

Life

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PLACED TO WIN? DON'T BET ON IT!

SPRIHA SRIVASTAVA SHARES INSIGHTS FROM THE DELHI RACE COURSE...





Thinking about The North Indian Derby (pronounced Dar-bee) horse racing in Delhi brought flashes from the scenes at the Polo Grounds I'd noticed in the newspapers – of the social elites decked in their designer best, brandishing their glamorous accessories; some hobnobbing with celebrities while others puffing away at cigars. Driven by the enthusiasm of actually experiencing one such *mise en scène* myself, I was at the Delhi Race Course for the so-called 'World Cup' of horse racing. Of course, the atmosphere at the race course was quite different from that at the polo matches.

In the narrow lane that leads to the gates of the racing ground, one is greeted by little children who enthusiastically sell pocket-sized booklets

containing pertinent information and details about horses, that could serve as a prospective gambler's guide. "I can tell you which horse will win today. Bet on dad's horse," said one of the kids while a buyer fished out some money from his wallet. These kids, bathed in dust and grease, are children of horse trainers, jockeys and stable caretakers who spend the entire day outside the gates of the race course. "I hear and learn about horse betting. I will grow up to become rich of betting," muttered one of them and ran away to catch attention of another interested buyer.

On the other side of the gate, there was a small section with a circular track where horses were exhibited before the race. In the huge crowd gawking at the horses, turn-

"THERE ARE THESE PEOPLE WHO'RE HERE TO ENRICH THEIR FUTURE OFF AN ANIMAL THAT MEANS NOTHING TO THEM"

ing pages of the booklet and making quick notes before placing the bet, were mostly youngsters and especially those who appeared to belong to the lower middle-class. I walked up to a man (somewhere in his mid-thirties) called Ved Prakash and tried asking about the race, and the brief conversation probed quite insightful. "Madam, winning bets is not a day's job. It requires regular visits to understand the dynamics of betting. And this is a Derby race... very important race, madam. In this, stakes are high and people bet huge amounts," he explained. On casually enquiring about his gains for the day, Ved Prakash smiled and said, "Arre madam, I bet safe amounts. I just placed Rs 500 today and won Rs 3,500. Today's wage is taken care of!" Ved Prakash appeared to be one of those calculated risk-takers, but he and some others who I spoke to had numerous stories to share about people who'd lost jewellery, property etc and still borrowed money from people they knew at the race course, in the hope to win back all that they once owned.

At the stands lining the racing track is a clear demarcation of class. While the lower stands had people for whom the spoils would perhaps allow them to indulge in healthy meals for a few days, the upper stands had ones who looked like they may well be splurging on a whim. I met Daksh Oberoi, a suave young man, just short of 30, who owned horses and was probably the most recognised figure at the race course. His stable, located behind the race course, houses 43 horses. "Apart from Delhi, I own horses in Mumbai, Hyderabad and Mysore as well and I work in partnership with my friend, Sunil Kumar Verma" said Daksh whose passion for horses was a hand-me-down from his father.

In the olden times, horses were used by kings not only as a means to

commute, but were passionately groomed and trained for warfare. This passion was given a purpose by the British who introduced horse racing such that it became a forum for princes and aristocrats to socialise. The likes of Daksh who invest their passion in horses is, unfortunately, a disappearing breed. "I started learning the business of horse racing from a very young age. I'd visit the race course with my father, go through the booklets where the entire history of the participating horses is listed, talk to people and get involved," he reminisced. Daksh has yet not stepped into the league of breeders like the Poonawallas, Ramaswamy's (Chettinad Stud Farms) or the Usha Stud Farms, since it requires behemoth amount of investment. Content with purchasing and owning horses, he fondly refers to them as 'my kids' and was honest enough to reveal that his 'kids' haven't won him great fortunes yet, but they hadn't left him out of business either. As he walked me towards the section which was abuzz with people discussing bets and where bookies were on their job, he suddenly stopped and pointed towards the roof. "Don't these tin awnings upheld with those old rods remind you of a cremation ground?" And he laughed before adding, "It's funny because this place is one!" He explained that there are some here who're probably betting their last penny and there are others who're rejoicing today, but will go back with empty pockets tomorrow. "There are countless number of those who've come down from riches to rags... Don't bet if you don't understand the game. It simply hurts to see that the thrill to watch your horse race and win has died down and instead, there are these people who're here to enrich their future off an animal that means nothing to them," he said. Daksh stated that the Derby race in

Horse d'oeuvres

Horse racing, also known as 'The Sport of Kings', dates back to about 4500 BC; the nomadic tribesmen of Central Asia were the first to start the practice of domesticating horses. Spreading across Central Asia and the Mediterranean, by 638 BC, horse racing became the most popular event in the ancient Greek Olympics. Back then, it was in the form of chariot and mounted horse racing. The modern form of horse racing, which exists today, was an initiative of the English knights who brought in Arab horses in the 12th century and then started the breeding and training of horses for speed and endurance. Currently, apart from India – where horse gambling is the only legal form of gambling – Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America are some states where the sport of horse racing is passionately and professionally pursued.

On your marks, get set, listen up!

- You would bump into a lot of people who'd happily give advice on which horse to lay stakes on. Do not listen to them. You might end up burning a hole in your pocket.
- Start by doing a thorough research about the history of a horse's lineage, the number of races it won etc. All this information is available in booklets distributed at race courses.
- The best jockey might not definitely win races.
- Low risk takers, keep distance from the race course!



Delhi scored way below the one at the Mahalaxmi Race Course in Mumbai, where the stakes go up to Rs 2.5 crore as against Rs 10 lakh in the capital city. One of his plans is to steadily raise the standard of the Delhi Race Course and promote the passion for horses, and not the mere addiction of gambling on them.

Horse gambling, though legal, wouldn't be called a fair game. If owners buy horses worth up to crores and then also spend money on feeding and training, there has to be a way to earn that back. And one can certainly not rely on something as uncertain as a win in a race. Heavy 'negative gambling' happens here where the owners, bookies as well as jockeys drain away a huge share. "Everyone knows it's all fixed. *Sab setting hai madam*," is what Ved Prakash revealed, with few others, including the guard, though it didn't seem to dissuade them from coming here very frequently.

More than the prospect of deplet-

ing moolah, my concern went out to those severely addicted, most of them youngsters. 24-year-old Abhay Thakral shared that he's a part of his father's property business, and horse gambling is just a way to pass his time. "I come here every Tuesday. Today I won Rs 5000 and last week I won Rs 16,000. This gambling becomes so addictive that once they start understanding how to go about it, people only bet in lakhs. I've gone through huge losses as well, but if I lose, I want to win it back... and I do. It's just my way to pass my time and earn that extra money!" As I took his leave, he enquired if I'd want to give it a shot. "I'll tell you which horse to bet on in the next race. You'll win. 100 per cent." Tempted by his offer, I did place a very small amount at stake, and well, I lost. I shrugged it off, but couldn't help wondering about situations where such losses equaled loss of day's square meal. Then again, if I had won, I would've found myself in the range of yet another worthless addiction! **ISI**

THE DERBY RACE IN DELHI SCORED WAY BELOW THE ONE AT THE MAHALAXMI RACE COURSE IN MUMBAI, WHERE THE STAKES GO UP TO RS 2.5 CRORE AS AGAINST RS 10 LAKH IN THE CAPITAL CITY