

MUMBAI'S REAL MILLIONAIRES

UNLIKE THE PROTAGONIST OF THE OSCAR-WINNING *SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE*, THESE FOUR MUMBAIKARS DIDN'T WIN ANY GAME SHOWS TO BREAK OUT OF THE STREETS. GRIT, HARD WORK AND THE HOPE FOR A BETTER LIFE MADE THEIR DREAMS COME TRUE **BY ADITI RAJA**



Masrud at the Akanksha office. (Right) With grandmother Shani Bano, mother Anwari Begum, sister Heena Ansari and brothers Maqbool and Maqsood.

MASRUD ANSARI

Social Work Executive, Akanksha

Masrud, 19, believes he would have ended up like another hapless street kid if it hadn't been for Akanksha, an NGO that works towards upliftment of underprivileged children. One among six kids – four brothers (two elder and two younger) and a younger sister – Masrud was seven when he joined Akanksha. His parents were unemployed and the street was his home.

"Our parents did not have any money or home. We grew up on the streets where fights often broke out," recalls Masrud, who often got

embroiled in such skirmishes. "But the centre [Akanksha] helped me learn what life is all about," says Masrud, conversing in almost-flawless English. "My teachers have been very helpful and encouraging. It is their faith in me that has given me the strength to change myself," says Masrud, who now works in the same organisation earning about Rs. 10,000 per month. "I am trying to give something back to this organisation by helping restore more lives," says Masrud, who is also pursuing a Bachelors degree in Computer



Application.

His job at Akanksha involves coordinating education plans for street kids. "So many children simply go astray. It took me a lot of time to realise that education can make such a difference, but I am happy I was in good hands," says Masrud, who now supports his siblings' education.

Masrud knows he still has a long way to go. "I will complete my education and take up a better job, but I shall always remain indebted to my teachers," he says. For now, he just wants to "do my best in life".

INSET: CHANDRAKANT KUMAR/PEOPLE

JAMIL MOHAMMED JAVED

Insurance Agent with a private company

Jamil, 20, believes he has managed to carve out his own identity – something he lost 12 years ago when his father abandoned him on the streets of Mumbai after his mother died. Brought up at the Shelter Don Bosco in Wadala, Mumbai, Jamil studied at the home for street kids until Class 7 and then appeared for the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) exam for his Class 10 certificate.

"The priests at the shelter offered to take me to Delhi [where he had lived until then] and find my father, but I had no directions to my house. Moreover, I thought it was pointless looking for someone who left me," he says. And even though his abandonment still haunts him, Jamil never gave up hope. "Sometimes I feel that I have absolutely no one around me. But I have learnt that even if you don't have a single relative, you can still be your own person."

Work has given him the impetus to seek better opportunities. "I trained to be an electrician, but the job did not pay me much. So I worked as an office boy at an online computer gaming company," says Jamil. Two weeks ago, he joined an insurance agency. No longer at the shelter, he visits his 'home' once a week now. "I seek guidance from the priests there," he says.

And although he doesn't earn much (about Rs. 3,000 per month), Jamil is happy to be independent. "I have rented a flat with friends [in Andheri] and I am able to live on whatever I earn," he says, adding, "That is more than just having an identity."



(Top) Jamil, in the front row on the right, with kids from the shelter. Jamil was eight when his father abandoned him on the streets of Mumbai.

Sadashiv has been in the police force for 15 years now. (Below, from left) With his kids Krishna, Kajal, Sanket and wife Asha.



SADASHIV DHAKANE

Police Constable, Arms Division, Mumbai Police

Sadashiv is proud that his education has made a difference to the lives of his three children (two sons and one daughter). This police constable with the Arms Division of the Mumbai police was born to farmer parents from Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, who migrated to Mumbai to work at the Bombay Stone Crushing Company in Powai. "They came to Mumbai looking for work, but they weren't educated," he says. Sadashiv was six when he learnt his first lessons at the Mumbai Mobile Crèches' day school for children at construction sites.

"I remember that the teachers came to gather all the kids and take us to the balwadi," says Sadashiv, adding, "Since I was a bright student,

my teachers requested the owner of the construction site to help me get into a municipal school." Since his parents couldn't even afford a schoolbag, the mobile crèche sponsored his school uniforms, textbooks,

"I have learnt that education is the most important instrument in life. I am so happy my parents allowed me to study"

etc.. He completed his SSC from a "dilapidated municipal school running out of a chawl" and graduated with an Arts degree from a night college. "I also taught at the balwadis during that time as I wanted to do something for the institution that gave me wings," adds Sadashiv.

Soon after he enrolled into the Mumbai police training academy in the hope of getting a stable job and "settling down in life". Now, as he enters his 15th year in police service, Sadashiv says, "I have learnt that education is the most important tool in life. I am so happy that my parents allowed me to study [his elder brother could not] because of which I can educate my children, who, in turn, will do better than I have."

