

JALLIKATTU

New Symbol of Tamil Angst
an analytical narrative

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N Sathiya Moorthy

Chennai, December 2017

Prologue

Taking the bull by the horns! There is no Tamil equivalent for this English idiom. But when in mid-January 2017, Tamil Nadu erupted in angst as never before, barring of course the anti-Hindi agitation of the mid-Sixties, a forgotten piece of identity-logo spread across the social media. It was of a man holding a bull by the horns and trying to tame it—or, taming it. The legend around the circular logo in Tamil read: *Veezhvadhū naamaha iruppinum, vaazhvathu Tamizha-ga irukkattum*. Loosely translated into English, it says that as a people, Tamils should not think twice about giving up their lives and whatever else they possessed in the cause of Tamil.

The picture with the legend was a straight lift from the logo of the nearly-forgotten DMK mouthpiece, *Murasoli*, or the ‘Sound of Drum’, founded by party supremo and former Chief Minister, M Karunanidhi, in his teens. As coincidence would have it, the newspaper celebrated its 75th anniversary only months after the Jallikattu protests, which in turn happened when Karunanidhi, 93, was slipping into memory-loss and other age-related health problems.

Originally, the logo found its way into the mast-head of the newspaper in the Sixties, followed by the legend around it in 2006, penned by Karunanidhi into one of his daily *Murasoli* letters to the ‘*Udan-pirappaye*’, or ‘Dear Sibling’, much earlier. Most Jallikattu protestors were apolitical and some self-styled coordinators of the agitations from a later stage could be perceived as either being non-conformist or as belonging to peripheral pan-Tamil and other ideology-driven ‘radical/extremist’ outfits not inclined to be supportive of either the DMK or the ruling AIADMK in the State. Some of them were also perceived as having problems with the Indian State structure. By one count, pro-Jallikattu protests, or pan-Tamil protests in the name of Jallikattu were staged in 50 countries, most of them just symbolic but some of them as vigorous as in Tamil Nadu, though with fewer participants but with equal vigour.

The legend around the ‘Bull Fight’ logo referred to only the cause of the Tamil language, but in the context of the mid-January protests seeking an instantaneous reversal of the ban on the annual bull-taming sport of *Jallikattu*, it also extended the cause to cover all that was Tamil—customs, traditions and practices from the distant past, to the present day aspirations of irrigation waters, development and jobs, but synchronised with Nature and environment. The slogan had been used

earlier at the time of the anti-Hindi agitation, too, with a direct reference to the protection of Tamil language, so to say. This time there was another, equally important difference, too.

The anti-Hindi agitation had a visible, if not declared, political purpose, of targeting the then Congress Party government in the State, then going by the name Madras. Violence was in the air almost from the start. In a way, the over-heated violence caused a re-think in the student-participants, their parents, and possibly the Opposition DMK organisers, too, contributing to an early end to the anti-Hindi agitation than possibly planned for.

Anyway, which organiser of protests of the kind plan for the end, and more so for the day-after—whether in India or elsewhere? What more, with demands fully or mostly met, the issue is lost and lost for good. Re-inventing an issue from the pre-Independence past (1937-40), re-energising a protest and re-capturing minds were all not an easy task—not within living memory, yet precisely that was also the conceptual achievement of the anti-Hindi movement of the Sixties.

In comparison, the Jallikattu protests were peaceful to begin with, there was no violence either at the beginning or at the peak, in the middle—though at the end, there was enough of it at the main Marina venue in the State capital of Chennai. More importantly, there were no identifiable organisers for the 2017 protests. There were also no mood-setting preparatory rallies, conferences, or any other propaganda initiative of any major kind, which is typical of those called by political parties. For the same reason than as an element of surprise, at no venue was any formal police permission for the rally, sought or obtained.

The limited publicity campaign was through the social media, from man to man, woman to woman. The propaganda part, in justification of the protests and also the sport of Jallikattu, followed again through the social media, as if it were an after-thought. Then came the time when the traditional media could not overlook or ignore the protest. Soon, the Jallikattu protests were all over the nation and elsewhere, too. That way, even an equally quick-fix ‘trial balloon’ of a rally a week earlier did not show up what was in store as much or even much less. The rest, as they say, was/is history.

The January 2017 protests were to press the nebulous demand for lifting the ban on *Jallikattu*, a martial sport, mostly localised to south-central Tamil Nadu and even more identified with the martial community of Mukkulathores with its three identifiable sub-sects in particular. The Supreme Court of India had successively banned the sport for two previous years. Though the Central and State governments had alternated in trying to lift the ban through legal means and through Executive orders, or both, and try and restore the sport—the Judiciary would have none of it.

Yet, the competitive ‘Dravidian politics’ of the State, with an element of coalition spirit at the national-level up to 2014, ensured that the people always remained unconvinced and suspicious about the party or parties in power. So, when the ban stayed and no one seemed to be wiser as to which way the pendulum would swing in the Jallikattu season of 2017, the call for the protests came. It suddenly caught the imagination of the people.

But it was still not about Jallikattu, and Jallikattu alone. The protests, and the readiness with which the Tamils in the State first, and those across the world, embraced the call without a second thought, said a lot. It was an expression of the Tamils’ sense of denial and alienation, for which they had repeatedly targeted the Centre, the State government (whichever party or ruler was in power), and neighbouring States—and at times a neighbouring nation, southern Sri Lanka in particular.

Of course, the issues too went beyond a game or sport of Jallikattu, with its divine cause flowing from Hindu religious texts, both in Tamil and Sanskrit, and cultural moorings in Tamil legends of valour and literature, among other sources. There were water-sharing issues with neighbouring States, which when became violent, saw fellow-Tamils in those States being physically assaulted by the ‘locals’. Issues of the kind were numerous and almost repetitive, evolving into a pattern, but with no end or solution in sight. At least, the Tamils of Tamil Nadu felt that they had been wronged, not just as a State in the Union, but as a community—and as an ethnicity, and always so. The sense of ‘ethnic unity’ was not exactly there earlier despite the ‘Dravidian political identity’ to the extent that the later-day Sri Lankan Tamil issue revived and re-kindled it ever more.

To the defence of them all, it should be said that judicial verdicts of the nation’s highest body, namely, the Supreme Court, were seldom enforced, in matters where the Tamils’ (*read*: Tamil Nadu’s) interests purportedly suffered. Nor has been any serious and conclusive political initiative taken (especially by the Union of India) to find a negotiated settlement to the pressing problem(s) of Tamil Nadu, which at least were real.

The ‘Cauvery water dispute’ with Karnataka and the ‘Mullaperiyar storage issue’ with Kerala, both neighbours of the constitutionally-mandated political entity called ‘Tamil Nadu’, are prime examples. Every such issue and every such initiative ran into a predictable stone-wall, only to bounce back with greater momentum with even more predictable periodicity. But when it came to ‘anti-Tamil’ (?) verdicts of courts, they were enforced without fail. Or, the governments at the Centre and in the State would cite the court verdicts and the propriety to abide by such court verdicts, as the *sine qua non* for the continuing constitutionality of the Indian state and the States within the Indian Union. The ‘Jallikattu ban’ was/is a prime and near-permanent example in recent years.

