



## BULL-BAITING FESTIVAL IN TAMIL INDIA

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1.0. On March 5th, 1958, while staying in Madurai in South India, I happened to witness the bull-baiting festival, the *jallikkattu*, as the Tamils call it—one of the most interesting customs of South India which forms, on the one hand, a tie between a very remote tribal past and the present time, and, on the other hand, may be regarded as one of the features indicating some sort of relationship between the Dravidian South of India and the great cultural region of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Tamil Lexicon gives under the term *callikkattu* or *jallikkattu* the following explanation: "Bull-baiting festival in which the competitors capture fierce bulls let loose on the occasion." The term itself is a compound meaning "to fasten the *jalli*"; now *jalli* or *calli* means small copper or silver coins, medals, pieces of broken metal etc. which are fastened as ornaments to the forehead of the bulls forming a sort of pendant. The bulls, prepared or even trained especially for the festival, are also called *callimātu*, lit. *jalli*-bulls.

The *jallikkattu* festival was described several times by authors like E. Thurston.<sup>1)</sup> Nevertheless, no author gives the exact date of this festival, no one gives a detailed description of "the segments of activities" during the festival, and no one has apparently noted the connection between the modern *jallikkattu* and the ancient *ērukōḷ* festival described in very early strata of old Tamil literature.

1.1. The modern bull-baiting festival, called *jallikkattu* or

*callikkattu* in the country round Madurai and *mañciviraṭṭu*, *mañ-jaiviraṭṭu*<sup>2</sup>) in the country round Ramnad, is practiced once a year by the Tamil castes (originally no doubt tribes) of *Kallar*<sup>3</sup>) and *Maravar*.

The custom which is, as will be shown, a survival from very remote past, is now going through the period of revival of a kind. It has survived in the best form in the Kallar country, in Tirumangalam and Puliyankulam (southwest of Madurai) and in the Maravar country between Madurai and Melur (see map). I myself have witnessed the jallikkattu in a place not far from Melur.

Those who actually take part in the festival are always members of the two castes,<sup>4</sup>) but among the spectators, there are of course members of many other castes and communities.<sup>5</sup>)

2.1. It was said that the bull-baiting festival has had a long tradition—so long that its beginnings are buried deep in the remotest past of may be the Proto-Dravidian tribes migrating to the South of India from the north-western regions of the river Indus.

In the most ancient extant text of Tamil literature, the famous grammar *Tolkāppiyam* (prob. 4.—3. cent. BC) and in the commentary on this grammar (cf. *Tolk. Porul*. s. 53), the custom is mentioned under its ancient name *ērukōṭal* (< *ēru* s. bull. + *kōṭal* v. n. taking) or *ērutaluvutal* (< *ēru* s. bull. + *taluvutal* v. n. embracing). The common name appearing in later texts and commentaries is *ērukōḷ*, bull-capture, and, under this item, the *Tamil Lexicon* says: “capture of the bull at large as a proof of bravery, by a man seeking in marriage the hand of a woman, a custom among herdsmen (*āyar*) in ancient times”. A special drum, *ērukōṭparai*, was used in these *ērukōḷ* tournaments which took part in the forest-pasture (Tam. *mullai*) regions.

2.2. The best detailed description of *ērukōḷ* contests occurs in the *Mullaikkali* (the 4th section of *Kalittokai*, an ancient collection of lyrical poems belonging probably to the 5th—7th cent. A. D.) by Cholan Nalluruttiran. Stanzas 102, 103, 104, 105 and 106 of *Kalittokai* all deal with this custom under slightly different angles: 102 gives a description of *ērukōḷ* as performed by the chief of the *Āy* tribe and witnessed by his kinsmen. The *Āyar* were a tribe of herdsmen;<sup>6</sup>) 103 gives a picture

of *ērukōḷ* and after, as seen by a young woman of the tribe and related by her to her friend, the heroine (*talaivi*) of the poem; 104 gives again the description of the festival as seen by a young woman, 105 is more or less of the same content, only there is stronger element of erotic poetry added to the description, and 106 deals with the young men and women of the tribe coming together after the festival and dancing — intoxicated with love — the *kuravai*-dance.<sup>7</sup>)

I give here a literal translation of the substantial part of Kalittokai 103 as an illustration of this detailed description of the ancient *ērukōḷ* so that it may be compared with the description of the contemporary jallikkattu.

