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ARTICLE

## Relationships of Chance: Friendships in a Gambling Setting of Urban India

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines male friendship at the Delhi racecourse as an example of a sociality amidst an urban South Asian setting defined by uncertainty and the absence of fixed identities. It argues that such friendships are 'relationships of chance', embodying and reflecting the contingency of the gambling arena, rather than sociological or ritual notions which may condition friendship in other settings. This hyper-competitive and hyper-social space configures both the possibility and impossibility of friendship. The paper thus provides insights into how relating to others happens in a heterogeneous, fluid context that is over-determined mainly by a shared passion for self-enrichment.

### KEYWORDS

Exchange; friendship;  
gambling; sociality;  
uncertainty; urban India

### Introduction

My friends are all gamblers and among gamblers you cannot be friends.

— Bettor at the Delhi Racecourse

In this paper, I focus on friendships between male gamblers at the Delhi racecourse. I do this in order to examine sociality in the context of indeterminacy in urban India. During fieldwork I conducted at the Delhi racecourse in 2009 and 2010, bettors at the racecourse introduced me to their acquaintances as 'my friend' or '*mera dost*'. These friends would spend a lot of time together—both inside and outside the racecourse. Yet, when alone with me, they would say: 'He is not a good friend. I have no friends here, money is my only friend', or 'I have no friends at the racecourse. I don't trust anyone there. We are all enemies'.

The friendships at the Delhi racecourse are part of a demarcated domain of sociality that is made possible in a heterogeneous urban context. This is a domain saturated by betting, which is marked off from other spheres of life. Racecourse actors are actively social and spend considerable time together. Other gamblers comprise the bulk of their friendships, yet the authenticity and durability of these friendships are commonly questioned. I argue that friendships among bettors embody the contingency of the gambling market—they are 'relationships of chance'. They are characterised by instrumentality, calculation

and self-interest, and are based on mistrust with the possibility for temporary trust. Friendships are dreaded and considered potentially deceiving, as they do not stand outside the competitive game, but exist within it. Yet, at the same time, they are highly valued. Friends can be useful in settings where transactions of credit and information are central to the betting game. Also, they are people with whom they can share their passion for betting, and the joys and sorrows that follow from winning or losing.

Gambling is a rather archetypical space of uncertainty, which foregrounds competition and speculation. In play theory, gambling tends to be theorised in terms of its significance because it stands in contrast to 'real' life outside the game, and the uncertainty and sociality of playing is tied to the breaking down of real life identities.<sup>1</sup> Once the game is over, normal life is resumed. However, if we consider the gambling setting as one out of several domains of urban life, we have to study the reality and sociality of gambling in its own right. So what kinds of relationships are established in a place like the Delhi racecourse? If we were to follow international psychiatric models such as the *DSM-5*, the bettors interviewed for this article could easily be diagnosed as having gambling addictions; however, rather than identifying pathological behaviour, which is associated specifically with gambling as an activity, I thought of the bettors as having risk personalities, which are found in gambling as well as in other settings of heightened uncertainty. Gambling is a popular activity that is to be understood in its own right as an example of social and cultural life; it is also an examination of friendships in a gambling setting that highlights attributes of relationships established in contexts that are framed by contingency beyond the setting of gambling. This is an indeterminacy that is tied to social and economic practices in contexts where people are believed mainly to act out of self-interest, which is characteristic of many market settings.

The 'work' of betting, as it is called by bettors, has clear similarities with the 'work' of speculation in stock exchange futures markets; I have found strong correlations in betting strategies and the social environment between betting at the Delhi racecourse and speculation in futures markets in the United States as described by Caitlin Zaloom.<sup>2</sup> Speculation, however, is not confined to closed markets for betting and speculation, but is an integrated aspect of many markets. Together with Laura Bear and Ritu Birla, I elsewhere have argued that we need to pay greater attention to more marginal markets of speculation in our studies of India and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> What defines speculation is that it exists in spaces of uncertainty framed by both calculation and suspicion, where self-enrichment may be the goal, but where market behaviour is nevertheless deeply embedded. From ethnographies of South Asian markets, we know that people and groups who have been associated with speculation have overall been placed in an ambiguous space at the border between the moral economy and the market economy.<sup>4</sup> This, I suggest, is tied to the entanglement of

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1. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955); and Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961).
  2. Caitlin Zaloom, *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
  3. Laura Bear, Ritu Birla and Stine Puri, 'Speculation: India, Uncertainty and New Economic Imaginaries', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 35, no. 3, forthcoming 2016.
  4. David Rudner, 'The Bankers Trust and the Culture of Banking among the Nattukottai Chettiars of Colonial South India', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (1989), pp. 417–58; Ritu Birla, 'Hedging Bets: Speculation, Gambling, and Market Ethics, 1890–1930', *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 143–98.

market uncertainty in social relationships, which I will illustrate through a focus on transactions among better friends.

So, in order to understand sociality in this particular kind of speculative setting, I have framed this article around the anthropology of exchange, rather than the anthropology of friendship. I have furthermore chosen to compare these friendships with other relationships described in the anthropology of gambling, in order to clarify how sociality is determined by different games as well as by its position in the surrounding society in settings that blur distinctions between market and social institutions. What is interesting in the anthropology of gambling is that at its core is the dilemma between social and economic ends. It is my hope that this literature, combined with my ethnography, will enable me to shine fresh light on the anthropology and sociology of sociality in India through a focus on the morality of exchange. The contribution of the article is twofold. First, it contributes to the anthropology of friendship by focusing on how intimacy is crafted in relationships that are entirely focused around one activity in a circumscribed domain of heightened uncertainty. A focus on friendships in gambling challenges Western middle-class notions of friendship, which foregrounds love and loyalty as its foundational characteristics in contexts beyond the sphere of the market.<sup>5</sup> Second, by mapping the interiorised realm of sociality and friendship peculiar to the racecourse that is made possible in an urban bounded space in South Asia, the article contributes more broadly to the anthropology of South Asian sociality. Dealing with examples of seemingly more unstable relationships in competitive settings destabilises the fixed cultural identities and social positions that South Asian society has often been thought through.

