DISPATCH

In the Kingdom of Dying Ponies

Polo, the sport of kings, hails from the forgotten, violent state of Manipur, India. Can anyone save its endangered, fabled horses?

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IMPHAL, India – Fifteen seconds into the opening match of the 10th Manipur International Polo Tournament, after a long and feverish drumming performance, after the Manipur state chief minister had been properly honored with gifts and praise, after mounted players had paraded around the Mapal Kangjeibung polo ground with country flags held high, the home team scored on the Australians.

It was a bright late November afternoon in Imphal, the capital of the state of Manipur in northeast India. The rounded mountains beyond the grounds loomed a dusky jade as the concrete stands, filled to the brim with local fans in shabby coats, bawled with joy at the breakaway goal.

Polo is the archetypal sport of snobs. But in Manipur, where the British learned of the game before introducing it to the world — or at least the aristocracy — polo is still a commoner's game. And the exalted status of the Manipuri pony, the only breed used at the Manipur tournament, is one reason why. The indigenous semi-

feral pony is a sacred figure for residents of Manipur, featuring prominently in the ritual life of the Meitei people, the area's majority ethnic group. The ponies are treated as regal mounts, never put to labor, and trace their origin in local lore to the Pegasus-like Samadon Ayangba, the "swift first among beasts."

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Significantly wilder and smaller than regular polo mounts — 10 to 13 hands high (one hand equals four inches) compared to the average 15 or 16 — they are also relatively hard to ride, which is a common complaint of foreign players in the Manipur tournament, though not the Manipuris, who grow up used to the recalcitrant animals. For the locals, who have won the tournament every year except for the last (which went to the Americans), the ponies are a home-field advantage.

But the ponies' regal status has not stymied their slow demise. For decades, the ponies' numbers have gradually dropped and now there are thought to be only around 500 left. In Imphal, one spots them on the streets, huddled together in pitiful herds, red-eyed, skinny, and surrounded by honking traffic. At night, they forage through garbage piles alongside cows and mongrels. Many of them seem hardly in a condition to be used in sport, which is just as well, because there are far fewer places in Manipur to play polo than there once were. "People in Manipur have forgotten the legacy of the pony," lamented one local musician.

The ponies' sorry state is a symbol, and result, of Manipur's own downward trajectory. For centuries a prosperous, independent kingdom, it is today a pariah on India's fringes. If it is ever in the national conversation, it is over its separatist unrest, heavy militarization, endemic corruption and overall dysfunction. But for residents of the New Jersey-sized state, the biggest shift isn't just the violence and disorder — it's the area's marginalization, and the way it has sapped the city's pride, autonomy, and political will.

Some Manipuris have now taken it upon themselves to prove that providing basic necessities for the city's ponies — food, clean water, space to graze and roam — isn't beyond the city's grasp. The bigger question is whether, by restoring to health

the population of ponies and the sporting tradition associated with them, they might help do the same for the city's people.

Members of the Indian army's brass band sit at the edge of the pitch during a polo match, as a replacement pony is brought in by a groomer.

In the two and a half weeks that I was there, and for weeks after, Manipur was beset by sporadic violence. The two highways leading out of Imphal valley were blockaded by armed protesters angered over a jurisdictional change, resulting in a crippling fuel shortage; several small bombs exploded in and around Imphal; and, a week before I arrived, the chief minister's helicopter, while landing to inaugurate a new countryside hospital, was fired upon by "unknown assailants," injuring a bodyguard.

The constant off-and-on conflict of Manipur's nearly 40 armed groups — Maoist, Marxist, ethnic — has held Manipur in a kind of developmental purgatory while much of India has boomed around it. Conflict between the Indian military and Manipuri militant groups has simmered there since the 1970s. In 1980, the state, population 2.8 million, was officially deemed a "disturbed area" by New Delhi, granting the military extrajudicial authority there. Since then, Manipur's conflict hasn't been a fiercely sustained insurgency so much as a series of flares and sparks, aggressions flaming, then guttering and dying. Some militants attack an

army post; the army attacks some militants; every so often the paper reports a dead "civilian." (On the Sunday before the polo tournament, a 32-year-old shopkeeper "succumbed while trying to enter a nearby house" after a bomb exploded near a police post, reported a local daily.)

Whatever the cause, as long as New Delhi is against it, plenty of people in Manipur will be for it.

