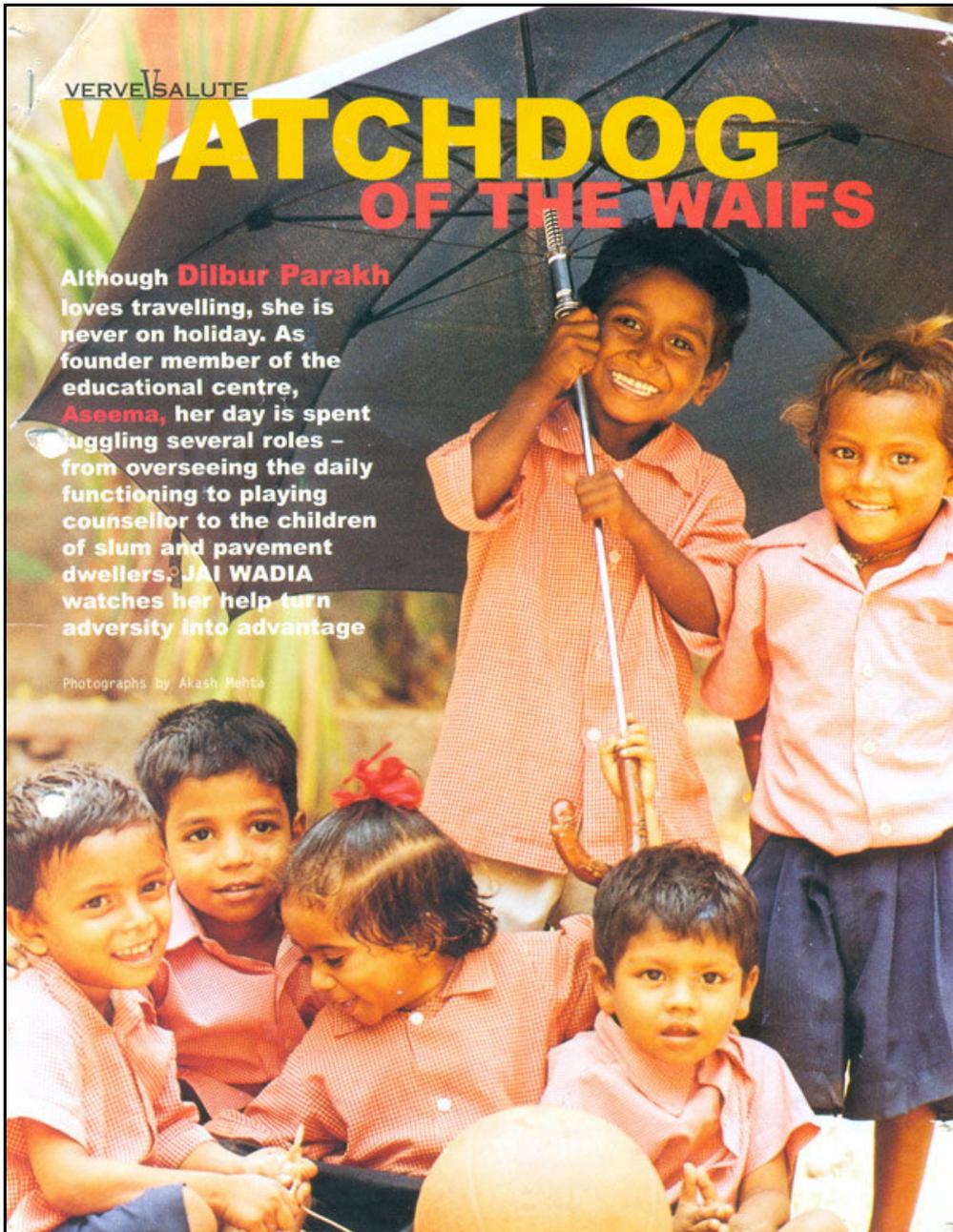


**WATCHDOG OF THE WAIFS - Although Dilbur Parakh loves travelling, she is never on holiday. As founder member of the educational centre Aseema, her day is spent juggling several roles from overseeing the daily functioning to playing counsellor to the children of slum and pavement dwellers. Jai Wadia watches her help turn adversity into advantage.**

A sea of pink-clad kids, with grubby hands, swathed in bobbing red ribbons and cherubic smiles, strolls into the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School . Breaking into gleeful laughter, they pose un-selfconsciously for the photographer, never once betraying the poverty-stricken lives they lead, the emotional and physical abuse some of them undergo or the unhealthy conditions in which they eke out their living. These children from the pavements of Bandra in suburban Mumbai, carry a heavy burden lightly on their tiny shoulders, almost seeming to forget their problems when they come to the education centres of Aseema - a home away from home.



