

An Image Journey into Carnavalesque and Representation: The Case of the Postcolonial Indian Mainstream Narrative

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Abstract

Carnivals in pre-independence India had a medley of episodes—sometimes fascinating and sometimes marred by violence as such hostile incidents were mostly due to the feudalistic fabric that it worn. British ruled India presented some respite. Postcolonial India indicated a return to modernity but it was not to be. Regressive elements ducked in with myths and superstitions which stemmed the progress. Amidst this milieu, the postmodern and postcolonial elements of carnivalisation and representation have become a contested site. Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival theory assumes significance in that the problematization of carnival in the Indian scenario has resulted in a unique syndrome wherein the carnivalistic discourse is being subverted and appropriated by the forces by virtue of their dominance in power, class and the quite primitive social structure called caste. By deconstructing Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, this research attempts to explore issues like carnivalisation and its relation to hegemony, demystification, representation and social change. How far has carnivalisation affected and effected the Indian society? What are the other forces that dominate the spectrum of India’s landscape? Do these elements point towards an exclusive or an inclusive India? The present discussion assumes significance due to the volatile social and political climate since 2014 due to the divisive forces in power. Some of the findings from this research pose a humungous concern, aptly aided by the postcolonial and postmodern elements coupled with the likes of corporate cannibalism. Consequently, Bakhtin’s idea of carnival has been reduced to a farce here. Plurality has been sacrificed at the altar of unitary centralized structure. With regard to the notion of representation too, a similar phenomenon has struck making this postcolonial conundrum into a sham.

Keywords

Carnivalization, Demystification, Hegemony, Representation and Social Change

1. Introduction

Celebrations, rituals have often played a vital role in any society and continue to do so. None can brush this aside. Indian history is replete with examples of celebration but the spirit of carnival or carnivalization, as ordained by Mikhail Bakhtin, is yet to be located in a proper perspective. The dictionary meaning of the word “carnival” varies but none can deny the fact that it is a celebration of an annual event—whatsoever it is—sacred or profane or mundane. Predominantly, carnival has been associated with religion. Mikhail Bakhtin was the pioneer in this area to explore the nuances of carnivalization, which was essentially a contribution from the Western Europe. In this regard, a significant question arises as to whether the phenomenon of carnival undermines hegemony resulting in social change. No wonder, an upbeat carnival sometimes leads to chaos, noise and sound—all posing a stiff challenge to hegemony. This research article shall dwell extensively on the concept of carnival—tracing its genesis, growth, implications and the potential tasks that it throws during such an experiment. More specifically, this study shall also reflect the relevance of carnivalesque in the Indian socio-political landscape which is quite nebulous and offers interesting case dynamics. During the process of this trajectory in the Indian firmament, two related incidents from the south of India—Kerala and Tamilnadu were analysed for case study in order to place the verisimilitude of the Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque herein. Is Bakhtin’s carnivalesque reflected in the Indian socio-cultural setting? Does it offer any space and dialogues for the others? Does it give rise to a new world order as envisaged by Bakhtin? What are the social changes postcolonial India has witnessed due to this carnival, especially since 2014? Can carnival be considered as a tool of social change and to what extent has it done? Since this research is an exploratory one, it might suffer from certain limitations due to the limited availability of resources earlier done in this area. This article gains significance due to the vitiated atmosphere prevailing during the last decade.

Since the year 2014 after an ultra-Hindu nationalist party—Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rode to power, the Indian socio-political-cultural fabric brought in some notable deplorable trends. Secularism—one of the basic structure of the Indian constitution is slowly getting extinguished. Nonetheless, other democratic institutions too suffer the same fate. Socio-politico-cultural institutions are assaulted with several instances of killings over possession and eating of beef, alleged religious conversion theories, violence against women wearing hijab (purdah/veil), vandalizing mosques, churches, opposing inter-religious marriages and the list is endless. This right wing party with its leanings towards fascism patronizes hate crimes, bulldozer politics of razing buildings owned by Muslims and an open call to kill Muslims and Christians so as to make India a Hindu country. “Unity in diversity”—a hallmark of Indian plurality is undermined as all the three pillars of the Indian government—executive, judiciary and the legislature have failed miserably and have become silent spectators to the ongoing lumpenism throughout the country. Against this backdrop the need for an alternative dialogue emerges.

Constructive criticism and tolerance towards other cultures are the need of the hour. Carnival and carnivalesque furnishes ample space to express such feelings of dissent. Not just the right to freedom of expression but even the right to live or exist has come under increasing attack. No wonder the ruling dispensation exploits these cultural forms to sabotage their identity and reinforce their ideas. Carnival is one such cultural practise that suffers from the misdemeanours of this union government as they believe that carnival might disrupt their ideals.