In the following sections of the article, I examine how friendships are practised and perceived by focusing on exchanges of money, information and food between friends. The uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding these exchanges highlights the value, as well as the problems, of these relationships. I do so by unpacking the friendships of one informant, Chipper.<sup>6</sup>

### Dinner with Friends

Chipper lived not far from the racecourse in a small room. His place had become a hang-out for him and his friends both before and after the races. Here, they talked about past and upcoming races as well as women and parties, in the absence of their wives and families. Chipper was a jovial man in his thirties with an open and searching look in his eyes. He always wore jeans, a T-shirt and trainers and had his hair slicked back with wax. He had a large smile, which emphasised his puffy and reddish cheeks. The man who, at the racecourse, was only known by his nickname, 'Chipper', was a Punjabi from a Kshatriya caste from a rural area of north India. His family owned a large parcel of land, some of which they had been selling off. Much of this money was put towards Chipper setting up a real estate business in Delhi. The money and his time, however, were by and large spent at the racecourse, and he had been doing that for a couple of years now, apparently

5. Simon Coleman, 'Afterword', in Amit Desai and Evan Killick (eds), *The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 197–207.

6. All names are pseudonyms.

without his parents knowing. Depending on his financial situation, Chipper would place anything between Rs100 and Rs100,000 per bet (approximately US\$1.50–US\$1,500).

Tonight, Chipper had invited me and my friend over to his place. When we arrived, the mood was cheerful and Chipper and his friends had already started drinking Kingfisher beer and Old Monk rum. Chipper had had his employee cook a chicken and lamb dish with *chapattis* for us in the tiny kitchen set up next to the main room. The food was served on top of the bedcover laid out over Chipper's double bed, which filled most of the bare room. I sat down on the bed, and my friend in one of three red plastic chairs set up next to a heavy laptop computer showing the *indiarace.com* website with information on the next day's races. We quickly joined in the eating, drinking and talking.

I asked the usual question about how their day had been. Chipper had 'eaten' (won) Rs70,000 on a horse named Hidden Pleasures. His Bengali Muslim friend called 'My Name is Shahrukh' (a nickname given to him after a Bollywood movie playing at the time) had lost an amount he would not disclose. According to Chipper, My Name is Shahrukh had lost because he had not followed Chipper's tip, derived from inside information that Chipper had paid a substantial sum of money for. My Name is Shahrukh was a short man in his late thirties who constantly smoked and had a slightly reserved and worried look on his face. He made a steady monthly income of Rs30,000 by smuggling electronics through airport customs. He had started this business after he had been kicked out of a lucrative family business that provided false visa documents for people wanting to migrate to Europe because he had been using its profits to bet on horses.

The second friend, Sachin, also a Punjabi Kshatriya, besides betting himself, had a 10 percent share in a bookmaking firm, which meant that on a weekly basis, he was paid 10 percent of the profit made by the bookmaker at the racecourse—or had to pay 10 percent in the case of a deficit. He told me that he had 'won' just a small amount at the races, which came from his share with the bookmaker. I asked Sachin how he got into bookmaking. He told me that a friend he went to school with had taken him to the racecourse and he had won on the first race: 'I came and sat down and ate a korma (minced meat dish) and I won 4,500... then I was like, "I want to eat more money"'. I asked whether his bookmaking firm was involved in fixing races as a way to make money. This was a central theme of conversation at the racecourse, as well as a focal point for betting and bookmaking strategies, because at the racecourse, everyone assumed that most races were fixed, usually by bookmakers in order to prevent the favourite horse winning.<sup>7</sup> Sachin smiled at me enigmatically in a way that seemed to suggest something between 'of course' and 'I cannot answer that'. Chipper took over and started talking about a horse from a couple of days ago that he had heard had had a nail put into its shoe to prevent it from winning. Everyone agreed that it was the mafia that was involved in such methods. Sitting in the corner was the third friend of Chipper, who had become too drunk to get any sensible information from.

Digging into the delicious chicken dish, I asked whether on a day like today, the person who had won would pay for the alcohol and food. Chipper told me that they split their

7. Stine Simonsen Puri, 'Betting on People: Bookmaking at Delhi Racecourse', in Rebecca Cassidy, Claire Loussouarn and Andrea Pisac (eds), *Qualitative Research in Gambling: Exploring the Production and Consumption of Risk* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 140–55; and Stine Simonsen Puri, 'Betting on Performed Futures: Predictive Procedures at Delhi Racecourse', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 35, no. 3 (Jan. 2016), pp. 466–80.



expenses and added, 'but the money for an Old Monk is nothing compared to the money at the racecourse'. My Name is Shahrukh's cell phone rang, and on the screen appeared the words '*Pareshan* (trouble) calling'. It was his wife. He said that he did not want to pick up his phone because they had had a fight over money. He had just got a new phone after having thrown his old one on the floor in anger while talking to her a couple of days ago. Everyone laughed about it.

I had encouraged my Danish-Indian friend, also an anthropologist, to ask questions while I was sitting writing in my notebook, and she got right to the point: 'So, were you friends before or do you know each other from the racecourse?' 'We know each other from the racecourse', Sachin replied, and Chipper added: 'We have been friends for the past two years'. 'But can your friendship not be jeopardised?' she asked. Chipper continued, 'We are true friends; we will borrow some money from each other when...we trust each other'. Sachin touched himself on the heart and looked up towards the sky as a gesture of gratitude and hope of perseverance for the future.

