

Delhi's slumdog paupers

Delhi's underbelly is filled with scores of slum children who do odd jobs to eke out a living, be it due to family responsibilities or ever-present financial problems. The common thing that remains between them is the want of a better life. SUNIL THAPLIYAL reports

Dreams die hard in the real world. And though many may be inspired by fairy tales and cinema, believing in angels, it becomes difficult to cope when reality bites.

For 10-year-old Bharati and six-year-old Amar, life has been no rags-to-riches story. Slumdog Millionaire may have rekindled hopes for a better life in many children dwelling in slums, but Bharati and Ajay still continue to wade through the sea of garbage thrown daily by millions of Delhiites, sifting through the piles to find something worth recycling.

Leading a tough life in the slums of RK Puram, Sector-6, has made the brother-sister duo more mature than their age, and they know the hardships that they must face in order to achieve even an iota of success in their drab lives. "We dream, but not to become millionaires," Bharati says.

Her eyes start twinkling at the prospect of going to school. She looks longingly at the children carrying heavy satchels as they trudge toward their schools, desperately wanting to be a part of them. Asked what prohibited her from joining school, with a painful look in her eye, she said, "I used to go to school. But few months back, when I reached there, I found my name had been struck off the attendance register. None of the teachers explained why. Perhaps, this was a fallout of the fact that our parents just vanished without a trace, leaving us to fend for ourselves."

She added that, if given a chance, she would definitely rejoin school. She quickly implored, "Will you get me admitted in a school?" A municipal school is located just behind the slums.

Picking up a dry twig and adding it to others in her gunny bag, she explained that she needed them to cook food, in addition to doing other household work. "Since our parents left us, we have been living with 'uncle and aunty'. Our jhuggi was demolished by the Government, so we had to shift to the slums," Bharti said.

Amar also have the same dreams as his elder sister. But with a different primary agenda. "I want to reunite with my mother and father. I have saved a few Rupees. But I know I'll need much more to search for them." His eyes shine up like a spark when discussing movies. "I like Singh is King and Akshay Kumar," he says.

But Delhi is filled with hundreds of such unsuccessful slumdogs. And they all have different stories to tell. Adjacent to Dr Zakir Hussain College,



Salim Mohammed



Irfan

Silver lining

There are always times when a fidus achates comes to one's aid when in dire need and the Robin Raina Foundation has been doing the same. The Foundation organised a special screening of *Slumdog Millionaire* at Spice World, Sector 25, Noida, where many children, living in various slums of Delhi, came to see it. The foundation is working for the upliftment of these slum dwellers from the past 10 years.

Few children were quite impressed by the movie and learnt many lessons from it. Narayan (12) is one of them. He is studying in the sixth standard. He has been living in one of Delhi's slums for the last five years with his parents. They migrated from West Bengal to earn a living. Narayan has two younger siblings, a sister and a brother. His father works as a driver and his mother is a maid. He described his dreams saying he wanted to be a social worker after completing education. "I want to do something for poor people like me. I want to do something for children who have been suffering," he said.

Deepak (10), another boy from the Foundation, is in third standard and looks energetic. His parents migrated from Uttar Pradesh two years back. He says, "I wanted to go to school but my parents could not send me. Now, I'm happy to go to school with the help of the Foundation."

He dreams of being a police inspector as he wants to protect the society from bad elements. He was heavily inspired by the character of 'Salim' in the movie. He added that he did not want to be anything like the police shown in the movie. "I will not create trouble for the poor and innocent and will arrest all criminals," he said.

While these seemed like the usual dreams of small children, mature com-



ments came from Rajkumar (14), an eighth standard student. He dreams of becoming an engineer. He has been living in Delhi's slums since childhood. Before being blessed with the chance to get educated, he was like other street children, scrounging through garbage heaps, collecting plastic for recycling.

"Life in slums is difficult and we know only education can change our destiny. This movie showed how Jamal learnt to read despite so many difficulties and we are lucky that we are getting education here. I hope one day I will do become an engineer," Rajkumar said.

Liten (10) is interested in sports and wants to be a racing car driver. He wants to earn millions so that he can get his four younger sisters married and take care of his parents in their old age.

