

**PLEASE ADOPT US: CIVIC SCHOOLS - Following from Part III of the Collapse of Public Education series interrupted by the deluge of July 26, Farah Baria examines the conflict of interest as activists attempt to revitalise municipal schools.**



The renovated library at Pall Chimbai School, Bandra, adopted by NGO Aseema

The toilets are spotlessly clean, their tiles brightly decorated. The freshly painted classrooms are cheerfully festooned with artwork.

The little library is packed with beautiful books, and in the *balwadi* downstairs, lunch is served on neat blue place-mats in shiny *thalis*. It's hard to believe this is a municipal school.

But while hundreds of others lie callously neglected and abandoned by their parent body - the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC)- the Pall-Chimbai Municipal School in Bandra (West) has been adopted by Aseema, a charitable trust run under the guidance of Asoke Basak, former chairman of the Maharashtra State Electricity Board.

"This is a wonderful example of what a committed partnership between the municipality, corporate



sponsors and activists can achieve," says Basak.

Bina Lashkari, director of non-governmental organisation (NGO) Doorstep School, says adoption has improved attendance and lowered the dropout rate in civic schools.



Most importantly, says Lashkari, it has injected the kids with enthusiasm, a fact that has nothing to do with the BMC's standard bait - the free mid-day meal. "If school is fun, the kids will come," she adds.

But several NGOs and private sponsors who have adopted 325 of the 1,185 municipal schools in Mumbai want the BMC to take the experiment further and enlarge the scope of its School Adoption Scheme.

Currently, all adoption agreements have to be renewed every year - a tedious and lengthy process.

And, unsure of whether the application will be renewed, donors are wary of funding long-term projects.

In addition, activists say, the BMC is unnecessarily rigid in many respects. While cosmetic "beautification" and sponsored computer labs or libraries are quickly sanctioned, adoptive agencies are discouraged from actually running the school. This means that donated facilities remain poorly maintained.

But the BMC is adamant. "Our rules and regulations protect us from rogue NGOs who could misuse the School Adoption Scheme," points out BMC Projects Officer Geeta More-Patil. "We have to take precautions because these children are our responsibility."

Ironically, there was no evidence of this sense of responsibility when seven year old Sheetal Mistry died after she jumped out of the Vakola Municipal School window because the rusted toilet door had jammed.

Or when a little boy was crushed to death after a gate collapsed on him at the Magathane Municipal School. Or even when a student got electrocuted due to improper wiring at the Tulsetpada Municipal School.

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