2. Carnival: Its Genesis and Growth

Carnival in a very ordinary sense of the term points to merry making, fun and frolic. However, upon deconstructing this word, carnival per se, trailblazers a host of issues in its fold—chaos, conflict, fury, hegemony, language, noise, parody, satire, sound, social change to name a few. Everything was bifurcated into the “highs and the lows” reminiscent of Karl Marx’s class differentiation. High culture dictated the margins of low culture and relegated its people to periphery. During carnival, people experience unlimited freedom and express their emotions, feelings in a very open manner. Hence the word carnival is open-ended embracing a galaxy of meanings as told above and remains to be seen how much this can be decoded in the contemporary situation. Carnival is alive everywhere and “grows organically out of a rich culture, a torturous history. The event is a space where the entire range of our cultural expressions and ethnic diversity emerges” (Sankeralli, 1998).

Different authors recount various tales about the origins of carnival. Bullock (2020) is of the opinion that “carnival originated in the Caribbean as a blend of the music, dance and festival traditions of Africans brought to the West Indian islands by the slave trade.” Carnival’s genesis can be traced to the followers of Roman Catholics in Italy who observed fast for forty days, after which it came to be celebrated as the Lent festival. Lent or Lenten festival, as it is also called, begins on Ash Wednesday covering a period of forty days and ends with Easter in the Christian calendar. “In medieval Europe, carnival was part of an organic cycle of discipline and release” (Godet, 2020). Europeans started this tradition of holding wild costume festival right before the first day of Lent (Hunt, 2018) and Lent “is a special time of prayer, penance, sacrifice and good works in preparation of the celebration of Easter” (Saunders, 2002). Traditionally meat was not eaten during Lent, they called their festival, *carnevale*—which means “to put away the meat”. Thus, a carnival would be the last occasion on which meat was permissible before Easter (Cuddon, 2013). As time passed, carnivals in Italy became quite famous; and in fact, the practice spread to France, Spain, and all the Catholic countries in Europe. Then as the French, Spanish, and Portuguese began to take control of the Americas and other parts of the world, they brought with them their tradition of celebrating carnival. Hence, carnival came to be identified as a season of merry making, revels, feasting and entertainment (Cuddon, 2013). The carnivalesque refers to particular experiences and ways of behaving that characterised the medieval carnival (Chapman & Light, 2017). Over a period of time, carnivals came to be

associated with disruption, hierarchy being turned upside down and subversion of authority (Cuddon, 2013).

Carnival in India exists from time immemorial but with its own ifs and buts. Visuvalingam (2018) states that “the meaning and role of carnival is best understood through the semiotics of transgression”. Carnival, when takes place in a religious context “violates the interdictions and observances of the tradition in question, but does not to seek to replace the latter” (Visuvalingam, 2018). Carnival exudes itself through various shapes and structures like chaos, comic, grotesque, horror humour, laughter, mock and masquerades. It ought not to be perceived in a narrow sense of feast, festival and celebration but approached in terms of dialogism, parody, polyphony self-reflexive and non-monologic (Hutcheon, 1983). Both the concepts of “carnival” and “carnavalesque” are associated with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Webb (2005) says “the utility of the concept of carnival lies in its capacity to illuminate potentially transgressive elements within popular social and cultural practices.” Carnival has the propensity to be joyous all the while making the world inverted, subverting “formalistic, logical, authoritarian structures” (Hutcheon, 1983: p. 85) and renders it to the status of a jester.

3. Bakhtin’s Carnivalization

Mikhail Bakhtin coined the word “carnivalization” (he introduces it in the chapter “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”, in his book *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated in 1982) to describe the penetration or incorporation of carnival into everyday life, and its shaping effect on language and literature. A carnivalesque element is also characteristic of burlesque, parody and personal satire. One of the notable feature of this celebration during the Lenten festival is the unrestricted and unlimited feasting, dressing in costume which the Church liberally allowed. Consequently, it was observed that the “world turned upside down” (Robinson, 2011). During carnival hues of all colour pertaining to rank, hierarchy, order are abolished thereby liberating people from the gross inequalities that they might have been subjected to. Chapman & Light (2017) opines that carnivals are an opportunity for liberation, inversion and transgression through which an alternative social order can be created though temporarily. Archaic customs and traditions that hitherto held people in chains are broken, new conventions emerge and a new order is established. Besides this, it creates an “alternative social space” (Robinson, 2011) characterized by freedom, equality and abundance.