It is the last few days before the summer vacation begins and like most children their age, they're rejoicing at the prospect of an extended break, before classes at Aseema begin again. This non-government organisation has been set up to provide primary education to street kids between the ages of two and a half and fifteen.

Though it may be vacation time for the children at Aseema, its chairperson and founder member, Dilbur Parakh, 42, is rarely - if ever - on holiday. Parakh not only oversees the daily functioning of the education and vocational centres run by Aseema but plays constant friend and counsellor to the little waifs. I watch as she patiently cajoles, explains and helps sort out problems they come to her with - Ravi insists on getting admitted to a private school and Shobha's daughter is terrified of the dentist's chair! For these children, Aseema is far more than an NGO that protects and promotes their rights. Nor is it merely a primary education centre - it is a refuge that they have come to depend upon. Which is exactly the

organisation's credo - to provide them support, help them deal with the kind of emotional and traumatic situations they typically encounter, boost their morale and direct them towards a better future by enrolling them into formal schools.

Here, children are treated with dignity, as individuals in their own right - and this is not just jargon for Parakh, it is part of her belief system which peters down to all the staff members, be it the regular teachers or the volunteers who work at Aseema.

A lawyer by profession, commercial litigation could never sustain Parakh. After practising in the Mumbai High Court for two years, she quit to join the Legal Aid Cell, at the SNDT Women's University. Here, she was involved in training social workers, making them aware of women's rights.

Later, having received a fellowship from the International Human Rights Internship Programme, Parakh went on to work at the Union for Civil Liberty (UCL) in Thailand - a national body protecting the rights of farmers and labourers.

She then took up a job as a legal officer (Asia and Pacific regions) at the International Commission of jurists (ICJ) in Geneva, where she was involved in many investigative missions to regions like Jammu and Kashmir and Burma where human rights were being violated.

**" These kids are not used to a classroom and it took us a very long time initially to calm them down. We had yoga sessions for them every morning."**



After a five-year stint at the ICJ, Parakh began to pine for work at the grassroots level. She recalls, "I was not cut out for this job where all resolutions were politically motivated. I had to take a decision and it was very difficult. At that point I didn't know what I wanted to do but I realised I had to come back and start at the root of the problem."

In December 1994, Parakh returned to Mumbai where she now lives with her niece. A home bird by nature, being single and unmarried doesn't really bother her much - she loves reading, watching movies and listening to music when she's not practising yoga. Yet she does admit that, "It was difficult to get back. My decision had also to do with the fact that one feels very comfortable here in Mumbai." A few more years in Geneva and her resolve to return to India may have weakened and Aseema which came into existence in 1995, would never have seen the light of day. Parakh, with two friends - now trustees of Aseema as well - Snehal Paranjape, a lawyer and Neela Kapadia, a documentary film-maker, were responsible for setting up the organisation.

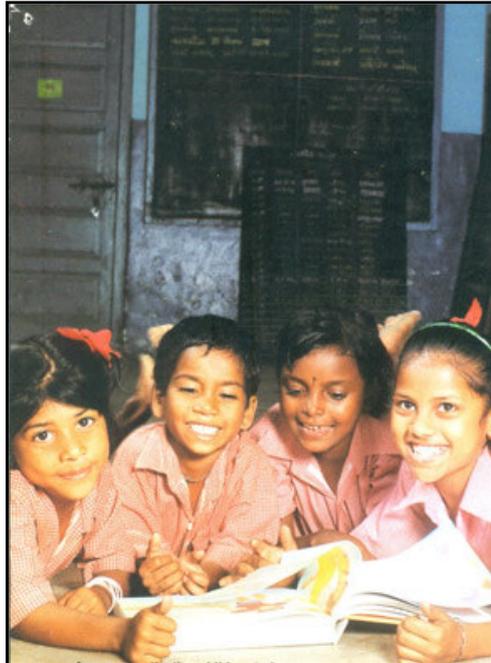
A detailed study on child labour in India undertaken by them triggered off the spark to initiate the project. "There are numerous such studies undertaken and many a judgment passed, yet so many children are out of school. I wondered what could be done on a practical level rather than just leave it as a theoretical study. That's when we started the centre for street children, to actually make a difference in their lives. We went to traffic signals in the area and also visited the homes of these kids in Bandra Reclamation area, to find out whether they would be interested in acquiring an education.

