

MAKING LIVES - Aseema, an NGO engaged in the rehabilitation and education of street children, aims to protect and promote the human rights of children. Aseema strongly believes that education is the right of every child. Flavia Gonsalves discovers how Aseema is making a difference to the life of the street child.



Universal primary education is widely recognised as one of the most effective instruments for combating child labour. It is believed that nobody can successfully eliminate child labour without first educating children. Aseema recognises the crying need to educate those who cannot avail of even basic education and is totally dedicated to addressing this significant issue. Their mandate is clear - to make the world a better place for children and give them a secure future.

Humble Beginnings

Says trustee Dilbur Parakh, "Aseema started as a registered trust in 1995. We were three trustees initially; lawyer Snehal Paranjape, Dr. Neela Kapadia and myself. We have two more trustees now, Dr. Usha Thakkar and Yogesh Kamdar. We received a grant from abroad to make a film on child rights, as we thought we'd do something on child labour. We did a lot of research on child labour from organisations like Tata Institute of Social Studies, the Bombay University and so on. Studying the legal aspects of child rights made us realise that only education can evade child labour. That to be effective in eliminating child labour, education must be useful, accessible and affordable. That's how Aseema was born.

Dilbur Parakh, with the help of other trustees, went around the signals in Bandra to gather children. "Most of the mothers wanted to educate their kids. But they were worried about the indirect costs of education such as fees, supplies, books, uniforms, meals and transportation. But, we had to make a start somewhere. We visited the slums where they live and many children wanted to attend school. We didn't have a proper place then. A visit to other NGOs working with children helped us understand the intricacies of education street children. We could not do without a classroom. We visited St. Stanislaus High School in Bandra and the principal agreed to give us a classroom after school hours. So that's how we started. The same week 'Concern India Foundation' called us and gave us our first grant. It was sufficient enough to start off. We started with 18 children,' reveals Dilbur.

Making a Difference

Aseema trustees earlier operated from home. "We faced difficulties in rounding up the children as most kids were very young and could not come to school alone. Even the parents don't value education and therefore, we had to send a teacher everyday to the slums to collect the children. It was very exhausting for her and in a short time she left. Then I started going to the community to round up the children. This went on for about 2-3 months, till one mother volunteered to bring the kids to school. After their initial education, we admitted some children to St. Stanislaus High School, St. Joseph 's Convent and the Municipal School . The schools gave the children huge discounts and helped them. Some principals also arranged for children to come early so that they were given a proper bath and dressed well like the other kids. All the local schools supported us. The children were brilliant, but their foundation was very weak. Other children in private schools have the advantage of the nursery, junior and senior kindergarten. Our kids didn't have all that. So, we introduced the Montessori system for children between the ages of two and a half and six years.

It's a wonderful system and a great success. We have found that not only do the children grasp and learn well but the Montessori system has also helped in instilling in them a sense of discipline and well-being. We then set up a Balwadi for children who are too old for the Montessori and too young for standard one," explains Dilbur.

Activities for the kids

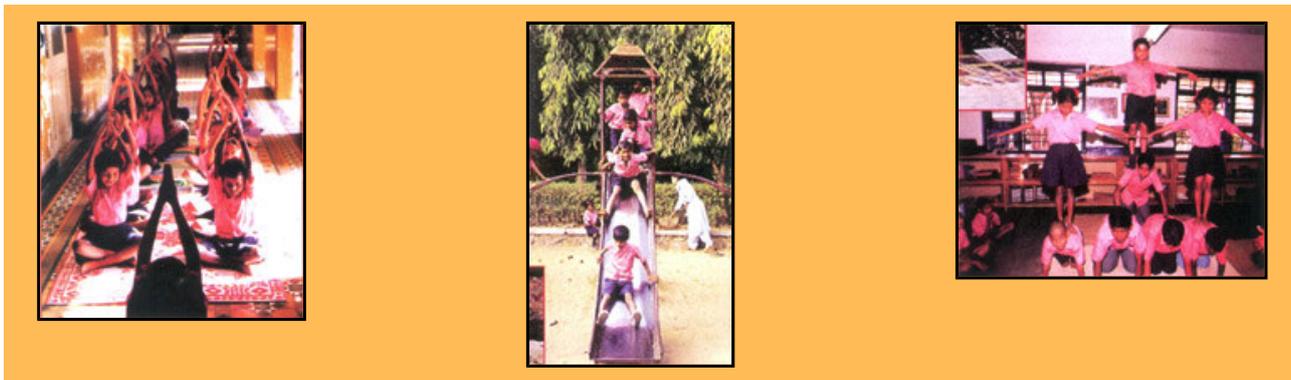


The attendance at Aseema is as high as 90-95 per cent. With overall 90 children in the Aseema programmes, that includes the Montessori children, the evening support children, and the Urdu school girls who come to learn embroidery and needlework, Aseema is totally dedicated to its cause. In addition, there are about 40 Balwadi children and 200 kids in the Municipal school. Aseema volunteers are from all walks of life - college students, trainee teachers, qualified teachers, Montessori teachers, doctors, designers, housewives, lawyer, etc. Aseema conducts activities for the children. They



