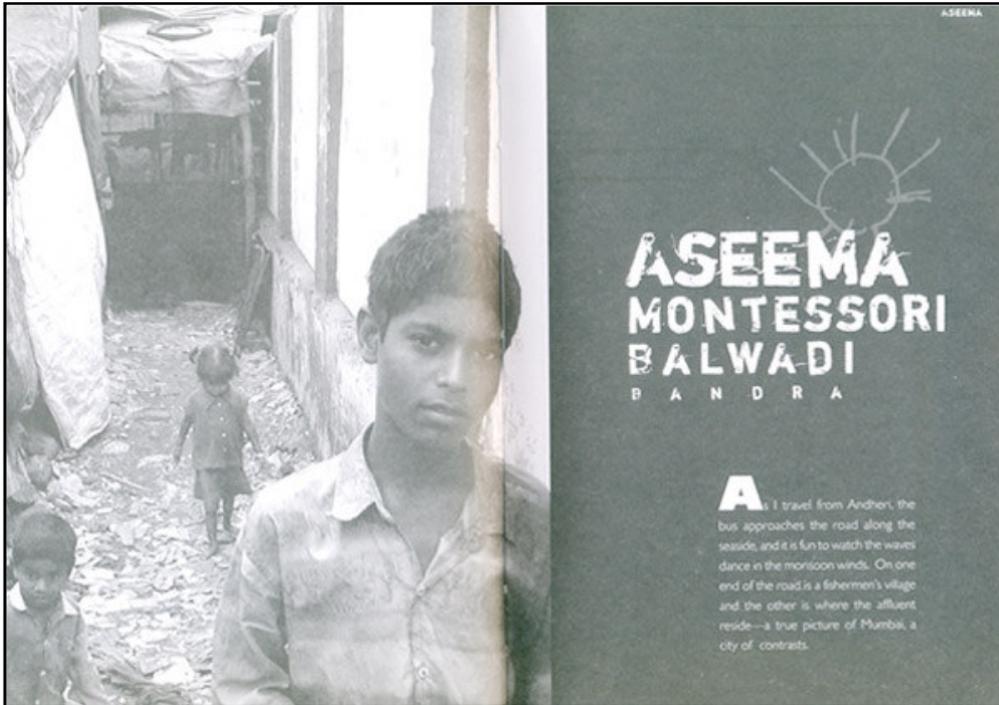


As I travel from Andheri, the bus approaches the road along the seaside, and it is fun to watch the waves dance in the monsoon winds. On one end of the road is a fishermen's village and the other is where the affluent reside - a true picture of Mumbai, a city of contrasts.



When the bus stops at Perry Cross Road in Bandra, it is lightly drizzling. The environment seems so different. There are bungalows: single and double storied houses with compounds that have lovely green hedges, and gardens full of budding roses! The road is lined with green leaves and bright orange, pink and magenta flowers on the bougainvillea creepers. There is a remarkable quietness all around. Small shops line either side of the road: cigarette vendors, sugarcane juice shops, a salad junction, and an old paper mart. The fruit vendor has some exotic looking fruits piled up so neatly; some were also covered by silver foil, and sheltered by an umbrella.

I ask an elderly man for directions and thank him with a smile. He says, "Koi baat nahi, Behan!" *It is okay, sister.* I continue to walk as the rain pours down.

The Pali-Chimbai Municipal School has an impressive foreground of red soil, bordered with small shrubs. Inside the compound, the building is pink in colour with red oxide grills and windows.



Part of the courtyard has an elevated place for the students and parents to sit that has been renovated by Reliance Industries as a gift to Aseema.

The morning batch children are just about to board the bus and the older children who have come for the afternoon session wait outside the class. They are sitting in a row along the wall and greet the chairperson of Aseema, Dilbur, in a loud chorus! She lovingly smiles at them.

The afternoon children are four and a half to five and a half years old and twenty-two young ones attend this balwadi. The class begins by recalling the previous day's work. The children take turns showing the sense organs and then the different parts of the body. They are conversing in Hindi when the teacher, Shamim orders them to speak in English!

