

CLEAR THE BAR: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN COMPETITIVE EQUESTRIAN SPORTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The history of equestrian sports in India spans centuries, where the access to these sports was mainly limited to the royalty. This was a by-product of not just monarchy, but also the caste system prevalent in India, which restricted horse riding to the highest stratum of the society. This was further perpetuated by the rule of the British and the Mughals. Unfortunately, the situation remained very similar after India achieved its independence from the British Raj in 1947. Most civilians could not afford to own horses in this era, and equestrian sports were primarily practiced by Indian Army officers. This paper studies multiple concerns around the access of equestrian sport in India such as infrastructural facilities, lack of investment, issues around coaching and institutional hurdles. It also includes an interview with multiple equestrian professionals who provide ethnographic details about issues around the sport's access to the populace in India and abroad. It concludes with policy recommendations around the sport such as relieving governmental regulation, increasing corporate funding and widening spectatorship of the sport.

Keywords: Equestrian sports, Clear the bar, Horse riding, Barriers

I. Introduction

Equestrian sports in India traces its history back to the Independence. Although the references to sports like Polo trace back to centuries, the access to these sports was mainly limited to the royalty. This was a by-product of not just monarchy, but also the caste system prevalent in India, by the virtue of which riding horses, especially for sport was restricted to the highest stratum of one of the four castes in India. This was further perpetuated by the rule of the British and the Mughals.

Unfortunately, the situation remained very similar after India achieved its independence from the British Raj. Most civilians could not afford to own horses in this era, and equestrian sports were primarily practiced by Indian Army officers. There was no governing body, which

could control and promote the growth of these sports in India until 1967, 23 years after independence. The Equestrian Federation of India (EFI) was founded by senior army officials as a governing body responsible for making equestrian sports more accessible to the general populace. As a result, the association between the EFI and the Army has been a strong one.

Compared to its access in other developing nations, participating in equestrian sport is not economically feasible for the general Indian populace. Barns are extremely localized in India, and their growth is restricted to army cantonments, or extremely posh localities of developed cities. Both of these facilities are extremely inaccessible to the common masses. There are several reasons for this: the historical hegemony of the army over this sport, the high expenditure involved in participation, and several legal hurdles complemented by the indifference of multiple governments to broaden its access. There are only 282 Equestrian clubs in India and 8297 affiliated members (as per the national federation database). To put this in perspective there are more than 100 swimming pools providing training facilities in only the capital city. Given that both water and equestrian sports were something equally inaccessible at the time of Independence, it is safe to infer that the industry has witnessed a slow growth in India. The weather conditions of India are partially to blame, as not all regions can support the breeding and growth of professional horses throughout the year, but even if we account for the regions with inhospitable climate, the growth has been sluggish.

Equestrian sports became a part of the Asian Games in 1982. At its inception, India was surprisingly one of the pioneers, owing to the dedication of the army. At the 10th Asian Games, held in Seoul from September 24 to October 4, 1986, India was one of only four countries (Indonesia, Japan and Korea being the others) to send full teams of riders in all three disciplines - Show Jumping, Dressage and Eventing (some of the Indian squad took part in more than one discipline). However, India's performance dwindled after that. Since then India has managed to win only two bronze medals in these sports- in Korea (2002) and Doha (2006). Equestrian sports have been a part of the Olympics since 1912. India has only been represented twice, in the Olympics for equestrian sports by Wing Commander I. J. Lamba, and Imtiaz Anees. Unsurprisingly, all of India's accomplishments have come from members of the defence forces.

II. Existing Facilities

The existing facilities cater to only those who have had historical access or who can afford the huge expenditure involved in maintaining a horse fit to participate in these sporting events. Moreover, there has been little or no attention paid by the government to develop these sports.