are encouraged to develop their natural talents and skills through vocational programmes like carpentry, sewing, embroidery and other handicrafts. The Centre has also introduced yoga, gymnastics and judo, as also computer education and art classes for the students. A volunteer

doctor visits the centre regularly for conducting health check-ups. A nutritious meal is also provided to the children every day. A library with storybooks, reference and lending sections has recently been set up. A monthly fee of Rs. 10 is now set so that the kids learn to value education. A parents committee has been started and meetings are held every term to increase parental involvement. "Children need consistency from their parents: they need to feel that they are on a solid foundation, and that their place in the family is secure. They need to see the actions and hear the words to reassure them of their parents' love. But rarely is this the case, as most of the parents are too involved in begging and other activities. These children want security. We try to foster the child's self esteem, confidence and trust," says Murad Bukhari, a volunteer with Aseema. He continues, "The entire education system is flawed. The definition of education is all wrong. I have observed that even teachers in English medium schools are not fluent in English. Their English is not as good as it should be. And these kids come from terribly underprivileged backgrounds. If you get them textbooks, rubbers, pencils, they either get stolen or lost. Nothing comes back. They live in slums, it's an open area. But, we are trying our best to help them."



Aseema volunteers are aware that what will sustain their efforts in the long run is inclusion and acceptance of these children. They know that these children crave for love, affection and protection and do all they can to give them a sense of security. Says Murad, "If you want these kids to grow and become productive members of society, they must really learn. There is also a growing awareness among children of the fact that they need to learn the universal language English since it is the language of communication and commerce." Adds Murad, "They all want an English medium education. That's what we are really trying to do. Ours is an English medium school, the books are in English, and the teachers talk to them in English. It's a complete linguistic breakdown. Difficulties arise because there is absolutely no input from these children's homes. Their parents are busy begging or eking out a living and are in no way equipped to contribute. They expect the children to help them in their struggle but when the children go to school and their parents see them communicating in English, they

become very happy. Parents need to see tangible results or they get impatient."

REACH OUT: There are several ways in which you can make a difference to the life of a street child. Make the world a better place for children. You could contribute in your own way:

- Sponsor a child
- Sponsor a teacher
- Sponsor a project
- Sponsor a teacher-training programme
- Sponsor a product
- Sponsor a meal
- Sponsor a picnic or a field trip
- Sponsor health care
- Sponsor educational material
- Organise exhibitions of the centre's products



School Adoption

Aseema has adopted the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School located in Bandra. This Municipal School, supporting 200 children, has the potential to be a model school. "The BMC had a scheme for adoption of schools. We applied and adopted the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School. The first floor is the Marathi medium and the second floor is the English. Now for BMC, adoption means beautification. We are currently engaged in raising funds to make some essential improvements. We also get permission to train the teachers academically. We believe in training the volunteers and teachers so that every person who interacts with the children works towards building a relationship with them while imparting aspects of the curriculum. With such a huge number of children wanting to learn, the municipal school is the only institution where they can be given basic education. "Therefore adoption was the only logical thing to do," explains Dilbur.

Now, Aseema students won't have to be admitted to outside schools after the adoption. They will all be taught at the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School. "We want to be in touch with the over-all development of the child. We can now admit more kids and give them a quality education. A municipal school too can be as good as a private school," says Murad. Dilbur takes over, "The girls, who have been educated here, not just speak fluent English but confidently too. The same goes for our girls who have been admitted to St. Joseph's Convent."

Helping Hands

Luckily for Aseema, help has arrived from a lot of organisations. "We are particularly grateful to Reliance Industries. Tina Ambani has extended a solid helping hand to our projects. When we adopted the school, the drainage, the toilets, the pipe lines were terrible. She got her workers to repair the school. Thanks to her, the children will now walk into a bright, renovated and refurbished building. She also gave us a platform during the Harmony show. Our presence was noticed and there has been an overwhelming response since then," says Dilbur gratefully. Aseema receives donations from individuals too, and Concern India will be funding them till the current year. "They feel that now we are capable of standing on our own feet. But this is not really the case. The number of children is growing. And children will always be dependent. We are now thinking of ways to become self-sufficient. Only then can Aseema grow. As fund-raising efforts, we create products and artwork. framed paintings, greeting cards, art books, cloth bags, lamps, gift tags, bookmarks, wrapping paper and gift envelopes. Our older children have an innate talent for art. From their art, we produce various products which are then sold at exhibitions," informs Dilbur. These products help the centre achieve many things. It has helped raise the money needed to run and assist the centre in its goal to become self-sufficient eventually.



Aseema's hard work has paid off as they don't need to visit and gather slum kids anymore. Now, the parents are more than eager to enrol their kids here. Aseema is striving to give its children the best education possible (both in and out of the classroom). The smile and the confidence that these children exude are reward enough for Aseema. As also the fact that they will never have to beg on the streets. Equipped with an education they can carve a better destiny and look forward to a bright future.

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