Dilbur Parakh matter-of-factly narrates an incident that would be alarming to most: "A few years ago, some Aseema children were taking exams in their school. The headmistress, a state government employee, was supervising the exams. She was worried that the kids' grades would be used as a measure of her performance. So she insisted they cheat -- either from each other or their textbooks. When our children refused to do so, she took a ruler and beat them. Yet our kids still refused."

Teaching the children such "how-to-live" values is the raison d'être of Aseema, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on providing quality education to slum children in and around Mumbai. Parakh, chairperson and trustee, founded Aseema in 1997 with 18 children found begging at traffic lights in the Bandra area. With start-up funds of just US$100, Parakh launched Aseema as an informal center in a classroom that a nearby school offered for use after hours. "We started Aseema to teach the children to be good human beings, to give them role models to look up to," notes Parakh, a former human rights lawyer. "But very soon we found that the kids were capable of learning a lot."

Parakh and her team decided to get involved in the children's formal education via the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) school adoption program. In 2002, she took on the Pali Chimbai Municipal School in Bandra. Aseema provided its own staff and tried to "make education more meaningful and value-based." Since then, the organization has adopted two more schools around the area and converted the initial evening class into a support center for children who need additional tutoring.

Today, Aseema works with 1,400 children ranging in age from two to 17. Last year, the organization spent close to US$400,000 on its operations. "Most of that money comes from donations. The MCGM gives nothing," says Parakh who has been lobbying the government to create a public-private partnership for the schools, which will make it mandatory for the MCGM to provide funding to partnering nonprofits. "It's been five years; the matter is now lying with the commissioner."

Aseema's primary donors are corporations, trusts and individuals, largely within India. "I think we have enough generous people, so donations will continue to come. Financial sustainability is important for an income-generating NGO; for an education NGO, it is far more difficult," says Parakh, adding that it is important to build a fund to sustain the organization over the long term. In India, however, a corpus donation cannot be used for administrative expenses, and donors are reluctant to give to a corpus because misappropriation of donor funds is a rampant problem. "Trust has to be built up. Once that is there, donors stay with you," Parakh notes. She plans to raise US$800,000 this year and US$1,200,000 next year. "While you have to be practical, I honestly believe that it is part of a divine plan."

Padma Velaskar, a professor at the Center for Studies in Sociology of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), supports Parakh's donor-driven model. "It also involves the people, keeps them in touch with the problems of the underprivileged and fosters commitment to society. It builds social sensitivity among people," she says.

Denzil Saldanha, a retired professor from the same TISS center and author of two books on literacy campaigns -- *Education of Adolescents: For Development in India* and *Civil Society Processes and the State*) -- offers a different perspective on the notion of sustainability: "Unfortunately when most people talk about sustainability, they reduce it to financials. While that is important, you can sustain an organization with a more intensive, qualitative approach. By doing something well, an organization draws attention and then is able to draw funds," she notes. "My point is that

the social development sector will be a dependent sector for at least the visible future. It has a justifiable claim on the rest of society and I think we need to respect that -- whether the funds come from the government, the corporate sector or funding organizations. It is their responsibility to see that a right as basic as basic education be granted to all."

Parakh maintains her quasi-philosophical views even when it comes to another NGO buzzword -- scale. Aseema's efforts are often labeled by critics as being insignificant toward helping Mumbai's approximately 500,000 (according to Aseema's website) underserved children in MCGM schools. But Parakh is unfazed. "We have no goals in terms of number of children. We are going to see how it goes. Above all else, we want to make our children good human beings. And if you have to sacrifice a few numbers along the way, so be it. I think the focus should be more on giving the children you are working with the best."

Aseema's cost for each of its beneficiaries -- the amount spent on one child annually -- is US$180, significantly more than many Indian NGOs, some of whom work with as little as US$50 a child. "If you want to provide the quality and extracurricular activities that we do, I honestly don't think we can do it for less in Mumbai," notes Sanaa Shaikh, Aseema's director for education and head of donor relations. "The MCGM spends more than double -- US$420 in a regular MCGM school -- than we do [for each] child and does much less."

According to Velaskar, no country has achieved universalization of elementary education without substantial state support. So while Aseema's efforts are a "welcome initiative", it is impossible for any NGO to scale beyond a reasonable limit without state involvement. Saldanha offers a different viewpoint of scale. "Scale need not necessarily be understood in a multiplication sense," he says. "It can also be doing something in limited numbers but doing it well and building on that through networking with other like-minded organizations and then impacting policy or curriculum. One need not multiply oneself to get the job done."

Yet, with neither scale nor financial independence being key goals, Aseema's strategy is certainly an anomaly in India's NGO landscape. "If things are meant to happen, they will. You just have to put in the effort and, most importantly, believe it will happen," Parakh says. "Whatever we've wanted in the past has fallen into place."

