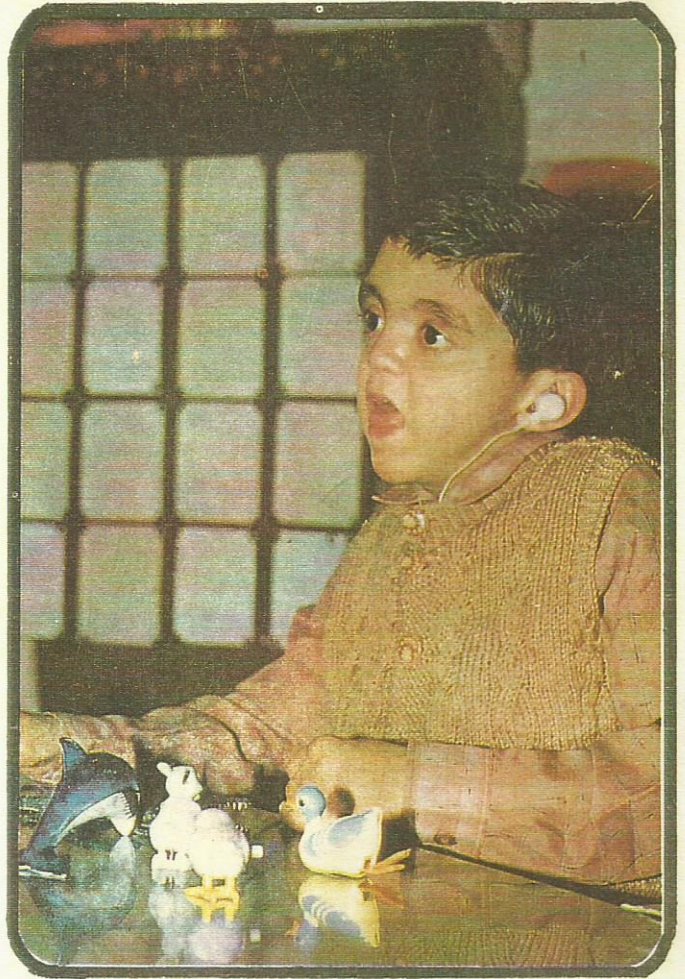


Hi! I'm Rohit..

By Kamala Ramchandani

Photographs: Sandeep Agarwal

"I try very hard by hearing only. I don't lip read because I'd be cheating myself. I wish I could learn faster because I want to know everything all at once!"



I'm talking to you, aren't I?

I love life ! I love you all ! I can't keep still for even a minute, I'm like a grasshopper, jumping from here to there and there and there ...

My name ? Rohit Advani. I was born one day before Republic Day, on the 25th of January not very long ago, in 1984, but it feels like ages and ages ..., because so much has happened to me.

Like an express train, I'll quickly tell you what the doctors say is wrong with me. They say I was born with Freeman's Sheldon Syndrome and there are only 65 reported cases in the world.

So, I'm unique ! My heart is

affected and so are my kidneys. I have club feet, and my hands are angulated (turned inwards, like my feet). They say I have a narrow trachea – I think that means my throat – so, I have a cough and cold most of the time because of it. But I can laugh and shout and sing and dance as long as and loud as I want to, so it doesn't worry me. I have impaired hearing, but please don't think I'm dumb or retarded. I'm talking to you, aren't I ? I wish I could sing for you because inside me I sing all the time.

I have an older sister, Priyanka, and I fight with her a lot. But that's because I love

her, otherwise I wouldn't bother. We each have our own cycles and go cycling together, and we play ball. In fact, I love playing with her. Yes, I can do things that all of you can do, I don't feel different from you because I don't know what *you* feel like. I feel like me !

When I was very small I used to watch everyone's mouths moving, and the funny expressions on their faces, but I could just hear a jumble of sound. I didn't know anything was wrong with that. But my parents realised I needed help, and took me to AURED in Bombay, a centre for the hearing impaired, and there I met Ms



Aziza Tyabji, who made the world came alive. She gave me hearing aids, and I was so excited because I could hear much more. Then Ms Aziza taught me words, and showed me how to do things; I just love going there, and I want to learn more and more. Before this, I didn't know what to do with my thoughts, I couldn't put them into words like other people, I didn't know how to speak, because I couldn't hear properly, so I'd scream. I screamed because ... well, because I was frightened by everything. By the painful tests all those doctors put me through. I didn't want them to know I was frightened ! I tried to be brave.

