

young turk

## on cue

*World Ladies Billiards Amateur Champion and five-time National Champion, 23-year-old ANUJA THAKUR in a tête-à-tête with SAVIA RAJAGOPAL*

**You debuted when you were 14 at the National's in Indore. What was that experience like?**

I participated and ended up being ranked as India's number two player on my national debut. I surprised myself! It wasn't so nerve-wracking for me, nor did I feel any pressure even though people around me felt it was a big deal because of my age. I was just enjoying winning match after match. I didn't realise it would make news!

**You won the bronze medal at your international debut. Were you surprised with your success?**

My international debut was in December 2004, in Holland at the IBHF World Ladies tournament. It's a great experience to play for the country. No one looks at you as an individual. People view you as an Indian, which is a lot of responsibility. I did feel a lot of pressure when I was playing the semi-finals, as I was the only Indian left at that point. To play Ariana, who eventually won the finals, was a great experience.

**You quit your MBA earlier this year and went to England for the Ladies World Billiards Championship. What prompted you to take that risk?**

I realised that I have to make a decision about what I should do. When I did well in Holland and won the bronze medal, it inspired me to take the plunge. There are many MBA graduates but not too many great players in the country. I gave myself more time and decided to look at some more international events. After Holland, there was no looking back and I took to the sport full-time.

**As a world champion, what are the pressures you face?**

Any sort of success brings along with it a lot of responsibility. When you're looked up to as a rolemodel, it's not only about your game. It's also about your approach off the table – what you wear, how you talk, how you conduct yourself as a person. People do keep an eye out for all these things. I no longer have that much privacy. I'm quite busy, but I'm enjoying all of it. I'm doing something that I like so it's absolutely fantastic.

**Having won many events, which has meant the most to you personally?**

I won the World Championship in April, in Cambridge last year. I competed in three events and I won all of them. I was playing till the last day, almost four to five matches a day and it was very tiring! When I won the final billiards match, and all the Indians there stood up and applauded, I was really happy.

**Is there any male bias in your sport?**

The men in this sport are very supportive, to a large extent. However, not all women have good experiences. The sport is not doing very well in the north and not many women play from there. People are quite conservative, especially about women playing a sport.

**In a cricket crazy country like ours, is sponsorship and finances a major hurdle?**

To get individual sponsorship is extremely difficult. Even for associations conducting tournaments, it is a challenge financially. However, now at least, sponsors are looking at other sports. Sania (Mirza) has done a great job in tennis. People are looking at hockey, golf, polo and other sports too.