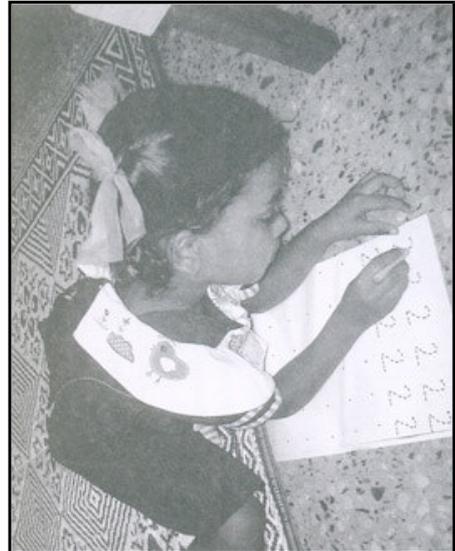
They are sitting close to one another. Some are giggling and one of them, Areefa is eating something like a powder out of a pouch. She, along with her friend Reena are discussing something very interesting and looking into the pouch. Areefa drops the contents on her purple frock and Reena is trying her best to dust it off. I can see them enjoying themselves, oblivious to their surroundings. Suddenly, at the top of her voice, Shamim yells at Areefa but the child is not bothered! I was sitting close to the teacher, and her loud voice caught me off guard! The children show indifference to her and do not respond to her threatening tone. Perhaps they have heard the same tone in their community and have escaped obedience before. It would seem that only a strong hand can control children who come from such an undisciplined place as Bandra Reclamation. Is there no other way?

I move upwards towards the Montessori on the first floor. The atmosphere in the Montessori is one without tension. Children look contented. Everything is peaceful. There is soft music playing in the room and the atmosphere is relaxed! It is hard to believe that these children are from the same community as those I just visited!

Altaf who has spent just five days at the Montessori, picks up an introductory game, settles down on the mat and plays quietly with it. He picks up each piece, studies it upside down, looks around, and arranges the pieces together. He goes through the full process two times, picks up the game and puts it back in its place. Amazing!

One of the new tiny girls cannot make up her mind. She picks up one game and puts it back, picks up another and puts it back! The sensitive teacher, Nicola, pulls the child towards her, holds and touches her so lovingly, looks intently into her eyes and asks her why she cannot make up her mind on which game to play. She cajoles the child and tries hard to find out why she is uncomfortable!

When I arrive another day, the school is unusually quiet! I walk up to the first floor and hear the faint sounds of children, running about in the corridor and talking. I find Nicola sitting with the tiny kids, trying out raincoats on each one of them. She looks up and gives me a beautiful smile. I follow Nicola's lead and sit on the ground nearby. She is very friendly by nature, and looks intently into the eyes of every child as she talks to them so lovingly. She touches them and is watching every move of their body! Dressed in black pants and soft white top, I can see the love flowing from her eyes. I follow this very charismatic personality as she moves in and out of the Montessori room distributing raincoats to the children and writing their names on the inside of the collars. She does it so beautifully by holding the child, showing the raincoat to him, asking him if it is a nice colour while she opens the buttons and slides it gently on the child and checks the size. If it fits, she claps her hands and hugs him and asks the child to wear it each time it rains when he comes to school. Then Nicola calls out for a new young one.



One very tiny boy is crying and wanders off to a higher floor or goes down the steps to the ground floor every now and then, she turns to me and says, "He is a new child and I told his mother not to leave him here for a whole day because he is not used to us. We also allow the mother to spend the day with the child but look at this poor child, this is not fair. I feel so sorry for him as he is crying a lot today. Poor fellow must be traumatized!" She lovingly hugs the child.

As I sit and observe, I do not hear the teacher talking in a raised tone even once to the children.

Nicola is the head of Aseema's Montessori programme, and Nirmala another loving and committed trained teacher works with her. Both Nicola and Nirmala are ecstatic at any new progress made. All I can hear from both of them are positive remarks to each child.

