

SOFT SPOT - In a city that seems to thrive on people in a hurry, Shalini Gonsalves finds a small group of people who stop to help those less fortunate.

There are many things you can accuse suburbanites of. Apathy is not one of them. Aseema in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works in the western suburb region. Their mission is simple: to protect and promote human rights, especially those of children and women. Which sounds really nice, but how does one go about implementing it? And moreover, how can you help them all?

Aseema figures that the largest section of those denied education are the marginalized, the urban and rural poor. "Without access to education, this section which needs education the most, becomes doubly marginalized," says Neela Kapadia, one of the founding members of the organisation. "Therefore we've dedicated the first phase of our operations to the educational rights of marginalized children. We've started by establishing the Centre for Street Children in Mumbai in December 1997.

Aseema's teaching approach follows from a principle employed by the Atmananda Memorial School in Kerala. In a nutshell, it believes that all children have a love for learning, and this flowers when a particular kind of relationship exists between the teacher and the taught. At the centre, the children interact with their teachers on a daily basis. They leave with more than just an academic education. They learn that they matter. Kapadia says, "The knowledge that they are valued is one of the most empowering gifts that we can give the children."

Another gift is time and space to pursue their own interests - usually in the playing, singing, drawing, having fun category. Through the process, the children develop their own unique personalities, pick up information and skills, learn about the world, and more importantly, learn about themselves and their potential.

Aseema's office is based in the JVPD Scheme, but the Centre operates on the premises of St. Stanislaus School in Bandra. Another centre was recently started at the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School. On Thursdays a singing and sports class is conducted at St. Joseph's Convent, also in Bandra. So far, more than fifty kids between the ages of three and fourteen have been enrolled at the centre. The teaching curriculum has been evolved from the Department of Early Childhood Care and Education at Sophia Polytechnic, and involves educationists from both the formal and the non-formal stream. Principal areas covered are cognitive development, language development, environmental studies, creativity, physical, social and emotional development.



Dilbur Parakh, another partner of the organisation, is pleased with the achievements of Aseema. "Attendance has risen significantly. Parents report that negative behaviour such as aggression is diminishing in their children. Also, they say that the children's confidence levels have also improved." She adds, "Parents are getting involved in the education of their children - one parent volunteers per day as an assistant to the teachers at the centre."

"Another breakthrough has been the children's increasing ability to sit in one place and attend to a particular activity," says Parakh. "This has a direct bearing on their learning ability and in their expressions of creativity."

The children's art bears testimony to this. In January 1999, some of them participated in an art competition organised by the Time and Talents Club and won the first and third prizes in two different age groups. In August last year, the Centre participated in the Annual Child Art Exhibition organised by the Concern India Foundation at the Cymroza Art Gallery, and the work was very well received by the public. Some of the kids' art has been converted into greeting cards and Crossroads in Tardeo will be displaying some of them at an exhibition in December.

So much good, and it's happening in the suburbs. Thank heavens, success and the good life haven't let us forget our less fortunate neighbours. If you'd like to lend a hand, give Aseema a call.

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