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Review

The voices of culture, conservation and the media event around bullfight '*Jallikattu*' in Tamil Nadu, India

Jayashree B[1*], Arul Aram[1] and Yasmin Ibrahim[2]

[1]Department of Media Science, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Anna University, Chennai, India.
[2]International Business and Communication, Queen Mary, University of London, UK.

In the Southern Indian 'State of Tamil Nadu', the traditional *Jallikattu* sport involving young men competing against bulls is described as one of the ancient living sports in the modern era. Based on petitions by animal rights groups, the Supreme Court of India banned the ancient sport of *Jallikattu* in 2014 on the grounds of animal cruelty. The ban of this traditional sport ignited protests culminating in a large-scale 15-day movement across the state from January 8 to 23, 2017 with a massive mobilization on the world's second longest beach, the Marina in the state capital of Chennai. Largely propelled by the youths, the ban was perceived as an attack on Tamil culture and identity. The anger was directed at foreign animal rights activism and an unstable political situation gained momentum with media attention. This resulted in the promulgation of a central Act to overturn the ban and facilitate conduct of the sport. This paper examines the role of social media rallying the public and activism against the *Jallikattu* ban. The paper examines how the platform of social media provided a means to mobilize effectively an affective public and a means to construct Tamil pride and identity through the ban of this bull sport.

Key words: *Jallikattu*, bullfight, social media, tradition, Tamil culture.

INTRODUCTION

The harvest festival Pongal in the Southern State of Tamil Nadu in India includes a number of social and cultural events. One of these is a sporting event called '*Jallikattu*' that involves trying to hold onto a bull as it runs through the pathway of an arena. The event came under criticism by organizations that cite instances of cruelty. However, since it has been followed for generations, and it uses traditional breeds of bulls that are also revered, the other side has argued that it is a legitimate part of

culture. The sport was banned in 2014 by the Indian courts. After successive efforts to reinstate the sport failed, a series of protests broke out from January 8 to 23, 2017. The intensity of these protests and the manner in which they resonated with the theme of 'Tamil culture' to reinstate a sport, the streams of discussion on social media and the manner in which mainstream media picked up these developments to make it a 'media event' is the subject of this paper. It also studies how the social

*Corresponding author. E-mail: jayashree.author@gmail.com. Tel: +91 98400 50444.

media engagement facilitated the youths' movement.

THE HISTORY AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JALLIKATTU

Tamil Nadu in South India is home to a traditional annual rural sport known as '*Jallikattu*' (Tamil form of bullfight which is referred to as *'Eru Tazhuvudhal'* or *'Manju Virattu'*) held around the Tamil harvest festival *Pongal* in the middle of January. It involves the challenge of trying to hold onto the horns or the hump of a bull for a specified time within an enclosed arena. As an intrinsic part of the annual harvest festival celebrations and rituals in the region, *Jallikattu* manifests in different forms today. Historically, it sought to display mastery of bull by men, who, singly or in small groups, try to take a cloth from its horns or to overpower it (Duff, 2012). According to Kalaiarasan (2017), the literal meaning of Jallikattu is Jalli/salli (coins) and kattu (tie) wherein the men, gathered in the arena, try to take a prize of coins that are tied to the horn of the bull. In that sense, it is not so much about 'bull taming' but more as a sport of 'bravery' and gaining a prize from the bull unleashed in the arena. It was, therefore, intrinsically bound with masculinity and heroism of the men who take part and aim to 'tame' the bulls. As an act of chivalry and male prowess, according to legend, men successful at Jallikattu were chosen by women to be their husbands. There are references to other versions of the sport, including one where the bull is left free in an open ground for any person to challenge and another where the bull is tied and a group tries to tame it (Ramesh et al., 2014).

The sport itself has been dated as ancient and described as one of the oldest living ancient sports seen in the modern era (Saidulu, 2014). The presence of bulls in seals[1] dating back to 2300-1700 B.C. suggests that these may be in reference to the *Jallikattu* sport (Duff, 2012), concurring with an earlier study (Mahadevan, 1977). These ancient seals refer to human figures interacting with bulls indicating a form of sport or combat with the figures of men or women wearing knee-length tunics and bangles. While these may not have been gender-specific and plausibly related to social status – the tunics may be indicative of clothing worn by men in South India. Vivekanandan and Alagumalai (2013) describe the first domestication of zebu (humped cattle, *Bosindicus*) at the site of Indus valley of Pakistan about 7,000 years ago, suggesting that the sport might have been subsequently taken to other parts of the present-day India. The bulls used for the sport are specific Indian breeds of cattle. Therefore, preservation of the sport is directly linked to the conservation and sustainability of these specific Indian breeds.

