

## Marco Polo in Dhaka

Dhaka is an amazing city of wondrous proportions. Its people are inexhaustible builders. They build at dawn, at daybreak, deep in the night... They build with gigantic cement mixers, they build with hammer and hacksaw, and if nothing is available, they build with their raw hands until they are bleeding and frothing,

writes Kazi Khaleed Ashraf

**I**n Italo Calvino's fiction *Invisible Cities*, the Venetian adventurer Marco Polo describes to Kublai Khan all the fabulous cities he has passed through in his travels through the empire of the Great Khan and beyond. The chronicle continues, sort of.

Marco Polo has never visited Dhaka. When Kublai Khan asked if Marco Polo travelled along the Sitalakhya, and down the Buriganga, the Venetian replied that he never went to that amazing city. The Venetian adventurer gives to Kublai Khan description of all other cities. It is a veritable catalogue of cities — amazing cities, fabulous cities, incredible cities. Cities that pop up from the ground, and cities that hang from the air. Cities where time flows backward, and cities, no matter how many times you leave, you return again and again, to the same spot. Cities where no desire is lost, where you believe you are enjoying the city completely when you are only its slave.

Take Octavia for example. It's a spider-web city, built over a void between two mountains, bound to the two peaks by ropes, chains and catwalks. Below there is nothing for hundreds and hundreds of feet, far below, a few clouds could be seen gliding by in quiet isolation. The net is the foundation and support of the city: all the rest instead of rising up hangs below from it. "Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long."

Or, the city of Tamara, where the eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things. The city exists by signs, billboards, and nameplates. The scales represent a grocer's store; a drinking tankard, the tavern; and, maybe a dagger and a skull, the pharmacy. While you can believe you are visiting Tamara, you are only seeing things the way the city chooses to show

herself. "However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it." Esmeralda is a city of water where a network of canals and streets span and intersect each other. There is always a choice for going from place to place, by land or by boat. The shortest distance between two points in Esmeralda is not a straight line but a zigzag that opens up in numerous optional routes. The paths that open to each passer-by is never two. The most fixed and calm lives in Esmeralda are spent without repetition and boredom.

But if Marco Polo travelled a bit further south-east he would have arrived in Dhaka, an amazing city of wondrous proportions. Anyone who visits that fabulous city can ever forget to tell its tale. The inhabitants live on this island where they call the city, an island framed by three rivers, and beyond that, an infinite web of marshes and lakes, but the people swear that they have never seen those water, that their city is not an island, and that it stretches endlessly.

"River?" the Sultan of the City asks Marco Polo back in puzzlement. "We have a river in the city? Three Rivers?"

Few have tried travelling from one end to another, for there is no end. It is the same thing, endlessly, repeatedly. Without a break, without a pause. Only a fool would attempt making a journey from one end to another where none seem to exist.

In another time, Dhaka was another place. In some long-forgotten age, people gave lyrical names. Banani, the perfumed park. Gulshan, the paradise garden. Motijheel, the lake of jewels. Shahbagh, the orchard of the nobles. Nilkhet, the emerald field. Dhanmandi, the rice franchise. Beautiful names that conjure up the fragrance of flowers and spices.

and the gentle rustle of leaves and ripple of lakes. Elegant couples meander among the shade and... but who cares, and who knows now. All that must be in another country. The people of Dhaka suspect and detect anything beautiful and pleasing. They are much too sophisticated for that. They know beauty is skin deep, and it doesn't last long. So they look for the permanent — the foul and the detestable. Mile after mile, without a break, without a pause. They know that it is their right to make things wrong, to make something beautiful is only an obligation.

The city does not know its rivers, but by some cosmological reasons, once a year, water returns to the city. Overnight the city becomes completely aquatic, and people are reminded of their ancient water ways. Boats arrive, people shop and bargain on the water, little children dressed in their fresh school uniform are peddled in tricycle vans in water, they return home dreaming of fishing from their verandas. But that is for once a year. Once the water recedes they forget that their city is an island and water encircles their life... and they go about their amnesia until another year. They mutter something absent-mindedly, next year.

Waters come and waters go, and philosophers and poets write couplets about the city without water and the city under water, and about the brazen sun and the mellow moon. This city of divine contrasts. They adore the emerald and ruby set *teheng* and the ragged bony creatures under the streetlights. They love wedding lights and lightless nights, stock-brokers and rag-pickers, flower-vendors and polythene bag-gatherers. The poets write, "You need a little bit of light to show how dark dark is." The poets giggle in astonishment at their genius... short poets, not-so-short poets, poets with long hair, poets with no hair, and poets with



curly hair. They talk about reality and illusion, *samsara* and *maya*, Mac and IBM, existentialism and provident fund.