Towards the end of days of protests, a sudden awakening to the immediate Tamil cause across the nation, a workable—though not wholly satisfactory—solution was found for restoring Jallikattu for 2017, with the season's events in multiple venues commencing a week or so later than usual. Rather, the workable solution, though interim, was the one that facilitated the early end of the protests, which had otherwise threatened to drag on longer.

It was known that people could not be expected to stay on and on without tending to their daily chores and other priorities, including day-jobs and other income-generating enterprises to support their families. But there seemed to be a possibility that if left with no alternative, members of the dis-organised 'core group(s)' would take turns during week days, calling upon the rest to come back during evening hours and week-end. With the fact that many members of the core group(s) and also many of the equally youthful participants were doing shift duties in 24x7 IT and ITE firms, the possibility of maintaining a decent turnout was not entirely ruled out.

The Court Position

Though Jallikattu came to be staged later in the season, the real issues in the overall context remain. One relates to the pending Supreme Court case against a facilitating Tamil Nadu legislation that made Jallikattu possible in Season 2017, and an earlier one, challenging the Centre's lifting of the court-ordered ban.

With little time left for the 2018 Season in mid-January, the First Bench, headed by Chief Justice of India, Justice Dipak Misra, took up the pending petition from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), the international animal rights NGO, on 6 November 2017, and issued notice to the Tamil Nadu government, returnable in four weeks. When the matter comes up before the court in or after the first week of December, the court in the normal course is expected to give reasonable time for the petitioners to respond.

In ordering notice on the new PETA petition, the Bench has also clubbed this case with the pending cases on Jallikattu, in one of which the court had declared that it was finalising the verdict in the midst of the protests that broke out in January 2017. Either the First Bench or another Bench may then hear the case, on a pre-scheduled date. It is hoped that the Supreme Court will either pass its final verdict well before the traditional mid-January start-off date, or pass an interim order, either banning or permitting Jallikattu for the five-week Season-2018.

Not a Reluctant Partner

Unlike propagated by some, Tamil Nadu was not a reluctant partner in the post-Independence Indian political and constitutional schemes. If anything, it was the first of the unified political entities on whose foundations British India was

founded. So, it was also natural that it should be the first one to be counted in for merger, both in terms of political preparedness to join the new nation and also the administrative set-up prepared to make the transition smooth and effective.

Rather, there were no big kings or rulers wanting to go ‘independent’ or join Pakistan as was the case with the erstwhile princely States of Travancore and Hyderabad in the immediate vicinity, other than the enclaves of French-ruled Puducherry, then Pondicherry, in the immediate neighbourhood, Pudukottai was the only officially-recognised kingdom embedded in the larger Tamil-speaking territory in British-India at Independence, and the ruler signed up for merger without protest. But there were social elements of the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), who took a politically conscious decision, to observe Independence Day as a ‘black day’. In the end, the Indian democratic scheme embraced them, too, and provided for the constitutional political accommodation and elevation of DK’s political offshoots in the DMK first and the AIADMK, later—an elevation that has remained unbroken for 50 long years, as never ever elsewhere across the Union.

The change of political identities, from DMK to AIADMK, and personalities, involving DMK Chief Ministers C N Annadurai and Karunanidhi, and AIADMK’s M G Ramachandran (MGR) and Jayalalithaa, have only strengthened the Dravidian political scheme and structure, not weakened the same—at least, not so far. Many have tried and failed. Others have dreamt and worked out some strategies. Some continue to do both.

Yet, travelling away from the days of yore, the Dravidian polity too has been compelled to re-invent itself, in the face of non-competition threatening them with inner-most fears of extinction. This has meant that peripheral political parties and groups, which alone remain to challenge them on their turf and on the causes that they had once held dear to the Tamils and their ‘Tamil identity’, have been able to do enough to stir them into competitive political action.

After the periphery too had failed them and also compromised the cause, so to say, a faceless, non-existent leadership and its messages through the social media was enough to stir up the people into taking pro-active positions, even if it meant that only a limited goal had been achieved in the end!

Layer after layer

The Jallikattu protests have ended, at least for now but not the protest-mode that had gripped Tamil Nadu.

If anything, like everything else that is synthesised at the bottom and travels upwards, the Jallikattu protests too peaked out, and have begun travelling back to the grass-roots, with more and localised protests, and some like the post-January Tamil Nadu farmers’ agitation reaching up to the national capital of New Delhi, with all its shades unfolding, layer after layer with each passing day.

Peaking again in what otherwise should be unthinkable in such a short span was the 'anti-NEET protests' across the State after the Supreme Court upheld its order for nation-wide common entrance examination for medical college admissions, with no relief or exemption for Tamil Nadu, over the short, medium or long-terms. If the post-NEET suicide of S Anitha, a 17-year-old girl who had just completed her Plus-Two examinations with high marks under the State scheme, but could not make it to medical education of her dreams owing to low NEET scores at the entrance examinations, triggered the State-wide protests, the fear of the law possibly coming in the way of the current crop of high school kids otherwise, became a dampener after a point.

Yet, the underlying ‘Tamil angst’ remains to be fully understood, appreciated and addressed. But in seeking to educate the ‘blind’ elsewhere, the protestors too have begun leaving their angst behind and bringing ‘action’ to the forefront. These angst-mongers’ methods militate against the conventional understanding of the Tamil psyche, of theirs being a peaceful and peace-loving people. Suddenly, the Tamils are re-discovering someone within, but from the outside. Not many of them like what they see of themselves. Or, what they are made to see of themselves, by some from among themselves.

Everything in the name of youth, student groups and as an expression of unexpressed Tamil angst has suddenly become passé. The new-generation peripheral groups—and they are still peripheral groups, and nothing more—has replaced the jaded, older ones with a clear political identity and acknowledged leaderships. They have also replaced the latter’s rhetoric with direct action, which is both imaginary and eye-catching. The forms of protests and calls for protests that they have initiated at times border on violence. At least, they had potential for whipping up violence, if not directed along the right path, over a rightful cause, all the time. The Jallikattu protests, especially in the central theatre of Chennai’s Marina sands, was/is a case in point.

The question then arises. Was the hidden agenda of the faceless leadership of a just and timely cause aimed at creating confusion, leading up to chaos in the politico-administrative structure of Tamil Nadu? After the relatively localised ‘Kudankulam protests’ against the Russia-funded nuclear power project in southern, coastal Tamil Nadu, which did however capture national and at times international headlines the Jallikattu agitation, soon followed by other micro and mini-protests across the State, the question arises: Is the ‘Tamil angst’ the effect of what has not happened over years and decades—or, is it also the cause for the indeterminable more that may follow? A trial-balloon of sorts!

Introduction

ACROSS THE Tamil-speaking world in India and elsewhere, the community's centuries-old annual harvest festival of *Pongal* in mid-January 2017 will be remembered for a long, long time to come—and for all the wrong reasons. What should have passed off as three days of community-centred festivities across Tamil Nadu, and wherever Tamil-speaking people lived, turned out to be a mass movement of protest unknown to any regional/sub-regional part, party or sect of India, which is even otherwise diverse, and at times divided.

True, the 'Team Anna' protests across the country against corruption and more especially the Congress-led government of the day at the Centre did draw huge crowds not very long ago. The 'Nirbhaya protests', following the gruesome gang-rape and murder of a young girl on a moving bus closer to midnight, aimed at underscoring women's rights and security, also began in the national capital of Delhi, which was the scene of crime, and had similarly drawn massive crowds. But both carried the hidden blessings and/or participation of political leaders/forces (however invisible—or visible—their symbols and/or symbolism were) and their politico-electoral motive too was all-pervasive.