Godet (2020) distinguishes carnival from carnivalesque wherein carnival “involves processions, music, dancing and the use of masquerade”. Carnavalesque is “used to characterize all sorts of collective activities that use symbolic inversion for expressive purposes and in which negation of the established order provides a temporary opening for alternative, hybrid identifications to flourish” (Godet, 2020). Dissent, political discourses and social upheaval takes place at a carnival thus, blurring the boundaries between rich and poor, high and low. The differences and distinctions in the society become porous notwithstanding the amount

of excess and grotesqueness in it. Furthermore, it dissolves the borders alienating the performer and the audience during the carnivalesque. Situations are created wherein there is much space for polyphony and cacophony of voices, which were unheard of in the past.

3.1. Hegemony

Carnival deconstructs dominance and undermines the hegemonical practices prevailing during the time. During a carnival, too much noise and sound erupts very often leading to chaos, an inert form “transformed into organized form by art” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 8). Another important fallout of carnival is the use of masque, not to be co-opted with the veil, to camouflage the original identity of the participants as it involves reversal of role-play. One can also assert with a certain amount of confidence that human relations were redefined during carnival. Sometimes it has led to a birth of new human relations which were just not simply “imagined but experience” (Robinson, 2011). Carnival, thus steers into a new era by posing a stiff challenge to hegemony while at the same time airing its voice for the suppressed and marginalised groups. Such left out groups, very often, use carnival to articulate their concerns which were hitherto unattended and uncared for while the dominant majority turned a Nelson’s ears towards them. Carnival creates a “world turned upside down”, or a state of “topsy-turvey” in which a new social order was (temporarily) able to change (Chapman & Light, 2017). On a mundane level, it can also be said that the carnival presents a phantasmagoria where people are transported from reality at least for a brief moment. Like dream, people enjoy living in this state of life. Bakhtin, not just talks about carnival alone but also about language and how it is used in the carnival. Carnival, thus finds its expression in literature, arts and films as exemplified by Shakespeare, who skilfully exploited the use of masks in most of his plays. Films like *Ben-Hur* (1959) revelled in this theme of carnival and carousal.

3.2. Hierarchy: Uprooting the Social Order

Mikhail Bakhtin views carnivalization in its totality and that violates the socio-politico-economic order of the society. For him, it is an amalgamation of all forces at work during the process of carnivalization. “The carnivalesque refers to a period of liberation, revelry and celebration when everyday rules and norms are relaxed or inverted” (Chapman & Light, 2017). Existence of asymmetrical relationship in a society possibly could have dawned on his mind about the need for a utopia in a carnival. But he does not altogether rule out the emergence of a grotesque too. Rampant skewedness permeating at the cultural level ought to be decimated in a carnival. Carnivalesque comes in to rescue people from “insecurity in the face of both nature and social order” (Hutcheon, 1983: p. 85). And the fundamental issue here is the element of fear. Hutcheon says that people “live in fear of the consequences of what our forefathers unironically called ‘progress’—urbanization, technology, and so on.” Bakhtin suggested one response to this fear is “popular-

festive forms” which allowed temporary respite in the shape of temporarily restricted, legalized transgressions of social and literary norms. Today we call this folk culture “pop” (Hutcheon, 1983: p. 85).

Bakhtin’s theories are only too important to a society that cannot be brushed aside to bring about equanimity. Political theorist Andrew Robinson (2011) feels that “carnavalesque” can also be called “folk humour” that occurs in a variety of cultural sites, most notably in carnival itself that would undermine the equations in power. Carnivalization, according to Bakhtin, creates and shares a syncretic relation among the members of the society, at times creating in them a feeling of utopia, unsolicited warmth and a cornucopia of gaiety. The never-ending festive spirit of the carnival gladdens the hearts of people and become a harbinger of hope, promise and expectations. Both the real and the reel are merged and the difference between them ceases to exist.