Pongal or the harvest festival in Tamil Nadu is a time when the cattle are worshipped with a day dedicated to them known as 'Maattu Pongal' (where 'maattu' denotes cattle), since they are considered divine as well as essential to the livelihood of agriculture.

The native cattle breeds of the region used for the *Jallikattu* sport include *Kangayam*, *Pulikulam*, *Umbalachery*, *Barugur* and *Malai Maadu*. These bulls are characterized as strong, vigorous with well-developed hump and more resistant to communicable and parasitic diseases compared to crossbreds in that area (Vivekanandan, 2013). The publication by Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Voluntary Action (SEVA)[2] notes the dwindling numbers in the *Pulikulam* breed of cattle, one of the main breeds used for the *Jallikattu* sport. Due to the preference for female calves, there is a risk that the bulls used only for sporting activities would dwindle faster in the absence of the sport.

In a project for the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) that was published in *Caravan*, Karthikeyan (2016) points out that the numbers of indigenous breeds have decreased particularly bulls and bullocks, while in comparison the overall livestock numbers including that of exotic and cross-breeds have increased. Out of the 37 indigenous Indian breeds recognized by the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources, the sub-species *Bosindicus* characterized by humps on their backs dipped nine per cent from 2007, and the overall stock of indigenous bulls and bullocks by 19 per cent. In a marked contrast, animals of European descent and exotic-indigenous crossbreeds rose by 20%.

These figures reflect the dwindling numbers of specific native breed of cattle – especially the bulls. Historically, one of the key uses of these native breed bulls is for the *Jallikattu* sport. Kalaiarasan (2017) links the sport to its references in ancient Tamil literature, *Yeru Thazhuvuthal* (embracing bull) asserting that the support for the sport denotes intimacy with the bull and their domestication in Tamil culture rather than showmanship or male chivalry.

The U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit recognized the importance of traditional knowledge and recommended initiatives to preserve and promote it. It made an explicit and vital link between traditional lifestyles of indigenous peoples and local communities and the sustenance of biodiversity (Bavikatte et al., 2015). The vulnerability or security of individuals and of societies is determined, not only by the likely responses of the resources on which individuals depend (Adger et al., 2003), but also on the entitlement of individuals and groups to call on these resources.

This means that in the case of the bulls or the sport that was part of the lifestyle, it is this perception that it is their identity and their entitlement to their way of life. Also, the diverse breeds of bulls were part of the conservation

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[1] The seals, part of the iconography of the Indus Valley civilization, include a script, sign or motif and probably an animal (Duff, 2012). The image of the bull and ritualistic activities such as bullfighting seem to feature in these ancient seals.

[2] An NGO based in Madurai in south India, SEVA works to conserve and disseminate traditional knowledge, especially livestock and agricultural biodiversity.

fabric, as was the cultural diversity. However, these cultural and traditional aspects of their lives were intertwined with the outside world, when it was seen from the lens of animal rights and cruelty.

Jallikattu ban

The *Jallikattu* sport was banned by the Supreme Court, the apex court of India, in May 2014 citing violation of animal rights and recognizing animals as part of the environment of human beings and, therefore, needing to be protected under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.

The verdict imposed a complete ban on *Jallikattu*, bullock-cart races and other such events, holding them to be in violation of several sections of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, (Sharma and Singh, 2015). The court found there were 12 violations of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCA), 1960, of the Government of India under Section 11(1). This section specifies the cruelty to animals as entailing "beats, kicks, over-rides, over-drives, over-loads, tortures or otherwise treats any animal so as to subject it to unnecessary pain or suffering" (PCA, 1960: pp 8). The Section details various instances and circumstances which may be construed as cruelty and violation of the Act. In invoking this Act to ban the traditional sport, the court found that the violations caused distress to the bulls in a number of ways. It also detailed the injuries that took place in the three events that had been observed by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI). These arguments laid out by AWBI have been endorsed by the court (Mathew and Chadha-Sridhar, 2014). Similar arguments against the bullock cart races in the state of Maharashtra in central India are also in the same judgment, citing violation. The court contends that bulls are not naturally performing animals but meant for agriculture and farming activities and to treat them as performers with actions that are cruel to them are violation of the Act. While the state of Maharashtra did not contest the alleged cruelty to bulls in the bullock-cart races, nor claim this to be a traditional or cultural form, the case was different for Tamil Nadu.