Like the 'Nirbhaya protests', the '*Jallikattu* rallies' in the Tamil Nadu capital of Chennai and elsewhere, was a student/youth movement that grew into a mass agitation cutting across gender and age, caste, class and religion. At least in the early days of the Tamil Nadu protests, too, no speeches were made, or no condemnation heaped upon any political party. If anything, the protest-leaders, or whoever claimed to be one before the cameras, assiduously kept politicians of every hue far and away. For students and youth protests of the kind, both were as quiet and peaceful as they were efficiently organised, whether you give credit to the faceless, non-existent student and youth leaders or some hidden hand, as you desire!

The 'Team Anna' rallies were an expression of the average Indian's helplessness against the system, particularly focussed on large-scale corruption. They sought to highlight the political and administrative ills that the inherited pattern of post-Independence governance across the country had been reduced to. So, when a call came, the people responded. Truth to be acknowledged, Anna Hazare was not known outside of a select circle of activists, confined mostly to Maharashtra and lesser to Delhi. His chief lieutenant of the time, present-day Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal and later-day Puducherry Lt-Governor, Kiran

Bedi (whom Anna soon disowned) was known lesser, even in Delhi, when Team Anna took shape. Anna Hazare was not another Jayaprakash Narayan of Independence era vintage and later-day 'anti-Emergency fame', to be known to very many people in the country at the time, but the cause that he espoused had become dear to every Indian's heart. In context, Tamil Nadu's Jallikattu protests too were a symbol of the pent-up Tamil sentiments, emotions and expression of anger, against the neglect and worse, by the rest of India. Or, so did the protestors and the protesting State believe.

Whatever the impression outside of the State, and outside of the country, the Tamil angst of the times flowed from deep-seated perception of the abject insensitivity and consequent failure of successive governments at the Centre and in the State, to measure up to the unexpressed expressions of the expressionless (people) on varied counts on various occasions.

The irony is that especially over the past two or three decades, one or the other of the two Dravidian majors, namely, the ruling All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) or the parent Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), had alternated as partners in and to power at the Centre. The situation changed only after Elections-2014, when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power on the steam of a rediscovered Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Damodardas Modi. As may be recalled, Modi became Prime Minister, without having to look up to any Dravidian political partner to ensure parliamentary majority.

One of the two 'Dravidian majors' have been in power alternately in Tamil Nadu over the past 50 long years, ever since the undivided DMK dethroned in 1967, the then ruling, unified Congress Party, once and for all—as it would seem now in retrospect. To be fair, the Tamil Nadu voter too acknowledged the 'national mood', especially in the Nineties. Like others of their ilk, they too had tested sub-regional parties from within as alternatives to the 'Dravidian strangle-hold', if it could be called so, for nearly two decades. Rather, a new-generation of voters had emerged, and they wanted change, just as their predecessors had wanted in their time—in the Sixties.

In doing so, the Tamil Nadu votes also went along with the national sentiments, and were ready to vote with whichever alliance that was identified with the BJP alternative to the shrinking Congress behemoth at the national-level, too. They were the first ones to sense trouble for the BJP-NDA ahead of the 2004 polls, and they were together at it, in crossing over to the refurbished Congress—or, what they and the rest of the nation had thought it would be. It was an enriching experience may be, but the Tamil Nadu voter was not enamoured of the Congress. When the rest of India thus voted the BJP and Modi in, the State went back to its regional ways in the historic Elections-2014. In doing so, it also let the tried and

tested Dravidian majors to subsume the political space that they had given sub-regional parties and leaders, though only in stages and paces. The latter did not measure up, as their political performance and poll figures showed.

Pongal and the Protests

The Jallikattu bull-fight, as it is loosely translated, dates back to centuries and millennia, unlike what is commonly (mis-)understood. There are references to Jallikattu in ancient Tamil literature, and relatively recently in Tamil films, too, as it readily captures the mass-imagination of a brave youth's rural instinct to join the sport and win—and win a beautiful maiden's hand with it, at times.

Even in the North, Hindu/Indian mythology has references to bull-fights, where Lord Krishna was the tamer. Needless to point out, Krishna too won a princess' hand with it. Ancient Tamil history, mythology and literature are all replete with such instances, too. So have been recent Tamil works of fiction, non-fiction and semi-fictional narratives, until urbanisation and urban sport like cricket, and later on, video games, began capturing the imagination of the local youth, from the childhood on.

The Jallikattu protests have their origins in the more recent past. It began with a notification of the Centre, followed by the orders of the Supreme Court of India. Both banned the traditional bull-fights, or bull-taming to be precise, held either on the Pongal day or the day after, celebrated as *Mattu Pongal*, dedicated to *maadu*, or cow—and other cattle-heads. For the uninitiated, Pongal festivities in Tamil Nadu run through three days.

The first day is called *Bhogi*, when people discard the old, ready to welcome the new. If the term is pronounced as *Poki*, which it is not, there is some etymological link to Tamil. The term *Po-ki* can be a derivative of 'po', or 'go', telling the past to go away as one gets ready for the new—new harvest and the prosperity that comes with it. Better still, *Pok-ki*, as differently spelt, could mean 'to remove'. It then implies the 'removing of difficulties of the past year of poor rains and crop in a new one'.

Pronounced as such, the term *Bhogi* might have also been derived from the word *Bhogam*, which refers to a crop season. That is to say, in most parts of Tamil Nadu, farmers raise two crops of paddy each year. In some parts as in the Cauvery delta, they also raise three crops in the year. This is called *Bhogam* in Tamil, and hence extends to include harvest and the harvest season.

In many other languages and regions in the country, the word *Bhog* means 'offering', offering to sun god in this context. On the day of *Bhogi*, people clean their houses, give a good coat of white-wash or paint, and also paint the outer walls

with the auspicious 'kavi' or saffron—and also burn the rubbish that has collected in the home through the previous year, all in preparation for the post-harvest prosperity. They also burn the stumps left behind in their paddy fields after the harvest is completed. The ash of the burnt stumps is good manure. It also makes ploughing of the paddy fields that much easier.

The Pongal is celebrated the day after Bhogi, on the very day the rest of much of India observes *Makar Sankranti*. The term 'Pongal' refers to the overflowing of the cooking pot on the oven. The pot contains rice and milk, and when it boils and overflows, the whole family and the community celebrates.

It is an expression of hope and cheer, for eternal prosperity for the individual, village, and the nation at large. Jallikattu forms a part and parcel of the Pongal festivities in regions wherever it used to be conducted traditionally.

The Jallikattu sporting event is conducted in some places in the afternoon of the Pongal day, in many others the very next day, called the *Kaanum Pongal*. That day, people also visit family elders and friends, to seek their blessings. There are also other local practices in different places, the Jallikattu gathering being one of them. But the Jallikattu part of the festivities extends over a few weeks, held in different villages on different days. So, for these people—and by extension, for others—to accept the Supreme Court ruling of 2014 was an impossible task, however much they tried. They felt miserable when the 2014 verdict said that Jallikattu was not a part of 'Tamil culture'—and was also dismissive about the findings in this regard.