2.3. Kalittokai 103 runs as follows: “The fair (girls of the herdsmen tribe) reached the platform — they who had ears adorned with shining golden earrings, who were of naive speech, of wide cool eyes, who had teeth like jasmine buds and (white) quills of feathers arranged in a row — to witness the capture (*kōḷ*) of the furious bull (*katal viṭai*) by the herdsmen (who have) many cows wearing fragrant garlands (of flowers which) grow in forests and on rocks, the *konrai* (Cassia) with soft clusters, the *kāyā* (Memelycon) with thin blossom, the *veṭci* (Ixora coccinea) with small leaves, the *piṭavu* (emetic-nut), the *taḷavu* (golden jasmine), the *kullai* (wild basil), the *kuruntu* (wild lime), the *kōṭal* (white gloriosa) (and) the *pāṅkar* (Salvadora persica?).

When they reached the platform, the black bull with white legs which like a stream flowing down the slope of a gem-filled hill had exceeded the limits of beauty, the spotted white bull with spreading big marks like the sky with evening clouds where the stars have blossomed and glittered, the red bull adorned with heavy bent horns like the young moon worn by the Murderous one<sup>8</sup>) (and other) fighting and fierce (bulls) were driven into the stall (*tolūu*) which was surrounded by fragrant creepers, resembling a large hilly-tract where rain-clouds dance, where, in the mountainous cave, lion, horse, elephant and alligator are assembled together when there is much rain with roaring thunders before and after.

The bulls, having found out that the herdsmen had entered the stall with strong desire (to embrace them), pricked (them with their horns). After they cut and parted asunder (the belly

of the herdsmen), the horns of the bulls were red with blood and had guts winding round them like the red-hued garland around the crescent moon worn by the One with the battle-axe round which flames are burning.

Behold (his) greatness! He is dancing before the bull, whose horns are encircled with guts, he takes the guts, standing (there) like one who holds in (his) hands a knot of red thread and another one parting the thick thread into three strands takes it.

O young friend, look at this! Here, this one — is he not the son (*makan*) of the Āyar tribe of the buffalo-herd (*kōṭṭinattu āyar*) ? — has sprung on the rough back of the fighting bull and has embraced it like a garland. He will not let loose (*or*, escape).

