

As part of a project that began in 2008, every year children from slums across the capital join Delhi University and other private colleges. *The Sunday Express* brings you some of their stories

By **Deepu Sebastian Edmond**
Photographs: **Tashi Tobgyal**



Rohit Sharma (right) with his sister Neha at Kusumpur Pahari near Vasant Vihar, South Delhi. While Rohit completed his BA (Programme) from Aurobindo College, Neha has joined the same course at Aurobindo this year

ROHIT SHARMA
KUSUMPUR PAHARI
BA (Programme)
Aurobindo College

In six months, Rohit Sharma will have a certificate in hand and a Rs 1.8 lakh educational loan to pay off. He shrugs it off: "Of course, I will pay it on my own."

Rohit, 21, is awaiting his BA results and his 36-month animation course from a private institute too will wind up soon. "I added two more softwares to the package, so six months have been added to the course," he says.

The terms of the loan stipulate that he should start paying back within six months of getting a job. It will take him seven years to pay off the loan but Rohit is ready to add a few more to the balls that he is already juggling.

He hopes he will land a 9-5 job, which will let him continue with the newspaper drop rounds that he

takes with his younger brother Ritesh every morning. "I will soon join Pizza Hut's delivery team, and that is a 7-11 p.m. job. I think it would be great if I can manage all three," he says.

Rohit seems to thrive in the added responsibility that his father's death brought. "We had just bought a piece of land at Badarpur and my father was planning to build a house there. Then he had a heart attack," says Rohit, sitting on the floor of his house at Kusumpur Pahari near Vasant Vihar.

The plan to build a house were shelved and Rohit abandoned all hope of going to college. Rohit credits a lot of people with helping him recover and succeed, but says his mother Sushila is his biggest inspiration.

“WE ARE TRYING TO GO WHERE OUR PARENTS NEVER WENT”

THIS year, 190 children from slums across the city were among the thousands who joined Delhi University and other private colleges in the city. Their dream to study was made possible by Asha, an NGO that reaches out to 3.5 lakh people in about 50 slum colonies in Delhi. In 2008, it launched an ambitious programme with the aim of sending 5,000 students to the University from the slums of the city in five years.

In the first year, 58 students went to Delhi University and private colleges. The number rose to 157 the next year, with 107 of them going to DU. The numbers have continued to rise, with a total of 173 in 2010 and 190 this year. Delhi University still takes in most of these students, with 145 of the total joining in 2010 and 170 this year.

Asha helped send these students to college, providing them financial support, skills training and counselling.

Among the students from the first batch that went to Delhi University in 2008 are Divakar Thakur whose father is a labourer and Vinita Mahato. While Divakar is now preparing for his MBA entrance exams, Vinita wants to become a journalist. Rohit Sharma, another student from the slums who graduated this year and is completing an animation course, hopes to start working soon to pay off his education loan.

Among those who joined the University this year are Aslam Qureshi who wants to be a lawyer and Usha Shrivats who takes tuition to earn money for her bus fare to college. This is their story.



USHA SHRIVATS
EKTA VIHAR, RK PURAM
11th year, BA (Programme)
Maitreyi College

USHA wants to break free, but has planned her revolution one-battle-at-a-time. When someone in her family spotted her on Facebook, she changed her user name and now has a very modern-sounding one for an alias.

Usha ("I don't use my second name") Shrivats, 18, lives in Ekta Vihar near Sector 6, RK Puram. She blushes when asked about the scam-

pering on the first floor of her house: "Those are the kids I tutor." She has kept this a secret from her friends at Maitreyi College. "These children pay me Rs 100 a month, but most of them don't pay regularly."

From teaching ABCs to kindergarten students to mathematics and English to class VI students, she does it all.

Even as she is hurling words with alarming speed, Usha is planning for the evening. "My mother is away in our village for the past four months and I have to do the cooking. I also collect water in the evenings," she says.

Usha's family is from Mahoba in Uttar Pradesh and her father began working in the city as a gardener on contract with government offices.

The money Usha makes from teaching children goes into her bus fare. "I only have enough money to take the bus to college and back home," says Usha.

The tuition and her personal reading are often disrupted by her neighbours. "This is an area populated by people from Rajasthan and the family next to my house are drummers. So, it's *dhol, dhol, dhol* all the time," says Usha, beating an imaginary drum hanging around her neck.

After pausing for much-needed breath, she reveals her ambition: "I want to be a journalist and be paid to talk." She wants to be a television presenter. College has helped boost her confidence. "While in school, I did not know anything about the city. Now, I can go anywhere on my own," she says.

