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

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.”

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 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

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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.

Inset: CHANDRAKANT KUMAR/PEOPLE