

Rural Tulunadu - memories

I was detained for attendance shortage in my very first year in the medical college – primarily because I found the diversions in the new place where I was now in much more interesting than sitting dumbly in a classroom where lecturers droned monotonously and eternally.

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One particular week, I made bold to travel with a friend to a idyllic village, Kumble, just across the state border. The purpose of the trip was to soak in some rural ambience and culture. The village wore a festive look: we had stumbled upon the day of the weekly shanty, a kind of flea market. Also on the cards was a grand finale fixed for the evening, the traditional gory sport of cock-fight. Roosters, bantams and cockerels, were lined up all along the perimeter of a circular yard in the village green right from afternoon. The robust and fidgety birds were tethered by one leg to pegs driven into the ground. They strutted in small circles, crowing and ruffling their feathers – in anticipation. I felt sad, that little did they know that half of them would not survive to nightfall. The crowds milled round, and heavy betting was on. Wads of currency extricated from waist bands of dhotis and lungis. What astounded me was almost all the professionals, had tiny books they constantly referred to between parleys and odds. I discovered that this cock fight business is no simple entertainment spectacle. Much stake, by way of prestige is involved. Prize birds fetch fancy prices. The little stapled books were filled with names of the roosters in print with their history, lineage and pedigree. This was quite a revelation to me, of how seriously the village folk took the contest an combat. Just at the start of each round, the handler would tie a mean looking small double edged knife to one leg of the bantam. The restless bird usually attempts to kick and struggle during the process and care is taken by the men to position and align the knife, which is directed backwards. The birds themselves are sinewy, wiry, slim and mean looking, quite unlike the common plump white leghorn farm raised chicken we come across. Amidst whistles and hoots and a cacophony of noises, two expert handlers enter the ring with their birds carefully held by their necks and breast. They squat facing each other from a dozen or so feet separating them. The birds are in a frenzy by now, kicking air wildly and ferociously pecking empty space. The handler is extremely cautious, one wrong move, and the bird could thrust the six inch blade right into him through a vicious back kick. They hold the roosters at arms length, away from their bodies. The evenly matched birds are thrown into the pit towards each other. The cocks rear up and attack each other savagely, feathers fly and it is all over in a few seconds actually. The winner struts while the loser, gored by a vicious thrust of the steel metal sinks low, its eyes unblinking, dying – dead. The owner winner picks up the still agitated bird and calms it down by stroking its bristled neck before shoving him under an up-turned wicker basket. He collects his pickings, enters a note or two in his black book and is ready again soon, with another prize. The losing fighter is divested of his armor, the knife, and unceremoniously stuffed into a jute gunny sack – he, along with many other also-rans will become a part of the night menu in the winners householders dinner spread. The vivid colors and glistening hues of the various birds dazzle. Something about the blood-shedding and gore upset me. I moved away from the ringside to reflect. A sport? Betting and speculating over death and killing? If it was, it wasn't one I particularly liked. Then, I hear a hubbub. Screams. I see someone being carried. Blood, bright scarlet blood spreads rapidly on his clothes. His white dhoti is now red and wet. He is shoved into a cab and driven to a nearby hospital. What happened? Oh, Sandow got Maxim anna. Sandow? Yes, Gama's son Sandow, the yellow orange feathered fellow from Uppala got Maxianna, the handler from Kanhangad. Later at supper, where I was specially fed a home made vegetarian pulao while all others feasted on chicken legs – I overheard Maxim died even before they reached him to a private hospital at Ullal. Femoral artery rupture. Only much later did I learn that one of the more common sports injuries in rural India is the severance of the major artery in the thigh, the femoral, through inept handling of steel knife armed roosters in village arenas. Cockfighting as a public entertainer and sport is today proscribed by law, yet, it does take place clandestine and under cover now and then, as proven by the trickle of handlers who are rushed to hospitals every season, with mean lacerations and gashes on their legs. The Indian Red Jungle fowl is a native heirloom and heritage. It is the progenitor of every species of domesticated hen you see anywhere. It is becoming extremely rare in India in the wild. It is poached widely, wildfowl meat is claimed to be delectably palatable. I have only seen another subspecies of the galliformes in the wild, the Grey Junglefowl (*G. sonneretti*). It is a furtive bird with the male sporting brilliant metallic hues. Despite much effort by conservationists, the gene pool of the species has dwindled for the Red Fowl refuses to breed in captivity. The bird values its freedom – and to see its cousins being tethered to pegs, senselessly pitted against each other for man's amusement is trivializing evolution. In a way, though it may sound a bit weird and uncharitable, I feel good every time a struggling feathered combatant, kicks backward and plunges his curved steel knife into the flesh of his tormentor, man. {mosgoogle}