Since it is a rare few who make it to college in her slum colony, she has become an inspiration for younger girls. "I am respected more now. The kids see me and say 'Namaste, Didi' and my neighbours take me more seriously," she says.



ASLAM QURESHI
SHASTRI PARK
1st year, BA (Programme)
Zakir Husain College

On a bench at the open-air canteen of the Zakir Husain College, Aslam Qureshi shrinks further every time someone smiles at him. "This is my first time in the canteen. Since college began on July 21, all I do is go to class and return home as early as possible to prepare for Iftar."

Aslam says he's not troubled by the crutch by his side—the result of a polio attack at the age of two—or his background. Aslam belongs to a family of butchers and lives in an east Delhi colony near Shastri Park's Buland Masjid.

"My biggest worry is my English. I studied in Hindi-medium schools all throughout. When I went for Delhi University's orientation for the physically challenged on July 19, they told us that the EOC (Equal Opportunity Cell) has spoken English classes. But how do I travel all the way to the North Campus every day?"

Aslam is the third of five siblings—his sister and three brothers have dropped out of school. The eldest brother has taken over the family business and runs a meat shop in Usmanpur. The family also rents out a part of the house to a butcher.

Aslam's parents first came to Delhi about 35 years ago from Uttar Pradesh's Bareilly. It was their father's death that rocked the family. "My younger brother dropped out of school permanently to supplement the family income. I was in class VI then and dropped out too," he says.

Aslam stayed out of school for three years and then rejoined

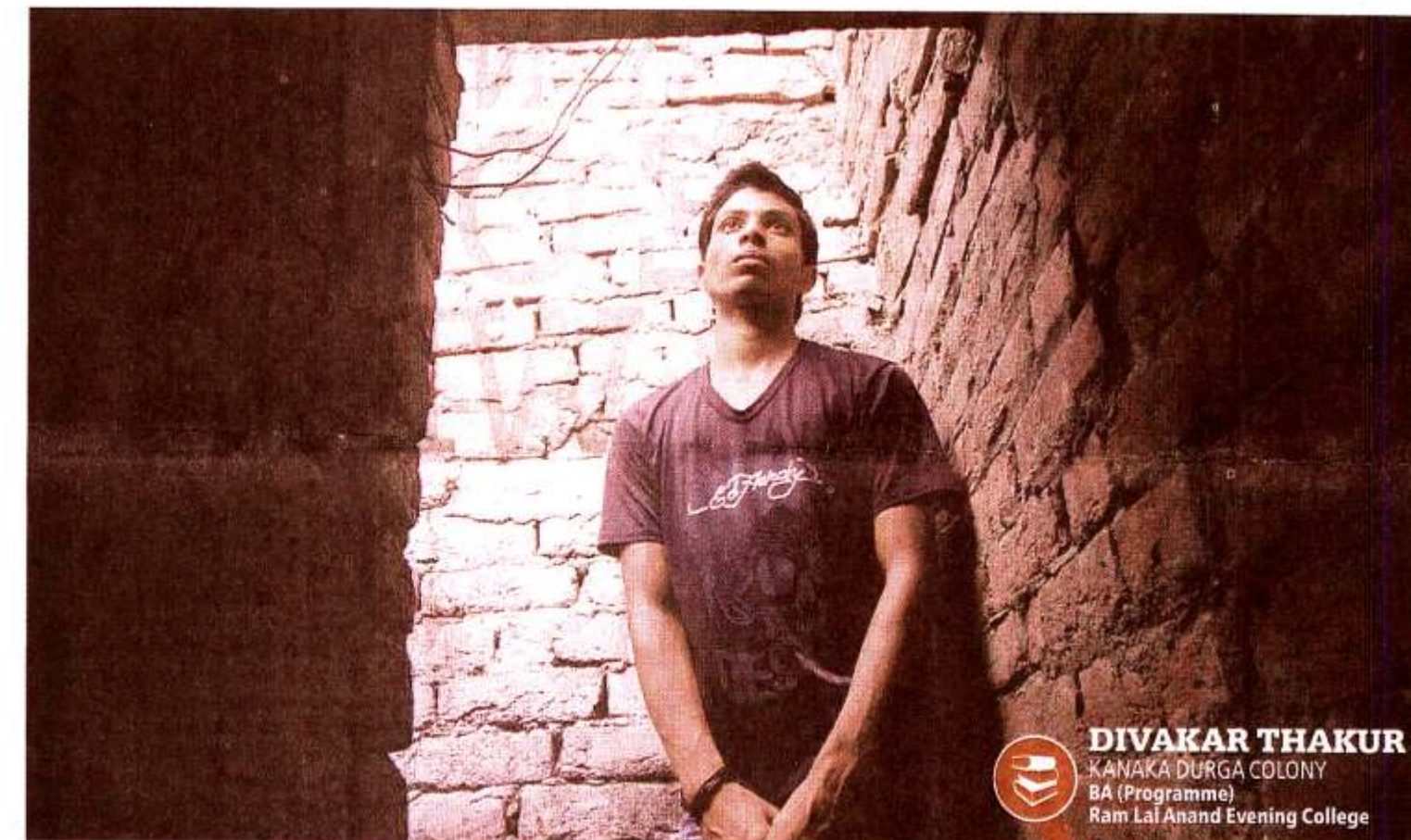
classes in Open School. He went on to join regular classes at the Arun Model Public School in Bri-jpur. After scoring a best-of-four-subjects score of 57.2 per cent in the Arts stream, Aslam decided to join University. He opted for the BA Programme, which includes Hindi, English, History and Political Science.