The state of Tamil Nadu had already passed a state Act called the 'Tamil Nadu Regulation of *Jallikattu* Act, 2009' to regulate the conduct of *Jallikattu* with the introduction of strict protocols in holding such events to safeguard animals, participants and the spectators. In the Act, the term, *Jallikattu*, includes related events such as *manjuvirattu*, *oormadu*, *vadamadu*, *erudhu vidum vizha* and other events involving bulls. However, the Supreme Court was not in favour of this, raising doubts on the congruence between the promulgations of the state and centre, contending that the former only emphasized the safety and concern for spectators and participants, not the bulls. It struck down this state Act as being constitutionally void. It contended that the safety and the rights of the bulls too were important.

Peter Singer's landmark 'Animal Liberation' (2002) takes a very clear stand on animal suffering that is in line with this court ruling.

If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering-insofar as rough comparisons can be made-of any other being (pp8).

However, legal analysis such as Mathew and Chadha-Sridhar (2014) find the verdict is 'incompatible' and 'ineffective' as Article 21 essentially considers human rights and the right of 'person' cannot be accorded to animals the same manner in which it can be given to human beings. The verdict brought to the fore heated debates over animal and human rights. It also led to discussion over continuance of cultural practices and their role in conservation of native breeds. Several legal papers review this verdict and the validity of the Animal Welfare Board and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of India, 1960, but fail to integrate the cultural aspects of the debate. Also it is pointed out that without an objective or normative concept or standard of harm for comparison, the decision is aberrant and contentious in a country where slaughterhouses are permitted for commercial reasons but a ban is imposed on *Jallikattu* and related sporting activities (Mathew and Chadha-Sridhar, 2014; Sharma and Singh, 2015).

The judgment emphasized the 1992 U.N. Biodiversity Convention, on a nature-centric approach, rather than a human-centric approach for all forms of life. While *Jallikattu* was claimed to be an ancient and traditional sport by respondents, the court struck down this claim and contended that it was not performed in the traditional manner. It accepted the arguments of the Animal Welfare Board of India and ruled that bulls could not be used in *Jallikattu* or in bullock cart races in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra.

Legal discussions over animal rights did not view the cultural setting the symbolic significance of cattle to Tamil identity and heritage. In Tamil Nadu, as in many states of India, cattle are revered, decorated and worshipped especially during the harvest festival, besides during other occasions. Connecting *Jallikattu* with violence and abuse was seen as a misrepresentation of Tamil values and historical traditions. The relationship of Tamils with animals and reverence of bulls historically needed to have been considered in the light of the long history of the sport. Also, this sport has been known to cause injury to humans, but animal casualties were rarely reported.

The 2014 ban goes back to 2006 when the Madras High Court banned all types of bull-related sports or 'entertainment'. This was in response to a petition by A Nagaraja, whose son, an artist, had died while sketching the sporting activity (Imanullah, 2017) and the Animal Welfare Board, which later pushed for a ban on *Jallikattu*, was actually a respondent in this case. The Madurai

Bench of the High Court took the stand that the sports could be conducted while ensuring the safety of the animals, participants and spectators. Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu Government enacted a piece of legislation, to permit the sport, with certain safeguards and protocols (Tamil Nadu Regulation of Jallikattu Act, 2009). However, a 2011 notification by the Centre banned animals including bulls from being used for performance.

The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), a global animal rights organization, entered the scene when it found the sport being conducted in spite of the ban. The Supreme Court, the highest appellate of the country, had the Animal Welfare Board of India monitor and report with photographic and video evidences. In May 2014, the Supreme Court banned the conduct of the sport after viewing the Animal Welfare Board evidence. Nevertheless *Jallikattu* was permitted as 'part of culture' subject to conditions[3]. Organizations including the Animal Welfare Board and PETA continued to challenge the conduct of the sport. Although the original legal petitioner against *Jallikattu* was from the community, it was an international organization's involvement that jarred people. While the sport was still being conducted in the interim years through one way or the other, based on PETA's subsequent complaint of violations, the Supreme Court reinforced its 2014 verdict. Hence PETA was seen as the main antagonist to the 'Tamil culture' in the *Jallikattu* debate as the 'foreign' hand that caused the ban.