Strict (and dated) governmental regulation around the equestrian industry – which hasn't been revised for a long time – is a significant way in which governments have hindered the

growth of the sport. The outdated EXIM (export import) policy is largely to blame. By retaining horses in the negative list and clubbing them in a tabulation of 518 items on Security and Safety Considerations (along with, it must be said, such unsavoury items as beef tallow, muzzle loading firearms, opium, pig fat and ozone-depleting substances), the government has done a signal disservice to the equestrian breed and has largely hampered the growth of this industry. Horses are obviously the focal point of equestrian sports and their growth has largely been hampered. Horse breeders are supposed to follow extremely strict policy measures. They need foundation stock when the occasion arises (for example, sudden death of an existing asset). They need trading opportunities to buy and resell stock, after rearing or increasing its value by racing. They need flexibility to respond to a rapidly-changing environment. Apart from the general absence of these facilities, the lack of flexibility in terms of policy also makes rearing of professional horses an extremely onerous task.

The taxation policy under the recent GST (goods and services tax) reform has made the situation even worse. The winnings are taxed at an extremely high rate, that is, at the flat rate of 30% which, after adding cess, will amount to 30.9%. It is shocking to see that equestrian sports are clubbed with activities like lotteries, crossword puzzles, television games and gambling. It must be noted that every other item on this category is obviously not a sport, but an activity – like gambling – which is partially or fully illegal. This shows the disposition of the policy makers toward the sport; they don't think of it as one akin to cricket or football or tennis.

The expenditure is extremely high, both for the riders and the race clubs. Coupled with the high level of taxes on income, the maintenance of horses becomes extremely difficult. The government also introduced new artificial barriers on the export and import of horses to restrict the spread of foreign diseases. Quoting Anil Mukhi, a Mumbai based racing analyst, "To those in the industry, all this talk of phytosanitary considerations and biosecurity appears a thinly-disguised veil to raise artificial barriers" (Mukhi). The safeguards are at par with a nuclear power plant, and that is obviously unjustified. A lesser degree of restriction on horse imports was an intention of the government back in 1994-95, when import licensing was abolished and replaced by purchase of Special Import Licenses. After just one year of this experiment, the clock was rolled back and full licensing was reintroduced by the erstwhile Commerce Minister, Mr. P. Chidambaram.

The Indian bureaucracy provides several hurdles as well. The horse breeders are required to fill in application forms (25 copies each), undergo annual inspections, obtain recommendations from local authorities, and wait for several months for the decision to come in. Red tape makes situations much worse. This hampers the growth of technology and skills in multiple ways and prevents India from realizing its multi-million dollar potential in this industry.

III. Coaching education and Lack of Investment

There is a dearth of quality coaching in equestrian sports in India. Compared to the training in mainstream sports like hockey, football and cricket, which is provided by schools across the social and economic spectrum, equestrian sports fall extremely short. Training is provided in elite private boarding schools and military academies such as The Army Polo and Riding Club of Delhi and Mayo College in Rajasthan. As a result, equestrian sports remain alien to the vast majority of the Indian population due to financial or legal restrictions.

There have been efforts to set up coaching and training facilities for horses and riders in metropolitan cities, but the cost of training and maintaining the facilities are so high that they drive tuition costs through the roof. Coaches charge Rs. 4,000 for a 40-minute class and Rs 50,000 for training a horse for a month. Therefore, the access has only been opened to the metropolitan elite. In terms of increasing equestrian access to non-metropolitan regions, the future seems bleak.

Most of the country's equestrian infrastructure is controlled by the Army, which also dominates the EFI. This usually implies that most of the competitive equestrian sportsmen come from the Army. With Olympic-standard horses costing up to 5 crore INR (upwards of 700,000 USD), not many individuals can afford to be "independent" equestrians – someone not associated with either the Army or a riding club. Given the inaccessible nature of these clubs, their selection becomes an elite matter as well, which further makes equestrian sports socially inaccessible, apart from being economically unviable.

The concentrated nature of the sport is easy to infer. The EFI website provides the details of all 51 recognized clubs in India, with their names, addresses and contact numbers. The first observation to be made here are how almost all of them are located in areas that are economically or legally inaccessible to the general populace, such as upmarket parts of metropolitan cities. Additionally, more than half of the clubs do not provide any contact details to the general public, which means entry and participation in the club's affairs is an exclusive phenomenon, open only to those present in its inner circles. Clubs' email and phone number columns remain empty. Thus, there exists a barrier of communication which is symptomatic of the economic and social barrier between equestrian sports and the mass populace.

