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GĀVBĀZĪ

GĀVBĀZĪ, arranged fights between bulls. These now take place only in the Caspian provinces of Gīlān and Mazandarān. In the past, however, they were common throughout Persia and formed part of the entertainment in local festivities along with other games involving pitting animals and creatures of all kinds against each other, including rams, buffaloes, camels, guard dogs, bears, cocks, and even spiders and scorpions. A wide-ranging selection of accounts of these spectacles by travelers to Persia from the 17th to the 19th century is given by Henri Massé (Massé, *Croyances*, pp. 419-23). In particular, Garcia de Silva y Figueroa (1550-1624), Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-89), and John Chardin (1643-1713; qq.v.) mention organized fights between bulls in the central squares of major cities (Isfahan, Qom, Qazvīn) under the patronage of local governors. Sometimes the bull fights were related to the Ḥaydarī-Neʿmatī (q.v.) groupings, the mutually hostile urban moieties of the Safavid and later eras. In his account, Tavernier refers to the two factions and their part in these sports in Isfahan, “The populace of Isfahaṇis divided into two factions or classes, one called Ḥaydarī and the other Niʿmatullāhī. On festive occasions when the people gather together to watch bear- and bull-baiting, cock-fighting and other such sports, these two factions place bets on the outcome of the bouts, sometimes wagering considerable sum” (quoted by Mirjafari, p. 145).

It is not surprising that the Caspian plain should be the last bastion of bull fights, for it is there that beef livestock predominates and is almost emblematic of the identity of these regions. The ox (*varzā*) was, until the onset of agricultural mechanization, the farmer’s companion par excellence. It was

looked after with great care and celebrated in folk songs and poetry. At the same time it was associated with hard masculine tasks including the plowing and the harrowing of the rice-fields. The rearing of bulls (*kalvarzā*) for fighting is now carried out by a small number of devotees who meet once or twice a week at cattle markets. They select calves of good pedigree which show some natural aggressiveness, have a well-proportioned stature (*andām*), and long horns. Kept in isolation but showered with attention and care and well fed, these beasts reach 500 to 700 kg in maturity.

Bull fights (*varzā jang*) usually take place at the end of the summer and during the fall, at the end of seasonal labor in the fields, or they may take place at a marriage ceremony or to honor an important guest. The venue is usually the *sabza meydān* (the village green) of the locality. They used to be organized by the village headman (*kadḵodā)* but are now set up by local go-betweens (*dallāl*, *mīāndār*) who charge an entry fee and arrange the bets and wagers. Several bouts may be held in large meetings, with opposing bulls of equal weight in succeeding events. They are kept without fodder prior to the fight to make them more belligerent. The horns are sharpened and rubbed with garlic to make them more effective and the bull more bellicose. Having been brought to the center of the arena, the two protagonists confront each other and fight until one is put to flight or wounded. In the old days, the winner was bedecked with flowers and a ribbon tied round his horns and a bell round his neck. The *kadḵodā* would present the owner with a *baram*, i.e. a branch of a tree shorn of its leaves but decorated with colorful pieces of cotton, hand kerchiefs, and oranges (Rabino, 1914, p. 102). As for the defeated, his wounds were treated with egg yoke and turmeric (*zard-čūba*) or, if the wounds appeared fatal, he would be sold off to the butcher. A vivid description of such a fight appears in *Šīrīn Kolā*, a short story by the modern writer Moḥammad Ḥejāzī (1900-73; q.v.), in which a bull is led to the arena earlier than the other protagonist, thereby inducing him to treat the arena as his own home territory and fight more ferociously as a result (Ḥejāzī, pp. 5-12).

Gāvbāzī (*varzā jang*) has had a checkered history, banned at times in the name of law and order and morality and exploited at others by those eager to enhance their status and prestige. For example, an edict (*farmān*) by Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn Ṣafawī in 1106/1695 banned several types of betting on animals including those on bulls as a source of disturbance and corruption and demanded that the edict be read out in public and engraved in Friday mosques. The edict was carved in stone and placed in the Friday mosque in

Lahījān (Sotūda, pp. 115-17; Rabino, 1928, sec. on inscriptions, Persian text, pp. 7-10). Similar tablets were placed in the Friday mosques of Ašraf (later Behšahr, q.v.) and Āmol (q.v.) The dynasties succeeding the Safavids were more indulgent towards the practice of *varzā jang* and they were even at times sponsored by the notables of the region to please and placate the local populace. During the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) however, *varzā jang* was again temporarily banned as it was deemed to be against koranic laws (Rabino, 1914, p. 99). The process of modernization, including that of agriculture, in the latter half of the 20th century, contributed to a further decline in *gāvbāzī*, although it is still highly popular in those regions where it had always been firmly established, such as the area around Lašteneša and Fūman (q.v.). The Emām-e Jomʿa (q.v.) of Rašt has for some years now condemned the practice as illicit (*ḥarām*) on grounds of cruelty and the fact that it involves gambling. A great deal of care is therefore taken by the organizers of the fights in order to evade official surveillance.

PLATE I. *Gāvbāzī* in Gīlān in the early 19th century. After Rabino, 1914.

PLATE II. *Varzā jang* in the central plain of Gīlān in 1993. Photograph by C. Bromberger.

PLATE III. Palang, the *gāvbāzī* champion in 1365-66 Š./1986-87. Photograph by M. Ajiri, courtesy of C. Bromberger.

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