In the end, as the protests showed, the Tamil angst was not just against the Establishment, be it at the Centre or in the State, or both. It was not even against the Judiciary, if at all. For, even when slogans were shouted during the five/six-day long protests in Chennai and elsewhere against the 'Jallikattu ban', no one shouted any slogans against the Judiciary. At least, there has not been any report to the effect, either in the media or otherwise.

In between too, court battles had been fought and lost. The Centre and the State government were seen or at least shown as doing their best to restore Jallikattu. However, there was no clear idea until after the last minute, why either the Centre or the State could not have intervened as effectively earlier, for the conduct of Jallikattu, as a martial sport of Tamil Nadu, this past Pongal season, January 2017. The average Tamil had some, and at times selective, knowledge of the law. He has had past experience(s) with court cases, orders and the Centre's disposition. It is the same in the case of other people, wherein property ownership and related issues have a knack of ending up in courts, at times only civil but otherwise with an add-on criminal element, in terms of knife-cuts, if not gun-shot wounds. Such experiences have been compounded by daily evening doses of local TV channel

talk-shows, where self-styled experts vie with one another and also with the self-possessed anchors to mislead the viewer-voter.

In between all these, the voter had been made aware that between the two, either the Centre or the State could and should promulgate an ordinance, to make Jallikattu happen this year. That's if it had to be unlike other years since 2014, when the Supreme Court had intervened decisively again, after a gap.

Virtual Stand-still

Adding to the Jallikattu fans' woes was the preceding long hospitalisation of AIADMK's charismatic Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa Jayaram, followed by her not-so-unanticipated death on 5 December 2016, all of which had brought the State and State government to a virtual stand-still for nearly three months. When two-time Chief Minister O Panneerselvam was chosen again after his mentor's death for the third time, 'Cyclone *Vardha*' turned Chennai city and suburbs upside down in December 2016, and all the energies of the State government had to be re-directed towards putting its house in order. The government without Jayalalithaa did measure up, maybe better than when Jayalalithaa herself was around and active. In the process, the State government leadership perhaps chose to forget that Jallikattu would be around as a socio-political issue soon. It is also possible that at least some sections of the leadership had concluded that after the *Vardha*, the people would understand and that they could be hopefully convinced.

However, the efficiency of the administration possibly ensured that *Vardha* was forgotten earlier than expected, and Jallikattu returned to the centre table in time for the ensuing Pongal season. It, however, became apparent that Jallikattu was not to occur in 2017. Both, the Centre and the higher Judiciary, had clearly sent out a possibly unintended impression that they were not at all serious about the issue or the larger causes involved. The flash-point was reached, without even anyone seriously trying or igniting it, at least at that very point in time.

As if to justify the protests and protestors *post facto*, the State government and the Centre rushed in, for the former to promulgate an ordinance, to conduct the event in the days that followed and the latter to stand by it, in legal and political terms. The Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI), an arm of the Centre, which was the main petitioner seeking the ban, would suddenly find sense in going slow on its challenge to the post-protests ordinance of the State government, promulgated with the blessings of the Centre. In turn, the Centre too did not have options. That also formed a part of the Tamil angst, so to say.

Once the street-protests in 'distant Tamil Nadu' (had) captured the nation's imagination, the Supreme Court too became more aware than earlier. The court rose to the occasion, and accepted the Centre's submissions to put off the anticipated verdict on a pending case against the earlier lifting of the ban, by a

week. Thus, a more immediate, though temporary, resolution to the protestors' cause became possible.

This, in turn, led to the consequent dispersal of the lakhs of protests-participants across the State. As may be recalled, only three days prior to the D-day for the annual Jallikattu fair, the Supreme Court had tersely told counsel for the two governments that the Bench could not be rushed into pronouncing the pending verdict from a 2016 case, as though it had already begun dictating the judgment. It meant that the case in which arguments had been closed months ago could not be decided upon in time (even if it was the proverbial last minute), one way or the other, for the 2017 show.

It also implied that pending the Supreme Court verdict, against what essentially was a notification of the Centre from the previous year, 2016, in turn facilitating Jallikattu all over again, the Union of India could not promulgate a fresh ordinance or notification even if it wished to, pending the Supreme Court's disposal of the case in which all arguments had already closed. It is not as if such a thing was not attempted earlier, but it would mean that the Centre had flouted constitutional norms and healthy precedents in relation to the higher Judiciary, the proverbial 'watch-dog' of the Constitution and Democracy. Why the Centre did not approach the Supreme Court for an early decision, or even a postponement of the verdict, earlier no one knows.

Alienation and Angst

It is here that the Tamils' angst and unhappiness showed up, as it did through the Marina protests and elsewhere across the State, equally peaceful and successful. But the roots lie elsewhere, from the sublime to the trivia. Be it the Cauvery water dispute involving neighbouring Karnataka, or the Mullaperiyar dam storage level where Kerala is the other party, the Tamils have felt cheated by the system. In both cases, there have been a series of governmental initiatives from the Centre and a succession of Supreme Court orders, favouring Tamil Nadu, whose farmers have suffered enormously over the past several decades.

In both cases, the Supreme Court was the adjudicator and the Centre the enforcer under the Constitution. When those orders of the nation's highest judicial body had not been implemented—instead flouted—in the weeks preceding, Jallikattu's Season 2017, that too in yet another bad year for the State's farmers, it snapped something from inside. As if this was not enough, on national TV talk-shows, leading legal luminaries from the North began talking tough against the possibility of a fresh ordinance to facilitate Jallikattu even at that late hour. To the average Tamil, not the ignorance, but the purported, or perceived, partisanship of these 'worthies' showed up. For the first time possibly, the elite of Tamil Nadu

concurred with the opinion of the masses, without sharing their angst to the same degree. The proverbial Tamil patience was lost.

Yet, the average Tamil maintained his cool and peace, even as he/she answered the calls for a show-of-strength, again peacefully. The contradictions began showing up then. On the social media, many protestors (not necessary that any or all of them went to any of the venues, or were even residing in the State) made out their case thus. If a new ordinance, whether by the State or the Centre, would tantamount to contempt of court, what was the legal luminaries' 'verdict' against or justification for Karnataka and Kerala when they had 'blatantly flouted' successive orders of the very same Supreme Court? The elite could not claim to be honest and disagree, too. The social media did not leave out the Centre, either. Those that posted the social media messages/calls asked, what kind of Centre was it that would agree to the Apex Court's explicit direction for constituting a Cauvery Management Authority (CMA) one day, would go back to the court, seeking a review of the earlier one, that too, the very next day.

Social media campaigners had a more explicit point. The arguments having been placed long ago, and the court having decided on the setting up of the CMA, how could the Centre, which only had the duty to enforce that order, go back and seek a 'review' of sorts? If anything, Karnataka as the stake-holder State could have sought a review one more time, not the Centre, so to say.

Did not the Modi government at the Centre, too, qualify for 'dismissal' just as the court was hinting at the Tamil Nadu counterpart if it did not ensure that the Jallikattu protests did not become a 'Law and Order' concern under the Constitution? It is another matter that as per the Supreme Court verdict in the 1971 case, *U N R Rao vs Indira Gandhi*, there has to be a government headed by the Prime Minister to carry out the affairs of the Indian State at the Centre, thus denying the President of India autocratic powers of a kind. The Jallikattu protestors and their social media campaigners were seeking to make out only an argument—which had all the valid socio-political elements in it. Though some saw the State government caving in on the 'Jallikattu protests', to ensure that no such gatherings were ever allowed, when it came to the subsequent anti-NEET agitations, firmer *diktat* from the Supreme Court had its effect. In between, the State government's Law and Order response to various minor protests against methane projects and the like were mixed, at best.