It was an uphill task in the beginning. They experienced a lot of resistance and mistrust from pavement dweller parents, who resented sending their children for studying. Neither could Aseema afford a proper staff, but was dependent on volunteers to help. For three months, the dedicated Parakh trudged to the slum areas to round up children and coax them into attending classes. She initially had 18 - 25 kids coming in. Keeping their interest and motivation levels high was difficult too. "These kids are not used to a classroom and it took us very long initially to calm them down. We had yoga sessions for them every morning," Parakh explains. Spiritually inclined and a regular follower of yoga herself for more than 20 years, she strongly believes in the efficacy of this holistic science and swears by it. "Yoga makes you strong and teaches you how to deal with life's ups and downs. It gives you the right perspective and one learns to take each day as it comes." She hopes to impart these same values to the children she works with. "We want to develop the right kind of values in them, like honesty, trust and faith. Today, youngsters are only concerned with how much money they will earn, now how!"

Other issues like ill health and poor nutrition cropped up once the kids started attending, so a doctor was roped in. though they couldn't afford to give free food to the children back then, for a nominal monthly fee of Rs. 10, they were given a nutritious meal once a week.

It was not until 1997, when Aseema received its first donation from the Concern India Foundation, that the fully-fledged centre was finally established. Simultaneously they were allotted space at the St. Stanislaus High School for their activities. Today, Aseema has 56 children who are integrated into the formal school system. Aseema's role, however, doesn't end with helping these kid with school admission - they are also provided with a supportive environment to sustain their interest in studies and help them cope with the curriculum. At the educational and vocational centres, at St. Joseph 's Convent and Stanislaus high School respectively, the children receive help with their homework, practice yoga and judo and learn to work with computers. The centre introduced the first Montessori system of its kind for street children in India between the age group of two and a half and six years. Montessori classes are now underway at the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School , both morning and afternoon. Free meals are also provided every day to the kids.

**"Even if industries use NGOs for vested interests, I think its worth it, if they are helping an honest cause."**



Along with other activities, an excellent art teacher encourages the children to create artwork that is then reproduced and transformed into innovative tablemats, coasters, bags and bookends for sale. Some of these were recently displayed at Tina Ambani's Harmony Show at the Nehru Centre, an annual event for art aficionados, where Aseema caught the public eye. How did a low-key NGO like Aseema get involved with as high profile an event as this? Parakh remarks, "Seven years after Harmony was born, Tina Ambani decided to do something different at the show. After visiting several NGOs, she finally selected Aseema, giving our children a chance to publicly display their work. It gave them tremendous satisfaction and also helped the organisation gain some exposure. The reliance group of companies have since, show an interest in getting involved in the Pali-Chimbai municipal School which ahs recently been adopted by us.

"When we agreed to participate in the Harmony Show we did not give much thought to how it would benefit us. When one is working with good intentions and knows what's being done is right, I believe that things fall into place." But how does Parakh feel about the corporate world in general riding on the goodwill of NGOs? "Even if industries use it for vested interests, I think it's worth it, if they are helping an honest cause.

**"We want to develop  
the right kind of values  
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Parakh recounts the story of Mamta to illustrate the trauma some children undergo as a result of emotional and physical abuse. An extremely intelligent girl, Mamta was a school dropout, brought to Aseema by her mother. After a years work she was finally integrated into a private school and was doing well, when it was back to square one when she came in crying with a swollen face to the centre. She had been assaulted by her stepfather. Parakh strongly feels, "These children have to undergo so many adverse experiences that it would be useful to have boarding facilities for them."

What makes Aseema different, according to Parakh, is that it helps children tackle emotional problems, making them feel secure. She adds, "Our teaching philosophy is different and incorporates the methods of the Atmananda Memorial School in a village in Kerala. After visiting several NGOs before opening Aseema, we were clear that we wanted the child to feel valued. I didn't find a lot of existing organisations doing that. Joining hands with another NGO would mean that they would have to think along the same lines as us. Also, quality service can be provided only to a limited number of children. Each and everyone can contribute by doing their bit."

And as they very name - Aseema - suggests, if one really wants to make a difference, the possibilities are limitless .

JAI WADIA,  
Verve 2002 - Volume 10 Issue 3