And calamity. It arrives in the city regularly, unfailingly. Like the daily apparition of the sun, and the return of the moon, calamity comes without fail.

Big, small, petty, daily, monthly, bi-monthly, annual. All kinds of calamity. Buildings collapse, trucks run over school children, housewives vanish, three-wheelers turn turtle... On the street, in the cavalcade of vehicles, machines, beasts, and men, people thank God that there is something permanent in this madness after all, they give a sigh of relief. "Calamity".

The people of Dhaka are inexhaustible builders. On that island city that no one knows as an island, there is only so much space, and yet people build. No matter how much you build there is always another space to build. People build at daytime, worrying in the evening that there is no more space, but they go to sleep each night waking up to find more space to build. They build furiously, unceasingly. They build at dawn, at daybreak, deep in the night.... They dig roads they build again, and then they dig again. There

is a gigantic paranoia that if they stopped digging and building, the world will come to an end. They build with gigantic cement mixers, they build with hammer and hacksaw, and if nothing is available, they build with their raw hands until they are bleeding and frothing.

The city on the island has one big fear: open space. They are convinced that open spaces invite rakshas and other diabolical creatures from the underworld... and they must be stopped at any cost. Great decisions are taken, battle-gears are made ready to invade, occupy, fill the demon grounds. Every day, a little gain is made, more and more open spaces are confiscated — gardens, parks, front-yards, footpaths, side-yards — and the diabolical creatures are held at bay.

The people of the city will tell you that no one really knows how the city actually works. Everyone does know that there is an exquisite system of decisions and transfers. A decision is taken to build a road, for example. A great fanfare is held. Viziers, amirs, ambassadors, poets, and minstrels congregate to bless the occasion. Speeches are made and songs are sung. At the end, the decision is transferred (delayed)

to another occasion, another time. Another event, another fanfare. Viziers, amirs, ambassadors arrive again to bless the occasion. This is repeated, and people soon forget why they are there, but when they return home happy and contented that they have witnessed another momentous event in the city.

Aren't all great cities like these, they ponder. Rome, Beijing, Samarkand, Isfahan, Chota Nagpur... aren't they all made of a string of glorious events, rituals, and pageants. The people of the city silently thank their nobles: we have a noble city.

Kublai Khan has known all kinds of cities. His endless empire is virtually an archive of every city and settlement. But Dhaka throws him in enigma. There is something about it that leaves him troubled and pensive.

The Great Khan steps down from his high divan. He looks at Marco Polo and implores, "Will you go to Dhaka one day?"

The intrepid voyager appears a bit anxious, he looks away from the Khan, and replies timidly, "O Great Khan, forgive me but I would rather be in Venice."

The author is an architect

## The Urban Chaos

Unplanned development is pushing the metropolis to the verge of total collapse, writes Zarina Hossain

**W**HAT'S Looking Out For Dhaka", "City of Suffering", "Pollution, Unplanned Growth: Things Fall Apart", "Dhaka's Traffic Jams", "Disappearing Sidewalks", "Save Dhaka Campaign", "Lack of Parking Lots Causes Traffic Jam", "Dhaka's Waterlogging"...

task. Planning is not done by a single agency. Development authorities are all too often at loggerheads with the city corporations.

Planning is a pre-requisite for and encompasses economic and social planning. We need to plan not only for orderly and efficient functioning of the existing system but importantly for improving and developing the whole system. Sadly, we are doing neither. Wherever we rest our eyes there is chaos and disorder — be it an urban — semi-urban or the rural scene.

Poverty cannot be an excuse for this ensuing disorder. A poor society does not necessarily imply a chaotic and disorderly society. People and society has needs both present and future. We need to take account of these needs and plan to satisfy them. A whole sequence of plans — starting at the National level and ending at the Local Area level is required, which must be continually tested, monitored and updated as situation demands. What we have is scrappy bits and pieces of policy at National level, obsolete plans at the city level and virtually no planning at Local Area level.

The whole realm of planning paradigms have undergone great changes, with the advent of the market economy and the private sector becoming major partners of development. The management of any city, cannot be achieved by simply writing it down in a PLAN which can then simply be implemented by one authority. Besides the government, hundreds and thousands of small and large land owners, developers and real estate agents are making individual decisions on land everyday. Without planning briefs at the local level it is a *laissez-faire* situation.