The EFI requires individuals, clubs and associations to be their members in order to be recognized. The membership fee is not extremely high, ranging from 3000 INR for an individual to 7000 INR for clubs with an annual subscription fee of 1000 INR and 3000 INR respectively. However, this remains problematic as other sports in India are basically free (to play at an official level). This barely scrapes the surface of the problem. If one wishes to participate in a national or international event, the rider must pay 1,00,000 INR and 2,00,000 INR per discipline

respectively as “Corpus Money”. Technicalities aside, this amount is literally unrealistic for a country whose median annual wage is approximately 42,000 INR or 616 USD. Riders are also required to produce “No-Objection Certificates” costing 250 USD (more than a third of the median annual wage of an Indian citizen). Moreover, unlike other sports, there has been extremely low investment and encouragement from the side of the Indian Government that could bring down the costs of rearing, training and participation.

The government investment in the equestrian sports industry has been negligible. There has been a rise of domestic sports leagues in the country after the success of the Indian Premier League – a cricket tournament. Leagues are mainly supervised by the controlling body of that sport. Several sports have witnessed the promulgation of leagues, be it from more popular ones like football and hockey to sports that did not previously enjoy a lot of viewership such as wrestling, badminton and kabbadi. Thus, one can infer that governing bodies have a significant role to play in broadening access to a sport to the people in a given region. They are also responsible for creating athletes of a calibre that can compete nationally and internationally. In that vein, the EFI has a lot of opportunity and scope to build on its activities to ensure a wider dissemination of information on equestrian sport by encouraging mass engagement at least on the level of viewership if not on that of participation.

IV. Interviewing the Professionals

Apart from compiling a review of the policies, regulations, and statistics around equestrian sports in India, the author of this paper has reached out to prominent stakeholders in the equestrian community to procure some ethnographic information about the sporting landscape in India and abroad. The interviewees are Abhishek Chopra, who is OCCUPATION, Nick Verliers, who is a coach for PUT WHERE HE COACHES, and Inderjeet Singh of the Army Polo and Riding Club, Delhi. They interviewer put forth questions related to the evolution of the sport in India, contemporary developments, future prospects, and areas of improvement.

How has horse riding changed since you have been involved?

Abhishek Chopra: The equestrian sport has developed multi folds since the time I started to ride. In today’s date we have Indian riders competing globally and winning internationally. We have also gained immense access to Global training techniques and had the exposure of training at larger platforms.

Nick Verlies: In my opinion, Europe is becoming much bigger in scale and sophistication every year. The prize money and the price of horses is increasing every year, along with the entry fee for competitions and sponsorship for the sport. In comparison, the standard in India is growing at a very low pace.

Inderjeet Singh: In India, we were jumping higher in more competitions, even though the access to knowledge and resources was lower. Today, standard of competitions has gone down, though horse riding in general has improved in terms of the number of people taking up the sport and participating in it. This may, however, not be much in comparison to the growth rate of equestrian sport in other nations.

What is the future of horse riding in India?

Abhishek Chopra: The pace at which Indian riders are developing, India will soon be winning at continental and Olympic levels.

Nick Verlies: In order to step up, the equestrian industry needs to get more support from both the civilians and the government. It is only then that the future looks bright. The country needs better facilities, training, horses, and better shows. Only then will more crowds come to watch the sport.

Inderjeet Singh: I think more people are riding horses these days. This is especially the case in South India, which is doing fairly well for itself in the equine industry. Earlier, the sport was only dominated by the Army, but now there are some very qualified civilian riders too.

What are the specific steps that can be taken to foster mass participation?

Abhishek Chopra: To increase participation of competitors, more clubs and stables should come up with professional trainers and more competition at local levels should be organized to give opportunities to amateur riders.

Nick Verlies: I think the first step is definitely negotiating with the government to widen the access to the sport to the youth. A marketing campaign which covers the right bases can also be used to broaden the exposure of the masses to the sport.