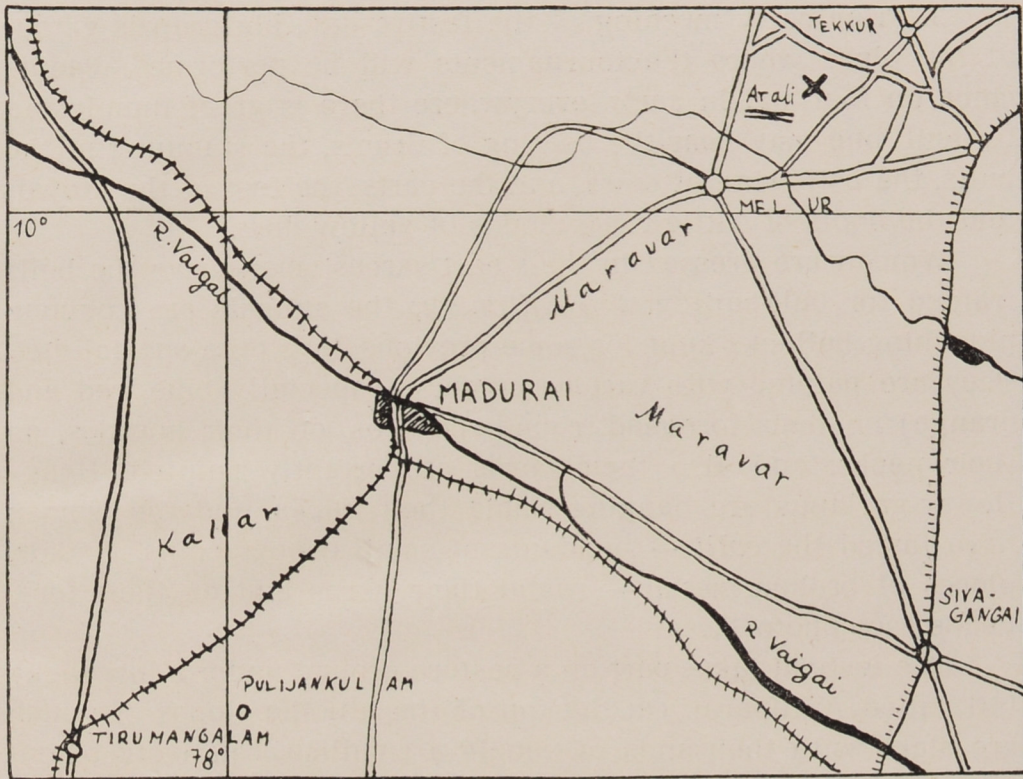
O young friend, look at this! Here, this one — is he not the son of the Āyar tribe of the cow-herd (*kōvinattu āyar*) ? — is dancing upon the speckled bull looking like a man driving a boat in the stream. He will not cease.

Look at (his) greatness! In the stall, the herdsman has embraced the swift black bull which came like wind, and has destroyed, on the thrashing floor, its strength, standing on its back, appearing like the Lord who on one day broke angrily with his feet the god of Death who rides on a buffalo, and took his precious life. My heart is stricken with fear.

O young friend, look at this! Here, this one — is he not the son of the tribe of the herd of small (calves? *pul inattu āyar*) ? — is joined to the side of the strong spotted angry white bull like a black spot on the moon. Behold the excellence of the herdsman who is wearing the garland of *kāyā* blossoms, he has caught the ears of the red bull which rushed on him with ceaseless speed, and embraced him, turning him away, similar to *Māyōn*,<sup>9</sup>) who one day caught the horse with a beautiful mane sent by enemies, tore open its mouth and beat it. My heart is stricken with fear.”

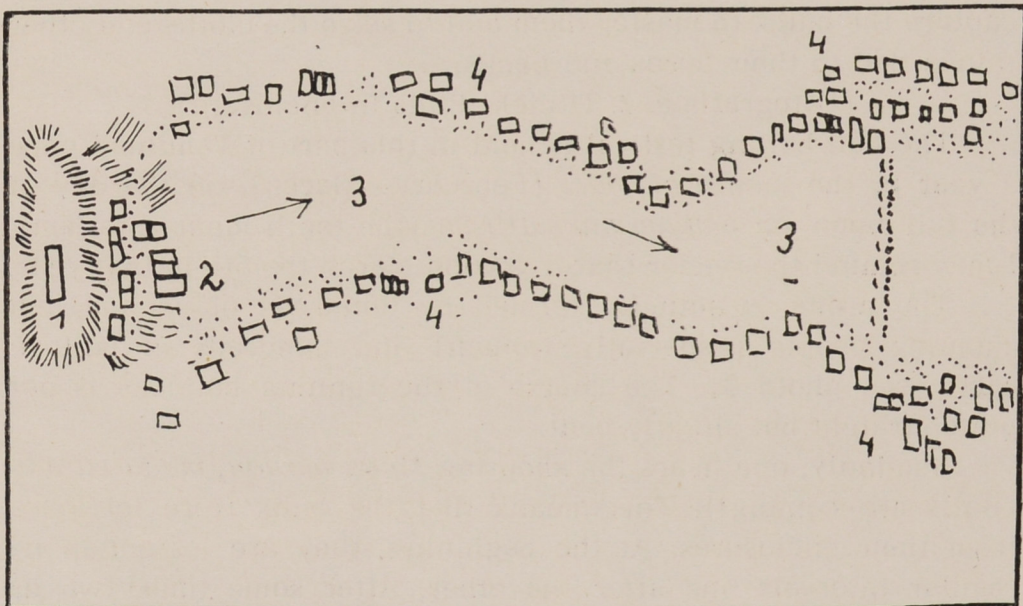
2.4. The poem further describes how, after the tournament, the young men and women of the tribe danced the *kuravai*-dance, on the *manram* (the common place of assembly) which was covered “with blood (or cow-dung? Tam. *eru*) and pollen (or semen? Tam. *tātu*).”