PROTESTS FOR *JALLIKATTU*

The impossibility of *Jallikattu* looming large over the harvest festival of 2017 gave rise to the pro-*Jallikattu* protests began. A movement across the state of Tamil Nadu, considered unprecedented in their intensity and mass support, broke out, to reinstate this sport. Described as 'iconic' in the history of Tamil Nadu (Kalaiarasan, 2017), not only was it massive, non-violent, and spontaneous, it also attracted people from all strata of life with a large number of women and men, mostly young people, taking part in the protest. Interestingly, the protests began and picked up momentum in the cities, mainly in the state capital city of Chennai. This was an interesting phenomenon, as *Jallikattu* is primarily seen in rural settings as part of an agricultural landscape and the harvest festival. It is not conducted in cities and city-dwellers are no more than tourists, witnessing the event in its native locations. Later in 2018, *Jallikattu* was advertised and for the first time in its ancient history, held in an urban setting, indicating the impact this movement had on city dwellers too.

Although many of the *Jallikattu* protestors may not have watched a live bull sport in their lifetime, they saw the ban

on *Jallikattu* as an attack on Tamil culture and 'pride'.

This sentiment of the Tamil culture being under siege transcended the rural-urban divide to unite these binaries under the banner of this bull sport. *Jallikattu* became synonymous with a symbol of Tamil pride and as public antagonism grew against the ban, those who were in favour of the ban were portrayed as anti-Tamil. The issue provided a means to construct and define Tamil identity (Sarukkai, 2017).

Other prevailing political and social issues became conjoined with the ban to intensify the anger of the public. The economic plight of farmers, increasing numbers of farmer suicides due to crop failure due to one of the worst droughts experienced in Tamil Nadu for decades added to the populist sentiments of Tamil identity.

According to Lal (2017), the *Jallikattu* protest became a lightning rod for complaints, concerns and worries of the youths in the state. These cumulative issues were also related to inter-state waters disputes that aggravated the farming crisis. In spite of court verdicts in favour of the state of Tamil Nadu, the Government of India's inability to implement the water-sharing in two water disputes – Cauvery and Mullaiperiyar added to the perception that farmers of Tamil Nadu were more affected due to bias in the Central Government's stand. The death of a popular Chief Minister of the state, J. Jayalalithaa, in December 2016 and the political instability that followed, added to existing anxieties with people of the state, looking for new ways to reinforce demands. The *Jallikattu* verdict seen as negative to Tamil people seemed to come as a last straw in this perceived neglect of a region and its people.

With Indian farming systems being predominantly mixed – with livestock and poultry –cattle play a very important role within the system. Often, sale of livestock indicates the first sign of agriculture distress. With modern farming systems replacing the traditional plough and bullock carts, *Jallikattu* remained one of the few uses for specific breeds of cattle. The concerns were that the ban on the traditional sport would deal a further blow to the rural fabric and sustainability of farming communities, endanger the biodiversity of livestock, besides laying siege to traditions and heritage and equally their belief systems and practices.

YOUTHS AND *JALLIKATTU*

The visible protests over banning of Jallikattu, began in January 2017. Interestingly, young people from urban regions were active participants in the protests for this rural sport.

Beck (2016) shows how the internet can openly challenge oppressive institutions through smooth digital spaces, applying Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory. This suggests a non-hierarchical spreading of a protest and a movement of young people that spread rhizome-like in different directions, without one specific leader or root using the internet as a facilitator. In the case of

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[3] The Centre notified that Jallikattu could be conducted during the festival period and only in the locations where it was traditionally held.

Jallikattu, the issue seemed to have found a resonance,in Tamil Nadu among the youths. People came together in large numbers, with no single identifiable leader.

Youths engaged, articulated and built momentum on the subject of culture and their right to tradition through multiple protests all across Tamil Nadu. In a period of over two weeks, the protests witnessed an unprecedented gathering of women, men and children coming together, cutting across political affiliations to protest as one. Street corners and tier-2 cities erupted with multiple protesters taking up the cause in a visible manner. Private companies directly or indirectly permitted their employees to show solidarity with protestors as people were seen in black clothes, with the sign of the bull, accompanied by drumbeats and theatre artistes, or in silent solidarity with placards. As the 15-day protests between reached a peak, schools were closed, traders shut shops and many official establishments announced official or unofficial holidays. Overall, it was one common cause that united. However initially, the protests were small (Moorthy, 2018) January 13 – the date when *Jallikattu* events would have actually begun in various parts of the state. It was only after it was clear that the Supreme Court was not allowing any reprieve that people re-converged. Moorthy notes that Palamedu in Madurai where *Jallikattu* is usually held earlier than in other parts of the state signalled to the rest of the state on January 14 that the protests needed to be intensified. They did intensify in an unprecedented manner, increasing after protesters were arrested in Alanganallur, the seat of the most famous *Jallikattu* event a couple of days later.