Yet the militants, as brutal or naive as they often are, are still championed by portions of a population that tend to have their own reservations over New Delhi's authority. Manipur, most of whose myriad ethnicities are Tibeto-Burman and have more in common with neighboring Myanmar, joined the Indian union only in 1949, and under conditions which many still lament as coerced and unjust. That is why, 68 years later, insurgents still find support in Manipur: Whatever the cause, as long as New Delhi is against it, plenty of people in Manipur will be for it.

These resentments might be seen as the curdled byproduct of Manipur's proud royal heritage. Stretching back to ancient times, Manipur was an independent kingdom, one embroiled for much of its existence in a fierce rivalry with the Kingdom of Ava, based in modern-day Myanmar. *Sagol kangjei*, polo's predecessor, came about with royal patronage as a means for the Manipuri citizenry, most of whom owned ponies, to keep their cavalry skills sharp. Tree-bark manuscripts from which much of Manipuri history is deduced — the oldest of which dates back to 33 AD — detail a series of back-and-forth raids with the Burmese. The last one in 1819 led to a seven-year occupation of Manipur.

With the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, Britain not only ended the grisly First Anglo-Burmese War and freed Manipur from the marauding Burmese, but also established Manipur as a de facto British protectorate. Out of this imperial arrangement came polo. A British officer named Joseph Ford Sherer, stationed during the 1850s in Cachar, a picturesque hill district that is now a part of the neighboring Assam state, is credited with popularizing the sport beyond the Manipuris. When Sherer saw Manipuri settlers smacking a ball made of bamboo root with mallets on horseback, he joined in on the peculiar game of "horse hockey" and was immediately enamored. By Sherer's efforts, polo spread through

the empire like spilled curry. It reached the nearby city of Silchar, where the first polo club was established in 1859, then Dhaka, Calcutta and, eventually, England.

During polo's foreign adoption, the game came to be altered — bigger horses, bigger fields, more players. But in Manipur it stayed virtually the same. The owners of Manipuri ponies would still release them every morning to graze in the open like buffaloes and fetch them in the way it had always been done. The only noticeable change, beginning in the 1970s and '80s, was its gradual disappearance. As the insurgency heightened and a drug epidemic began, clubs shuttered en masse. Meanwhile, urbanization in the Imphal valley, Manipur's main population center, began in earnest in the 1970s and has quickened in recent years, thus complicating old lifestyles for people and horses alike. The common consensus is that this is why ponies now wander the streets: There is no room for them anywhere else. Today, as the ponies have become an unavoidable and ever-sadder sight, the sport has faded almost completely from view.

But like many bits of cultural heritage under threat from modernity the sport survived in Manipur under the ragtag but patient auspices of the peasantry. Devoid of royal patronage, players made their own stirrups, clubs, balls, and whips. With the disappearing of grazing commons, less well-off owners had little choice but to set their ponies free in the streets to find food. The remaining dozen or so polo clubs were maintained as best they could. The two major horse-riding associations in Imphal continued to hold tournaments now and then, which kept up interest.

The international tournament, the first of which was held in 1991, began as a means to spread awareness on the ponies' decline and also to remind outsiders that, as is advertised on a large blue billboard at the tournament polo ground, "MANIPUR GAVE THE WORLD THE GAME OF POLO."

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A boy tries to coax reluctant ponies into the water to bathe and exercise on a cold morning.

Sinam Bimol, a policeman, looked out on the field and yelled, *"La! La! La! La!"* There were three steeds in the distance grazing between the narrow pools of a government fishery. The sun shone strong from a cloudless sky on this rare piece of Imphal green; there is preciously little un-urbanized space here. Bimol, 40, a packet of Parle-G biscuits in hand, was summoning the attention of the middle horse, a 7-year-old chocolatey beauty named Stallion. The tournament was six days away and Bimol, a short, stout forbearing sub-inspector in a black beanie and captain of the Manipuri team, India B — the New Delhi squad goes by India A — was showing off his herd: In addition to Stallion there was Red and Jackson.

People in Manipur told me that Bimol is the state's best polo player. But even he had to keep his ponies on land that was not meant for mammals. This fishery was doing him a favor.

To an outsider like me the solution for the lack of grazing space seemed simple: Set apart some land for the ponies and put them there. And indeed, that is what some, like the state government, are trying to do. But results have been uninspiring. A preserve set up in 2013 quickly fell apart after money ran dry without warning. On top of that, the farmers who cultivate the land set aside for the preserve have been haranguing the government over compensation amounts. The dispute, which is still ongoing, raises the question: In a place with abysmal roadways, rising unemployment, constant power outages, and armed insurrection, why should anyone care about ponies?

