

# For some Mumbaikars, there is a new word order

By Meher Marfatia

**Mumbai:** Good vowel movement is the key. To most people, sounds like 'aa', 'ee' and 'oo' are inextricably associated with the speech therapist, the dentist or daily ablutions. But to Mumbai's Scrabble buffs, these vowel pairs are the distance between victory and defeat. 'Aa', it turns out, is cinderly type lava found in Hawaii (there's also stickier fluid lava called 'pahoehoe'), 'ee' means 'eye' in Scottish dialect, 'oo' is 'wool' to the Scots. Akshay Bhandarkar, taking pause during a game at a meeting of the Mumbai Scrabble Club, explained the essence of word game theory. "It's a question of maintaining a balance between consonants and vowels," he declared. "The first rack is random. Any point after, you should always play with three vowels."

Mr Bhandarkar should know. The 23-year-old relationship manager with Kotak Securities placed eighth at the 1997 World Scrabble Championship in Washington. He's among the stars at the Club's sessions at the Juhu-Vile Parle Gymkhana on the evening of every alternate Sunday.

Of the Mumbai club's 200-odd registered members, 20 regulars turn up most times to swap strategies and learn the finer moves from more-experienced players. The average meeting pits people like Dr Bhupendra Dutia, the group's 75-year-old founder, against a software consultant visiting from Bangalore or an eager schoolboy who travels in from Chembur.

There's also six-year-old Ekta Mehta, a voracious reader of Enid Blyton's Amelia Jane school series, who loves crosswords. She doesn't quite understand Scrabble's scoring system, but has a vice-like memory that helps her recall any word she's seen only once.

Scrabble was born during the lows of the Great Depression, when out-of-work architect Alfred Mosher Butts took to studying 'The New York Times' front page to figure out the frequency with which individual letters of the alphabet cropped up in commonly-used words and sentences. He wanted to devise a game that blended both skill and luck. His 100-tiled effort was initially called Criss-Cross Words, then Lexico. Christened Scrabble only post-war in the late 1940s, the game has an India connection, if tangentially. Butts lived in Jackson Heights, the New York neighbourhood now dubbed Little India.

Butts' game spawned a slew of imitations and professional 'how to' tips to tot up

'bingos'—those coveted words that wipe the rack enviably clean and give you 50 bonus points. Memorising high-probability seven-letter words, experts average two or three bingos per 50-minute game.

The brain of the average player of competitive Scrabble is a thing of wonder, filled with such lexical information as 'jo' (sweet-heart), 'al' (an East Indian tree), 'qi', (the Chinese life force), 'xu' (a Vietnamese coin) and 'da' (a Burmese heavy knife). Devotees of the board have their own methods of mining these nuggets. Fanatics have been known to attempt to memorise the dictionary. Others pore over especially compiled word lists and battle unseen partners in on-line games offered by the Internet Scrabble Club.

Top-notch players don't need more than a half-hour weekend workout but when a tournament approaches, most put in at

least an hour daily. Getting your hands on the tiles is vital, Mr Bhandarkar maintains. Reading can be no substitute for practice. Of course, Scrabble has a large element of chance—there isn't much you can do with a rack of single-point letters.

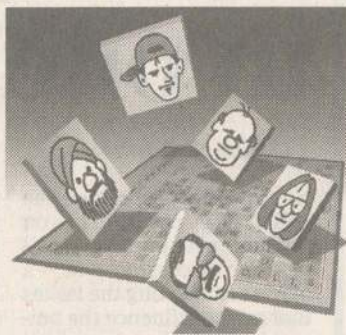
But what matters isn't really what you have as what you do with it.

"This is an offbeat mental sport," said Mr Bhandarkar. "What's best is, the game has no favourites. With right thought applied, anyone can win."

For Dr Varish Hingorani, the fortnightly meetings present the opportunity to get "hold of rare, new things to learn each successive game". Those rare things are listed in the two dictionaries that have become Bibles for budding and accomplished players alike. Americans follow 'The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary', based on Merriam Webster, followers of Chambers relate to 'Official Scrabble Words International', which comprehensively collates words from American and British dictionaries.

The Mumbai club has hosted an all-India Open Scrabble Tournament, besides holding monthly competitions in the city and also in Pune. Meanwhile, its members continue playing for pleasure. Armed with printed score sheets and tile-tracking tallies, heads tilted in intense concentration, they're busy building words that have lesser mortals skulking off quietly, shamefaced for not knowing what 'kanzu', 'yird', 'niobate', 'euoi' and 'dopa' mean.

*(This series explores the numerous subcultures that add sparkle to the Mumbai mosaic.)*



## STARS AND TRIBES