Chipper told us that he had recently invited all three men present to Bangkok after having won a large amount of money at the races. He had paid for everything during the trip, which had added up to Rs200,000. He had eventually gotten money back from Sachin, but not from My Name is Shahrukh or the drunken man. He told me this in a semi-quiet voice and then laughed with a double-edged smile. After a couple of hours, we all went home. When I asked Chipper about his friends at the party the next day, he reacted to my use of the term friend. 'With them I just pass time, have fun. They are interesting characters'. He then emphasised My Name is Shahrukh's cash problems. The above case gives a sense of the kind of social space that these friendships develop from, and the exchanges involved. My Name is Shahrukh owes Chipper money. Chipper had given information to My Name is Shahrukh, which he nevertheless had not followed. The men talk about the uncertainty of race-fixing; they eat meat, drink alcohol and make jokes, all the while keeping their dissatisfied wives at a distance.

## Hidden Spaces

Here, I describe the Delhi racecourse out of which Chipper's friendships have grown. With comparisons to other ethnographies of gambling, I want to emphasise how the racecourse exists as a bounded social place where friendships between bettors are not interwoven with other social domains. Located just next to the prime minister's home, the Delhi racecourse was built in 1940 during British colonial rule and can be reached by driving through the beautiful wide boulevards of New Delhi originally established for the British Indian government. On a daily basis, approximately 3,000 bettors come to the races from all corners of the city, betting in amounts ranging between Rs10 and Rs500,000 per wager. Apart from the prime minister's residence and the more exclusive polo ground, surrounding the racecourse are the stables, as well as a slum inhabited by people who work in various jobs in the racing industry, as horse strappers, track riding boys, jockeys, cleaners, operators of betting machines, and so on. The Delhi Race Club hosts live horse racing on approximately fifty days of the year, but is open almost every day from around noon to 6 pm. On days with no live races in Delhi, one can bet on some of the approximately 3,000 races held yearly in eight of the ten cities that today have operating racecourses in

India. During this time, races are shown every thirty minutes from one of these cities on small television screens set up in various corners of the racecourse.

Despite the prominent location, the racecourse is in decay and is not a place that is visited by the prime minister or other high-profile people, except for occasional invitation races, like the Derby. Anyone who can afford to pay the entry price of Rs40 can enter, and there are people of all classes, castes and religions, although few females.<sup>8</sup> In this heterogeneous context, there is a specific way people can be known. In one bettor's words: 'We know everyone here: who owes money; who has lost...' Knowing someone at the racecourse was tied to betting and the economy of betting. This situation is different from knowing someone in other settings framed around family or occupational identity, where knowing someone involves knowing their caste and family history. At the racecourse, there was hardly any mention of prescribed identities related to caste, family background, occupation, and so on. Bettors would most often go by nicknames, or first names only, without mentioning their last names, which point towards caste and class. The regular norm of asking 'How is your family?' was replaced with the question, 'How is your day?', referring to whether one was winning or losing.

Overall, it was difficult for me to get in touch with the bettors' families and wives. I had encountered girlfriends, and also in Chipper's bed, but few wives. Whereas I received various invitations to join bettors for drinks in the company of their other bettor friends, I was rarely invited home to meet the family—and neither were the other bettors. As part of their friendships, bettors acted with what Roy Dilley has characterised as a 'willed' ignorance towards each other<sup>9</sup>—an intentional practice of not knowing. Part of the premise for the friendships among bettors is concealment from other parts of one's life. The premise for the friendship that is practised in a gambling space is a friendship in which you cannot expect a full persona to be revealed, but just parts of it.

The Delhi racecourse is a public, yet enclosed, space. I consider it an example of an urban space in a South Asian city, not because it is part of an immense continuous and chaotic inhabited space, but rather because it exists as a pocket that people act in, in which only parts of their identities are of relevance. This is not to say that people entering the racecourse are anonymous, rather that their identity is tied to the specific relationships and exchanges that develop from the location itself. For the same reason, as I entered my relationships with the bettors as one of those friends from the racecourse, it was not easy for me to get a clear picture of the bettors' socio-economic identity beyond the racecourse, including precise information about the sources of money that finance their betting lifestyle.

At times when I would question the bettors as to whether they considered it okay to gamble, they would proudly tell me how they had managed to keep it a secret from their wives. Asking a Sikh bettor whether it was allowed to gamble according to the Sikh faith, I

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8. Based on the information from a survey of 109 respondents, I found that the majority were from the middle classes (45 percent with a middle-class income of between Rs17,000 and Rs83,000, and 73 percent when including lower and upper middle classes as well). There was also a relatively equal distribution over the four caste categories, with a slight majority of Kshatriyas. All the main religious groups were represented, but with a larger group of Sikhs (14 percent) as compared with the general population of Delhi. The largest age groups were men in their thirties and also men older than sixty. The respondents were all regular racegoers, going to the racecourse a minimum of once a week, with 54 percent going every day.

9. Roy Dilley, 'Reflections on Knowledge Practices and the Problem of Ignorance', in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 16 (2010), pp. 176–92.



was told, 'No, but as long as one keeps it a secret one can gamble'. Here, secrecy was not considered a sign of dishonesty, but rather a moral act. As discussed elsewhere, rather than attempting to redraw moral lines, bettors kept family as well as religion at a distance from their betting practices.<sup>10</sup> Such modes of concealment enabled a kind of parallel life for the bettors, where the city became a place where they could move around in demarcated places, defined by separate social and moral frameworks.

In the anthropological literature on gambling, I have identified two overall approaches to gambling sociality. First, there are studies on gambling, often card gambling, in close-knit communities where establishing and maintaining friendships and alliances are seen as part both of what defines the sociality of gambling and of the incentive for gambling.<sup>11</sup> In this line of analysis, gambling is examined in relationship to, and within, an existing stable social realm. As an example, Ellen Oxfeld Basu has examined Mah-jong gambling in homes within a Chinese community in Kolkata,<sup>12</sup> and identified how gambling momentarily contradicts the existing social hierarchies and ethics of the community; nevertheless, these are reinstated once the game is over. Gambling here takes place within a community having fixed values and identities, even though it challenges them. It is seen as an activity that takes place within communities or between existing friends, or as a means of building friendships or alliances beyond the gambling setting itself.