The children are sitting, playing and figuring out their favourite number of games, depending on their age and ability. One little boy, wearing a grimy quilted pajama is new to the class. About three years old, this little boy is carefully...very carefully...stacking pink blocks on top of each other, from the largest size to the smallest. At one point he has put two of the blocks behind him and doesn't see them. The teacher quietly tells a little girl working next to him to find them for him so that he can put the blocks on top in the proper order. She gently helps him find them. The little girl is finished with her game and puts it back where it belongs and selects a new project. They are all busy...they are all busy LEARNING...and the teachers have no trouble getting them to participate.



It is fun, and interesting...the children are allowed to choose their activities, spread out their own mats to work on, and so have their own space. At the end of the time, just before they are treated to a banana snack, one little girl asks the teacher if they can have a music-coordination activity. Soon the teacher turns on the tape player and the children line up and do the motions to the song, flapping their arms like birds, flicking their fingers together, dancing along with the music. What a happy place!

The habits that they are inspired to inculcate from the beginning are remarkable. Montessori teachers take pains to train young and innocent minds in an orderly way of life. Nicola tells me that they have trained the children in that way. She gives me a first hand demonstration by asking a child to put a writing table outside. The child carries the table and puts it properly in its place after taking a step forward, she looks back to check if it is in line with the others, and turns her head. Her eyes meet Nicola's and she finds instant reassurance from her!

Nicola is an impressive example of the emotional bonding between a child who does not know the meaning of home, doting parents and comfortable living, and a committed, loving teacher. She says, "This is the best job! I am blessed to be here - I love them so so much!"

Aseema, a non-government organization, was registered as a Charitable Trust in 1995, with a mandate to promote and protect human rights of underprivileged children and women. They soon decided they would work at a practical level, beginning with a small education centre in Bandra. The staff visited the traffic signals and collected children who were doing nothing but begging and standing idly on street corners. Aseema interviewed the children and parents with a questionnaire, and found that most of them were interested in being educated. One of the mothers of the street children invited them to visit the community at Bandra Reclamation where many more children expressed a desire to attend school.

**"This is the best job!
I am blessed to be here --
I love them so so much!"**



At that time Aseema had no place and very little money. However, that very week, Aseema got its first grant from Concern India Foundation. It was not a lot but something from which they could start their work. Immediately after that, the principal of St. Stanislaus School in Bandra promised them a classroom after school hours. Within a week, everything was tied up and they started Aseema's Education Centre on the 16 th of December, 1997. Since that time, Aseema has shifted their location, "adopting" BMC's Pali-Chimbai Municipal School . They currently look after maintenance of the school and run "support" classes at St. Joseph 's Convent.

Aseema supplements food for all the children, maintains a well-stocked library, and provides additional teachers and programs for them. It is there that they operate the Montessori balwadis.

Dilbur Parakh, the articulate, soft-spoken chairperson and founder of Aseema welcomed me to her office to talk about the organization. "Initially it was an eye-opener, as the children had never been in a classroom environment and they were of all ages together, from three years to twelve years! When I told them to stand in a line, they did not know the meaning of a line. They used to stand on benches or desks, were running into other rooms pulling things; it was a very difficult time." Says Dilbur and quickly adds, "As I have done a course at the Bihar School of Yoga to teach children, we used yoga to calm them. Yoga continues to be taught once a week by a volunteer.

When they found emotional deprivation through their community study at Bandra Reclamation, they engaged a child psychotherapist to advise the teachers at Aseema regarding how to deal with children who have traumatic family backgrounds, "Unless these issues are addressed, it is impossible to expect the child to grow, develop and learn in a classroom," says Dilbur.

The children WANT to come, and they tell their friends about the school.



Since their challenging beginnings, they have produced a curriculum which gives equal emphasis to academic study, creativity, physical, social and emotional development.

The staff at Aseema believes that "education is the most important right of a child. Even when all children are not born equal, they have the right to good quality education. We can hope for no greater reward than that our young boys and girls - the citizens of tomorrow - may find...something to inspire them with an undiminishing zeal to bring about some improvement in the lives of their parents and also their own. The function of education is to enrich the character. People cannot live by bread alone; the quality of life is far more important."



