then recaptured by those who had lost them. These acts are discussed in the *Puraththinaiyiyal* section under themes such as *Nirai Kavarthal* and *Nirai Meetta*.<sup>6</sup> The seven *puram* divisions are Vetchi, Vagai, Vanchi, Karanthai, Ulinjai, Thumbai, and Kanji. Among these, Karanthai thinai is associated with cattle raids.

Stone inscriptions are among the most reliable sources for reconstructing social history. Early Tamil hero-stone inscriptions, datable from the sixth to the ninth centuries CE, vividly record episodes of cattle capture and recovery. These hero stones were erected in memory of warriors who died in such conflicts.<sup>7</sup> However, there is little early inscriptional evidence for heroes who died during Jallikattu. One such example has been identified at Karuvanthurai village in Salem district. It reads:

“Kovuri Sankan  
Karuvanthuraiyil  
Eruthu vilaiyadi ppattan  
Avan makan Sinnappayalu  
Natta kallu.”<sup>8</sup>

### III. Jallikattu in Tamil Nadu

As noted earlier, Jallikattu is an ancient sport with roots extending back to early Tamil culture and possibly to the Indus Valley tradition. Even today, selected villages in Tamil Nadu continue to practise it. In Madurai district, places such as Alanganallur, Palamedu, Siravayal, Araniparai, Kandipatti, Nedumaram, Kandra Manickam, and Avaniyapuram conduct Jallikattu on the day following Thai Pongal, the Tamil harvest festival.<sup>9</sup>

The term *Jallikattu* is believed to have evolved from *Sallikkattu*, meaning the tying of a bunch of coins to the horns of a bull. The hero who successfully tamed the bull could claim those coins as a prize. Since *salli* in Tamil refers to small-denomination coins, the sport came to be known as *Sallikkattu* and later *Jallikattu*. Today, the event attracts vast crowds and is celebrated each year with enthusiasm and pride. The sport is also known by other names such as *Manju Virattu*, *Mainthu Virattu*, and *Eruthazhuvuthal*. The word *mainthu* means “son,” suggesting that the bull was often raised like a family member. Over time, Jallikattu became integrated with the Pongal festival and, in Pudukkottai district in particular, became associated with the annual car festivals of village goddesses.

### IV. Mariamman Worship in Pudukkottai District

The earliest form of worship among the Tamils appears to have been the worship of the Mother Goddess. A copper image unearthed during Alexander Rea’s excavation at Adichanallur in 1904 depicts a mother goddess with well-developed breasts and a full stomach. Excavations conducted at the same site in 2005 also revealed pottery bearing figures of a mother goddess along with a deer, a reptile, a paddy stalk, a crane, and a fish.<sup>10</sup> These findings confirm the antiquity of Mother Goddess worship among the Tamils. This tradition continues in various parts of Tamil Nadu under names such as Mariamman, Kanniyamman, Isakkiamman, Draupadi Amman, Kaliyamman, and Pidari Amman.

<sup>4</sup> Mullaikkali, 103, song. Verses, 71-73.

<sup>5</sup> S. C. Ray Choudhary, *Social, Cultural and Economic History of India*, Surjeet Publication, Kamalanagar, Delhi, 2005, PP.No 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> *Tholkappiyam*, *Puraththinaiyiyal*

<sup>7</sup> Hero stones of Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu State Archeology Department, Records (TNSAD).

<sup>8</sup> Hero stone is now displayed at Salem government Museum.

<sup>9</sup> Tinamalar Nalithazh, 21.01.2021, P.No.12

<sup>10</sup> Interview, M.Renkaraj, Jallikattu Bull temple Owner, Sevappatti, Pudukkottai, 19.01.2021.

In Pudukkottai district, Mariamman worship remains highly significant and is celebrated each year with active participation from local communities. The seven prominent centres of Amman worship in the district are Narththamalai, Vaithikkoil, Konnaiyur, Tennangudi, Thiruvappur, Kannanur, and Ilanjavar.<sup>11</sup> The worship of Mariamman in Tamil Nadu may be traced, in a broad cultural sense, to the period of *Silappathikaram*. Chera king Senguttuvan erected a memorial shrine for Kannagi, the heroine of the epic, in honour of her chastity. This gave rise to the Pattini or Kannagi cult, which later spread even to Sri Lanka. In time, the worship of Kannagi appears to have developed into forms associated with Mariamman and Bhagavathi worship.<sup>12</sup>

Although Mariamman temples are found in almost every village, the seven temples mentioned above attract especially large gatherings and their festivals are celebrated on a grand scale. These annual festivals are held during the Tamil months of Masi and Chithirai, corresponding roughly to February through April. Car festivals are conducted separately in each of these centres. Jallikattu has become closely associated with these Mariamman festivals. Altogether, the festival cycle extends for sixteen days, with the final day marked by the car festival. The first day begins in the morning with Jallikattu and is followed in the evening or night by the *Puchchoriyal* festival. At Narththamalai Mariamman temple, the *Kappukkattu* ritual is performed on the eighth day after *Puchchoriyal*. On the previous day, Jallikattu is usually conducted at Narththamalai. Bulls from across Tamil Nadu participate in this event. A separate ground is prepared for the sport, known as the *Manthai*. The bulls are gathered there and released one by one through the entrance known as the *Vadivasal*.