The assumption that gambling and betting spaces are places for potential friendships being forged within or between communities has been challenged in more recent studies that have focused on gambling in urban settings that feature computerised and institutionalised conditions. For example, Natasha Schüll has looked into gambling on slot machines in the USA, finding there a relationship between the individual and the gambling machine, a relationship that is designed and controlled through modern technology.<sup>13</sup> In betting outlets in England, Rebecca Cassidy has observed how, in contrast to those who bet on slot machines, those who bet on horses generally like to keep to themselves, interacting only with the betting shop operator when they place their bets.<sup>14</sup>

This difference in emphasis on gambling as a primarily social or individual act is tied to the difference in location and organisation of the betting game. Studies in small-scale rural settings point towards gambling as oriented towards the community, whereas in large-scale urban settings, gambling is a more individualised practice, an engagement between the gambler and the game facilitator, which sometimes does not even require interacting with other people. The Delhi racecourse stands somewhat in between what has been associated with the small-scale and large-scale organisation of gambling. At a structural level, on the one hand, the gambling market is integrated into national fiscal policies and is

10. Stine Puri, "'Gambling is Gambling': Creating Decontextualized Space at an Indian Racecourse', in Esther Fihl and Jens Dahl (eds), *A Comparative Ethnography of Alternative Spaces* (London/New York: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 65–84.

11. Evthymios Papataxiarchis, 'A Contest with Money', in Sophie Day, Evthymios Papataxiarchis and Michael Stewart (eds), *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 158–76; Thomas Malaby, *Gambling Life: Dealing in Contingency in a Greek City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); and Michael Herzfeld, 'Idioms of Contest', in *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 123–62.

12. Ellen Oxfeld Basu, 'Profit, Loss, and Fate: The Entrepreneurial Ethic and the Practice of Gambling in an Overseas Chinese Community', in *Modern China*, Vol. 17, no. 2 (April 1991), pp. 227–59.

13. Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

14. Rebecca Cassidy, 'Horse versus Machine: Battles in the Betting Shop', in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 18 (2012), pp. 226–84.

computerised via the totalisator betting machine. On the other hand, there is an extensive, primarily illegal, betting market dependent on social relationships established between bettor and bookmaker. In this kind of space, people are neither playing as a member of a community, nor independently of relationships established with people. What I observed in Delhi was gambling in an urban setting, which was innately a social act that was all about establishing relationships. These were nevertheless relationships limited to a single domain. What I find interesting is how the Delhi racecourse exists as a place of hyper-sociality, where everyone pays attention to everyone else and explores the possibilities for friendship with others, yet where gambling is not done primarily to establish relationships, but where relationships are used to enable gambling. One way that friendships enable gambling is through loans.

### Indebted Friends

Among friends at the Delhi racecourse, there was an obligation to give interest-free loans which enabled them to continue to bet even when they had had sudden big losses. Inside the racecourse, there is an ATM machine which is barely used, partly because a lot of the money in betting is part of the black economy, and partly because for some bettors, the Rs25,000 daily withdrawal limit is simply not enough. Lending money between friends was important because bettors wanted to avoid having to go to the moneylenders (who sit on a stone bench inside the racecourse, wearing pointy leather shoes and with a stern look in their eyes). The moneylenders gave minimum loans of Rs10,000 for which the interest rate was Rs100–Rs200 a day. According to Chipper, over a period of ten years, they had killed six people who were not able to repay their debts. On several occasions, Chipper told me the story of a man who had had his arms and legs broken by the moneylenders at the racecourse gate not long before I had come to do my fieldwork, and who had died in hospital three months later. In Chipper's eyes, the worst thing about the moneylenders was not their violent methods, but their interest policy: 'It is a very bad thing being charged interest', he told me. As in other places in India, moneylenders are associated with immorality as well as lower-caste rank, in contrast to friends who would act beyond the pure market logic of clearly-defined contracts.

As part of this obligation to lend money to friends interest free, My Name is Shahrukh owed Chipper Rs200,000, a sum which had accrued over a number of years. Despite his smuggling business, My Name is Shahrukh was occasionally short of money, and he would ask Chipper for help. Sometimes My Name is Shahrukh would give Chipper Rs50,000 after a big win, but he would soon come back for the money when he had again lost. Chipper kept account of how much My Name is Shahrukh owed him, although he doubted whether My Name is Shahrukh would ever fully repay the debt. But Chipper still wanted to remain friends with My Name is Shahrukh, telling me that he found him 'useful'.

My Name is Shahrukh helped Chipper in a number of ways. For example, he would place bets for Chipper when he was away from Delhi visiting his family in rural India. While there, Chipper would walk long distances to get cell phone reception in order to obtain information on the races so he could tell My Name is Shahrukh which races he wanted to bet on. Therefore, My Name is Shahrukh could partly repay his loans by betting for Chipper in his absence. It was common for loans to be given and then repaid as bets,

by betting the amount owed for the lender, rather than by returning the loan in the form of cash. This meant that there was a fluidity or unpredictability in the actual amounts exchanged, as it depended on the outcome of the races. Loans were not easily differentiated from bets, as they were given and repaid in the form of bets. In that sense loaning and repaying money not only involved an exchange of money, but also an exchange of chance. Chance was infused with the principle of indebtedness, and in that sense debt was not simply a consequence of a lack of economic resources due to spendthrift behaviour. Rather, it was central to the social relationships with other bettors as well as to the sociality of the game. Thus, the game of the racecourse was much more than just being about the relationship between bookmaker and bettor because bettors were entwined in each other's betting through the practices surrounding debt. During those times when Chipper was away, he would also give me a call now and then if he thought that the information he had on a race was not to be missed, and he would ask me to place a bet for him. As part of my participant observation, I took part in betting, which, among other things, provided insights into the kinds of exchanges that exist between bettors. When I placed a bet for Chipper, he would only owe me money if he did not win, whereas I would owe him money if he won. Loans were not always easily differentiated from favours, as it was a way of enabling other people to bet. The possibility of obtaining loans in times of need, which, at the racecourse, can happen to the poor as well as to the rich, creates incentives for friendships, but also challenges friendships if there was doubt about repayment. Nevertheless, through the exchange of money, bettors share the experience of chance, with betting becoming a communal act.