Thus far the Kalittokai describing *ērukōḷ*, the bull-baiting festival of Tamil India, as it was approximately fifteen hundred years ago. Let us now see how it is at the present day.



1. Schematic plan of the festival grounds near Madura.

2. The arena; arrows show the direction in which the bulls run, dotted lines show where bulls are captured. 1 — Arali hill, 2 — Enclosures with bulls, 3 — The arena, 4 — Carts and onlookers.



3. From early morning of the festive day, big crowds gather at the place where the tournaments will be performed. People come on foot and in carts, everywhere there is great tumult and turmoil, one may hear the beating of drums, the stamping of the bulls, the bellowing of cows, and the carts, the feet of the crowds and the hoofs of cattle raise clouds of yellow dust.

Women are dressed in their best sarees, men drive the bulls trained for bull-baiting, the *callimātu*; the animals are common ploughing bullocks kept for some previous days on a special diet. They are painted with various colours (especially blue, red and orange) on their forehead, round the eyes, on their muzzles, on their necks, and also their horns are brightly painted. Heavy flower-garlands are hanging round their necks, and the women have fasted the *calli* — pendants of small copper coins, medals, pieces of broken metal — round their horns and on their foreheads (see photo 1).

The festival takes part on a pasture ground under a low rocky hill called Araliparai. On the top of the hill the slopes of which are black with thousands of people a smallish, relatively recent temple of Murugan<sup>10</sup>) has been built.

The bulls are kept in several enclosures, not very big, made from stone-walls.

New cloths, handkerchiefs, turbans and towels are tied round their necks and horns. The game consists in endeavouring to capture the bulls, to master them and to seize the cloths and other things tied to their horns and necks.

(Fotografie č. 2. Titulek: Bulls in enclosure)

The bull-baiting festival is held in this part of Tamilnad once a year in the month of *māci* (February—March), on the day of the full-moon, on *makam nakṣattiram* (the tenth lunar asterism). I may remind the reader that it was on March the 5th in that year.

The arena is actually formed by hundreds of excited and shouting people (especially women) and hundreds of bullock carts (see photo 3). The course of the running bullocks is not quite straight but slightly bent.

Suddenly, one hears the shouting *Mādu varudu, mādu varudu* (Bulls are coming!). This means that the bulls were let loose from their enclosures. At the beginning, they are let out in irregular intervals one after the other. After some time, two or

three or even more are let loose at a time. About 50—60 bulls are run in the course of a day.<sup>11)</sup> The animal may run more or less straight, or, quite often, it may march directly into the midst of the crowd and disperse it or overthrow the carts<sup>12)</sup> (cf. proto 4).

The men are waiting in ambush and when the bulls, provoked by their owners and some other men, run speedily and fiercely enough, the second "chunk" in the "structure" of the festival begins. The bravest of men start after the bull from behind; when they catch up with it, they jump on its back after catching hold of its tail. Then they usually crawl up to the nape of the animal, grasp its horns, press its head down, try to stop it and finally, sometimes after stopping the bull, sometimes even before, they untie and capture the prize — the cloth fastened to its neck or horns. All this goes on amidst shouts, laughing, cracking jokes and producing many encouraging exclamations from the crowds.