Inderjeet Singh: We have to organise competitions which are frequent and regular. A very important front on which to work is sponsorships. The industry needs more sponsors, otherwise the sport won't grow. It is as simple as that.

Are there any current efforts towards the same?

Abhishek Chopra: Yes, clubs like AGL Stables, BRF Stables, Adagio Stables, EIRS, etc are already making efforts to develop new talent and organize competitions to promote upcoming talent.

Nick Verlies: No, the government is not doing enough at all. We need the support of individuals and perhaps even multinational corporations to collaborate and increase the ratings of South Asia in showjumping, which, at the moment, is very low.

Inderjeet Singh: I think there are some well-intentioned efforts to further this cause, such as coaching camps being organised by the Sports Ministry, competitions are being pushed for, and the EFI is taking more interest in widening access. Of course, these efforts need to be quadrupled for there to be any effect.

Do you see a business opportunity for budding equine entrepreneurs in India?

Abhishek Chopra: As more number of stables start opening in India due to an increase in the number of riders, more job opportunities will be created for coaches and other people involved in equestrian business.

Nick Verlies: Well I think it is too early to answer that question, but if things begin to change in terms of governmental regulations, sponsorship, and participation, then yes. The field is wide open right now.

Inderjeet Singh: I would say so, but the system also needs to be able to sustain any radical growth in this sector.

What is the role of EFI? What are they doing and is it enough?

Abhishek Chopra: EFI is the governing body of Indian equestrian. In the past they have made efforts in the interest of sports by organizing more competitions like REL and now coming up with the Metro League. They also support state associations to organize competitions at local levels and help riders train and develop.

Nick Verlies: The main thing it can do right now is support the horse riders and anyone in the industry who is contributing to its growth. It can definitely up its game in advertising

Inderjeet Singh: It's simple, as a body, it has to take better initiative. They must organise more shows and better shows to maintain that upward momentum.

What is the level of coaching facilities, and what needs to be changed?

Abhishek Chopra: In the recent years few new facilities have emerged which are of international standards with international level trainers, the rest of the facilities available are substandard, who need to invest in gaining knowledge on how to develop correct infrastructure and higher the right trainers

Inderjeet Singh: Well apart from the absence of adequate facilities, there aren't coaches to train people either. But this is because of the lack of demand for coaches. Once more people participate in the sport, the number of coaches will increase. Once that happens, there needs to be a steady availability of equestrian courses open to the public.

Policy Recommendations

The first initiative must come from the side of the government. The high rates of taxation on winnings and services must be reduced to incentivize people to participate in this sport and make finances for them something more realistic and doable. The heavy regulations imposed by the government on the import and export of horses must be removed. This would not just make the sport but the entire industry revolving around horses to flourish. In terms of historical context and natural resources, Australia and India lie at par with each other to develop this industry. Yet Australia, presently has an industry worth over \$10 billion, whilst Indian athletes struggle to make ends meet. However, this shows the potential for growth, if the government changed its stance from that of ignorance to that of cooperation and support.

The composition of the athletes at the EFI, as iterated previously, is primarily Army-oriented, a status quo that needs to be checked if equestrian sports need to witness growth. Ensuring a decrease in the participation fee and coaching facilities will increase participation, as these are the major disincentives when it comes to people wanting to join equestrian sports. India has immense potential in terms of natural resources but these remain largely untapped. Presently, army cantonments and barns are synonymous with each other. This is something that obviously needs to be changed. Thus, the government from its side must bring major reform, both in its own economic and trade policies and in the governing body responsible to promote equestrian sports in the country.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the private sector must be allowed to tap into this industry. With the exception of cricket, all sports have used the private sector to gain popularity, develop talent, increase access, and enter the mainstream ‘conversation’ in the nation. There is immense potential to be realized in terms of entertainment. Sponsorship can be a potential game changer. The huge economic gap between the cost and revenue side of things can be covered by pumping in private funds. The private sector has been instrumental in promoting sports in the twenty-first century. The beneficiaries range from badminton, Formula One, Gymnastics and of course, football. It seems like the perfect time for equestrian sports to realize their true potential.

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