The second longest beach in the world, the Marina beach in Chennai, has been an iconic venue from the tourist as well as from the aspect of being a visual entity that symbolizes the city, featured often in films or visual material related to the city. It now became a nodal point for the assembly of these protesters. The beach was not just a convenient point of congregation, given its space and access it also became a symbol for the protests, so much so it even came to be popularly called the 'Marina Movement' (Lal, 2017). Starting with a few protesters in the first week of January, the numbers increased day on day, leading to several thousands of people converging here. The beach, in fact, became as much a participant and symbol of the protest, more than just a venue. It was interestingly a predominantly urban protest for a specifically rural issue.

On January 20, 2017, there were an estimated 100,000 protestors gathered on the Marina Beach alone (*Deccan Chronicle,* 2017) and public transport was packed with people making their way to the protest locations. Some reports put it down to as many as half a million people to one million (Moorthy, 2018).

The protests went beyond just gatherings and slogans. News reports described how students stretched out their hands atop their heads to symbolise the bulls' horns enacting *Jallikattu*, got themselves painted as bulls, performed folk dances while traditional instruments including drums were played for youth who swayed to the beats for a two kilometre stretch (*Economic Times,* 2017).

All this was in spite of several efforts taken by the police machinery to prevent people from gathering. Many employees in the Government as well as private sectors too joined in these protests to show solidarity with this movement. Private vehicles, buses and trucks with performing drummers and musicians all made their way in a festive atmosphere. It was as much a chance for the city to celebrate its culture as a time to come together in protest. *Jallikattu* had caught the fancy of the general public, as a symbol of convergence.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The mobilization of this movement as it spread seamlessly relied heavily on online information. The social media was crucial in mobilizing millions of people who cannot be targeted by face-to-face interaction (Rucht, 2004). It also serves as a platform to articulate thoughts and emotions related to a subject.

While Tamil Nadu has a high literacy rate, the youths of Tamil Nadu have a high literacy rate of nearly 98% (Government of India Census, 2011) with the overall literacy rate at about 85% (NFHS 4). The state also has the third highest levels of penetration of mobile phones in the country, at over 81%, as per the Ministry of Telecommunication, Government of India data, 2017. The rural internet penetration is over 7 million users in Tamil Nadu and in urban areas Tamil Nadu tops the list of subscribers with over 20 million users as of January 2016 (source: data.gov.in). This makes Tamil Nadu an ideal ground for digital connectivity and social media access both through mobile phones as well as through other devices.

In the case of *Jallikattu*, the youths used social media as an important mechanism to communicate, share and build momentum, which will be explored in greater detail here.

Van de Donk et al. (2004) discuss social movements and ICTs and how they can be understood only along with their ideological beliefs, need for collective identity, and attempts to mobilize followers to appeal to a wider environment. However, they further add that virtual mobilization may lack the attraction of the group experience and the 'fun' and 'adventure factor' accompanying some forms of protest. *Jallikattu* presented a case for appeal on tradition and culture protection and social media was a means to mobilize and reinforce messages. However, it was the larger, real-life protests that became events of celebration and togetherness.

The 15-day event became a 'media event' (Katz, 1980) with live transmission on mass media due to its high dramatic or ritual significance. *Jallikattu* too in that sense became a media event as it was covered widely in the news with several opportunities for live coverage. The

social media had played a role in reinforcing the messages, building momentum and sharing updates across platforms. The free messaging service introduced by a service provider around the time is also attributed with helping bring crowds together (Moorthy, 2018). Already, the social media platforms had also been a vehicle to articulate the angst of the Tamil people. However, from this point on, the visibility in real terms was amplified by the mass media – newspapers, television news networks and web portals gave a lot of importance to this subject, in Tamil Nadu. As the momentum picked up in the rallies and gatherings, it also became national news, making it a widely followed media event. Protests not only in Chennai or in Tamil Nadu, but across the world were reported, mostly by Tamil population groups in those countries. *Jallikattu* had become a global discourse, even beyond the Tamil diaspora.

The heady feel among the youths, of moving against authority, was further reinforced in these manners, echoing Bakhtin's carnivalesque notion where the folk forms or the carnival is opposed to the official culture (1968, 1984). In that sense also, there were no spectators, everyone was a participant. Here too, the challenge of the authority, and the participatory involved nature of the protests recalled the concept of the anonymous mass that becomes powerful.

