

Inside the Smallfoot classroom.
PHOTO: MOYUKH MAHTAB

# Big First Steps for Smallfoot

## A group of university students' endeavour to change the way we look at children of the underprivileged

**MOYUKH MAHTAB**

Kashem peers out from behind his mother's figure at the doorway of the barely furnished quarter of the Mirpur-1 slum. The remnants of a fire which broke out in the slum in February are everywhere - piles of burned paper pave the alleys here. Hundreds of families lost what little they had according to newspaper reports. But Kashem's loss is more personal. His mother, who seems to have recouped from the shock,says, "The first thing he asked me was if this meant he could not go to school the next day. His uniform and books were burnt."

Gulshan Jubaed Prince grew up in Mirpur as a child. He takes me on a tour through the garbage infested murky roads of the slum. Just beyond is Time International Academy, the final destination - 12 children from the slum, including Kashem, are students in the English medium school thanks to Prince's initiative - Smallfoot. Whatever Smallfoot did for these kids seems to be working despite their physical hardships, everyday privations and most of all, the social stigma of being a slum kid among middleclass families.

Prince, a student of Computer Science and Engineering in Brac University, after coming back from the US from the Youth Exchange Program (YES) wanted to give back to the community. Initially, Prince and a few others wanted to work for a school for the underprivileged and were told to collect thousand taka donations as a start.

"It was difficult to get people to pay up that much," says Prince. It would be far more feasible to collect hundred taka from each. A subsequent visit to the school put them in a further dilemma. Prince and his friends were not happy with the way the children were being treated. These schools had