Concern over the ills of unplanned growth are being expressed in writings, seminars and workshops like "Mayors vow to make Dhaka Liveable". With the current institutional arrangement for planning, development and management of the city, this is an improbable

The author is an architect

## Photo feature



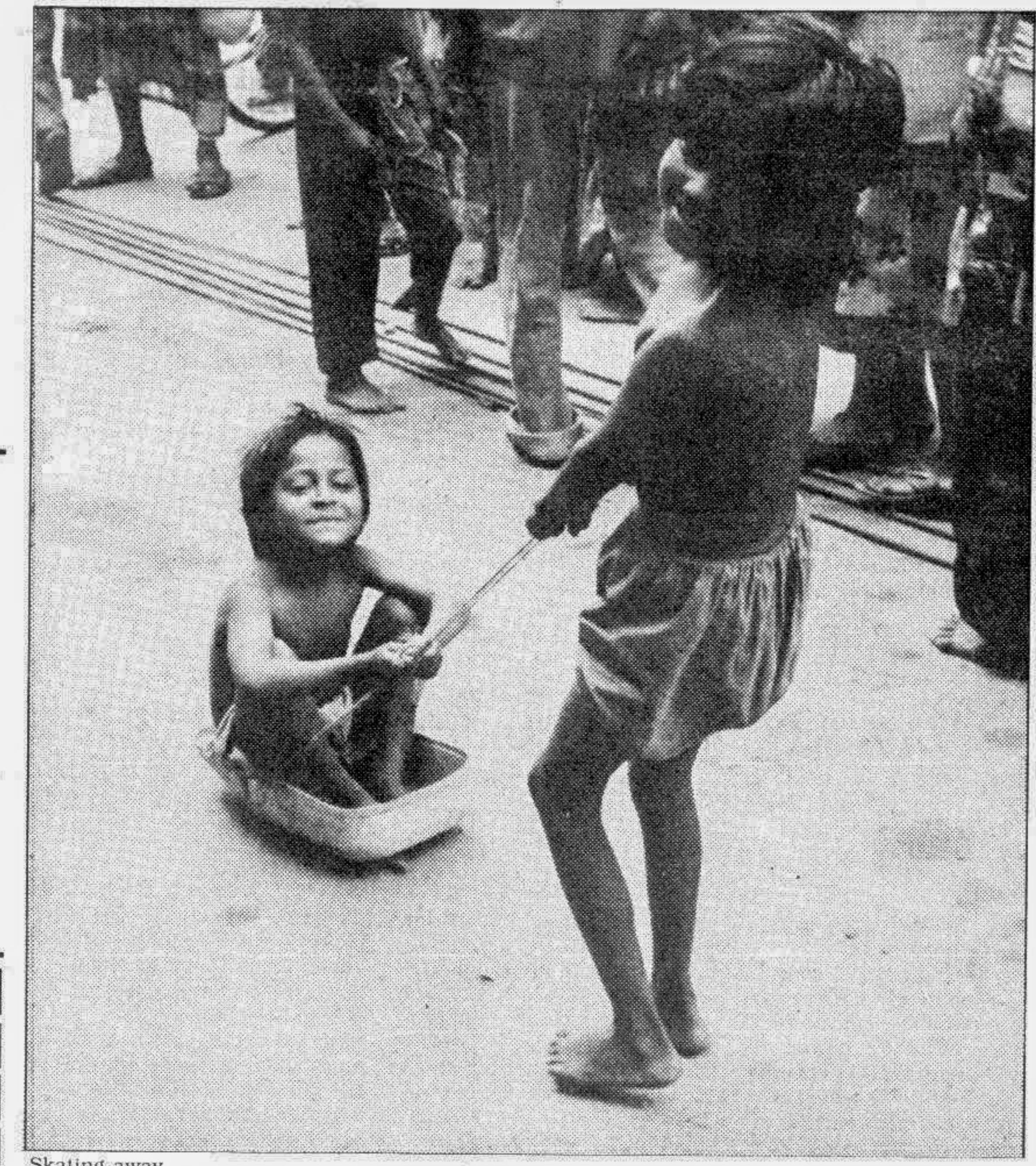
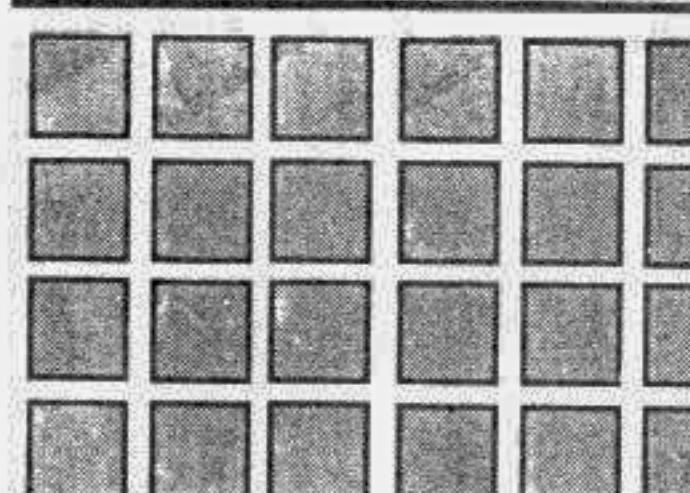
Happy faces with an unhappy future



