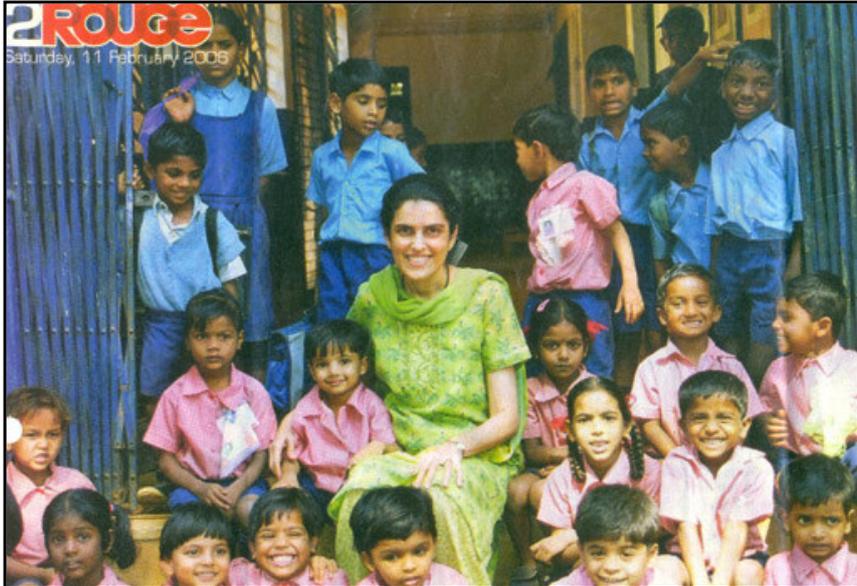


FOR A GOOD CAUSE - Aseema Chairperson Dilbur Parakh tells Savia Rajagopal about her devotion for the welfare of underprivileged children.

What prompted you to set up an organisation like Aseema dedicated to working for underprivileged children?



I had worked with the Union of Civil Liberties in Thailand and was earlier involved with social work in Mumbai. After that, I was working as the legal officer for Asia with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva. But I always knew that I had to work with children. The year I went to Geneva, the Convention on the Rights of the Child had just come into being. I worked there for more than five years, and then decided to quit my job. I returned and started 'Aseema' at the grassroot level with some likeminded people. The centre started on 15th December, 1997.

What has been your biggest challenge so far?

Fund raising is my biggest challenge. We look into issues like health and family environment but ultimately we are an education centre and we believe in providing

quality education. We need to have good teachers, social workers and staff. We want these kids to have a proper childhood. But after the kids reach a certain age, there's a lot of pressure on them to start earning and working. So we also have to keep in mind where we are taking these kids with the education. That in itself is challenging.

Working with kids can be extremely exhausting. So what keeps you motivated?

It's wonderful just being with them. Though there are times of disillusionment, being with the kids gives me a sense of satisfaction. There have been instances when I've felt low and there were days where I didn't feel like going to the school, but then I have always come away feeling uplifted. In fact a lot of us feel blessed to be working with the children. None of us who work here are forced to do so. I love being with the kids and they love coming here to learn and grow. It's a continuous growth for all of us here as individuals and a team.

How do you deal with children coming from difficult backgrounds?

Many of the kids have emotional problems. And no learning can take place till those are dealt with. We have a child psychotherapist who discusses with teachers how to handle such issues. But there are some cases, which are particularly difficult. So we refer them to the counsellor.

So what are the activities that Aseema undertakes on a daily basis?

We adopted a municipal school in Chimbai three years ago and we handle the classes for standards one to five. We have a Montessori and a balwadi. We run a support centre to help kids with their studies and undertake activities like art class, etc. We have an activity centre for older girls where they learn embroidery in the evening. Now we are also involved in a rural education project in Igatpuri which will educate the tribal community there as well as provide residential facilities for some of our children.

Tell us about the Aseema product line.

That has just evolved over time. Our kids make beautiful artwork. The whole product division is in collaboration with Wharton University and SP Jain Institute of Management. Our products include stationary goods like greeting cards, calendars and household items like tableware, trays, mats, bags etc. It's a good way to create resources for our initiatives and provides a tremendous boost to the kids' self esteem when they see their creations on the products.

How did you and your team feel when 'Raju ; I' - the animated film produced by Aseema won the National Award?

Of course, winning the National Award is a huge honour. Everyone was delighted, especially the children. When I went to receive the award from the President, they rushed home after school to watch it on TV! [Laughs]

SAVIA RAJAGOPAL, Rouge
11 February 2006