

The A, B, C OF TURNING AROUND A SCHOOL

Turning an old and defunct school into a modern, buzzing learning centre is no easy task. Yet, Dilbur Parakh rolled up her sleeves and did it. Pooja Patel has the story

Picture this school — drainage system in shambles, toilets disastrously dirty, stench-filled classrooms and walls infested with white ants. That was Bandra's Pali Chimbai Municipal School in 2001; a place few students, leave alone teachers, would consider stepping into. Then came Dilbur Parakh, who took one look at the school and decided it needed to be turned around 360 degrees.



In Pic: Chairperson of Aseema Charitable Trust Dilbur Parakh (top) Children enjoy a light moment at Bandra's Pali Chimbai Municipal School.

Fourteen years on, as hundreds of students run around its modern and super-clean premises, it's apparent that she's achieved her target and more.

Parakh didn't have a magic wand. What helped her succeed was her impressive prior work experience. A law student, Parakh had worked with Bombay High Court, Thailand's Human Rights Organisation as well as at the International Commission of Jurists (Geneva). "While working in Geneva, I became aware of the

ground reality of the condition of the children in India, and was moved to work towards improving it. That's when I resigned, returned to Mumbai and started Aseema Charitable Trust," she says.

Though Aseema was established in 1997, it is not until 2001 that Parakh's true resilience was tested. This was when, under BMC's adoption policy, Aseema 'took over' the Bandra school. The corporation was on the verge of closing it down.

After some groundwork and research, Parakh roped in Tina Ambani, who offered to renovate the school and improve infrastructure. Today, the school is a very different picture from what it was, standing proof of what determination and persistence can achieve. It now has hundreds of students, a library, sports teacher, play area, garden, art room, playground, counselling centre and spick-and-span premises. It is in fact, almost difficult to believe that this is a municipal school!

"We were determined to ensure that the quality of education is improved, as that's the only way to empower slum children who study here. Our aim is to also to teach them good values and groom them to face the world," says Parakh.

A visionary, she believes that classroom education itself is not enough. So, Aseema launched the 'after-school' programme, which included counselling to help students understand what to expect when they go to college.

"I have been helping Aseema with placements as it's difficult for these kids to get a job on their own. I figure out vacancies and send these students for interviews. We have also had cases where students have not been able

to study after class 8 and 9. In such cases, we help them enrol at Yuva Parivartan Centre, which provides vocational courses," says activist Shyama Kulkarni.

Aseema has a 360-degree approach towards these students, most of whom don't come from stable homes. Teachers, who take extra initiative with the children and follow-up with them in case any one misses a class, are also trained every week and briefed on how to deal with the students, remain calm and handle tricky situations.

As Gitanjali Palekar, head of counselling at Aseema Charitable Trust, put it, "Many of our students face hardships at home. They come from difficult living environments. We see many cases where children have been abandoned by a parent, witnessed alcoholism or have emotionally inattentive parents. We counsel them so that they can discuss their inhibitions and help them to adjust better at academics..."

Pali Chimbai Municipal School is just one of the schools Aseema has helped. The organisation has touched the lives of about 4,000 students via schools it has adopted. It has helped build libraries, science and computer laboratories and teacher training centres. It has currently adopted three municipal schools in Mumbai, one education centre for tribal children in Igatpuri and a teacher training centre in Kanpur as well.

The world needs some more Dilbur Parakhs.

Pooja Patel, DNA

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