Not all are that lucky

## Not a Fairy Tale

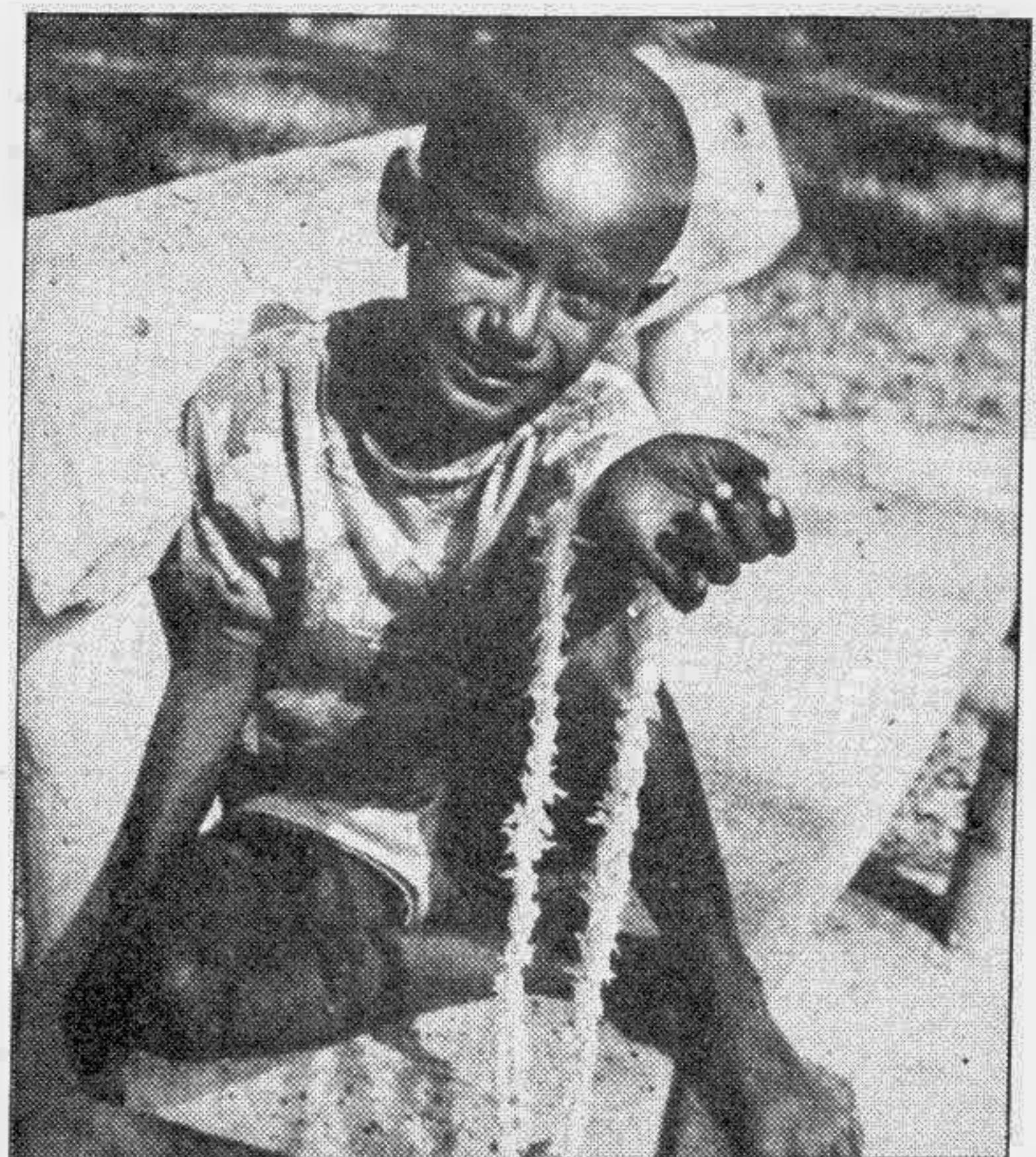
Life has not been generous to them. Struggle for survival starts at an age when their coevals in favourable socio-economic disposition go to school. Still, there is fun, there is game. But, life is anything else but a fairy tale... a photo-essay by AKM Mohsin



Skating away



Nature is her play-mate



Not the hands of a beggar