

A RAY OF HOPE FOR STREET KIDS - Aseema puts no limits to empowering underprivileged children.

Aseema, a Mumbai-based non-government organisation (NGO) was established in 1995 with an objective to protect and promote human rights especially those of children and women. Aseema believes that it can best fulfil its mandate by concentrating on the educational rights of underprivileged children.

But how did it all begin? It was the brainchild of Dilbur Parakh, the guiding force in this project who quit her job with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) which is based in Geneva to spearhead this movement.

"The most important right a child has is the right to education. It is the duty of the state to provide education. Most children in India, however, have no access to education. I wanted to do something and thought of starting Aseema. Backed with a contribution from Concern India Foundation, she and a few other like-minded individuals headed for the slums of Bandra Reclamation. After gaining the confidence of the parents who initially had the notion that all NGOs come and go and really do nothing, she promised them practical solutions.

Having convinced the parents, it was time to secure a place to work. Help was not far away as the principal of St. Stanislaus High School, gave them a classroom to use after school hours. The team started out with 18 children from the age groups of 3 - 15 years. But within a year they realized that barring the two hours of serious academic instruction, the rest of the day the children were left to fend for themselves. They then decided to have a morning and evening school, so as to keep the children off the streets for a major part of the day. Another centre was started in July 99 at the Pali-Chimbi Municipal School in Bandra which is presently on rental.

Later they also got the sisters of St. Joseph's Convent, Bandra interested and every Thursday, a singing and sports class is conducted at their premises after school hours. Aseema has also made learning interesting for the street kids with the introduction to computers.

"The teaching approach to Aseema's Centre is based on the belief that all children have a deep and abiding love for learning which flowers when a particular kind of relationship exists between the teachers and the ward," says Parakh. It is an adaptation of the teaching approach followed at the Atmananda Memorial School in Kerala.

The centre has five trained teachers on payroll who interact with children on a daily basis and are dedicated to the children's well-being. At Aseema the children learn an important lesson. They learn that they matter the knowledge that they are valued is one of the most empowering gifts that Aseema gives to the children. To pursue the interests of children they encourage singing, drawing and any other activity that can bring about a change in their perception of life. And through all the varied activities, developing their personalities, picking up information and skills, learning about the world, learning about themselves and their potential.

The centre has prepared children for enrolment in private and municipal schools. Aseema has 56 children at the moment of which 41 are in formal schools.

In August 2000, Aseema became the first NGO in India to provide Montessori education to street children. Monthly goal oriented excursions to places of interest; the zoo, historical and other places are also part of the itinerary. Besides this, the children's talents are put to profitable use as well. Their drawings and paintings are converted into greeting cards and designer bags that are sold at exhibitions cum sales at various points in the city.

"In January 1999 at an art competition organised by the Time and Talents Club our children won the first and third prizes in two different age groups. Later in August, the centre for the second year in succession participated in the Annual Child Art Cymroza Art Exhibition organized by the Concern India Foundation. Twelve of our children's work was on display at the exhibition. This year all the exhibits were sold, says a proud Parakh.

Presently the NGO is working on a documentary on Children's Rights which should be ready by May 2001.

But there is still a lot to be done. Aseema needs more help. What about you doing your bit? It could be as a dedicated and committed volunteer, giving much needed space for a few hours, help with medical visits, or just monetarily help a child get a decent education.

VERUS FERREIRA, The Times of India
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