



▲ Spectators watching polo matches at the Jaipur Polo Ground in

2023, above and below. Fans say part of the appeal is that people could

watch matches free of charge
PHOTOGRAPHS: SOPA/ALAMY; PRADEEP GAUR/SOPA/SHUTTERSTOCK



'We can't lose another green space'

Battle over Delhi's historic polo club

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Delhi

For decades, the social highlight of winters in Delhi for the "beautiful people" was the polo season. A sprinkling of royalty and diplomats, impeccably groomed women in pearls and chiffon saris along with wealthy industrialists sporting silk pocket squares used to gather to watch polo players compete under the mild, balmy sun.

They cheered on handsome players who, once the match was over, had children shrieking in delight as they put on a heart-stopping display of tent-pegging derring-do. Swish champagne lunches and other après-polo celebrations followed.

For a while, in this oasis of elegance in the heart of the capital, one could forget the reality outside the 6 hectares (15 acres) of the Jaipur Polo Ground.

Now the gates to the club are padlocked. Government officials took it over this week, ending an era that had begun when the maharaja of Jaipur gave the plot of land to the Delhi Polo Club nearly a century ago.

The takeover of the grounds was part of the government's plan to use the area for a "larger public purpose and benefit", its lawyers told a court.

One polo enthusiast, who did not want to be named, said: "I've

played polo here for 40 years. So did my father and my grandfather.

"People may say it's an elite sport but, unlike in many other countries, anyone could come and watch the matches absolutely free when the season was on. There was no entry or parking ticket."

No specific details of the other "public purpose" have been provided, but critics are convinced the government will build high-rise apartment blocks to house civil service and defence personnel.

As the controversy raged, some people highlighted the elite nature of the "sport of kings" and the huge tract of empty land it enjoys. Why, they ask, should the rich and powerful occupy such prime land in

the capital? But environmentalists say that the polo grounds are one of the few open, green spaces left in a city where people can barely breathe.

The government census, which is under way now, shows a population of about 23 million in the capital, up from 17 million in 2011.

This point was picked up by Justice Neena Bansal Krishna, one of the Delhi high court judges hearing the case, who expressed her concern that if high-rise flats were built on the polo grounds it would push the city's already densely built-up construction too far, depriving people of increasingly scarce open land.

The little breathing space left

in New Delhi was also going to go, said Krishna. "All of us are going to suffocate and die," she said. "You have no idea how we are choking. The small lung that we have, you are going to take it away."

In recent years, Delhi, along with the rest of India, has been hit by longer than usual heatwaves and extreme heat stress. All the concrete and asphalt creates urban "heat islands".

While the well-to-do are comfortable inside their air-conditioned homes, outdoor workers - such as street vendors, traffic police, construction workers, security guards and auto-rickshaw drivers - have a hellish time of it.

Pavan Das, a homeless auto-rickshaw driver in the city's Bharat Nagar neighbourhood, sleeps on the pavement every night. He perches his thin body on the very edge, inches away from cars speeding past along the road.

"I know it's dangerous. Other homeless people have been run over by speeding cars but, like this, I get a breeze from the passing cars," he said. "Otherwise, it's suffocatingly hot and I can't sleep."

Even if Das had a home in a slum, it would be a furnace, with no ventilation. If he were lucky enough to have a breeze coming his way, it would be warmed up by the hot air being pushed out into the atmosphere from all the air conditioners in the city.

According to a report last month from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 97 of the

world's 100 hottest cities are in India. Open spaces are shrinking. Parks are turned into spaces for the city's 8m vehicles, while children have hardly anywhere to play.

In the aggressive struggle for space in the city, homeowners greedy for a few more square feet narrow the road by placing massive pot plants near the pavement outside their homes.

Others encroach on to pavements by building small cabins for their security guards. In the gated residential enclave of Friends Colony West, for example, there are too many cars for the space and many are badly parked.

Rajiv Seth, the joint secretary of the residents' welfare association, said: "We'll be lucky if the fire brigade can even enter, but even if it does, it won't be able to turn the first corner."

Every bit of infrastructure is stretched to the limit in a metropolis bursting at the seams. It is only possible to breathe a little more freely in elite areas such as "Lutyens' Delhi", home to the political class and the wealthy, and the location of the Gymkhana and polo club, which has also been taken over by the government.

Bhavreen Kandhari, an anti-pollution campaigner and founder of Warrior Moms, dreads the idea of multi-storey buildings being thrown up on the land of both institutions. The government has taken over the grounds despite the fact the court case is still being heard and the club has paid rent until 2030.

"The issue is not polo versus public use," said Kandhari. "It's open green space versus construction. Delhi can't afford to lose yet another open green space, which serves to reduce heat stress, support urban biodiversity and provide vital breathing space in a city struggling with pollution and rising temperatures."



▲ Police address people affected by the government's takeover of the Jaipur Polo Ground for a 'public purpose' PHOTOGRAPH: VIPIN KUMAR/HINDUSTAN TIMES/GETTY