Interest-free loans are a common feature of the kind of obligation that is tied to gambling as described in the ethnography of gambling.<sup>15</sup> Based on ethnographic fieldwork on card gambling in rural Greece, Evthymios Papataxiarchis argues that giving loans to fellow gamblers in the village is a way of overcoming the potential problems of gambling being connected to something based on self-interest, as opposed to an ethics of sharing.<sup>16</sup> Giving loans was thus a procedure through which competition could exist within a sharing community. Papataxiarchis captures the significance of loans for the establishing of friendships among competitors in a setting of both leisure and contest. He stresses the importance of maintaining good relationships in the closed community of a small village in rural Greece. In an article on casino gambling in China, Wuyi Wang and Peter Zabielskis note that among business partners, friendship could be lubricated in gambling settings through the mutual exchange of gifts and favours in the form of drinks, food and, ultimately, a trip to Macau, known as the Asian Las Vegas.<sup>17</sup> The informal debts involved in such transactions were paid back in a non-gambling context, where the sanctions for reciprocity were considered stronger than inside the gambling context because of the need to uphold honour while preserving the relationship. For both Papataxiarchis and Wang and Zabielskis, establishing and nurturing pre-existing friendships are one of the primary goals, and the gambling setting a place for the possibility of strengthening

15. David Hayano, *Poker Faces: The Life and Work of Professional Card Players* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

16. Papataxiarchis, 'A Contest with Money', pp. 158–76.

17. Wuyi Wang and Peter Zabielskis, 'Making Friends, Making Money. Macau's Traditional VIP Casino System', in Sytze F. Kingma (ed.), *Global Gambling: Cultural Perspectives on Gambling Organizations* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 113–43.

friendships, which, as mentioned, is the turning point for several studies on the sociality of gambling.

This was not the case in the urban setting of Delhi, where I found that the desire for friendship was not aimed at establishing relationships outside the racecourse in a realm where honour was at stake. Interestingly, unlike in many other settings in South Asia, here there was no use of kinship metaphors to describe the relationships. These bettors did not refer to one another as *bhai* or brother, and thus did not apply the overriding social categories that exist outside the racecourse to define the relationships. Being indebted to a friend at the Delhi racecourse did not translate into an emotional bond of trust and generosity that extended beyond the gambling context. At the racecourse, debt between friends concerned the possibility for credit. It was not so much the economic practice of making loans that supported the social practice of friendship or alliance, but, rather, the social practice of friendship that supported the economic practice of giving interest-free loans. I am not trying to say here that friendships were simply instrumental—bettors did talk about the enjoyment of spending time together. With fellow bettors, they shared moments of intense excitement, and they preferred to go to the racecourse to bet, instead of betting over the phone. Yet, the market framed the way that they could be friends.

### Relationships against the Odds

Another point of entry through which we can see how friendships are embedded in the betting game is through the exchange of information. A defining feature of the Delhi racecourse is the abundant exchange of tips and inside information. Chipper got his information via his cell phone just before the races from his friend's brother in Mumbai, who he thought had good connections. If the horse tipped ended up winning, he would give 10 percent of his prize money, which sometimes could be as much as Rs50,000, to his information source. As well, men from the surrounding slums offer inside information based on their self-proclaimed connections to the stables and the jockeys, sometime in return for a meal or a cup of tea. There were also advertisements for tipster services in the daily racing booklets. Inside information was a valuable commodity in a space where everyone agreed that most races were fixed. Because of this, some people would know the result of the race before it started. Tips on upcoming races were not only part of a monetary economy, they were also part of the exchange between friends. However, this information, given freely among friends, was often met with suspicion, and My Name is Shahrukh did not always follow Chipper's advice.

The problem with the type of information given is connected to the fluctuation in betting odds. In principle, a tip could be given on the wrong horse in order to improve the odds of another horse in the race that the tipster wants to secretly bet on, so improving his profit margin. Depending on how much a friend is betting and with whom the person is sharing the information, the odds can change considerably as the information gets out into the public arena.<sup>18</sup> The tip, also called to 'give a horse', can thus be given out of self-interest, rather than to share profit between friends. No bettors confided to me that they were intentionally using this strategy, yet they thought that others might be doing so.

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18. Marvin Scott, *The Racing Game* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 1968).

For example, I was told by bettors as well as bookmakers that a horse's owners would tell everyone that their horse was going to win—a tip which would often be followed—and they would then make a deal with the bookmakers to hold back the horse during the race and so share in the profit from the bets placed on that horse. Betting odds at the racecourse thus resulted in speculation on the intentions and trustworthiness of people. It was not that this kind of manipulation of the odds through friends was common practice, yet an awareness of what brings about fluctuations in the odds creates a space in which the gift of a tip is accepted uncertainly. This of course reminds us of the gift as conceptualised by Mauss.<sup>19</sup> The Maussian gift, because of the principle of reciprocity, enables the establishment of beneficial long-term relationships among people who otherwise would be in the category of enemies. Gift-giving is an economic institution that seeks to maximise returns. Jonathan Parry, in his interpretation of Mauss, emphasises that the intriguing feature of gifts is that they can be given out of generosity and self-interest simultaneously; nevertheless, gift-giving embodies the sins of the giver.<sup>20</sup> Parry and James Carrier both argue that the idea of the disinterested gift is a consequence of the differentiation of social relations in a market sphere.<sup>21</sup> As argued by Parry, the anthropological interest in gift-giving has mainly come to focus on gift-giving in non-market settings, and has even been constructed in antithesis to market exchange. However, what is interesting about looking into gift-giving in a gambling setting is that it often forms both a hyper-social and a hyper-competitive space. In this space, it is as if the qualities of the gift, as both a sign of generosity and of self-interest, are exacerbated. As part of what might be termed a 'loose' relationship with money, which comes from the constant flow of winning and losing, bettors at the racecourse were overall very giving people, sharing their food, offering coffee—and lending or giving large sums of money to fellow bettors. At the same time, they saw everyone, including themselves, as 'greedy' and as acting out of self-interest. Both the eagerness to give and the hesitation to receive are tied to this duality.

