



By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

Fight the Lie to the Bull in the Name of Cultural Heritage!

The Chief Minister's announced plan to restore bull fights in the Goan arena again, is mired in strategic fascist politics, given that restored is spoken of in the name of cultural heritage. Is this talk of restoration of bullfights going to be the proverbial foot through a door that will finally open up to sanction for all kinds of practices in the name of cultural heritage?

What constitutes cultural heritage? Must everything that constitutes cultural heritage be retained or restored? Sati was supposedly a cultural heritage, and when it was banned many caste-hindus protested about the colonial insensitivity. How would restoration of bullfights as a cultural heritage be different from the restoration of sati? According to some, the latter is also part of our culture, as a stone in the Goa Government museum bears testimony.

There is a polarisation of people on the issue of bullfights between the defenders of human rights and the defenders of animal rights, which seems to provide an opportunity for undemocratic totalitarian politics to hold the day. There is a "we-say-it-is-cultural-heritage-therefore-it must-be-retained-no matter-what-be-the-consequences" tone.

While there is a certain power in organising the bull-fights, there also emerged another kind of powerlessness because the bullfights could no longer be organised and subaltern sections that were involved in the bullfight related activities were being targeted. The power comes from a certain macho ability to organise the bullfights by raising the bulls and preparing and provoking them into a fight. And the powerlessness as in operation today comes from the selective criminalisation of practices of certain sections, of certain communities.

Let me relate my own experience of witnessing bull-fights. They were organised right in front of my ancestral house at Taleigao, on Harvest feast day in August each year at the Church Square. As a child, I was a regular attendee. There were crowds of people from all over Goa, to witness the spectacle. Often the bulls would lock themselves into a fight but there were also occasions when the bulls refused to lock themselves into the fight and simply ran away

from the arena. This would cause a near stampede, because everyone was afraid, and naturally so, of being gored by the horns of the bull. There were also those occasions when, while the bulls were locking horns, some men in the crowd would take advantage of the situation and sexually harass women attendees, which I have also also been a victim of. Although this experience kept me from going for bull-fights again, I cannot forget how I enjoyed the spectacle of bull-fights along with relatives and Taleigao friends from the neighbourhood.

This naïve indulgence in adrenaline thrills of childhood is today a subject of a deeper anguish and guilt. I am re-questioning it because the whole idea of entertainment at bull-fights was built around bulls locking horns thereby putting a premium to fights, completely ignoring the cruelty to the bulls.

But then, when the bullfights were banned, the Government did nothing to rehabilitate the people from subaltern sections of society who were dependent on it. Even if a ban were to be inevitable, the Government had to demonstrate its humanitarian responsibilities to rehabilitate affected small entrepreneurs. Human rights invariably are made to take a back seat in the wake of bans.

Also, is restoration of bullfights a seeming way of addressing or pretending to address deep-seated prejudices that are increasingly surfacing ? We have a multifaceted and diverse cultural heritage. We continue to be robbed of much of its positive character, now in the name of Hindu Rashtra politics. So, can such isolated governance acts which polarise on human rights v animal rights lines, really bring back our cultural heritage? Can it at all restore our faith, when we see day in and day out the fascist tendencies running rampage to give a certain finality to dominant society practices as superior cultural heritage? How else does one explain the utter callousness following the killing of a Muslim on the ground that he ate beef? Or wringing out the survival of Catholics and Muslims in the business of beef?

Besides, the contextually located open spaces where bull-fights used to be held are vanishing. So, is this announcement about bullfights a red herring about choices that cannot be really exercised anymore? Surely they will not change the increasing encroachment, if we may call it that, on our spaces, on our positive cultural heritage, by rightwing Hindutva fundamentalist organisations?

Another lurking question is: why have only certain practices such as bull-fights been selectively criminalised? Is it about criminalising selective masculinities? While ignoring State masculinities such as those of banning cultural expressions in the name of not “hurting people’s sentiments”, or those that impose a culture of what to eat and not to eat at the cost of death? Or those that subtly impose a culture of what to eat with massive advertisements thereby pushing local products and the survival of people on those products out of the market?

Don’t make me choose between preserving heritage and hurting animals. We need a governance that privileges survival of ALL without discrimination.

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