3.3. Language: Dialogue in Carnival

Nekrashevich (2019) states that “language is a component of carnival and of culture in general. For Bakhtin, language is a never ending process, remains ubiquitous, ever evolving and keeps on changing its course. Language accommodates and encompasses meanings which can be comprehended by the reader at his/her own convenience. Like language in the novel, which Bakhtin defines as “multiplicity of styles” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 9), the “word constantly reinvented in a dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 9) carnival, too is not “one-voiced” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 9). “Bakhtin explains the importance of dialogue by examining how the dialectics of an object are surrounded by social dialogue” (Nekrashevich, 2019). Nekrashevich articulates that language is created when voices interact with each other. Hence language is not monologic, rather it helps to bring many voices together through the process of dialogue. Laughter, mask, music and dance forms can also be considered as a type of communication which gets reflected in a carnival. On a macro level, carnivals effuse a sense of metamorphosis and de-personification. Prior to Bakhtin, many “Russian scholars in the 1920s including Zelenin, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson, Bogatyrev, and Propp emphasized the importance of the ‘lower strata’ of culture as opposed to the uniform, official ‘high culture’ (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 9). Language during carnivalesque resorts to both sacred and profane. It is the language of the masses as they express their emotions and feelings known to them. One such instance is the use of bad or vulgar language in the serial *The Sopranos* wherein, one of the character has the nickname ‘Big Pussy’—viewed as one of the significant element of carnivalesque. During the pre-Renaissance period, even laughter was prohibited quite similar to the puritan movement in England of the late sixteen and seventeenth centuries. This cultural ‘centrism’ pertains not only to a social but also to an ethnic hierarchy. The danger of European cultural ‘centrism’, the recognition of the multiplicity of cultural strata, their relative hierarchy, and their ‘dialogue’ occupied Trubetzkoy all his life. The same is true of Bakhtin” (Trubetzkoy, in Bakhtin, 1984: p. 9). The language a person speaks and functions

as an object of representation and becomes his/her own style (Holquist & Caryl, 1982: p. 44). During conversing in a particular language, every speaker resorts to his/her own style, grammar, grotesque, laughter, metaphors, imagery et al. Perhaps all these can be used as anti-hegemonic strategies to possibly wriggle out of the hard-hitting, mighty ruling dispensation. Carnival encompasses all these elements and conjectures that language keeps changing, evolving and eventually un-masks everything in its fold.

3.4. Folk Culture: Demystification

Bakhtin's ideas concerning folk culture, with carnival as its indispensable component – possess some inherent features of carnival. What he underscores are its emphatic and purposeful “heterglossia” (*raznogolosost's* and its multiplicity of styles (*mnogostil nost'*). Thus, the carnival principle corresponds to and is indeed a part of the novelistic principle itself. One may say that just as dialogization is the *sine qua non* for the novel structure, so carnivalization is the condition for the ultimate “structure of life” that is formed by “behaviour and cognition”. Since the novel represents the very essence of life, it includes the carnivalesque in its properly transformed shape (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 10). For Bakhtin, one of the essential relation of man's relation to man in a carnival is the “unmasking” and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 10). During carnival a spree of laughter, sounds, noise, the importance of satire, rehearsals, performances, masks are exhibited through parodies of plays, novels in order to “destroy the forces of stasis and official ideology” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 16). “Bakhtin, like Rabelais, explores throughout his book the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire to change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 16).

Satire, too, has its connection with folk festivals like carnival, which was for Anatoly Lunacharsky, a kind of safety valve for passions the common people might otherwise direct to revolution (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 18). For Bakhtin, carnival is not just an impediment to revolutionary change but it is revolution itself. He says “Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 18). The magnitude of carnival cannot be undersized by the anonymous mass and the folk or the folk culture, which is inevitable in any circumstances. Burrowing under all the above-mentioned caverns in masks, parody, grotesque, laughter, sound, noise, conflict, chaos and revolution, it finally ends in freedom and liberty after a fierce face-off between “the conflict of official versus the unofficial forces” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 21). In his opening chapter of his book, Bakhtin, stresses a “striking peculiarity of carnival laughter, its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom” (xxii). World history, says Bakhtin, is a kind of drama in which “every act was accompanied by a laughing chorus” (xxiii). He “carnivalizes the present because it is a hope for the future: carnival forms “present the victory of this future over the past... The birth of the new... is as indispensable and as inevitable as the

death of the old... in the whole of the world and of the people, there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is being born” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 256).

Bakhtin’s interest in folk culture led him to comment that “these comic rituals and myths have attracted the attention of folklorists” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 7). He proceeds further to say that “all the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a non-official level. There they acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture. Such were the carnival festivities of the ancient world” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 6). They were far removed from the “primitive community’s ritual laughter.” Due to the sensuous nature of carnival and its strong element of play, it leads to another important element called the spectacle, which Bakhtin says it belongs to the borderline between art and life (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 7). He also introduces the word:

“footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 8).

Hence Bakhtin, feels that “carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages” (Bakhtin, 1984: p. 8). However, outside the “Christian sphere of influence” the carnivalesque can be found and can be characterized as “any ritual of rebellion such as Purim, the Hindu spring festival of Holi, the Muslim Indo-Caribbean commemoration festival Hosay (called “Coolie Carnival” in nineteenth century Trinidad newspapers) and so on” (Godet, 2020).