This duality is not fixed, but varies according to context. In order to understand this dynamic, it is worth taking two dimensions into account, which push the information about gift-giving practices, or the interpretation of these gifts, in different directions. The first dimension simply concerns money, or economic position. 'People won't invite an elephant into their house, but they will invite a rabbit', a middle-aged bettor once told me. When I asked him to explain what he meant, he said that people would only share good tips with those betting small amounts of money. He himself, an elephant, betting up to Rs500,000 per race, was seldom given any tips by fellow bettors that he could trust. He asked me how my betting season was going and whether I was in plus or minus. I happened to be in plus at that time after I had success following Chipper's advice. He told me that he was not surprised that I was winning because he thought that a lot of people would want to be my friend and give me correct tips. He told me that sometimes, when he was given a tip by one of his friends who owned a horse, he would not follow the advice. This both suggests that being involved in gift-giving—and by extension in social

19. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1954).

20. Jonathan Parry, 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"', in *Man*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (Sept. 1986), pp. 453–73.

21. James Carrier, 'The Rituals of Christmas Giving', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Unwrapping Christmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 55–74.



relationships—is a thorough calculation, and also that these calculations involve understanding the economic consequences of gift-giving for the giver.

A second dimension, which affects gift-giving, is the spatial dimension. What I observed was that tips given by people from further away were more trusted than tips given at the racecourse itself. This was because they were located in different odds markets. A tipster from afar could not easily benefit from giving a wrong tip, in contrast to those betting in the same betting ring as described above. This is one of the reasons why Chipper chose to get information from his source in Mumbai, even on those races run in Delhi, and even though inside information given from afar was more expensive than information bought locally. To some extent, distance in relationships was thus valued more than closeness because there was a danger associated with closeness. Here, Sahlins' theory of reciprocity, where those close by give without expecting a return (general reciprocity), and those far away are expected to take without giving back (negative reciprocity), is turned on its head. A form of negative reciprocity is thus assumed among those close by, and balanced reciprocity, where there is a direct exchange in which those involved arrive at a price they agree upon, among those further away.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the point is also that those close by are not, as in Sahlins' model, kin, but competitors. This also reminds us of what Peter Geschiere, in the context of studies on witchcraft in Africa, has called the 'dangers of intimacy', where those closest to one can do the most damage, rather than those far away who are not enemies.<sup>23</sup> An understanding of how information is set in markets at a geographical distance foregrounds how friendships at the racecourse, as opposed to those relationships that are more clearly defined in market terms, are imbued with mistrust.

A further dimension is temporal, which does not specifically concern information sharing, but more generally highlights the provisional character of friendships at the racecourse. According to Irving Zola, clients at a betting outlet in the USA in the 1960s did not constitute a group 'in a formal sense'.<sup>24</sup> Similar to the observations of Cassidy,<sup>25</sup> he noted that individuals in the betting shop would, to a great degree, keep to themselves. However, Zola registered a change in the social interaction around ten minutes before a race, when bettors would start talking to each other about potential winners. They would flock together in front of the television sets and then just after the race, they would exchange comments on the winners and losers, after which they would return to their own spots. Based on these observations, Zola argues that the patterns of interaction show the bond that betting creates between men who are otherwise strangers. At the Delhi racecourse, the temporal patterns for interaction were in many ways reversed in comparison with Zola's observations. Thus, there was a certain rhythm to the sociality of the racecourse, where bettors would be very friendly and chatty away from the betting ring long before a race was to start, then would shift out of the groups once the betting was about to start. As the act of betting came closer, it seemed the friendship ties were weakened as these friends became more clearly defined as competitors in a game. The betting game and the desire to win framed the temporality and the spatiality of friendships. Race-fixing added more uncertainty to the setting, because people were not trusted to be playing by the rules, and to the social relationships, because

22. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge, 1972).

23. P. Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

24. I.K. Zola, 'Observations on Gambling in a Lower-Class Setting', in R.D. Herman (ed.), *Gambling* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 19–32.

25. Cassidy, 'Horse versus Machine', pp. 226–84.



deception among friends could be part of a betting strategy. The moral framework for the racing game thus mirrored the morality of friendships.

### 'Eating' Horse and Money

Here, I examine the morality of gambling by paying attention to another kind of exchange—at a metaphorical level—namely, the exchange of food. In the above opening case, Chipper said he had 'eaten 70,000' rupees. The verb used for winning a bet can be *jeetna*, which can be translated as winning, but more often, *khaana* is used, which means to eat.<sup>26</sup> Bookmakers were called *khaanawallahs*, which can be translated as people selling or eating food. To 'eat a bet' or 'eat a horse' is what bookmakers do when they receive a wager from a bettor, and bettors can likewise 'eat a bet' from a bookmaker who wants to lay off bets when he has taken too many bets on a particular horse. One day, when I told an older man that I had tried out this kind of betting, he responded sarcastically: 'People are eating *chapatti* and rice and you are eating a horse. Are you hungry?' Betting on horse racing was metaphorically tied to eating money and eating horse meat, as opposed to a simple South Asian vegetarian meal.