GANGARAM BHIMRAO BOMIDI

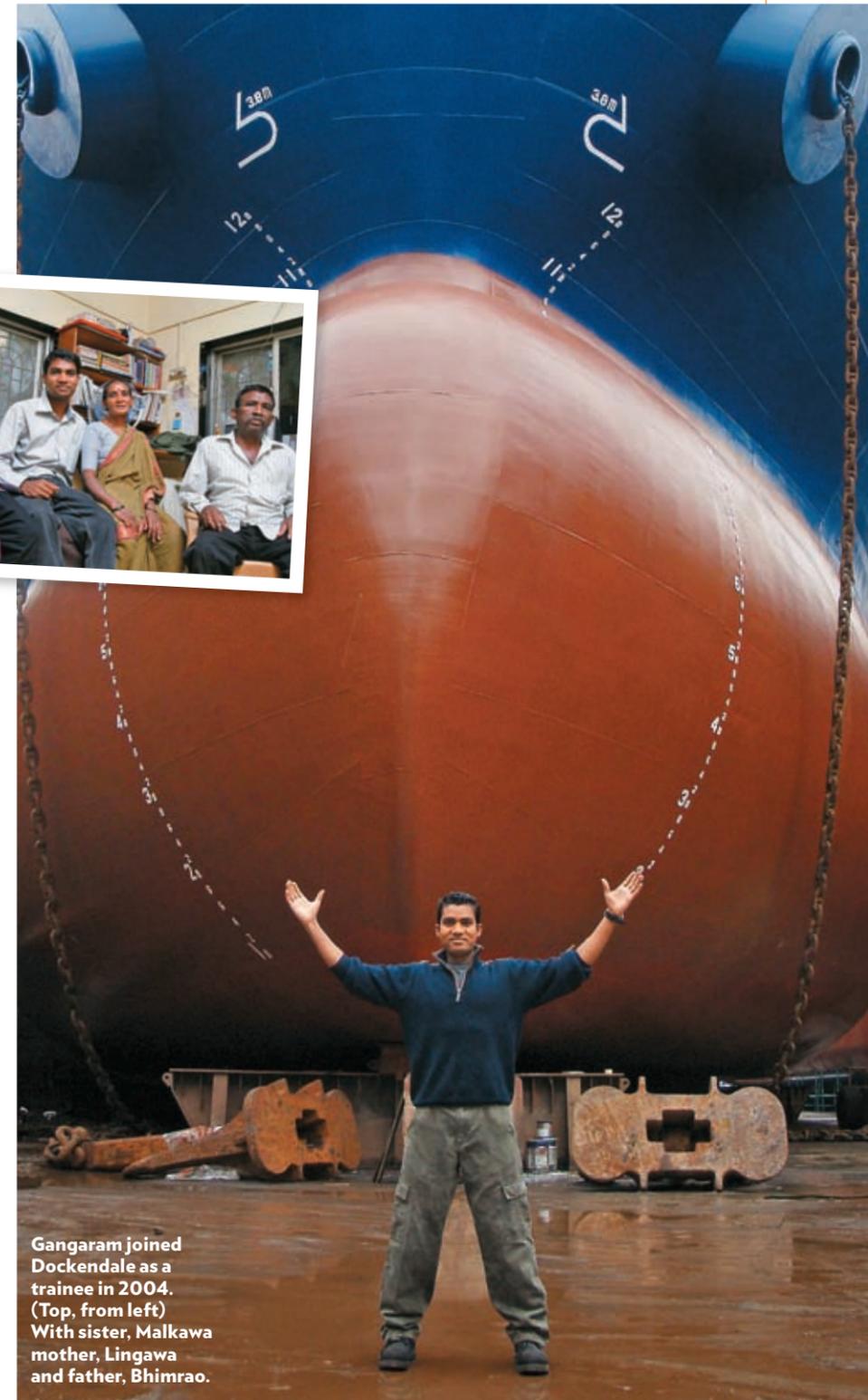
Sailor, Dockendale Shipping

In all probability Gangaram, 26, would have followed in his parents' footsteps and become a construction labourer, but he had other dreams. Today, as he readies to take over as an Able Body Seaman (his job will include steering the ship as per the captain's order) at the Dockendale Shipping company, he has realised most of them.

The eldest of seven children, Gangaram's struggle to beat the odds began when his parents moved from Chepur, Andhra Pradesh, to Mumbai when he was five. Says Gangaram, "My father didn't want to spend on education but my mother was encouraging." He recalls how his parents never forced him to work — "even when we didn't have enough to eat," he says. Teachers from the Mumbai Mobile Crèches, which runs day schools for children of construction labourers, insisted his parents send him to school and in 1993, when his parents shifted to the Hiranandani construction site in Powai, he was enrolled in a municipal school.

Between 1994-1997, Gangaram did odd jobs after school and also ran errands for a Hiranandani resident, Suhas Mehta, who paid him Rs. 25 per month. "She paid the fees for my [shipping] training. I also won scholarships from the Rotary Club [for a diploma in Mechanical Engineering]." Today, Gangaram earns about \$1,034 (approx. Rs. 53,000) a month when he is sailing and single-handedly supports his family. "I cannot express how it feels to be successful, but I think if you want to do something, you can do it."

And though he earns well, he has no savings — and no regrets. "I have sought an insurance policy for myself. But I am happy that I can take care of my entire family," he says.



Gangaram joined Dockendale as a trainee in 2004. (Top, from left) With sister, Malkawa mother, Lingawa and father, Bhimrao.

INSET: CHANDRAGANT KUMAR/PEOPLE