It was also providing vibrant opportunities for the mass media – whether newspaper, TV, radio on online to pick up the happenings of these gatherings. The coverage reinforced and kept the momentum of the event going.

Even as leaders of the state appealed for the protest to be called off, it picked up momentum with each passing day. Although media reports estimated over 100,000 protesters in one location, on the beach, some reports putting the numbers at several times higher, these protests went on peacefully. Reports also highlighted how women and girls stayed put in a public place of protest, even through the night, without any fears or concerns.

The movement also led to the creation of new youth icons. A singer, a radio jockey, an actor-dancer, a college girl – were some new icons who emerged after the 'Marina Movement'. The media coverage for these protests was consistent and elaborate, ranging from news stories, analysis, to live TV coverage and talk shows focusing on the protestors.

Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp were used for sharing information with hashtags related to *Jallikattu* trending on Twitter and Facebook. These hashtag #WeDoJallikattu was the first to become a major trend. This was followed by #IsupportJallikattu, #Jallikattu TamilPride, #TNneedsJallikattu, #JallikattuVeeravilayattu, #WeNeedJallikattu and the like. Social media icons and logos were used to give a branding to protests by groups of social media users. In a sense, the social media maintained the momentum and connected with the issue, providing background information and updates.

Student leaders, who preferred to be unnamed most of the time, projected this as a movement of the entire community. No one organization was identified in pushing this cause forward, though many spoke in its favour. The 'leaderless' movement even sent back politicians and film stars who tried to join the protestors (Janardhanan, 2017). This was observed and reported upon in several newspaper reports. Even film-stars who command high influence in this region were left to show solidarity with their own mini-protests in their film association compounds and not on the Marina Beach.

However, by attempting to join the movement, celebrities clearly indicated that they were in favour of the pro-Jallikattu group. This added to the public momentum and demand for holding the sport, making it seem much more bona fide case to be considered by the government.

This social media networks-led mobilization, writes Kalaiarasan (2017), changed the traditional protest or demonstration into the new social movement. Moorthy (2018) even compares it to the landmark anti-Hindi agitation of the 1960s that had marked a sea change in the political movement and alignment in Tamil Nadu. It was also seen in the backdrop of Tamil Nadu's floods in 2015, referred to as the worst in a century that left over a million people marooned. During this time, spontaneous contributions came in as youth took the lead, mobilizing support through the social media (Ashok, 2015) and taken the opportunity to share how it happened. What happened in *Jallikattu*, in a way that brought the spotlight on them, is similar to these precedents.

Youths demonstrated their power and solidarity while protesting in favour of *Jallikattu*. Parents, school-going children too, and others too took an active part in the evenings to distribute water and food. With schools, many offices and other establishments being shut, this kind of sustained pressure was finally heeded to.

The phenomenon of putting pressure on the Government through social media advocates, supporters and amplifiers is studied by Ansari et al. (2018) whose study of 100 events on social platforms over a period of eight years, find how social media pressure can force a government to respond.

A new federal law that would permit the sporting activity to be conducted was passed by the federal government. This was made possible since *Jallikattu* bulls were taken off the list of performing animals that were not permitted to be used. Only then was the protest called off. While there was some unfortunate violence at the end of the protests, marring the hitherto peaceful movement it was overall, a landmark protest in peace, solidarity and magnitude.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND *JALLIKATTU*

Briggs (2013) says communities are becoming increasingly empowered through self-confidence to inform development interventions which directly affect them in their everyday lives. Discussions on tradition, conservation and identity here were taken forward

Table 1. Top 10 liked pages related to *Jallikattu* on Facebook – as on October 2017

S/N	Name	Type	Likes	Possible Start date
1	Jallikattu Veeravilayattu	Sport League	312000	Jul.14
2	I love Jallikattu	Stadium Arena	68000	Apr.13
3	Venthanpatti Jallikattu	Community	57000	Aug.15
4	Jallikattu Tamil Nadu	Community	43000	Jan.15
5	Jallikattu by J Suresh	Sporting Event	40000	Jun.15
6	Jallikattu (@Jalikattu)	Community	29000	Nov.16
7	I like Jallikattu	Community	26000	Feb.14
8	We want Jallikattu	Sporting Event	27000	Jan.17
9	Jallikattu.in	Community	24000	Dec.13
10	TN Student Jallikattu @tnstudentjallikattu	Public Figure	20400	Jan.17

through contemporary communication methods with quantitative impact. Discourse, through new media methods in a heterogeneous manner, may possibly pave the way for reaffirming conservation, cultural identity, and biodiversity among young people, as the *Jallikattu* experience demonstrated.