"My family has always supported me. They have even kept aside a room in the house for my studies. However, I wish there was someone in my family who was educated and could counsel me," he says. His study room resembles the Amber Room: cut off from the rest of the two-storey house and painted in orange with a smattering of glazed green tiles.

"I have made two or three friends; they have promised to help me with assignments," he says. "I want to do law after my Bachelor's, a part-time LLB, so that I can also begin work."

He also wants to begin familiarising himself with computers but realises he would have to polish his English first. "Where I come from, going to a college is a pretty big affair. A lot of people come up to me these days, asking for advice," he says.

However, his family remains his priority. "I will soon have to start earning and supporting my brothers. My eldest brother's kids are growing up, and they need someone in the family to look up to. I want to start practising as a lawyer soon so that I can go up to them one day and ask them to go to college like me."



DIVAKAR THAKUR
KANAKA DURGA COLONY
BA (Programme)
Ram Lal Anand Evening College

WITHIN a few days of joining college, Divakar Thakur learned an important lesson. "College is not like in the movies," he says. He not only learned fast, he also became good at adjusting to life on campus.

Divakar, 21, part of the first batch of 29 students from slums to join Delhi University in 2008, is now awaiting his results.

Divakar, whose family hails from Bihar's Muzaffarpur, lives in RK Puram Sector 12's Kanaka Durga Colony. His father is a labourer and his brother, who joined Delhi University's School of Open Learning, is still doing the course after dropping a year.

At a meeting to introduce Asha's college-going students to their foreign sponsors, Divakar is a star, doing most of the talking. "It was easy for me to make friends in college. I had no language problem as I had gone to Jose Marti school, which is a very good one," he says, emphasising that it is Ho-Se, and not Jo-Se, in Spanish.

At the Ram Lal Anand Evening college, where he did BA (Programme), which included papers on Office Management and Secretarial Practice, Divakar made many friends. "I always took the lead when it came to organising seminars and conferences," he smiles.

Then, he goes back to fidgeting with his black baseball cap. The cap is quite a collector's item: former captain of the New Zealand cricket team Stephen Fleming had gifted it to Divakar during an event.

Coming back to his education, Divakar says he nurtures dreams of studying business administration. He could not make it this year but is preparing to take another shot at it next year.



VINITA MAHATO
AMBEDKAR BASTI, RK PURAM
BA (Hons) Hindi
Deshbandhu College

VINITA Mahato, 20, will always be remembered as one of the first. Amongst the first batch of students from slums sent to Delhi University, she signed up for BA (Hons) Hindi at Deshbandhu College in 2008 and is now a graduate.

While in college, Vinita made up her mind: she joined Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan for a Diploma in Mass Communication immediately after her third year. As with

most things, she has a sound reason for her career choice too. "I'm sure I will be able to understand the problems of the poor better as I am one of them."

Other girls in the slum look up to her. "When my parents arranged a marriage for my sister, they wanted me to get married too. I was just 17. I fought, I said no. I am now committed to my career," says Vinita. "Other children can rely on their well-educated parents to guide them. What we are trying to do here is different; we are trying to go where our parents never went," she says.

In a scrapbook, Vinita has preserved some of her best moments.

Among them are photographs of her as a volunteer at Commonwealth Games 2010. "They assigned me to the Games Village and I was with the Australian team. It was great interacting with them," she says.

Then she brings out another scrapbook. It is filled with sketches of skinny women in gowns. "When I was in school, they let us join a two-month course in fashion designing. I took it quite seriously and was considering a career in it. It was only then I realised that the fees were impossible to pay," she says.

So Vinita shrugged, and walked away from a dream. But she's found another one.

—With Anisah Ahmad