The Jallikattu protests were the first of the kind in a long time, where the tempo especially had not built up over time—unlike in the case of those earlier on the Cauvery water dispute and the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, among others.

Multiplied Agony

The agony of the average Tamil had multiplied in 2016-17 because they had lived much of the months preceding the Pongal season of 2017 with a non-functional government in the State. First, it was the Assembly elections in the State and the long run-up of campaign. This was followed by Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's hospitalisation. Before that, the nation was witness to Tamil Nadu's shame of mishandled 'Chennai floods' of December 2015. From one December to the next, it was like a long winter of discontent. Chief Minister Jayalalithaa should have held herself morally responsible, in the eyes of many in the social media, but no one was held even legally accountable.

Through the year, an unprecedented number of farmers had committed suicide across the State. But the State government and political leadership were seemingly concerned only about Jaya's hospitalisation, later death and the post-Jaya politics within her AIADMK. The local media, both print and TV, were equally uni-focused on politics and political personalities.

It left only the social media as a tool for those that it impacted, to share their pains and sorrows, tears and shoulders.

The irony was striking. *If Chennai City suffered owing to unprecedented floods, the rest of the State suffered from unprecedented drought. Common to both was the unprecedented callousness of the political leadership and mismanagement, or non-management by the bureaucracy, relatively efficient though dubbed corrupt, compared to the distant past. The drought highlighted the farmers' plight even more, in the face of denial of Cauvery and Mullaperiyar waters, so to say, and the even more unprecedented callousness of elected governments in the State and at the Centre.* Or, this was what the perception was in the eyes of the commoner.

Through much of Jayalalithaa's previous, fourth and fifth terms in office—the latter during 2011-16—the State government was officially in a 'denial mode', whenever and wherever dengue-deaths had occurred frequently and in large numbers. If media reports were to be believed, the government wanted the State's medical fraternity, too, to go on a denial-mode, even in the face of increasing number of dengue cases and dengue deaths. There were also reports of government doctors who talked to the media on dengue prevalence and death being handed down 'punishment transfers'. Like farmers' suicides, such infection and deaths had occurred across the State, and the victims were mostly children and infants, and for no fault of theirs.

Fastest Urbanisation

In context, even mostly sedate sections of the growing ranks of the State's urban middle class (at 50 per cent or so, Tamil Nadu is the fastest urbanising State in the country) felt helpless and hapless. In their own silent way, they ended up comparing the unfolding scenario in their neighbourhood and native villages

(where much of the dengue deaths occurred, for instance) and contrasted it with the unevenness of the system and scheme governing them all. These newspaper readers and television news viewers also took mental note and made mental calculations *vis a vis* the time taken by the Supreme Court to pronounce the verdict in the ‘Jayalalithaa wealth case’ or the consequent contribution to anticipated instability in the administration.

They were also deeply pained and hurt by the impossible situation that some of the other (*read*: DMK) politicians like Kanimozhi, MP, and former Union Minister Dayanidhi Maran, had got themselves into and tarnished the State and its public honour and fair image, through their own alleged role in mega-corruption and their consequent involvement in court cases. Those cases were not about to end soon either. Unlike the Jaya cases, present and past, those against the DMK leaders would continue to make constant news in the local and national media even more, adding to the embarrassment of the State’s population.

The Tamil social media compared the Centre’s determination on demonetisation and other political moves of Prime Minister Modi, with their reluctance to promulgate a pro-Jallikattu ordinance on the one hand, and the Centre (too) not coming up with convincing communication on Chief Minister Jaya’s health condition and its deterioration, when it was known to have access to the same. ‘If successive governments at the Centre could promulgate so many ordinances to set at naught various Supreme Court verdicts at different times, and the Modi administration, too, for its part, could keep issuing Executive Orders by the dozen on demonetisation-related issues and clarifications, why not show the same interest and initiative *vis a vis* issues that are dear to the people of a State that is very much a part of the Indian Union?’ was the crux of the social media arguments in this regard.

Unknown to most and unacknowledged by the few in the know, the Jallikattu protest was also an expression of the youthful protestors’ anxieties about their own future, near and not-so-near. Many of them, especially boarders, had taken the ‘short-span inconveniences’ caused by demonetisation an affront on their dignity. Those that stayed away from a college/university hostel were the worst hit. News reports and analyses about the negative fall-out of demonetisation and anticipation of industrial sluggishness meant that campus recruitments might either not happen, or those thus recruited might not actually land the promised jobs. Travelling distant in mind and time, those already holding jobs, especially in the much sought-after and most-employing IT sector, also feared that demonetisation and the Trump presidency’s H1B visa rule-changes in the US could mean ‘pink-slips’ for many of them. None in power cared, not even understood their agony.

For the younger generation of students—and more so, their parents—the Supreme Court order for national-level common entrance test (NEET) for

admission to professional colleges in the State, as across the country, was/is a problem. It is more of a concern for their parents, especially those from rural areas, who have inherent limitations to match up to the best in the State and across the country. From a constitutional view-point, Jayalalithaa as Chief Minister had been pressing for a review of the court order, and/or for the Centre to exempt the State and its students from the same. If other States did not take up the issue or were all for NEET, it was their problem—Tamil Nadu could not be made to suffer, was the refrain.

Less said about the reservations in professional colleges the better. Ever since the Supreme Court fixed a 50-per cent upper-limit for all reservations in the ‘Mandal case’ verdict (*Indira Sawhney vs Union of India, 1992*), Tamil Nadu has been playing hide-and-seek with its original 69 per cent reservations. This has meant that the State allots seats under 69 per cent quota, but later adjusts it to 50 per cent as and whenever the Supreme Court hears the case—by increasing the number of general category seats for the year, to meet the 50-per cent upper-limit.

Owing to the indecision or unwillingness of the Judiciary to hear and hear out the Tamil Nadu reservations case over the past two decades, the number of engineering and medical college seats in the State has increased every year—impacting on quantity as much as quality. Over the past years, high-end IT jobs at entry-level have become fewer than originally thought of, also because the employers can afford to start at the low end of the pay-gradation and yet hope to mine a wealth of moderate to high talent. Unlike their predecessors from the ‘dot-com bust’ era at the turn of the millennia, the present-day youth also knows that if you lost a private sector job once, you had lost it for good. It is more so within the highly-paying IT sector, where most of them belong. With Tamil Nadu, among other south Indian States especially, producing over 250,000 engineering graduates each year, employers just limping out of recession would rather go in for fresh hands at low salaries and other hand-outs instead of re-employ those that had been ‘benched’, and for reasons of economy and not non-performance.

It did not stop there, either. Concerned more about TRP ratings than people’s pain and farmer’s anguish, the famed Tamil media, both print and TV, had focussed more on the Assembly polls in the first half of 2016 and on Jayalalithaa’s hospitalisation, death and AIADMK’s ‘succession battles’ than farmers’ suicides and creditor-banks’ sending raiding parties to farmers’ homes and humiliating them. Where sections of the local media reported issues of people’s concerns, the report and the channel had a slant. There were also deliberate attempts to counter the same in and by equally politicised channels on the other side. The less said about the national media, including print and television news, the better.

