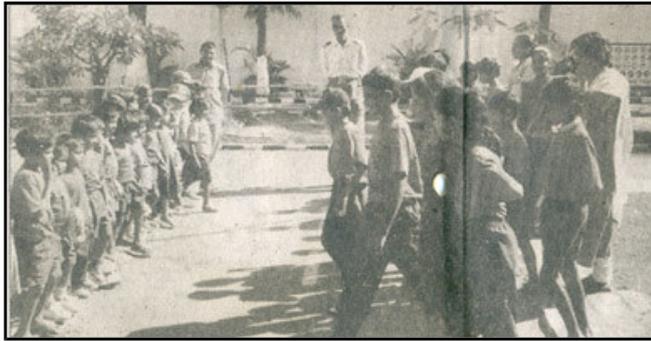


## FORMER LAWYER DEFENDS THE RIGHTS OF STREET CHILDREN

Former lawyer to legal activist to founder of Aseema, an NGO devoted to promoting the rights of children, Ms. Dilbur Parakh has come a long way. This gentle soft-spoken woman started her career as a lawyer in the high court but soon found that commercial litigation did not interest her. She joined the legal aid cell at SNDT University where social workers were trained in legal aspects. A fellowship took her to Thailand, where she worked with the People's Union of Civil Liberties. An article she did on child trafficking in the region got her interested in the rights of children, two years later, she joined the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva and participated in fact finding missions to Burma, Kashmir, Philippines, East Timor and Japan. Although she stresses the importance of this work, she decided that she wanted to work at the grassroots level.



She returned to India in 1995 and together with a few like-minded lawyers she began to closely examine the legal aspects of child labour. They discovered that despite the fact that India had strong labour laws and many judgments prohibiting child labour, these laws falter at the implementation level. Thus, they abandoned theoretical study in favour of a more practical approach.

They went to traffic signals and junctions in Bandra and spoke to the pavement dwellers and beggars. "We found that most mothers wanted their kids to go to school. They even invited us to the Bandra Reclamation slums where some of them lived. Initially they were reluctant to trust us, but slowly we won them over," said Ms. Parakh.

Aseema which means "no limits" started with one centre at St. Stanislaus High School and 18 kids, of all ages, who were given basic education. At present, Aseema has 60 children under its wing, many of whom have successfully entered the formal school system. While attendance was low for the first few months, within a year the children picked up quickly and parents were encouraged to send their children to formal school. "Today we have 12 girls at St. Joseph's Convent and two boys at St. Stanislaus High School while the rest attend the municipal school and they are doing as well as the other kids," Parakh says proudly.

Sharing her experience of working with these children, Ms. Parakh says, "The first day we had kids on the desks, running wildly around the classrooms playing with the electric switches, there were so many things we would take for granted with other kids. We have eight or nine year olds who could not hold a chalk to write, because their muscle development was so poor. They did not know what standing in a line meant."

Today, Aseema runs a Montessori centre for children between the ages two and four, a morning centre for those who attend afternoon municipal school, evening centre for the day school children and a vocational centre at St. Stanislaus. There are also computer classes, yoga, judo, singing, art and sports for the children. Since the health of the children was found to be poor, Aseema provides them with one meal a day as well as medical check ups. A line of products has been developed from the children's artwork, which has also instilled a sense of confidence in the children. Ms. Parakh says, "We approached a number of companies for help with our calendar, but all of them shied away from the theme of child labour. SKF Bearings who ordered a large number of calendars deserves mention for taking such a bold step."

Since they have a documentary film-maker on their board of trustees, Aseema has been involved in an animated film on child labour to sensitise school children to this issue. Ms. Parakh who recently won the Diwaliben Mohanlal Mehta Charitable Trust award smiles, "Now instead of 60 students we are dealing with 200 students from the municipal school. So we have our hands full right now."

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