

Navigating the Sacred Magic Circle Where Ritual and Play Coexist in Jallikattu

Akhila Rajeena James

Post Graduate Student
Indian Institute of Technology
Gandhinagar IIT Gandhinagar,
Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India
akhila.james@iitgn.ac.in

Dr. Malay Dhamelia

Assistant Professor
Indian Institute of Technology
Gandhinagar IIT Gandhinagar,
Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India
malay.dhamelia@iitgn.ac.in

I came to Palamedu, a small village town in Tamil Nadu to witness Jallikattu - an ancient bull taming sport held as part of a harvest festival. At the entrance of Palamedu, stood a banner that read “*Vaadi Vaasal 2026 - An Invitation to witness Madurai's fame, game and soul*” (Fig. 1). What struck me the most about the banner was the three words - fame, game, and soul. To an outsider like me, these words filled me with curiosity, but an insider never questioned why they belonged together. It was only on the way out, after two days of moving through the events of the festival, that I finally understood why these words were placed together.



Figure 1. Banner at the entrance of Palamedu

On the surface, Jallikattu is a bull taming festival. The player is supposed to hold on to the hump of the bull for a specific duration, in an open arena, in order to win. But this description fails to contain everything that makes the event interesting. The narrow gate that the bull charges through into the arena is called *Vaadivasal*. It is structurally identical to a temple gate, rather than a sports gate. The bulls depicted in the Jallikattu posters, were dressed the same way one would decorate a divine deity. The players, along with the intense physical training required to excel in the game, also undergo a two-week-long spiritual cleanse and religious preparation. They believe that the bull is a manifestation of a sacred entity, and can read their spiritual preparation and respond accordingly. There is a formal pre-event pooja, where the bulls and players attend in order to seek blessings before the game. The game itself is inaugurated by *Temple bulls*, who, despite being bulls participating in the game, are forbidden to be tamed by anyone.

To question whether Jallikattu is play or a ritual would be imposing a binary that fails to capture the phenomenon with all its complexities. The people of Palamedu were never able to answer the question because it never was a case of either/or. Throughout the festival, there is a paradox of deep devotion and intense competition that was unexamined by the villagers. Yet, historically, play and ritual are seen as opposing categories. People often perceive rituals as sacred and serious, often disregarding play as something that is 'just for fun'. Yet, they overlap in the intersection of ritual games, where devotion and enjoyment mutually coexist.

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Huizinga establishes that play and ritual share a formal structure, both occurring in a bounded space, governed by special rules, separate from ordinary life (Huizinga, 8-10, 1995). However, his magic circle assumes a single unified experience inside the boundaries. Caillois refines this but states that sacred and ludic are mutually exclusive. This is an assumption that Jallikattu refuses (Caillois, 1, 1961). Van Gennep and Turner offer the liminal thresholds and communitas as overlapping dimensions in rituals rather than a third fused category (van Gennep 1960, 18; Turner 1977, 350). What none of these frameworks account for is two frames, the sacred and ludic, simultaneously present in a single body without diminishing the other. That is the gap this paper addresses.

This paper draws on two days of ethnographic fieldwork conducive in Palamedu, Tamil Nadu, India, in January 2026. The methodology consists of unstructured observations and semi structured interviews, with the assumption that play must be

understood from an inside perspective, rather than from the outside. I attended the pre-event rituals, observed the game, conducted informal interviews across four roles - players, spectators, cattle owner and event organizers.

This entanglement of the sacred and ludic in Jallikattu is not accidental. It is structurally produced through space, objects and rules. The Vaadivasal is both a temple gate as well as a sports portal. The non touch zones are simultaneously game rules and sacred prohibitions. The *communitas* inside the arena are cheering for competition as well as sacred solidarity. You cannot remove one frame while making sense of the other. It is not a fusion of two previously separated states. It was never distinct to begin with. The entanglement is produced, sustained and materialised.

The entanglement produces a dual consciousness. It is an embodied phenomenological state that is structurally cultivated. The player does not actively switch between acting as a player and a devotee. He enters the threshold embodying both sacred and ludic states, fused through spiritual and physical preparation. The fear vanishes in the arena because of both these shields. His dual consciousness is fully activated. The body no longer needs to consciously distinguish between the two frames because he has absorbed and embodied it completely.

A player who participates every year describes what happens when he crosses the arena threshold. Outside he is afraid, but inside, his fear vanishes. Two weeks of fasting and prayer gives him the spiritual reassurance that he will be safe inside. This is Goffman's keying in the most embodied form. This paper proposes dual consciousness as the concept describing the simultaneous coexistence of devotional and ludic frames, where each intensifies the other. The question this paper opens is whether the bull knows it is playing. Every framework in this paper theorises the human experience. Although, the bull's unpredictability is what generates the competitive and devotional charge. Without this, the meaning of the sport falls apart. Bakhtin, M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by H. Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press.

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