To analyze how the narrative played out on social media, the flow of information, during and beyond the period of protests is studied. This paper looks at one social medium – Facebook – to understand the extent to which support for this sport is visible on this media platform. A manual search on Facebook for pages groups and communities that had included the word *Jallikattu* in the title or the name was pulled out through the search tab as of October 2017.

On Facebook, there were 105 pages, 99 groups, 98 accounts and 17 places with *Jallikattu* in their name. These had a tone or intent that was favourable to the conduct of the sport. The presence of a large number and types of these pages indicated the prevailing sentiment on this theme on social media. Of the pages on Facebook, 34 relate to 'community' or 'community organization', 26 are named sport event, league or arena, 17 places are marked for *Jallikattu*, including restaurants and places where *Jallikattu* is actually held and location of protest groups. There is interestingly even a game under Facebook Apps with the title '*Jallikattu* run'. In addition to these pages, there are 99 groups for *Jallikattu*, on Facebook. There are 98 Facebook accounts that have the name '*Jallikattu*'. These are as prefix or suffix to their name.

What makes the above information significant is that, the term '*Jallikattu*' has become a popular term on which many users are interested to engage upon. This may be the reason why various types of pages, groups and communities have been created.

While a page on Facebook is created for sharing information with regard to an official entity. Within the type of page, there is an option to indicate what it engages in. About one third of the Facebook pages have preferred to indicate that they are a community or community organization. Others include programme, communities and groups are related to common interest and could be official or unofficial. Sporting arena or restaurants usually denote a specific place.

The number of followers of each of the pages as indicated in the page has been listed (Table 1), to understand how people connected to *Jallikattu* on social media, through the various groups and opportunities that Facebook offered. The likes, followers and group memberships were counted to arrive at an estimated reach of the pages. On Facebook a 'like', 'follow' or a 'member' indicates that the social media user prefers to be regularly connected on this particular topic, usually getting an alert or a notification when there is a post on the page. Overall, on taking a count of the people who are regularly following this subject on Facebook, there were about 1 million connections for this subject including those for pages, groups and accounts measured through 'likes', followers and group memberships on Facebook as of October 2017.

Of the different types of presence on Facebook, the top influential pages with the *Jallikattu* theme measured by the number of 'likes' are given in Table 1, The number of likes is 871,000 cumulatively for the top few pages. It indicates those who would regularly subscribe to updates on this subject. There are also likely to be other social media consumers who read these posts without following a specific public page on a regular basis.

While it is difficult to indicate an exact start date for the pages, as Facebook does not give this information upfront, many of these pages, had been in existence much before the protests of January 2017 (Table 1). This has been identified by looking at the page post history for each of the top followed pages to get an idea of the date from which it has been active. Only two of the top 10 pages started in January 2017, when the legal crisis peaked and the protests started. The other eight had been in existence from before the protests. This means that the subject had been focused upon with interest in

social media and with people sharing updates, much before it became a large-scale visible public protest event.

What makes this even more interesting is that out of the 105 Facebook pages that contain the *Jallikattu* in its name, there were 1,000 followers or more for 56 pages, or over 53% of the pages. This indicates the popularity of the subject across pages and groups and that the social media users are keen to track this on a regular basis.

The popularity of the sport and the discussion around it may also be a reason why the name *Jallikattu* has been included in many of the pages. Since Facebook does not permit duplicate pages with the same name, pages seem to use different categories with the word *Jallikattu* and avoid duplication. Therefore, there are *37 different types* of page categories on Facebook including sporting arena, event, community page, community organization or public figure. The same name is seen with different page categories. For example 'Support *Jallikattu*' is a 'sports team and also a 'community' page, indicating the momentum on this subject.

The Facebook group with the largest membership interestingly is from a Special Economic Zone – that is, an industrial area. This may seem incongruous, but it appears likely from reading the posts on the page, it is more to do with individuals than the economic zone-related activities. People seem to have shown that their interest in the subject has been further reinforced through their work communities. The most liked page – 'Jallikattu – Veeravilayattu' (*Jallikattu* – Sport of Bravery) and several other pages are also very active, several months after the protests indicating that the social mobilization has been sustained. These pages have also been consistently keeping up the tempo on *Jallikattu* and other issues of concern for Tamils, including subjects like water sharing, agriculture-related updates or some political content.

