

Auction

By Vikram Kapur (India)

The ancient radio at the pakora stall came on to shake in the throes of a monstrous cough, after which it calmed down to cough quietly for a while, before winding up another big one. It had been that way as long as anyone could remember. Everyone expected it to heart fail any moment. But it simply kept on coughing, spitting out its phlegm of the news, Bollywood songs, the cricket commentary...

The day of the Indian Premier League's player auction it was coughing out U.S. dollars. Big ones. Hundreds of thousands. Millions. The knot of men fastened round it couldn't have been more entranced if it was the last over of a one-day international. The general merchant shopwallah instantly multiplied the dollar figure by forty. When he announced the rupee equivalent there were sighs, exclamations, rolling of the eyes...

'The next player is Mahendra Singh Dhoni,' the radio coughed.

'Five lakhs, at least,' the juicewallah said.

'Five lakhs?' the cycle repairwallah sneered. 'That Australian went for over a meelion. Our team captain can't go for less.'

Thanks to the broadcast, the men now knew a million was ten lakhs.

'Bhaisahib,' a man and a boy approached the pakora stall. Their skin was blackened by the sun. They had calloused hands and feet. There was dust on their clothes...They looked like they had been working at a construction site.

The pakorawallah didn't pay them any heed. The bidding had begun.

'Chennai bids five hundred thousand.'

'Mumbai five hundred and fifty.'

'Delhi six hundred.'

'Bhaisahib,' the man said again.

The pakorawallah made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

'Jaipur seven hundred and fifty.'

'Hyderabad eight hundred and fifty'

'Chennai nine...'

The voice died, as the radio went into its hacking cough mode. There were groans of disappointment.

'What do you want?' the pakorawallah demanded from the man.

'How much is a bread pakora?'

'Four rupees.'

The man and the boy looked at each other. The pakorawallah waited for a few seconds. Then he snapped, 'Either pay up or get lost.'

'Quiet,' the cycle repairwallah hissed.

The radio had got over its spasm.

'Mahendra Singh Dhoni has just been bought by Chennai for 1.5 million U.S. dollars.'

Jaws dropped, even lower as the general merchant shopwallah announced the currency conversion.

'If I were that filthy rich,' the juicewallah sighed, 'I bet I could land Miss India in a flash.'

'Miss India?' the cycle repairwallah scoffed. 'With that much filth I would settle for nothing less than Miss Universe.'

'She'd never go for an ugly mug like yours.'

'With that much filth I could get a plastic to make me better-looking than any Hollywood hero.'

They became quiet, as the radio gasped, 'The next player is Matthew Hayden.'

'Baba, four rupees is way too much,' the boy was saying. 'Maybe we should get one and share it.'

'No, we have to have something,' the man said. 'Here we won't get anything for less.'

He handed eight rupees to the pakorawallah who gave them the two bread pakoras, splattered with tomato sauce, in tiny paper plates, before returning to the auction. The two of them walked away to sit down on the edge of the pavement.

'Baba, we have only two rupees left,' the boy said, 'and the foreman was saying he may not have work for us tomorrow. Then what will we eat?'

The man bit into his bread pakora.

'Filth,' he spat.