Sometimes, however, the bull breaks the ring of the spectators and gallops off to his village. Or it may not come back home but wander about and its owner may seek it for whole days and weeks. To capture the bull and take hold of the cloth tied to its horns or neck is a matter of great prestige not only for the brave performer himself but for the community he represents — for his family and his *gōtra*, for his village, and for the owner of the bull.

There is thus a strong element of contest and real "tournament" in the bull-baiting festival; it is considered to be a sort of sporting game.

I was told that sometimes it may happen that the contesting parties become involved in disputes and quarrels which may take quite forceful turn accompanied with blows and blood. Also it may happen, though rarely, that the bull seriously wounds a man or even kills an onlooker.

From time to time there is therefore a campaign against the jallikkattu festival (especially some Congress leaders tried to stop it, but also some Maravar chiefs themselves were against it); on the other hand, the custom which survived thousands of years, has many supporters even now and it seems that, at present, the bull-baiting festivals are in the period of revival.

Notes:

1) E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, V, sub Maravar, p. 43 ff.

2) cf. *mañcuveruṭṭu*, bull-baiting, also cattle-raid.

3) Recently, a detailed monograph was written about the Kallar, cf. Louis Dumont, *Une sous-caste de l'Inde du sud, organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar*, Paris, 1957. The author describes jallikkattu on pp. 382-3. According to Dumont, among the Pramalai Kallar of K. Puliyanikulam, the « course de taureaux » is held on the third day of the Pongal festival.

4) According to some authorities, the Kallar are a subdivision of the Maravar, and the Maravar are probably one of the first Dravidian tribes which penetrated into the South of the peninsula.

5) A very lively description of jallikkattu is given in the first important Tamil novel *Kamalambal Charitram* (The Life of Kamalambal) by Rajam Aiyar, first published in 1893. Rajam Aiyar speaks about Madurai and Tirunelveli districts being the scene of "jellikkattu" festival; he says that 200—300 bulls are kept in an enclosure and after fastening a handkerchief to their necks, they are let out one by one. The aim of those who take part in the contest is to untie the cloth. He adds that this festival gives much joy to "those uncultured people".

6) The *Āyar* (sg. *āyan*, fem. *āytti*, cf. *āyam*, a herd of cows, *āy*, the cowherd tribe < *ā*, *ān*, female of ox, sambar, buffalo; this item is common to a number of Dr. languages, cf. Malayalam *ā*, *ān*, cow, *āyan*, cowherd, Kota *a. v.*, cow, Kannada *ā*, *āvu*, cow, Telugu *āvu*, cow, Kurukh *ōy*, cow, Malto *ōyu*, cow, ox) were a cowherd tribe, mentioned by Ptolemaios as *Aioi* (later, the tribes were partly integrated into the particular kind of South Indian caste-system and the term became to be used as a caste-name). In the Pandyan country of Tamilnad they had a tradition that they came into Tamil India along with the founder of the Pandyan family (cf. Kalittokai 104, 4—6, 105, 7). This tradition may perhaps be interpreted differently: the origin of the Tamil Pandyan dynasty might be thus traced to the headship of the Ayar tribe.

7) *kuravai*, according to the Tamil Lex., dance in a circle prevalent among the women of sylvan or hill tracts. According to ancient texts, *kuravai* was danced by men and women together.

8) Shiva.

9) An old Dravidian god of the forest-pasture tracts and tribes. Lit. "The black one", later identified with Krishna.



<sup>10)</sup> Murugan or Velan ("He who has a spear"), called originally *Cēyōṇ*, "The red one", is an old Dravidian god identified later with Subrahmanya, the son of Shiva.

<sup>11)</sup> According to older descriptions (cf. Thurston, R. Aiyar) of some 50 years ago, 200—300 animals were run in one day.

<sup>12)</sup> During the course I witnessed I had to seek shelter twice to save myself and my camera.





1. Jallimada — The bull is ready to start



2. Bulls in enclosure



3. Carts and onlookers



4. A bullock and a cart