Some of Aseema's students have hidden talent and are very good at art. The art of these children has been developed into marketable products to instil in them a sense of pride and achievement. They are sold in India and abroad to help support Aseema's work with the underprivileged. "We have a very good product range of things that are designed out of children's art. We are striving to find a good market for that because our aim is to be self-sufficient and not to depend on donations. Reliance has given us a very good platform to display and sell our products at the Harmony show organized by them every year."

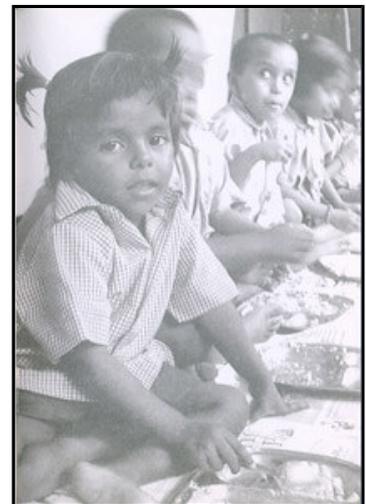
Aseema's adopted community at Bandra Reclamation is served by Ashokji, their social worker, who regularly visits hutments there and urges parents to send their children to the Montessori or the balwadi, according to their age, or to the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School .

The hutments are constructed along the reclamation wall, and there is no fixed partition or door to any of the houses: the land is uneven. A piece of cloth hanging poses as a door to the house. He tells me, "Here the community has a very bad influence on the children."

Prateeksha Subash Sawant, a balwadi student sponsored by Aseema, welcomes us into her home. The roof is very low so we cannot stand upright. There is a pole in the centre of the house to hold the roof up. Spread across the floor is a very dirty mat with grass sticking out of it. Prateeksha's mother, Sugandha urges me to sit down so I seat myself on the *chatai* (mat).

"If they live here, I can sit for some time," I thought to myself. I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between the place and the beautiful gardens in the neighbourhood of the school.

Sugandha is dressed in a soiled salwar kameez. Her shoulders dropping, she wears a tired look on her face. She tells me that she wants her children to be educated, to work and be independent. She says she has promised herself that she will not make the mistake her parents did to marry her off at an early age. She has five daughters, is twenty-six years old and works as a cook earning fifteen hundred rupees. Her husband works in a housekeeping firm that pays him eighteen hundred rupees.



The Government has demolished the area three to four times in the last ten years. There is always a threat of fire because the houses are made of cardboard and plastic sheets and have electric connections! They have one yellow bulb and one table fan. There is a torn and tattered suitcase in which the family keeps their clothes and there are very few vessels on the floor, but Sugandha has a stove on which she cooks for her family. In spite of this, she is very optimistic about life. She informs me that they have received voting cards this year, so she believes there is hope that the government will give them a place to stay somewhere if they are evacuated again from this land.

Sugandha says that Mumbai has earned the reputation of feeding each and every one who ends up here on a mission to find a job and place to live. Her family, too, came here with lots of hope. Her eyes get misty and she chokes as she looks at her house, her eyes travelling all over the torn plastic sheets. She shakes her head in negation.

I ask Sugandha how she came to know about the balwadi at Aseema. She smiles at Ashokji and shyly reveals that he approached them and promised to collect and return the children back to the community by school bus. Their daughter, Prateeksha, loves to go to school. She likes the food served there and makes certain I know that she takes her water bottle along.

Bhimabai, a woman from the same community who is employed by Aseema, proudly tells me that her daughter, Lakshmi Poonam, is very bright in her studies. Dilbur has arranged for her to study in a private school in Bandra, and she attends Aseema's support centre every evening.

The environment at Bandra Reclamation is unpredictable and often harsh. It does not allow the children to develop positive values or learn to control their behaviour. The toughness of their environment, living face to face in close proximity to the cruel realities of life in the slum, brings dissonance in their character



If underprivileged children are given an opportunity to study, and a chance to prove themselves, they can be like Lakshmi Poonam. Dilbur says, "The children WANT to come, and they tell their friends about the school."

Aseema has discovered that the children's response to love is amazing. They are giving their young students an environment conducive to learning, and tapping their aptitudes to promote the interests of these children of the balwadi. Aseema has become a model for changing the face of education in Mumbai.

Children of the Balwadi - Asha Saraswat

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