4. Carnival in the Indian Landscape: A Precursor to Mikhail Bakhtin

Long before Mikhail Bakhtin propounded these ideas of carnival, carnivalization, carnivalesque and grotesque in his book *Rabelais and his World* (1940), the idea of celebration has been in existence in India. As far as the Indian psyche is concerned, these celebrations have always been religious, as the word “secular” was not in vogue then. During the ancient Harappan culture around 2000-1700 B.C.E, the *great bath* was emblematic of a rendezvous of the people (Allchin, 2023).

“The Great Bath was mainly used for religious practice, but sometimes for bathing. They most likely used this for religious practice because there is no sign of a temple anywhere for religious practice. Some people weren’t even allowed to enter the Great Bath because they were poor or not pure. They

had a bathroom area near the Great Bath most likely used to purify them to enter the Great Bath. They had nowhere else to go for religious practice so they used the Great Bath. They might also use the Great Bath to clean themselves or to relax. Now their city is complete, they had a downfall.” (*Indus River Valley*, 2024)

Hence it is quite obvious from the above statement, that the meeting point was more religious rather than other causes.

Further down south of the Vindhya mountains in the Indian terrain, another civilization, perhaps older is the Dravidian culture which too displayed instances of celebrations in a systematic manner. For instance, an annual festival in the name of God *Indra* used to be celebrated in the Tamil speaking land of Kaveripoompatinam, an ancient port town. It was first recorded in the works of (Seethalai Saathanar or) *Cittalaicattana* (2002), a Tamil poet in the sixth century A.D, though there exists still a controversy on the exact dates of publication of this work. He wrote the epic-poem *Manimegalai* wherein he discusses the spirit of secular celebrations (carnival and carnivalesque) in the land of Kaveripoompatinam. Some scholars put this date somewhere around 890 A.D and 950 A.D (*Hikosaka*, 1989). Carnival, though not explicitly mentioned anywhere in this poem, but, but the idea of celebration finds a mention for the first time in the history of Tamilnadu and in fact the whole of India. But carnival, in its very essence, in the present day context is an integral part of people in Goa, a coastal state in the western part of India. On a personal front, this author was a witness to the official carnival celebrations, which usually takes place during the period of Lent festival in Goa. Verily religions, this carnival exhibits masques, dances, floats and is associated with Christianity. On the other hand, there is “the riotous carnival that regularly punctuated the ordered life of traditional societies, such as the spring festival of Holi and the Muslim celebration of Muharram in India” (*Visuvalingam*, 2018: p. 38). Here it is “characterized by the collective suspension of religious norms and prohibitions” (*Visuvalingam*, 2018: p. 38).

An analogy can be made out in the modern context thus equating *Indravizha* (*festival of Indra*) to Valentine’s day. Unlike the Western world, where the Valentine’s Day was named after an individual, the Tamil people christened it to a celestial event. Tamil Epics *Silappadikaram* (*Sivaguru*, 2022) and *Manimekalai* (*Sivaguru*, 2022) detail this festival along with ancient Tamil Sangam literature and didactic literature like *Thirukural*, which refers to *Indira* or *Indra* and *Amruta* (*nectar*). According to *Silappadikaram*, this was called *Indravizha*, festival for Lord *Indra*, and celebrated annually to bring in rains as *Indra* is the God of Thunder. More than this, this was also an event, which remained a popular hunting ground for men to covet lovely young maidens and courtesans. A translation from the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* about the clarion call at the start of the festival runs like this:

“The festival usually commenced with a group beating drums and announcing to the people the start of the celebrations. The citizens of the town then

cleaned the streets and roads and redecorate the city, with each house being adorned with many decorations. The officials of the kingdom would pay their respects to the king and wish him and the kingdom well. Musical performances would be held and the fire oblations offered in many temples for Siva, Vishnu and other deities. The festival ended with people bathing in the sea with the members of the family. It was generally believed that this festival was actually a prayer to Indra, and would remove the difficulties and dangers to those who celebrate it.” (*Silappadikaram* (5: 141-1444) and *Manimekalai* (1: 27-72, 2: 1-3, 1: 1-9, 24: 62-69, 25: 175-200 & translations, Parthasarathy, 1993; Balusamy, 1965).