When I'm with Ms Aziza, I play tricks on her. If I don't want to answer anything I just shrug my shoulders and say, "I don't know". I'm giggling inside because I *do* know ! Sometimes a few other children sit with Ms Aziza and me, and play. She

says, "You're Rohit. I'm teacher. She's Mummy. He's Vernon. She's Gulnaz." But I'm so full of energy I can hardly sit still, and they scold me. So then I very firmly say, "I'm teacher. You're Rohit. She's Mummy !" and then I scold them all ! It's great fun ! I love laughing, I love funny people, I love funny things...

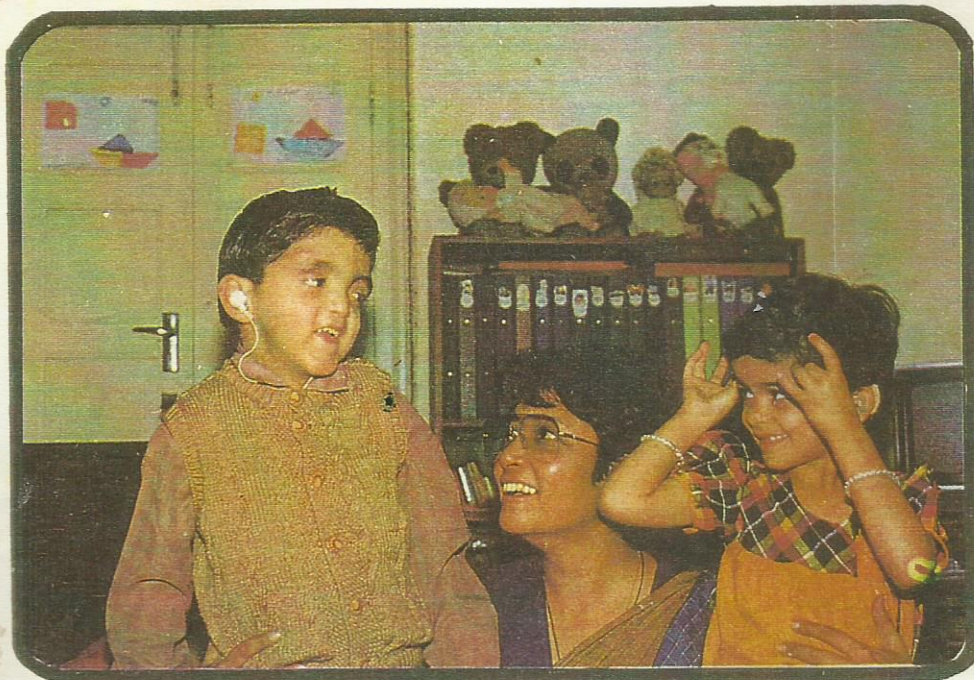
And I love my Nani. I love her so—so much it hurts. I love to visit her. I love to travel by car or train or 'plane. But since she's *not* in another city, I can't go by 'plane !

My Aunty had a baby, and I used to go to the hospital and play with it. I told my Aunty to rest, and I would look after it. My Mummy asked me if I would like to take the baby home, but I told her to give it to Nani. I wanted my Nani to have it because I love her so much. If I don't see her for more than two days, I purposely throw a tantrum. But ... I love my Nani,

and *want* to see her, and I'm trying to tell everyone that ! I really am !

I sit very quietly when I go to parties, because I want other children to like me. I want to eat cake and ice-cream, but the doctors said I can't. So I just eat wafers, and sometimes, very quietly, my mummy gives me a little cake. She looks after me so much, and I feel sad when I see the worried expression on her face. I don't like to play alone, but I can't talk properly yet, so all the other children won't play with me. But I do have three friends. Vishal, Nikhil and Rohan So, I decided that a few good friends are better than lots of friends who don't bother so much about me.

I love bright colours, bright as the sun, bright as signboards, bright as my eyes, my friends tell me *they* shine. I love horse-riding, and I love to tease our Doberman puppy, Trekker. I throw a mug of water on him



Ms. Aziza taught me words... I just love going there. So does Gulnaz here...