The concept of eating money as a mode of winning was not always stated. Often bettors would just make a hand gesture, putting the fingers on their right hand together, as if holding food, and then shaking it back and forth towards the mouth. This was a gesture which, outside the racecourse, could mean either 'Are you hungry?' or 'Come and have some food', and, among beggars, means 'Please give me money for food'. However, at the racecourse, the gesture meant, 'I have won'. It would be performed in a slightly different manner from outside the racecourse, with neither reverence nor despair, but with a glint in the eye. There was something naughty or illegitimate about this form of eating.

In India, as elsewhere, food is loaded with symbolism, and food exchange is central to the communication of social identity as well as for establishing social relationships.<sup>27</sup> Following the thread of Louis Dumont in the literature on food in South Asia, food exchanges have often been examined through the categories of purity and pollution, which indirectly take caste as the dominant referent for the transaction and consumption of food.<sup>28</sup> However Helen Lambert, in aiming to describe the forms of relatedness constructed beyond prescribed kinship and caste status, takes the eating of food as an entry point for the examination of the building of relationships outside approved identities. Exchanging food not only classifies people, but also creates bonds beyond fixed identities. Among bettors, there is a bond tied to money transactions, which is accentuated through the use of food as metaphor. This highlights the gambling setting as one of commensality. The food metaphor also emphasises the moral space of the racecourse encompassing friendships, where the food of money is, if not polluted, then quite difficult to digest.

26. Records of gambling places in India from the end of the nineteenth century show that *khaana* was used then as a verb for betting or placing a wager. See Anne Hardgrove, *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta 1897–1997* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

27. Arjun Appadurai, 'Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (1981), pp. 494–511; R.S. Khare, *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Manpreet Kaur Janeja, *Transactions in Taste: The Collaborative Lives of Everyday Bengali Food* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); and McKim Marriott, *India through Hindu Categories* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

28. Helen Lambert, 'Sentiment and Substance in North Indian Forms of Relatedness', in Janet Carsten (ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 73–89.

The metaphorical use of 'eating' among bettors, I see as an example of the fetishisation of money, where money is associated with organic qualities as a way of expressing the basic structures of social relations. Michael Taussig, as part of his study of Columbian labourers, identified the ritual of baptising money as a way through which economic structures and moral consciousness were expressed.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the use of the 'eating' metaphor in gambling is not unique to India. In David Hayano's study of an area of Papua New Guinea that has only recently come under a monetary economy, gambling is associated with a more competitive ethics tied to the introduction of money as well as the experience of sufficiency.<sup>30</sup> The introduction of money made the people subject to the uncertainty of the marketplace and affected the ability of individual labourers to make enough money to buy food.

Bettors spoke of how the value ascribed to money inside the racecourse was different from its exchange value outside the racecourse, as in the example above discussing the price of Old Monk rum. The money won at gambling went towards specific kinds of consumption, such as alcohol, travel or prostitution, rather than towards providing families with food; in that sense, it existed in a separate exchange sphere carrying its own moral value.<sup>31</sup> In personal conversations, bettors did not hide the fact that they felt they were letting down their families—not only economically, but also in terms of the time spent away from home in gambling. The food or money consumed at the racecourse is thus money not shared beyond the gambling setting. Not only was the exchange system at the racecourse not connected with exchange systems outside the venue, these short-term and seemingly self-interested transactions were not linked with the long-term and other-centred cosmic order,<sup>32</sup> which has been emphasised as a frame of analysis in particular for exchange within a Hindu cosmology, as in the aforementioned work by Parry.

Furthermore, let me stress that what is being metaphorically consumed when 'eating' a horse is eating meat in a society where the majority of people consider non-vegetarianism both morally wrong and unhealthy. It is not food for survival, but food. The verb used for losing a bet is *harna*, which means to lose, but which several bettors translated into English as 'to die', as in *maarna*. In either case, the process of gambling involves killing living beings and eating their meat, and not just any meat, but the very horses that they were betting on—bettors also emphasised that people on the racecourse were motivated by their love of gambling and not their love of horses, and that they would go as far as to maltreat horses in order to win—as the example of the nail being driven into the horse's shoe demonstrates.

Lévi-Strauss, in his examination of structures of exchange, categorises gambling as a social act that can be compared to giving a feast or a ritualisation of surpluses.<sup>33</sup> Gambling is seen as the ultimate form of sharing in times of excess, not unlike potlatch,<sup>34</sup>

29. Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

30. David M. Hayano, 'Like Eating Money: Card Gambling in a Papua New Guinea Highlands Village', in *Journal of Gambling Behavior*, Vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1989), pp. 231–45.

31. Paul Bohannan, 'Some Principles of Exchange and Investment among the Tiv', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 57, no. 1 (1955), pp. 60–70.

32. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

33. Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Principle of Reciprocity', in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 233–54.

34. Potlatch as framed by Marcel Mauss is a form of competitive gift-exchange where groups of people demonstrate power through excessive consumption and exchange at a material as well as an immaterial level.

and as a way of demonstrating hierarchy and creating integration. In this context, he compares gambling specifically with rich food, such as meat, as opposed to the kind of food that is eaten to survive, such as *chapattis* or bread. Even though gambling is metaphorically linked with meat, I do not think of betting at the racecourse as a mode of potlatch because betting was not oriented towards enhancing one's prestige outside the racecourse, and was not so much based on surplus as on credit. The morality of exchange involved in gambling is not universal, but is tied to the context in which gambling takes place. Per Binde has developed a comparative model for identifying the moral framework for gambling in relationship to modes of exchange. Inspired by Marshall Sahlins' model of reciprocity, Binde points out that whereas gambling in some societies is associated with honour and sharing (and general reciprocity), in other societies, it is associated with theft (and negative reciprocity).<sup>35</sup> As an example of the first moral framework for gambling, there are numerous ethnographic examples, especially from the ethnography of the 1980s, of small-scale tribal societies in which gambling is associated with sharing.<sup>36</sup> At the Delhi racecourse, however, gambling was linked to thievery, in the sense that bettors would openly state that the bookmakers were stealing from them. But more than stealing, betting money was associated with indigestion or excessive eating. When talking about one of the most popular bookmaker firms in Delhi, Chipper described them as being 'so rich they have stomachs full of food'.