In an attempt to avoid circumnavigating, only these two instances are briefly discussed—one from the Indus valley and another from the ancient Tamil kingdom, which invariably are a glaring testimony to the idea of celebration. However, the celebrations in the Tamil land of Kaveripoompatinam, also known as Poompuhar (a small town in the Mayiladuthurai district in the southern state of Tamilnadu) distinguish itself from the rest wherein, it calls upon all the citizens of this land to come and take part in the festivities of the *Indravizha*. While the celebrations in the Harappan culture was exclusive, the counterpart in the Tamil land was inclusive. It called upon all Tamils, irrespective of caste, creed and religion to participate and make the carnival a success. Needless to say that during this period, the main religions were *Buddhism, Jainism, Kaumaram and Vaishnavism* (Sivaguru, 2022). *Indravizha* celebrations comprised of reciting songs, playing games, contests, performance of street plays, sword-fighting, stick-fighting, dancing to the accompaniment of music, trade, and courting love (Balusamy, 1965). Such celebrations continue till date though in a modified version, in both rural and urban areas of Tamilnadu. One such carnival, in its true essence, which continues till the present day is the *Jallikattu* (Bull fight). Mostly *Jallikattu* is celebrated in the rural areas. However, the carnival in urban areas does not echo the features of a rural carnival which is marred by instances of caste conflicts though not on a major level. Of late, in postcolonial and postmodern India, notable changes have taken place in the realm of carnival and the spirit of carnivalization formulated by Bakhtin has meandered to an attitudinal shift thereby negating and subverting the festive spirit of carnival.

5. Whither Carnival in Postcolonial India—Demystification, Representation and Social Change

Contextualizing in the contemporary Indian scenario, the notion of carnivalization presents a mixed reality and invites national attention, though, for a variety of reasons. Here, quite contrary to the spirit of carnival visualized by Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival is symptomatic of exclusivity. Priding herself on a multicultural web, India today posits herself the spirit of carnival juxtaposed with the elements of grotesque. The problematization of carnival can be attributed to barricades in the form of caste domination, ranks and division persisting in every aspect of an

Indian life and to India's naturally diversified ethos. With a pluralistic populace that India possess, it is certainly a Himalayan task to confine carnival within the parochial notions of a single, unipolar culture. However, the spirit of carnival in the Caribbean island differs largely from the Indian landscape. For instance, Trinidadian culture is represented through the metaphor of 'callaloo,' a Trinidadian soup made of varied ingredients. Nunley & Bettleheim (1998) appropriates this metaphor to piece together a social image of their multi-ethnic diversity. Sadly, the Indian carnivals do not exhibit any such metaphors, not to mention Bakhtin's carnivalesque.

Carnivalization in India, too, boasts of the religious and the secular. However, the secular celebrations are demystified to feasts in the name of religion. Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization fails miserably in the Indian socio-political-cultural landscape as all the elements that Bakhtin envisaged has come to a nought. Deep rooted prejudices are still prevalent in many parts of India. Religious bigotry is the order of the day since 2014 wherein the Union government openly professes Hindu religion. Dialogues and representation are forbidden especially for religious minorities and backward classes. For instance, festivals like the *Ramleela* and *Kumbhmela* in North India are celebrated with an amount of rancour and hate targeting the minorities. Mosques and churches are destroyed, commercial establishments vandalized during these "celebrations" with the administration—police and judiciary being the silent spectators to the new hate culture phenomenon. It ceases to be a harbinger of social change.

Despite the *dalits* or scheduled tribes, scheduled castes fall under the purview of the larger religions entity called Hinduism, yet, their manners of worship, culture, customs, habits, traditions rarely resonate with the culture of a powerful microscopic minority—the upper/forward castes *Brahmins* followed by the Jains, though not from the upper castes, who remain dominant in all spheres of social, economic and political life of India. Caste hierarchy and hegemony plays a vital role in all these celebrations. Amidst the dark clouds of caste engulfing the horizons of festivals in India, some of them presents a curious insight into its manner of functioning. Festivals like *Deepavalli*, *Holi*, *Pongal*, *Muharram*, and *Ramleela* are some instances which provides ample testimony to the mood and method of celebration throughout India. However, for want of space, this study shall highlight only on two examples—the case of *Jallikattu* (bull taming also called bull fight) in Tamilnadu and *Onam* in Kerala.

6. Case Studies: *Jallikattu* and *Onam*

Taking a cue from Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival and carnivalesque, the *Jallikattu* (bull taming) in Tamilnadu is a traditional festival going back to around more than thousand years. Usually *Jallikattu* is celebrated during the Tamil month of *Thai* which coincides with the festival of *Pongal*. "*Jallikattu* is a bullfight that is similar to the Spanish bullfights traces its history to around 2000 years when the fight was conducted to select the most suitable bridegroom." (Tamilnadutourism,

2024). “*Jallikattu*, also known as *sallikkattu* is a traditional sport of Tamil Nadu that is celebrated on the third day of *Pongal—Mattu Pongal* Day. (Usually it falls on January 16.) The history of this bullfight dates back to 400-100 BCE when it was played by the Ayars, an ethnic group in India. The name is coined from two words, *Jalli* (silver and gold coins) and *Kattu* (tied). A bull is let loose among a crowd of people and whoever tames it will get the coins tied to its horn. The people who participate in the sport try to hold on to the animal’s hump to stop it. Sometimes, they run along with the bull. Pulikulam or Kangayam is the breed of bulls used for the sport. The bulls which win in the festival are in high demand in the market, and fetch the highest price. They are also used for breeding” (Tamilnadutourism, 2024).