For a State that has generally been high on the score-card for national (*read: English*) magazines sold, and English talk-show and news-watchers, the coverage

of local news and views by the so-called national channels has remained sparse, at the same time exhibiting the ignorance of the anchor more than the knowledge of the participants, if at all.

Reaching Across

For an agitation that was to have been Tamil Nadu centric, how did the Jallikattu row reach across foreign shores for similar protests (though much, much smaller in numbers) to be held wherever Tamil-speaking people were present? If social media postings of the time were to be believed, not only in the US and Canada, Europe and Australia, Gulf countries and South Africa, but even in communist Russia and China, such protests were claimed to have been held (reportedly Tamil Nadu students studying medical schools there). The social media did carry pictures of such protests, of anything between a handful to a couple of dozens gathered in protests out there. The faces were visible though names were not mentioned. Verification, if one wanted to check the authenticity of the claim, was still possible. There are reasons for the same. One, the Tamils from India, working or studying in those countries, have felt the hurt and angst. It was very similar to, or at times more, than the helplessness and consequent anger at the system, felt but rarely exhibited by the 'upper castes' over the reservations system. It was directed against their own State-level politicians, politics, including 'family rule' of the DMK, on the one hand and of the indifference of the AIADMK leadership. More importantly, it was against the Centre.

The overseas Tamil protest-participants empathised not only with the angst felt by their brethren back home for long, and which they had carried with them to the far off lands. Their hurt and anger at the Indian scheme and system flowed from a sense of agony and helplessness that they had felt initially over the Government of India's handling of the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, war and violence, ending with the ultimate exit of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and scores of his armed cadres and hundreds of unarmed, innocent men, women and children on the battle-front in 2009.

The agony was widespread and shared, both back home in India, and more so in countries where they lived, with their Sri Lankan Tamil friends and neighbours unravelling more details and stories every day since then. It had turned into a sense of betrayal against the Congress-ruled Centre as a political entity, the Government of India as a constitutional institution, and the ruling DMK of the time in Tamil Nadu.

The political reaction was slow in coming. But constant communication between a relatively enlightened member overseas and his/her family back home, ensured that the message got across, clear and sure. The DMK-Congress combine felt the electoral heat in the Assembly polls of 2011. More importantly, for the

non-resident Tamil (NRT), if they could be described as such, the 2-G scam cases involving the then DMK of Tamil Nadu became a matter of shame overseas, as their Sri Lankan Tamil (SLT) colleagues and non-Tamil Indian neighbours were also watching the elections in the south Indian State.

Their sense of shame got transmitted back home, reflecting in the poll results even more. Since 2011, that uni-polar unilateral feeling of hurt and neglect by the Indian state system as a whole, and the Tamil Nadu polity closer home, has only deepened and widened. Today, their belief in themselves and the power of their youthful colleagues back home may have only increased, not decreased. This apart, there is no denying the role and participation of SLT Diaspora in many/most western nations, in guiding political campaign in Tamil Nadu, over the Sri Lankan ethnic issue, war and violence, and targeted against the Government of India on the one hand, and select political parties and leaders in the State. If in war truth was a casualty, in peace, again, in this case, truth still seems to be a casualty—one way or the other, one size or the other.

Yet, the question remains as to why and how India's most peaceful and spontaneous protests in a long time ended in and with violence. Truth be acknowledged, the size of the protesting crowd was totally unanticipated. Even government agencies of the Centre and the State might not have considered the possibility. But it was not entirely unanticipated, that whenever massive crowds gathered anywhere in Tamil Nadu or even elsewhere in the country, on any issue, fringe-elements often seek to capture the imagination of larger, peaceful sections, try and leave them with little option but to stay along, and play along—and direct it in a way where violence against and/or by the State became unavoidable, and for which the State alone would have to take the blame.

In recent times, it had begun with the 'Kudankulam nuclear protests' in southern Tamil Nadu earlier, and had got built into the psyche of low-profile protest organisers of the kind. It is not as if Kudankulam protest-organiser, Dr S P Udayakumar, with an American doctoral degree, and his group were directly involved in organising or even guiding and coaching the 'Jallikattu protestors', but the lessons learnt there, and acquaintances made there would have been of help and assistance.

Once the Jallikattu protest act got together, the Tamil Nadu police began publicly addressing and advising peaceful sections of innocent participants not to get involved with someone who was seen to be pro-active in their midst. In particular, the police advised participants not to share their coordinates like phone numbers, address and political thoughts with a stranger in the protest venue, especially in Chennai's vast Marina venue, lest they became unwilling victims of political indoctrination and worse. It may also be thus that the State police, reacting late to the emergent reality on the ground, might have decided to take a chance, and try

and isolate the ‘trouble-makers’ from the mainline mass of protestors, and act against them, one way or the other.

The police and the protesting mobs in the end-game of the Chennai campaign especially blamed each other for the violence. After holding back for a couple of days, then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister O Panneerselvam ordered a judicial inquiry into the violent act of the protests, especially at Marina. Justice S Rajeswaran, a retired Judge of the Madras High Court, has been appointed under the Commissions of Inquiry Act 1952, and his report is expected to throw some light on why it happened.

With the post-Jallikattu period witnessing more protests, be it on relocation of State-run liquor shops, or against a hydro-carbon project in interior Neduvasal or on farmers’ plight, violence has been time and again seeking to rear its ugly head—be it on the police side, or on the protestors’ side, or both. After a break, the people of Neduvasal re-commenced their agitation, but then in some other villages across the State, the local population mistakenly stalled drilling by Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), leading to the latter suspending ground-water mapping operations.

Sure enough, the police can also be expected to pursue independent cases of arson and more against some of those arrested for violence at the Marina protests. Among them may be some/many possibly wanted for other/specific offences already committed but had stayed away from the police radar for long. To the extent that the peaceful protests had ended in violence, it could also open up new possibilities on State action against anti-national elements. Whether or not the methods that they pursue are right and legal, the causes that they might have flagged in the Tamil Nadu/Indian context may have sense and meaning to it. The uninitiated and spontaneous Jallikattu protests have flagged the underlying angst of a people within the Union, decades after the anti-Hindi agitations had set afire the Madras State of the mid-Sixties, but under the authorship and leadership of the then unified DMK Opposition. To the extent that the agitation and its aftermath forced the Congress out of power in the subsequent 1967 Assembly elections, there was a message in it. Now there is another one for the divided State polity and leadership, and yet another for the larger Establishment and the national psyche!

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.

Pongal and Aadi Perukku

AS PER the Tamil-Hindu astrological calendar, or *panchang*, and coinciding with the nation-wide Makar Sankranti observances, falls the Tamil harvest festival of Pongal. In astronomical terms, it signifies a phase of the movement of the sun, worshipped as god across ancient civilisations, as among the most visible and continuing symbols of Nature. Either out of fear for calamities and destruction that they can wrought, or out of sheer awe and respect for giving him all the bounty, Man has always worshipped sun and other aspects of Nature.