Somi Roy is Manipur's leading equine activist. To him the suffering ponies represent something far greater than the sum of their parts: The ponies' revival

might be the first step in sparking Manipur's own. "By using No. 1, the pony and No. 2, polo I want to instill a sense of self-esteem here by showing people what a wonderful, rich culture we all come from," he told me. "I want to reframe Manipur for the 21st century. We are known for HIV. We are known for the conflict, the longest hunger strike ever, ambushing army convoys. But we need to build up the positives."

Roy — of middling height; thin, inky hair; beady, bespectacled eyes; and with no particular background in animal welfare — has been instrumental in lobbying the state government on the ponies' behalf (including nurturing strong ties between locals and the United States Polo Association). Using his innate proficiency in the art of networking and the variety of connections afforded to him through family lineage — his mother was a princess of the Manipuri monarchy and a renowned Meitei author — Roy has convinced the government to adopt his "pony policy," a 10-point program designed to prevent pony extinction.

Key among the policy's proposals is the revival of the 300-acre preserve, the one that failed in 2013, and the creation of a multi-disciplinary board of pony "experts." But there is also mention of "scientific breeding," pony-related "ecotourism," construction of a racecourse, a disease management plan, an allowance program for pony owners, and the establishment of a national equine research center. In November, the government formally announced its adoption of the policy, but there has yet to be any significant progress made.

Like Manipur's ponies, Roy is a little wild. Born in Imphal, schooled in Darjeeling and Delhi, he has until recently called New York City home for three decades. He worked there as a film curator for groups like the Asia Society and the Lincoln Center, arranging film festivals and museum exhibitions. He has also worked extensively in rural Appalachia on film projects. Though his blood runs Manipuri, "What I am today is I'm created by America," he says. Particularly American, he insists, is his work ethic: He expects things to get done within a set timeframe, which can be a problem in Manipur. "My point is I want to make things happen. Where I'm going to be frustrated, yeah, okay, I'll be frustrated."

Roy considers the formal adoption of his program a significant milestone, but he also knows that unless concrete actions are soon taken it will about as useful as a

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fractured polo mallet. “Things fall apart quite easily here. This is a place where people are used to things not working out,” he says. “This is the only capital city in India that does not have street lights. Or street signs. Or a mass transportation system. It’s kind of, when you step back and look at it, this is amazing. They don’t repair the roads. They don’t have street lamps. The postal office barely works. Every invitation has to be hand-delivered.”

R.K. Nimai, 62, a former sports commissioner and amateur equestrian, often works with Roy in his pony activism. “If we allow the ponies to vanish, then we are losing a part of our roots. Almost every activity of the Manipuris, the pony was involved,” he asserts. “Somi, his perseverance is very good. He keeps reminding people of the need [to save the ponies].”

Some, however, find Roy’s methods distasteful. According to one young person who used to work as his assistant, “Somi Roy is more American than Manipuri. Everyone’s like, ‘This guy is acting like a king.’”

Even Nimai cannot help mentioning it. “The only thing I have a difference of opinion on is that he wants to do too many things. Somi doesn’t think like a Manipuri.”

Others support Roy’s mission but question its chances of success. “His plans are all good if the government takes it and implements it the way he’s envisioning it,” says a former official at the Ministry of Women and Child Development and a close friend. “But it’s not going to happen exactly as he has planned. I’d be surprised if it happened like that.”

Young riders volunteer to look after the ponies during international polo tournaments in Imphal. After each match, the ponies are washed before they're returned to their stables.

One day I accompanied Roy on his pony lobbying rounds. The tournament was a week away.

For publicity reasons, Roy wanted the adoption of the pony policy to be officially announced before the international teams arrived for the tournament. All it required was a few emails, but the chief minister, who was ultimately responsible, had been dragging his feet — perhaps understandably, given he'd been attacked in that helicopter the week before. Kennedy, his 31-year-old son, an aspiring polo player and politician, sat at his desk. We sat before him. Switching between English and Meitei, Roy's tone shifted from polite to paternal as he pressured the son to pressure his father.

"I need that pony policy approved!" he demanded, tapping the desk. Kennedy, grinning uneasily, fidgeting in his chair, made a call.