“A seal representing the sport has been found from the site of the Indus Valley Civilisation, and has been preserved in the National Museum, New Delhi. Also, a 1500-year-old cave painting in white kaolin colour has been found near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Legend also tells us the story of Lord Shiva cursing Basava his bull for the confusion he created among humankind by cultivating their land. The festival has been part of cultural tourism in the state. *Vadi manjuvirattu*, *Veli virattu*, *Vatam manjuvirattu* are the variants of this sport. Each version of the sport has different rules. In some versions, one must hold onto the hump for 30 seconds, while in others it may be for a distance of 15 metres” (Tamilnadutourism, 2024). Furthermore, the Sport has become an intrinsic part of the Tamil culture that it has broken all religious and caste barriers. People, irrespective of caste, creed and religions do participate in this sport, which is usually held once a year in a village to celebrate a local temple or church festival. Roughly about 30% of the events held during 2013 were organized by Christian churches.

A cursory browse of the above-mentioned celebrations available in internet would reveal the social inclusiveness and pluralistic culture of the Tamils (people who speak Tamil language in the southernmost tip of India called Tamilnadu) in participating in these events. On revisiting Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, social hierarchy gets broken up during this sport and all barricades are removed. The distinction between high and low, rich and poor, strong and weak, gets hazy once the sport begins its journey. People of all hue and colour, ranks come in large numbers to take part in this contest. Criss-crossing all barricades of caste, creed or colour, be it either physical or mental, the contestors tame the bull in a spirit-de-cops and claim the money which is hung in the bull’s horn. A victor is one who tames the bull and snatches the bag/wallet containing the money or gold from the horn without harming the bull. Being an open sporting competition, it is inclusive. No discrimination is practised anywhere unlike in other religious ceremonies. Rather it invites everyone and urges them to participate in the sport festival. It might so happen that a small farmer’s bull might be tamed simultaneously along with a rich landlord’s bull.

Upon deconstructing, one can also vociferously claim that the bull fight has come to be viewed metaphorically as an encounter between a *zamindar’s* (usually

the richest, powerful and dominant person in a village) bull and a poor farmer who emerges victorious in taming the *zamindar's* bull. Yet another instance of celebration is the festival of *Onam* in the state of Kerala which shares borders with Tamilnadu. *Onam* has a mythological origin unlike Tamilnadu's *Jallikattu*. Ironically, both were in the news in the recent past apparently stirring up the hornet's nest—*Jallikattu* for its ban by the Supreme Court of India and *Onam* undergoing the pangs of “revisionist history” by the right wing ultra nationalist party, BJP. Both share some commonalities—a harvest festival celebrated with joy and pomp all over the state by people irrespective of any community. Fortunately or unfortunately, in the month of January 2017, with the Tamil festival *Pongal* set to begin, the people of Tamilnadu staged a massive protest spanning a week, in a peaceful manner demanding the revoking of the ban on the bull sport *Jallikattu*. Ultimately, it came to be called “Marina protest” quite along the lines of Arab Spring in 2011, this protest spread to towns and villages along the entire Tamilnadu, forcing the then Union government to lift its ban and pass a presidential decree in support of it.

Legend has it that this festival of *Onam* is celebrated to welcome King Mahabali, whose spirit is said to visit the sands of Kerala. The “Carnival of *Onam* lasts from four to ten days. First day, Atham and tenth day, Thiruonam are the most important of all. Popularity and presentation of rich culture of the state during the carnival made *Onam* the National Festival of Kerala in 1961. Elaborate feasts, folk songs, elegant dances, energetic games, elephants, boats and flowers all are a part of the dynamic festival called *Onam*” (SCFI, 2024). *Onam* also boasts of sports, dances, songs, Snake boat race, and traditional games apart from feasting. Here again, the unity of all people belonging to Kerala is on the high as all denominations pertaining to religion, caste and rank gets diminished amidst the din and enthusiasm of the celebrations. As with the two other great epics of India, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharat*, which, seeks to embellish the Aryan supremacy, *Onam* negates this by paying tributes to the hero King Mahabali, who is an *asura* (demon) king.