In Tamil Nadu, and wherever Tamil-speaking people live, Pongal announces the arrival of the Tamil harvest month of '*Thai*', which is by itself a sign of prosperity. '*Thai piranthal vazhi pirakkum*' is an old Tamil adage, a belief. It means, 'Come the month of *Thai*, and new vistas will open up' (ending problems and miseries). The term 'Pongal' too signifies 'overflow' of the harvested crop, hence prosperity, again. On every Pongal day, inevitable prosperity is denoted by letting milk and rice overflow from the cooking pot, offered to sun god and then shared as divine *prasad* or *prasadam*.

Here possibly comes the first signs of the Tamils treating the cultivable land and the animals that help to plough his fields, or the female of the species, as

equals to future prosperity—as he cooks the rice in milk and adds jaggery or sugar to it, again representing sugar-cane, now a commercial crop.

In most parts of Tamil Nadu, the Pongal prasadam is cooked in the courtyard of the house, open to the sky and to sun god. In some places, it is a community affair. Even in places that are near inter-State borders, the old habit of celebrating Pongal only as a family affair with regular kitchen cooking is changing. However, it remains the same as far as the timing of the ‘cooking’ and ritualistic offering to sun god and other gods of Nature, both as a thanksgiving and prayers for the future, go.

Like Makar Sankranti observances elsewhere across the country, the Pongal cooking in Tamil Nadu is done at the exact time of birth of *Uttarayana*, the aspect of sun’s phase signifying the birth of the Indian calendar month of *Makar*, coinciding also with the Tamil month, *Thai*. In some communities, it remains regular morning cooking but with added prasadam, piety and festivities. In most others, the Pongal cooking is done at the exact hour of the birth of the new month. That again is changing. Yet, none of these differences and changes has made Pongal any less of a tradition and custom.

In much of rural Tamil Nadu, there is also the custom of ritualistically preparing and offering pongal (which also becomes the name of the milk-rice-and-jaggery cooked offering) to family deities and village deities, periodically. Entire families and communities gather on such occasions. To distinguish the annual harvest festival of Thai Pongal from the rest, some village communities also refer to the former as ‘*perum Pongal*’, or the ‘big Pongal’ festival.

Of equal significance is the use of only wet-land crops like rice, sugarcane and banana leaves on the occasion, so also tender/matured saplings of turmeric, which is considered auspicious in southern India, especially Tamil Nadu. For Tamil women, the use and application of turmeric on their foreheads at morning bath is a sign of their marital status and strength. Turmeric also protects the feminine face from the sun and heat, and has other medicinal qualities too—especially considering that she too is going to slog it out, dividing her time between home and farm, and needed protection from sun and heat, all the same. This is either the main cause for the use of turmeric, or is an added cause—but once again, the practice continues.

More importantly, Tamil women have their *mangalsutra*, or *thaali* in Tamil, tied only in a thread soaked in/with turmeric powder at the time of their wedding. Some may later on tie it in a gold chain, worn around their necks, others continue to wear both. In literature and films, real-life and fiction, turmeric tied in a yellow thread is a ready substitute for mangalsutra. On the reverse, crude as it may be, one of the early acts of widowhood in Tamil Nadu is the removal of the woman’s mangalsutra and abstinence from the use of turmeric, or yellow thread, along with the red *tilak* on her forehead. If the use of turmeric signifies prosperity and fertility

in a woman, its removal means the exact opposite. Rather, turmeric saplings to which again *puja* and offerings are made on the Pongal day, and which is then offered to sun god, is a sign of prosperity.

The same can be said of the use of fully grown sugarcane, banana leaves and fruits used on the occasion. Sugarcane is seasonal and does not grow in all parts of the State. Yet, for Pongal, it is a must item. Seasonal shops sell matured sugarcane stalks and turmeric saplings in push-carts on the eve of the Pongal festival. It is more so in urban centres, where the local population mostly comprises migrants from rural and semi-urban centres, even if for decades and generations.

Until successive Dravidian party governments began making rice available regularly in ration shops and at cheap rates in the dry peripheries of the land, rice was a rare commodity for the rural population in many parts of the State. Living on millets through most of the year, they used to have rice-based meal only on two or three occasions. Being the harvest festival, Pongal used to top it all, along with Tamil New Year in mid-April, and possibly Deepavali. Today, millets cost more than rice, which is available for free for the poor through the State government's public distribution system. For those that could not afford rice even that one day in the year, it used to be a sign of continuing poverty and penury. Tamil fiction and films have narratives of children from poor families protesting to their mothers, howling at the top of their voices, if they did not have their annual taste of rice, even if not rice pudding or *payasam*, on Pongal day at least.

Hence, everything associated with Pongal has a great social and economic, emotional and psychological significance for Tamils, living in or away from the regions where Jallikattu too is a tradition—and for generations, centuries and millennia together. So, has Jallikattu been a part of it all, in communities and localities where the sport was a part of the annual fair for local martial communities. Even granting that Jallikattu was/is a seasonal past-time, and was/is only a crude and cruel entertainment, it is historically obvious that only a prosperous community can afford it. Nearer home and elsewhere, only rich kings and landlords have been the patrons of arts and architecture, over the centuries, and only they could act as preservers and sustainers of cultural heritages too. The poor had little time or energy for what remained a rich man's past-time. Over time, Jallikattu had become an add-on sign of such prosperity, relative as it may have been.

What is not available readily becomes an idea for hope and dream. It is thus that in Indian mythology, a 'sea of milk', or '*paal-kadal*', became a sign of prosperity, where Lord Vishnu rests with his consort, Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. In Tamil literature, there are constant references to a river of milk, or '*paal-aaru*'. Tamil literature also mentions rains thrice a month, indicating it as a sign of eternal prosperity. Some early Tamil historical films, either seriously or out of jest, had the

line, '*maadham mum-maari*', meaning the same, the idea itself borrowed from ancient literature all the same.

In context, it signified either a kingdom's prosperity or absence of it. In the works of Omar Khayyam and other poets and writers, an oasis with some shade and water in the midst of desert conditions, was/is a sign of hope, if not outright prosperity, for a weary caravan. Call it superstitious or ardent belief, it is here that Tamil practices too become tradition, and tradition, custom. It is like anywhere else in the country and the rest of the world, too.

Fresh Flooding

Apart from Pongal, there is yet another farming-related festival that the people across Tamil Nadu celebrate every year. Owing to the inevitability of over-imposing religious connotation, it is confined mostly to Hindus, but other communities join in, in some places and on occasions. It is the *Aadi Perukku*, or 'fresh flooding' (of the river Cauvery) in the Tamil month of *Aadi*. Essentially, the celebrations should have commenced in the Cauvery delta region, but sure enough it has spread to other parts of the State too. They have continued to date despite the known and acknowledged fact that the Cauvery does not flow much in the State, over the past decades. On most occasions in recent decades, the State government has also discontinued the practice of releasing limited quantities of Cauvery waters from the Mettur reservoir for the festivities, owing to shortage of rainfall and also non-release of water by the upper riparian State of Karnataka.

The river Cauvery has its origins in Thalacauvery in the Kodagu/Coorg hills, now in Karnataka. For decades and centuries now, the south-west monsoon commences its Indian sojourns in the Andamans around 25 May each year, and reaches the Kerala coast on 1 June. From there, it spreads out across the country's west coast before turning in-land and travelling up to the North, East and the North-East. In the normal course, it should not leave out the dry West, either. The *Aadi Perukku* festival is timed for the eighteenth day of the Tamil month by the name *Aadi*, when the first floods of the year's rains in Thalacauvery will flow down to the Thanjavur delta, still considered the granary of Tamil Nadu.

