

Red sales in the sunset

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: Red is their favourite colour. That's the colour traffic lights turn to create their ephemeral marketplace. Multinational corporations could take a lesson from their book—in a mere minute, the children who make their living at the city's exhaust-choked junctions can charm the hardest-hearted motorist into buying fruit, magazines, books, plastic toys, gajras for the hair and bottled water.

When it comes to efficient organisation and improvised pitches, these street-smart salespeople are tough to beat. Even before a car screeches to a halt at Worli Naka, young Ahmad has managed to make a sale. He displays a riveting rack of magazines, informing clients about the shampoo sachets and thermos flasks that come free with a film publication. Ask for a magazine he doesn't have and he isn't fazed. Lightning-quick, he's efficiently relayed the request to his pal far down the road with a well-placed whistle. His friend sprints into action, and the issue plops neatly into your lap even as the green signal has you revving up again.

They're always devising new ways to attract clients' attention. Stationed at a signal on Marine Drive, one little lad is armed with a high pile of magazines he hopes to palm off by the end of the day. The T-shirt on his reed-thin frame is emblazoned in bold capitals with the somewhat-incongruous word 'OOMPH'. The small print reveals that he's a walking advertisement for a fashion and lifestyle magazine.

One ingenious strategy is to lock eyes confidently with the customer-to-be, flash a winning smile and proclaim, "Aap bilkul Kareena Kapoor dikhti hai re!" (You look the image of Kareena Kapoor.) The remark rolls off insouciantly, the name deftly interchangeable with that of the latest hip haseena on the filmi front.

One grandmother was tickled to hear, "Aunty you are bootiful, ek-

dum Aishwarya Rai!" Not surprisingly, such smoothness often persuades a manicured memsahib to reach into the recesses of her designer handbag to dish out the dough for the current Grisham gripper.

The children know that fleeting transactions make all the difference to their precious earnings. Explains 13-year-old Sonu, who is part of the bunch that hangs out at the Haji Ali intersection, "It feels good pocketing a bit of commission on what we sell."

In a touching display of gratitude for their means of livelihood, some children have been known to garland traffic lights with paper kandeel lanterns at Diwali. Watching the other half roll by at the flicker of the lights gives these mini-marketeers insights beyond their years. Seven-year-old Shevanti, for instance, has become a keen critic of new trends in women's haircuts. Standing at the busy Juhu-Vile Parle crossroads, she offers fragrant mogra and chameli strands strung delicately together.

"Some mornings, I only get bob-cut ladies," she frets. To Shevanti, a woman sporting a short hairdo is a lost

customer. Still, bob-cut ladies aren't all bad. Some kindly didis with abbreviated coiffures are regular customers, Shevanti says—they drape the fresh blooms around their wrists.

That's on the good days. Some days, the world seems be filled with brusque hands waving them away, hastily rolled-up car windows, irate chauffeurs and passengers ordering them to buzz off. "Some kids are asked to scat when they haven't even seen us properly," complains Kavita, who sells flowers at Bandra's Linking Road junction. "They say 'maaf karo' as if we were begging." This doesn't seem to deter them. Mumbai's juvenile junction vendors coast along unperturbed, determined to make a better living than yesterday.

(This series explores the numerous subcultures that add sparkle to the Mumbai mosaic.)



STARS AND TRIBES