According to the legend, the high popularity and fame of King Mahabali among his countrymen reached the pedestals of heaven and enraged the *suras* or the *devas* (who are supposed to be benevolent and closer to God, and live in heaven) thus earning their jealous and wrath. The *suras* appealed to the mighty Lord Vishnu to contain this “imbalance” as only *devas* was supposed to be good-doers and the *asuras* (demons) on the contrary. Stratification even among Gods on the basis of colour of the skin, wherein, the demons were painted as black in colour while the *devas* were fair in complexion, was the hall mark here. Lord Vishnu came to King Mahabali's palace under the pretext of a pygmy and asked for help. King Mahabali, though recognizing that it was Lord Vishnu who had come to destroy him, was nonetheless perturbed and assured him of whatever help he could ask for. Despite being warned by King Mahabali's minister about the sinister attempts by the Lord, King Mahabali felt that it was the king's duty to honour the guest and so he

accepted the pygmy's demand that he needs land that could be covered in three steps. Duly granted by the King, the pygmy took upon the role of the Lord, lifted his one leg and set on heaven and the next step he landed on earth but was searching for the third step. Knowing that he would be doomed to hell, King Mahabali being truthful in honouring the guest offered his head for the Lord to step. Alas, with the third step, the king was sent to hell but due to his good governance, he was granted a boon that he shall visit the Kingdom annually and bless the people there (SCFI, 2024).

7. Conclusion

With the two events mentioned above, displaying the true spirit of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival and carnivalesque, a demystification occurs here which de-canonized the cultural supremacy of the Aryans who invaded India in and around 300 B.C. While the Aryan rule harped on exclusivity, the two festivals down South of India practiced inclusiveness and shackled the existing foundations of hierarchy, inequality, social stratification and other ills which percolated the people's life over there. Even the popular festivals like *Deepavalli* (Diwali in the rest of India) which means the festival of lights, *Holi* and *Ramleela* in no way strengthens the cause of Bakhtin's Carnivalisation unlike *Jallikattu*, *Onam* and *Pongal* wherein all hurdles are dissolved and beseech participation from everyone. Since all these three festivals—*Deepavalli*, *Holi* and *Ramleela*—are purely religious in nature, the ingredients embedded in the phenomenon of carnivalisation—chaos, conflict, freedom, hegemony, language, noise, and sound scarcely get reflected in these celebrations. Moreover, if the etymology and origins of these three festivals are deconstructed, “heteroglossia” occurs resulting in multiple layers of meanings which are decontextualized.

Jallikattu, *Onam* and *Pongal* remain unique in the sense that it serves as a camaraderie for the entire community belonging to Kerala and Tamilnadu while the north Indian festivals of *Diwali*, *Holi* and *Ramleela* are attributed only to Hindus. *Holi* and *Ramleela* are rarely celebrated in the south Indian states of Andhrapradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamilnadu and Telengana with possible exceptions in their respective capitals. One reason for such demarcation could be due to the participants' consciousness of their religious affiliation. “The collective manifestation most representative of the Bakhtinian is the spring festival of Holi during which socio-religious and intergenerational hierarchies are overturned, aggressive impulses playfully expressed, sexual taboos violated, and otherwise repressed negative emotions freely discharged as shared laughter” (Mariott cited in [Marriott, 1966](#)).

However, on the flip side, it has to be acknowledged that Bakhtin's carnivalisation, in its true sense of the term is yet to come in the Indian firmament. Fear still exists among the Indian minorities as the Union government and those states under the rule of BJP openly call for extermination of Muslims and Christians from the Indian soil while the other minorities—gender, backward classes and Dalits

are denied their due space in the socio-cultural-politico matrix. Their fundamental rights—freedom of speech, expression, thought, eat and practise faiths of their own are curtailed. And the democratic institutions like the police and judiciary become subservient to the ruling elites just for want of powerful positions post retirement. Essentially carnival is either subverted or controlled by the BJP governments through their lapdog media. Human rights abuses during the celebrations of *Holi* and *Ramleela* are never reported especially in north India. Any event which surfaces is silently concealed through the mighty octopussian arms of the government especially. One ought not to diminish the perceived prejudices and inequalities existing throughout the length and breadth of India—like the existence of separate crematory/burial grounds for different castes. It needs to be condemned with unequivocal voice in this regard. One cannot but help asking the question “what does the future bode for us in this postcolonial world”. As India is going through the trauma of liberalization, globalization and privatization, the concept of Bakhtin’s carnival too is slowly withering away its golden hue. Rather, Bakhtin’s grotesque might be replaced by predatory capitalism in the near future.

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