Early Tamil literature has references to the *Aadi Perukku* festival on the banks of the Cauvery. The *Manimekalai*, written between the eighth and ninth centuries, is one of the five long epic-poems (*Aiyum-perum Kappiangular*) in Tamil. The epic has a scene wherein the male protagonist Kovalan (of the *Silappadikaram* fame) parts company from his lady-love Madhavi, to return home to wife Kannagi, at the annual *Poom-punal* festival—which is, celebrating the year's fresh flow of Cauvery waters in native Poompuhar. It is another matter that the Cauvery waters and irrigation have strong evidence in the Grand *Anicut* or *Kallanai*, a stone-dam across the river built by the Chola King Karikalan, as far back as the second

century after Christianity was born. Whether or not there is enough Cauvery waters to fill it each passing year, the Kallannai itself stands tall, in all its pristine glory, over 1,800 years after it was built—thus becoming one of the oldest man-made structures that has still survived in these parts—and continue serve the purpose for which it was conceived and constructed.

There is a link and relation between Aadi Perukku and Thai Pongal in the contemporary context of the ‘Jallikattu dispute’. As religious festivities, Deepavali (as pronounced in Tamil, and Diwali elsewhere) and Dussera have an all-India presence and prominence in the annual Hindu calendar. But Thai Pongal is an out and out Tamil custom and celebration, though there again Makar Sankranti is a national equivalent, so to say. Like Pongal festivities are confined to Tamil Nadu, Aadi Perukku should have been limited to the Cauvery delta. In practice, it is not the case. It may owe to the greater identification of the Tamils with agriculture and agrarian economy over generations and centuries. It may not be without rationale that Aadi Perukku and Thai Pongal (both named after the respective Tamil calendar months) fall six months from each other. The former is for thanking the gods for good rains, to help in irrigating the farms and fields. The latter is thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest. Tamils celebrate both wherever they are, in even this ‘IT *yugam*’, or era. They may be in distant Mumbai or Delhi or Kolkata, or Boston or Belgrade. Like Aadi Perukku, Jallikattu too is an extension of the average Tamil’s identification with his roots, whether or not they might have participated in the sport, or organised one in their villages, be it in the past or even at present.

Unlike the Aadi Perukku festivities, not all the migrant Tamils from India, took Jallikattu with them to far-off hands. It was/is not without reason. Those that went in the first lot to the West were from the upper crust of the Tamil society, and were not from the traditional ‘Jallikattu communities’. It is only in recent times that the latter too have ventured out. But where Tamils went out in earlier times, and are settled in their host-countries for long, they are hosting the sport there again, as part of the Pongal festivities. The Upcountry Tamils of recent Indian origin in neighbouring Sri Lanka are an example. Elsewhere across the British Raj where Tamils from India were taken as indentured labour, they did not have the freedom or wherewithal to practice their religion or celebrate their religious festivities. Not only Jallikattu, but even their other religious and community practices and customs were lost, some retained in some form, and others revived in more recent, post-colonial times, out of the fading memories of the generations that succeeded the forerunners.

Regional, Sub-regional?

At the height of the Jallikattu protests in 2017, there arose the question if the sport had a State-wide reach across Tamil Nadu. The campaign too was done mostly

through the social media, and the authorship of the protest could not be ascertained. But the argument that the sport was limited to a minority section was gaining ground at least until crowds began swelling and drowned it.

In a way, the gathering of massive crowds at different venues in the State for the Jallikattu protests was a demonstration of the sport's wider reach. The local television media also showed this time, how young boys and girls from other parts of the State and even other parts of the country, had travelled to traditional Jallikattu centres like Palamedu, Alanganallur and Avaniyapuram, all in the southern region. Many of them did not even know the name of those villages/localities. To some, it also became a pilgrimage of sorts. In the mouths of some other youngsters, it sounded like a penance for not doing what they should have been doing through their growing-up years. They had overlooked it, either owing to ignorance or peer-pressure or parental neglect. Now that they had been made aware of it, and they were also on their own, earning and living their own lives, they were atoning for the past. Whether they will do so in future remains to be seen, but they at least have stories of the same to tell their children and grandchildren that they had not heard from their parents, mostly based now in urban centres.

Like Pongal, and more like Aadi Perukku, suddenly, Jallikattu too started spreading wings, beyond the traditional geographical sphere of influence within Tamil Nadu. Maybe, the sport may never be staged in Boston and Berlin, especially with the traditional fervour native to the customary Tamil Nadu villages. But there is already an announcement about the State government hosting it in Chennai's famed Marina, the venue of the historic January 2017 protests.

Over the past several years and decades, the sport has already spread to some peripheral areas, outside the traditional confines. If the State government is serious about it and also has its way, on the Marina sands, the State Tourism Department can make it an extension of the annual 'Pongal Industrial Trade Fair', at the other end of the world-famed beach, in the Island Grounds, and draw huge crowds even without the 2017 controversy.

It can well be like neighbouring Kerala making the annual boat-race, again coinciding with local harvest season, a larger tourist attraction than already. Karnataka has its annual Dussera procession in Mysuru. Nearer home, many addicts of the annual 'December *kutcheri* season' of Carnatic music in Chennai believe that the fortnight-long celebrations, now going up to a month, may have preceded the birth of the city. It was transported from the rich Thanjavur delta, where fine arts had its patrons in the local land-lords. The *brahminical* organisers of the 1927 Madras session of the Indian National Congress, all lovers of traditional music-forms, added the *kutcheris* by Thanjavur-based *vidwans* in the

evenings, for relaxation and entertainment. Today, it has been institutionalised as never before, either in India or outside.

It is not only about Carnatic music but even various forms of folk music, instrumental or otherwise, which had originally belonged to traditionally prosperous regions of the State—particularly in the kingdom cities of Thanjavur, the erstwhile Chola capital, and Madurai (Pandyas). When kingdoms fell and went beyond repair and recognition, new patrons emerged—in the form of local landlords and *zamindars*. When they also became weak, politically and financially, newer sponsors appeared on the scene, in some cases—though not in all.

Some of these patrons/sponsors did not belong to the regions where the art forms had thrived and prospered. Some artistes migrated, some others still stayed back in their original homes, and travelled to different places in different seasons for different purposes, based on what the new-generation patrons wanted. It is not unlikely that Jallikattu, otherwise a dying tradition and art-form in its own way, can take such a turn, and a turn for the better, over time.

Who knows, half a century down the line, a casual visitor to Chennai may claim that it was an ancient sport native to the city, though even the city itself would have only been 400-plus years young. Better still, with the current impetus and new interest, Jallikattu can also be staged in other non-traditional areas of the State other than Chennai—or, even outside Tamil Nadu. No one can then say that Jallikattu was only a sub-regional sport, as some tend to say now. If *kabadi* can become a national sport, and vying to become an Olympic event, who knows, with Spaniards in Europe and across the Americas taking the lead, bull-taming of the Jallikattu kind, if not of the blood-letting bull-fight kind, could become an accepted international event over the medium term.