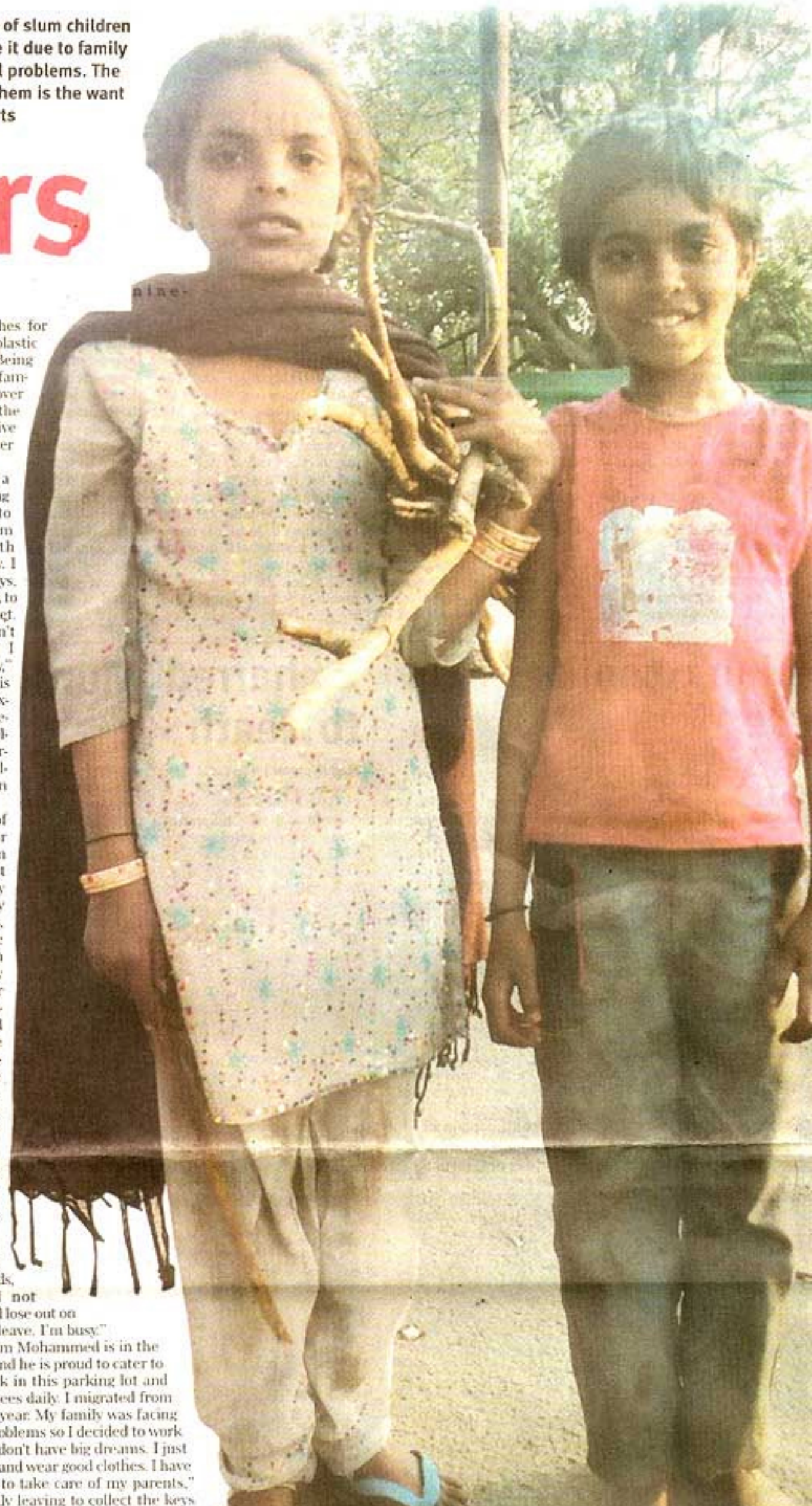
Robin, the Foundation's head, said, "I want to make charity fashionable and cool. Charity does not mean just contributing money." His foundation has adopted in excess of 3,500 children across the Indian subcontinent and has built 6,000 homes free of cost for the underprivileged.

year-old Irfan searches for plastic bottles and plastic bags in the dhalao. Being the eldest son in the family, he had to take over the reins of running the family and feeding five mouths after his father became crippled.

"I've never seen a movie, although I long to. I've never been to school. After all I'm bogged down with familial responsibility. I work 15 hours a day, from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., to try to make ends meet. Life is hard. I can't think beyond what I am doing currently," Irfan said. To make his "job" easier, his six-year-old sister sometimes helps him collect the plastics, carrying it to scrap dealers to get pittance in return.

With millions of questions in their minds, Delhi's slum children venture out to earn their daily bread. While many end up as ragpickers, there are still some who decide to work a notch up and try their hands in other professions. 11-year-old Shaukat decided rebelliously that he would not roam aimlessly around the city and set up a water trolley next to the historic Red Fort. "So what I'm selling water, I'm still an entrepreneur. I earn enough to make ends meet, and more." Seeing a crowd approaching his trolley, he hastily adds, "But you should not waste my time as I'll lose out on customers. Please leave, I'm busy."

14-year-old Salim Mohammed is in the services industry. And he is proud to cater to his patrons. "I work in this parking lot and earn nearly 70 Rupees daily. I migrated from Uttar Pradesh last year. My family was facing a lot of financial problems so I decided to work to make a living. I don't have big dreams. I just want to be well fed and wear good clothes. I have to earn thousands to take care of my parents," Salim said, suddenly leaving to collect the keys from a motorcyclist.



Brother-sister duo Bharati and Amar