

FEVERED PITCH



RAJESH KUMAR SINGH

JOINING IN: (C'wise from above) Mahant Ramachandra Paramhans in Allahabad, prisoners in Mumbai and Bollywood stars in South Africa



PRADEEP WANDHANI

Join the madheads at home and in South Africa as they follow Team India

■ by Kaveree **BAMZAI** and Nidhi **Taparia RATHI**

THE NEW NATIONAL ALTERNATIVE to tedious politics and silly cinema, the World Cup has become everything to everyone. It's an extended boardroom for savvy networking, a high-society party for mwah-mwah friends, a reason to imbibe cutesy cocktails like Botham's Up and Border Line in pubs across the country, as well as an excuse to bunk politics, school, and well, life in general.

It has brought legislatures to a standstill—on the day India played Sri Lanka, Trinamool Congress MLA Sougata Roy stormed into the West Bengal Assembly, screaming at Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to send

congratulations to Sachin Tendulkar and Virendra Sehwag only to find that the papers the chief minister's secretariat staff was bringing in at five-minute intervals were nothing but scoresheets. It has transplanted Page Three celebrities on unsuspecting South Africans—beer baron Vijay Mallya has already flown there twice in his Boeing 727 and intends to go again for the semis with a gaggle of his "closest" friends. The game is also likely to bring together the unofficial First Family of India—Subrata Roy, Anil and Tina Ambani, Amar Singh and Amitabh Bachchan plan to fly down in a Sahara Boeing if India reaches the final.

The passion subsumes the partially blind Ritesh Kumar in Dumka, Jharkhand, who not only goes to the

temple before every India match but also closes his medical shop. It has rubbed off on Pandit Shyama Prasad Maharishi of Jodhpur who chanted Om in a marathon sitting at Maru Ganga Temple for India's victory. And in Moghalpura in Hyderabad, it got some Muslim youths to organise a special thanksgiving after India won the match against Pakistan—a sentiment petrol station owner Shahnour Tucy summed up in a banner: "Allah-O-Akbar, Win India Win."

At a time when access to South Africa has been made ridiculously easy—thanks to liberal travel packages and a 28 per cent increase in South Africa Airways flight capacity since the World Cup began—the celebrations have become expansive. So a cable operator from Jalandhar thinks nothing

BOWLING THE MAIDENS OVER

The cricket frenzy crosses boundaries as more women succumb to the magic of the game

ISHAN TANKHA



WHEN SET MAX decided to turn cricket into a family entertainer, women were high on the channel's target viewership. Soft but sure marketing gimmicks like favourite recipes of cricketers, tarot card readings and saucy tidbits on the game were thrown in. The advertisement featuring a traditional south Indian woman making a rangoli of a cricket field while chanting a cricket mantra, reflected the ethos. Thousands of women succumbed.

The TRPs prove it. During the NatWest series in England last year, the female TRPs were 2.8. They rose to 4.9 in the World Cup and to 9.8 for the In-

dian matches. "The wrap-around atmosphere of the game has clicked," says Rajat Jain, executive VP and business head, MAX.

The new converts include the wife of Robert Blackwell, US ambassador to India. Blackwell is said to have confided in the prime minister that his wife, not much of a sports buff, now sits up at night to watch cricket while he sleeps. Others like Delhi-based Vidhu Kalia, an executive with an ad agency, have formed cricket clubs

in offices. Says model and former Miss India Gul Panag: "Cricket gripped me during the India-Pakistan match." She now wears her blue T-shirt whenever India plays.

Blue T-shirts, blue *gural* for Holi, tri-coloured plaits and cricket bindis—it's the silly season. At pubs men amusedly watch women who watch cricket. "I don't understand the game but I love the tamasha," says 58-year-old Sarlaben Joshi who organises Gujarati

ladies lunches during the India matches. Her husband doesn't mind at all. After 32 years, this is one cricket season when she hasn't nagged him for neglecting her.

—Shefalee Vasudev

PRADEEP MANDHANI



FAWZAN HUSAIN



PRADEEP MANDHANI



NO BAR: Lawyers in a Mumbai court watch India play Sri Lanka (left) while Indian supporters underline their presence in South Africa

of carting his chana and bhujia to South Africa to be consumed with pints of Castle Lager. And K.V. Ashok, a public-relations agency owner in Chennai, cheerfully takes off from work to station himself with friends in front of a giant screen in a five-star hotel. The beer, the applause, the wave, the painted faces: it's almost like being at the stadium. It's a gladiatorial contest without bloodshed, a boxing superbout without body contact, the Super Bowl of cricket without the pom pom girls.

It's also about marketing muscle, both of the game and of the people liv-

ing off it. Take Raj Sethia of Bangalore whose chaat shop has every possible cricketing reference, from a mock commentary box to a large scoreboard. Or Surinder Singh, an electronic goods dealer in Chandigarh, whose staff dresses up in India colours when a match is on. Or even Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani who demanded and got regular updates from aides on the India-Sri Lanka match during the all-party meeting in Delhi on Iraq.

They are all part of the Bharat Army, some of whom fight in the trenches and others who wave the

flags. Delhi minister Lalit Maken has a favourite chair on which he tries to stay put for the duration of every India match, while Raymond's Gautam Singhania and actor Sunil Shetty have apparently been so lucky for the team that their presence in South Africa for the semis has been declared a matter of national importance. The export surplus set has a first-hand account of our heroes in action. For the rest, there's the fast-selling T-shirt, with a battered ball for effect: "I played with Tendulkar."

The Indian team can do a huddle to that, wiggling bottoms and all. ■