The moral framework for gambling at the racecourse, nevertheless, does not reflect the morality of gambling in India as a whole. This can be illustrated by comparing exchanges among gamblers during Diwali celebrations, where family and friends get together in homes to gamble on cards. When I attended Diwali card parties in Delhi during my fieldwork, parallel to the game of *teen patti*, there was an exchange of food and *mithai* (Indian sweets), and card players were continuously sharing their profits with those who sat next to them. This mode of sharing profits was not practised at the racecourse. In the words of one bettor: 'At home it feels good to share, but at the racecourse we don't want to share'. This reminds us that at the dinner party at Chipper's place, he told us that those present would split the bill for the meat and alcohol. This stands in contrast to the kind of hospitality otherwise emphasised in South Asia, where hosts are often eager to give, even to strangers. It also may stand in contrast to the exchanges I have emphasised above, of credit and tips—yet not fully. Whereas credit and tips remain an exchange directly tied to the continuous practice of betting, and in that sense are exchanges tied to chance, the sharing of profits (and *mithai*) is an exchange beyond the game, so to speak, that expresses a relationship that exists beyond gambling activity. The point is that Diwali gambling and racehorse betting are two very different contexts in which gambling takes place. Diwali gambling is done among people with pre-existing relationships, and betting at the racecourse is enabled through relationships that grow out of that setting. Not only the gambling, but also the friendships at the racecourse exist in a different moral space than those associated with home life.

35. Per Binde, 'Gambling, Exchange Systems and Morality', in *Journal of Gambling Studies*, Vol. 21, no. 4 (2005), pp. 445–79.

36. William Mitchell, 'The Defeat of Hierarchy: Gambling as Exchange in a Sepik Society', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 15, no. 4 (1988), pp. 638–57; Jane C. Goodale, 'Gambling is Hard Work: Card Playing in Tiwi Society', in *Oceania*, Vol. 58, no. 1 (Sept. 1987), pp. 6–21; and Laura Zimmer, 'Card Playing among the Gende: A System for Keeping Money and Social Relationships Alive', in *Oceania*, Vol. 56, no. 4 (1986), pp. 245–63.

This is not to say that home life is necessarily tied only to generalised reciprocity and sharing. Amit Desai describes friendships in rural India that are ritualised through the exchange of gifts such as *prashaad* or *mithai*, sweets considered auspicious offerings.<sup>37</sup> According to Desai, in the context of ritual friendship, emotionality and love are emphasised as the foundations of the friendship as a way of contrasting it to the ideology of kinship. This is because kinship derives from an economic unit in which there can be disputes over money and inheritance between brothers. Friendships here, to an even greater extent than in the family, are emphasised as a relationship of loyalty and economic disinterest. The point is that the friendships at the racecourse should not simply be understood as being in opposition to the family sphere, but as being framed by the specific setting of the betting market characterised by heightened uncertainty and the possibilities for profit.

In and around the racecourse, friends did not exchange ritual food, such as *mithai*, but meat, alcohol and credit. Money, rather than emotions, bound the bettors together. The only existing form of love at the racecourse was the love of money. As Chipper said, 'Money is my beloved'. Friendships at the racecourse existed as an extension of the love of money won and lost in betting. Gambling friends shared their love of gambling and risk with each other, and enabled this love affair to flourish in a moral context separate from their home life and other spheres of urban life.

## Conclusion

In the opening line of this paper, a bettor states that all his friends are gamblers and that gamblers cannot be friends. Notice the use of the word *and*, not *but*. Above, I have tried to show how the two parts of this sentence are not mutually exclusive because both statements are correct. It is not a paradox, but it does define the indeterminacy of friendship at the racecourse. Friends are known strangers, partly trusted potential cheaters, and competing allies. Friendships exist in a contingent space defined by the possibility, as well as the impossibility, of friendship. By this, I mean there is the possibility for friendship where one helps out the other when in need, and shares a lot of fun in demarcated spaces, and there is the impossibility of a friendship based on love and disinterest in which one could expect the other's involvement in various spheres of one's life. Thus, gambling involves the possibility of one kind of friendship and the impossibility of another kind of friendship.

The context of the racecourse frames friendships in such a way that they are entangled with contingency. Friendships at the racecourse are immersed in the precariousness associated with the game the bettors are sharing in. As players in the game, they are calculating and focused on winning the game of betting. These calculating characteristics are also part of the practice of friendship. The possibilities for deception or debt between 'useful' friends does not rule out friendship as a social form at the racecourse, but shapes it in such a way that the category of friends encompasses one's potential enemies too.

The kind of relationship described here may seem far from any prototypical South Asian identity. Many of the usual analytical frameworks of caste, kinship and religion are

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37. Amit Desai, 'A Matter of Affection: Ritual Friendships in Central India', in Amit Desai and Evan Killick (eds), *The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 114–32.

missing from this analysis, simply because they were not important factors in the relationships established in this setting. This kind of ethnography, from what may seem to be a marginal space in South Asia—though paradoxically located next to the country's power centre—is important precisely because of its detachment from those other spaces determined by otherwise overarching categories. The racecourse is a hyper-social arena marked not by fixed identities, but by blurred and complicit transactions, dependencies and entanglements. Friendships develop in this bounded space framed by contingency and the market economy. These relationships of chance may help our comprehension of a variety of seemingly unstable friendships in South Asia that are central to urban social life by emphasising uncertainty and speculation as the context for sociality.

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