Overcoming the Odds

Five years ago, Aseema bought some land at Igatpuri, 78 miles outside Mumbai, as part of its rural initiative. The plot had no roads connecting it, and no lines for water or electricity. "We paid US$20,000 for the land and had to spend US$400,000 developing it. But somehow we managed," Parakh notes. But other than the financial hurdles and difficulties with government permissions, the biggest challenge for Parakh's team was working with the tribal community that had only been exploited by people from cities up to that point. "We had to first gain their trust," she says. "Yet today we have a center with 100 children and in two years, we've promised our children a primary school. It will happen. It has to." Aseema is currently fighting to prevent the municipal council in the area from putting a garbage dump across the road from the center, next to the village wells. "Our problems continue, but like I said, we have to have faith," Parakh adds.

Aseema's biggest "everyday challenge" however is no different from organizations in the for-profit sector -- "Getting good, dedicated, committed people. You don't necessarily get them by paying more though," Parakh says. Parakh and Shaikh consider the hiring of specialists in the organization to be the most significant change in the past five years. With the help of a foreign human resources specialist, Aseema has zeroed in on an organizational structure that Parakh thinks "is best for the time being." She dismisses any criticism of the organization being individual-driven, insisting that it operates "with a core philosophy of decentralized staff and empowered heads."

The organization now has education coordinators that ensure standardization of systems across its schools and education officers who are senior teachers that train more recent hires. Aseema has also hired counselors for its

schools and social workers to liaise between the parents and the school. In fact, Aseema's teachers also train those in other schools for a small fee. "Many who have visited us say that it is more than what private schools do in India. We try to go beyond rote learning. Children have to think, question and analyze," says Parakh.

That is perhaps why 11-year old Soliya Qureshi, the daughter of an auto rickshaw driver, can confidently say: "When I grow up, I can become something very good." She joined Aseema as a timid four-year-old, but in spite of a lack of running water, poor sanitation and living in a home that is under the constant threat of demolition, Soliya goes to school dressed neatly in uniform every day. At Aseema, she was able to foster her love of reading. She was so inspired by the library at Aseema's school, that she started a small library in her community when she was only 10. Now Soliya writes scripts and directs plays.

A Game Changer

A key achievement for Aseema in the recent past has been the development of its products division, which makes various gift items. Almost a decade ago, Wharton's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) together with the Mumbai-based S. P. Jain Institute of Management & Research, helped Aseema with its business plan. They set up a separate products division that has become Aseema's primary revenue generator. "Our students, faculty and staff were delighted to learn about Aseema and to work on Aseema's questions about how to create support by distributing items in the U.S.," says M. Therese Flaherty, director of Wharton's Small Business Development Center.

In 2010, products generated US$50,000 for the organization. For 2011-2012, the gross sales have more than doubled to US$112,000. Denise Anklesaria, head of Aseema's products division, attributes this growth to several factors. "We've hired specialized staff to oversee the product lines, marketing and accounting. This was earlier done by the teachers themselves," she notes. Aseema has also made corporate gifts a primary focus. Last year, it carried out extensive research on the kind of gifts firms tend to purchase and how to generate further corporate sales. "We found that desktop products, as opposed to cloth products, go well as corporate gifts," notes Anklesaria.

The change in strategy worked. Large orders by companies such as Franklin Templeton and Tech Mahindra for co-branded products have substantially contributed to Aseema's bottom line. In fact, an Indian businessman even presented an elephant motif gift box with coasters from Aseema to Warren Buffett during his visit to India last year. "The children were studying animal forms and were given a model of an elephant and asked to do their own thing. They came up with this box, which has been a big hit," says Anklesaria. Participating in over 100 product exhibitions a year has also helped Aseema to increase revenue and gain needed brand exposure.

However, Aseema has not been able to follow through with the SBDC staff's suggestion to expand its e-commerce efforts. "Retailing online hasn't taken off as we'd ideally like because we need to advertise our site more," Anklesaria notes. "Our back end [technology], however, is in place and we hope [the site] will take off soon." But she doesn't expect online sales to generate more than a few thousand dollars each year, at least initially. Anklesaria is more optimistic about increased corporate orders next year. She also hopes to be in more retail outlets in the city (currently Aseema retails out of one outlet at the domestic airport in Mumbai). Some well-wishers have offered to take on Aseema's product division and run it as a separate corporate entity. But Parakh believes it is very important that the division always remain part of Aseema. "Someday, we want our children to run the division," she says.

Parakh's near-term agenda simply involves "doing the best [I] can with the 1,400 children we have and attracting good people who will help us with our efforts." At several levels, Aseema seems to be burgeoning from a one-woman show to a more business-like entity with a focused strategy, distinct divisions and systems and specialized staff. But Parakh scoffs at the "corporatized" insinuation. "I don't like the word corporate," she says. "It doesn't necessarily mean more efficient. Let's just say more professional."