Facebook, therefore, played an important role in building the background to the media event along with mainstream media. The physical manifestation of this was identified mainly with a place with symbolic resonance – the Marina Beach, Chennai's iconic spot. However, it is to be noted that social media platforms have been an outlet to ventilate even before the physical manifestation of the protests.

THE THEMES OF THE POSTS ON FACEBOOK

The posts on the Facebook communities and pages focused on the *'Jallikattu'* and 'Tamil pride'. The predominant theme or subject in the top followed pages is mainly related to this sport. These include pictures of people in action, videos of events, information on a specific bull or a type of bull or other interesting information on Tamil culture. Interestingly, many prized bulls are discussed by names or by their identities on these groups, indicating that the followers of these pages

have a deep interest and connection with these bulls that are even accorded a celebrity status. Most of the posts on the popular pages have been seen, liked or shared hundreds of times. Sharing, a manner by which a Facebook user indicates their more active connection since the user adds it to their own timeline or page, shows that it is a popular space for not only sharing information but for reinforcement and amplification. The comments and posts to the page also show that it is two-way communication between the users of the page and those who are following the subject. On the regularity, dates, locations and event updates are given in detail on a daily basis. As regards the content, the pages are colourful and vibrant, with more emphasis on photographs, 'selfies' and videos rather than long reads or written content.

The youngsters also discuss politics on these pages and there is talk of showing 'youth strength' during the elections as well. Issues related to education, water disputes and agriculture, besides a follow-up of some of the key individuals who protested during *Jallikattu* are updated and shared (Figure 1). The '*Jallikattu* protest' is cited as a landmark for any issue that they want to bring up in the future (Figures 2 and 3).

When a prized *Jallikattu* bull passes away, the death is announced on social media with pictures of bidding farewell to it with flowers. Processions are also held in honour of the departed bull where the local community takes part. These pictures as well as condolences are shared through the page. These kinds of posts not only indicate a deep connection with the animals but also negate the general prevailing concern of animal activists that the sport is inherently cruel to animals and involves torturing them (Figure 4).

Social media posts also share information on conservation and in case non-native breeds are allowed in the *Jallikattu* arena. They raise it as an issue as well, reinforcing that this is a space meant for native and specific breeds alone. Violations are also reported and discussed in terms of where and how the events were held. Within the *Jallikattu* community, there seem to be in-built self-policing machinery to maintain the traditional norms of the sport.

While there are multiple pages as listed, these seem to maintain a discussion amongst them, mutually sharing posts and information, requesting for updates, reporting violations in conduct of the sport or denying rumours and false information. The most popular pages contain dramatic pictures, videos and images of *Jallikattu* or of youngsters sharing their photographs and posing in the sporting arena. These seem to reinforce their sense of cultural pride in relation to the sport. Till the time of the study, the most popular pages are still vibrant with several posts on a daily / weekly basis. PETA has yet again moved the court, at the time of completion of this study, challenging the legal permission accorded to conducting the sport, and stepped up their campaign to

Figure 1. Youngsters and students participate in a protest to lift the ban on Jallikattu on Marina Beach in Chennai. (Source: Press Trust of India, January 19, 2017).

Figure 2. Slogan, "For us, who love our bulls, we were taught how to express our love by PETA".

Figure 3. "The only sport that doesn't involve gambling is Jallikattu".

Figure 4. Death of a bull (Source: Jallikattu Tamil Nadu page).

ban *Jallikattu*.

CONCLUSION

Through its tumultuous journey between legality and culture, the struggle over conflicting views on *Jallikattu* made it an opportunity for discourse on ethnicity in the milieu of a media event. In this process, it made an impression on social media users. Since the protests were seen as largely propelled by youngsters, social media seems became an outlet for youth to articulate their angst, reaffirm their identity and resonate with themes of culture and tradition.

The news media backpacked on the momentum created on social media. While social media connected youngsters and the issue, mainstream media used this to create a symbiotic resonance accentuating the prevailing sentiment. More than just mobilization, *Jallikattu* protests became an opportunity for ventilation of feelings and expression of opinion.

To summarize, the manner in which youths engaged on the issue of *Jallikattu* and Tamil pride is visible on social media and is a telling example of how social media can not only amplify but also become a participant in social causes. The momentum generated due to *Jallikattu* is being sustained on the social media space. This is an indicator that one compelling, convergent issue can be the starting point of a galvanized young urban community not only in the digital but also in the real world – as

activism on social media did not confine themselves to the cyber space.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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