



In a swanky corporate office, has your attention been grabbed by a table calendar full of bright and happy drawings, obviously by children? The paintings reflect such warmth, and glow that it is difficult to believe that they are the brush strokes of children who have suffered extreme deprivation, even trauma. The calendar is one of Aseema's many products that you can order from their online store - stationary, tableware, household items and gifts. For Aseema, "the sale of the products made from the art done by our children is a way towards self-sustainability", says Dilbur Parakh, Chairperson and Trustee of Aseema.

Aseema, an NGO registered in 1995 under the Bombay Public trusts Act seeks to protect and promote human rights of underprivileged children. Among the founder trustees are: Neela Kapadia, Dilbur Parakh and Snehal Paranjape. Like many other NGOs working in the field of child rights, Aseema's founders recognised that the problem of school dropouts needed to be addressed urgently. It was not just a matter of advocacy but actual action.

Aseema, a Sanskrit word, meaning 'limitless', according to Dilbur, captures a child's spirit which can soar in the right environment. "We are committed to provide just this environment to street and underprivileged children", she says. They began with funding the schooling of just eight children in 1997 from the slums of Bandra Reclamation by providing them the fees as well as uniforms, books, shoes and schoolbags. Today, they have adopted the Pali-Chimbi Municipal School with 200 children who are determined to learn.

Located in Bandra, Mumbai, Aseema's focus is more on inculcating a desire in children to learn and to complete studies through the formal educational system. Their effort is to create a learning environment which is meaningful and fun, yet challenging and capable of encouraging children to make informed choices. So they focus attention on training teachers to value children unconditionally and respect their feelings and opinions, i.e. developing a child-centred approach in which they can draw out the child's inherent love for learning.

Aseema has set up an Art Studio based on the philosophy of "Room 13" (of UK) where art is not taught. The child artist is given the opportunity for creative expression. These sessions are held once a week at its Support Centre which are a great draw. Paintings of these child artists have been a feature of the Harmony Art Show run by Tina Ambani (wife of businessman Anil Ambani) for the last six years. Aseema expects to have an online art gallery displaying their children's work by June 2007.

Aseema seeks funding for its activities through donations from individuals and corporates. In addition to seeking donations towards their Corpus/Endowment, Aseema offers a structure of rates for ways in which you can help. A child's school education can be sponsored for Rs. 6000 a year and the health-care cost of the Centre for Rs. 2500 a month.

You can sponsor meals for children. You can provide educational materials for the Centre at Rs. 4000 a month. Normally, institutions and corporates sponsor annual picnics, annual day or sports day – each one of which costs Rs. 30,000. Annual sponsorship rates for various training programmes – for parents, teachers and helpers – range between Rs. 4000-Rs. 6000 a year. A holiday for 100 children can be sponsored at Rs. 30,000. Donations to Aseema are eligible for tax exemption under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act. "But the maximum encouragement comes from those who buy the artworks of our children; it gives them a feeling of great achievement", says Dilbur. "You can see it in those twinkling eyes". If you visit the Centre, what would, indeed, strike you are the happy and warm smiles of the children- as bright as the paintings on the calendar or the coasters. It will surely light up your day.

Dr. NITA MUKHERJEE, Money Life
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