"Hello, I am with Somi," he began into the phone. Interrupting, Roy gestured and pointed at me.

"*American* journalist!"

Kennedy grimaced. "And an American journalist," he repeated into the handset. Roy peered my way and grinned.

"I use everything *un*scrupulously," he whispered, reveling in the performance.

Next up was Govindas Konthoujam, the veterinary minister (and concurrently the minister of commerce). He wore a white tunic with red thin stripes, a charcoal

mustache, two golden rings and three smartphones. For him, the pony's downfall could all be pinned on economics. "The Manipuri pony is very special for polo players, but it is *not* an economically important animal," he told me. Profit-driven initiatives like the area's proposed racecourse were vital, he said. "People should love this animal. But because they do not love this animal, that's the problem." Love, he suggested, was a simple matter of financial reward.

Then Roy began his lobbying. They were the same methods used on Kennedy: the theatrical speech, the desk tapping, the highlighting of my presence. But Govindas, considerably older than Kennedy, merely nodded and yawned. Undeterred, Roy concluded the meeting with repeated promises of further communication — WhatsApp messages and phone calls — which sounded like credible threats.

But to Roy, the incessant badgering was the only way to ensure that things got done. "If it takes three years to build a project in New York it takes five years here, for sure," he says, as if commenting on weather patterns. The reason the first pony preserve fell apart, he believes, is because he was away in New York, only coming here twice a year and unable to properly oversee it. Roy's efforts aren't even that concerned with polo, or the ponies; the animals, as he sees them, are merely a means to an end, a way to fulfill his master plan of cultural revitalization. "Manipur used to be the center of its world," he laments. "We've become a broken backwater border region. We've now become the tail-end of something."

A pregnant mare is kept separate from the other Manipuri ponies until she delivers, at a pony preserve at Heingang outside Imphal.

At the top of a hillock, above the farmland that Roy hopes to turn into a pony preserve, is a shrine. The mythological winged Samadon Ayangba and Ibudhou Marjing, the god who tamed him, are its patron saints. In ancient times, the small open-air shrine was only accessible to Manipuri royalty but on a sunny Saturday morning it is abuzz with townsfolk praying and presenting offerings of food. A gray crescent moon, like an imprint, hangs faintly in the sky. Hundreds of little wooden ponies clutter the floor.

I ask one of the resident priests about Roy's pony advocacy efforts; along with his push to convert the farmland below into grazing land, he has been instrumental in reviving this shrine, which had fallen into neglect.

Tall, tan and handsome, the priest wears an off-white turtleneck draped with yellow and green scarves. "Somi Roy is making efforts but the government is ignoring [them]," he says. "They say they are doing something but we aren't seeing anything at the ground level."

He accompanies a translator and me down to the proposed preserve land. At the base of the hillock the priest buys a bundle of betel nut, a chewed stimulant, from a wrinkled vendor who also sells wooden ponies. We stop at the edge of the valley. Beyond lie acres of golden rice paddies hemmed by green hills. "We are still fighting with the farmers," says the priest and hawks a glob of red betel spittle. "They want more compensation."

We walk out onto the spongy wet field. The priest goes barefoot with his hands clasped behind his back. My translator points out a snake in the brush but all I see are cow pies. Up ahead a lone white foal wallows in the marshy grass, tearing at green shoots. We stand and stare. Its hooves are submerged in water; a thin rope is tied round its neck; clumps of mud taint its mane. *The semi-feral Manipuri pony.* It is the only one there.

At another end of the valley there are no ponies but several smallholders. One of them, a 57-year-old paddy farmer, calmly insists that he has been here his whole life. He wears a sodden purple T-shirt, a baseball cap, and has cloth bags tied round his feet bound by thin thread to protect against leeches. A portion of his land falls under the area, which the government intends for the preserve but he is surprisingly understanding. “Since the shrine is here, it’s good if the pony preserve is here too. We are religious people,” says the farmer. “If compensation is big enough, we’re okay.”

Escaping the sun, the three of us move up a ways and find a bit of shade cast by one of the abandoned pony stables. It is nearly noon. Three weeks later, in the tournament semifinals, Captain Bimol will lose two teeth against the Americans and the Australians will eventually take the top prize. But right now, far below the pony shrine, there is just us and the lone foal, still visible across the paddies as a white blob set upon a square of green-gold. It is clear, even from a distance, that it has hardly moved an inch.

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