#### V. Narththamalai and the Mariamman Festival

Narththamalai is believed to be a corrupted form of *Nagaraththarmalai*. The Nagaraththars were a mercantile community associated with this region, and the place may originally have borne their name. In the inscriptions of Rajaraja Chola I, this village is referred to as *Telunga Kulakalapuram*, after one of his epithets, *Telunga Kula Kalan*, meaning the destroyer of the Telugu kings.<sup>13</sup> The suffix *puram* denotes a trade centre. Narththamalai is noted for its Saivite, Vaishnavite, and Jain monuments, including an important cave temple dedicated to Vishnu. Alongside these traditions, village goddess worship also established a strong presence here.

The Mariamman car festival at Narththamalai is celebrated during March and April. A public holiday is usually observed, and the event attracts pilgrims from both nearby and distant places.<sup>14</sup> Ritual observances include wearing mouth locks, piercing the body with needles, carrying kavadi, shaving the head, and offering salt, jaggery, cotton seed, grain, fowls, sheep, and goats. Some of these vow-fulfilling acts can be physically intense.<sup>15</sup>

#### VI. Puchchoriyal Ritual

The car festival is preceded by *Puchchoriyal*, the ritual of showering or covering the goddess with flowers. Flowers are brought to the temple from different parts of Pudukkottai district and neighbouring areas. On the eighth day after *Puchchoriyal*, the *Kappukkattu* ritual is observed, and Jallikattu is conducted on the previous day. A large number of bulls are brought from nearby villages. Likewise, many young men dressed in special attire gather to tame them. On the ninth day after *Kappukkattu*, the car festival is celebrated, and the goddess is taken in procession through the main streets of the village.

#### VII. Present Condition of Jallikattu

Jallikattu was once conducted regularly across Tamil Nadu. However, animal-rights organizations such as PETA approached the courts and sought a ban on the sport. Following judicial intervention, the event was prohibited for a period. This ban led to widespread protest, especially among Tamil youth, who viewed Jallikattu as an essential part of Tamil cultural identity. Large numbers of young people from different sections of society gathered at Marina Beach in Chennai and demanded that the ban be lifted. Similar demonstrations took place in other towns across Tamil Nadu.

After sustained public protest, the Tamil Nadu government introduced a special ordinance and legislative measure permitting the conduct of Jallikattu under regulated conditions. In 2017, the Supreme Court also allowed the continuation of the event subject to specific norms and safeguards. The Court insisted that bulls should not be

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<sup>11</sup> K.R.Venkatarama Iyar., A Manual of the Pudukkottai state, Director of Museum, Government of Tamil Nadu, 2004, Vol.I P.92

<sup>12</sup> A.Devanesan, History of Tamil Nadu, Renu Publication, Marthandam, Tamil Nadu, 1997, P.47.

<sup>13</sup> Inscription of Pudukkottai Stat, No.91

<sup>14</sup> K.R.Venkatarama Iyar., A Manual of the Pudukkottai State, Commissioner of Museum, Government of Tamil Nadu, Vol.II Part-II, 2002, P.No.1079.

<sup>15</sup> K.R.Venkatarama Iyar., Ibid.1079.

tortured and that adequate measures should be taken to reduce injury and loss of life. Since then, the government has implemented precautionary arrangements and crowd-control measures.

Special uniforms are now provided to participants, and they are strictly prohibited from consuming intoxicants before the event. Bulls are also examined to prevent the use of drugs or other unfair practices. Because of these precautionary measures, Jallikattu has in recent years been conducted in a more regulated manner.

#### VIII. Government Participation and Gifts to Participants

The government, particularly the district administration, provides police protection during Jallikattu events. The courts also appoint mediators or supervisory officials to ensure that the festival is conducted according to prescribed rules and regulations. The Tourism Department makes arrangements for visitors, including foreign tourists who come to witness the event.

A large number of able-bodied young men gather to tame the bulls. In earlier times they received the *salli* tied to the bull's horns, but today successful participants are honoured with a variety of prizes. These include cars, motorcycles, scooters, and washing machines. Silver vessels, gold rings, gold chains, and cash rewards are also presented by organisers and notable guests. Bull owners, too, are rewarded if their bulls remain untamed. In this way, both participants and bull owners are recognised.

#### IX. Purpose of Jallikattu

Jallikattu is conducted for the welfare of the people and for agricultural prosperity. Many believe that the conduct of Jallikattu together with the Amman festival will bring rain and ensure relief from famine. In most villages, separate arenas known as *Jallikattu Thidal* are prepared and maintained for the event. The expectation of abundant rain is closely connected with protection from heat and epidemic disease. Among the important Jallikattu grounds in Pudukkottai district are those at Kavinadu Kanmai Thadikonda Ayyanar Temple, Singamuthu Ayyanar Koil, and Narththamalai near Pudukkottai.

#### X. Conclusion

From the pastoral and agrarian life of early Tamil society, cattle acquired a place that extended into economy, status, kinship, and ritual. The bull came to carry meanings of strength, valour, prestige, and ceremonial worth in the social imagination of the Tamil region. This paper has dealt with Jallikattu as a heroic sport and has traced its historical background through Sangam literary references, inscriptional evidence, and local tradition. In addition, it has looked at the place of the bull in the Mullai landscape and in the life of the Ayar community, where cattle formed an important basis of livelihood and social value. It has also examined the meanings attached to bull-taming in relation to courage, masculine worth, marriage, and public honour. At the same time, the paper has studied the incorporation of Jallikattu into the annual Mariamman festival at Narththamalai, particularly through rituals such as Puchchoriyal, Kappukkattu, and the car festival. This study attempts to show how an ancient cattle-centred heroic practice continues within the ritual and communal life of the village. Its continuity across time reveals the enduring place of Jallikattu in Tamil cultural memory, temple-centred tradition, and regional identity.

#### XI. Bibliography

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