



UNIQUE INSIGHTS ON INDIANS AND INDIA

Sep 24 Celebrities help schools for slum and tribal kids in Maharashtra

GIT Interview: Dilbur Parakh, co-founder Aseema

*In 1997, Dilbur Parakh, who trained as an attorney in Mumbai, co-founded **Aseema**, a not-for-profit organization to provide free high-quality education to impoverished children. Her goal was to create a caring environment that enabled students to learn and also nurtured their human potential by encouraging them, for example, to draw and paint. The first class consisted of 18 children from the slums of Bandra, a city suburb. Today, 23 years later, Aseema has grown to serve -- directly and indirectly -- some 4,400 children in Mumbai and elsewhere.*

In March, when the COVID-19 pandemic sent India into lockdown, the pandemic struck a body blow at Aseema's operations. Most of the children's parents were migrant workers. The downturn decimated their incomes, dramatically increasing the need for support. At the same time, Parakh saw donations decline sharply as traditional donors cut back on their commitments. Aseema responded to the crisis by launching an energetic campaign to deliver food and school supplies to the children and their families.

*As the crisis continues, **Friends of Aseema**, a U.S.-based non-profit whose goal is to support Aseema's mission, has teamed up with **Artrepreneur**, a New York City start-up, to launch on October 12 a global **online auction of the children's art**.*

*To support the auction, several celebrities, business leaders, educators and artists have agreed to donate a 15-minute online conversation with the highest bidders. They include film maker **Danny Boyle**, whose *Slumdog Millionaire* won eight Oscar awards; **Joanne Rogers**, pianist and wife of the late children's television personality Fred Rogers; **Shashi Tharoor**, member of the Indian parliament, former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, acclaimed writer and*

*Oxford scholar; and Nitin Rakesh, CEO of Mphasis, an IT services firm based in Bangalore, with \$1.1 billion in revenues in fiscal year 2020. See full list below.**

*To register and participate in the auction, kindly visit: **Artrepreneur***

In this interview, Parakh discusses how Aseema began, challenges faced, and how she and her colleagues are responding with grit and guts to the worst pandemic and economic downturn in a century.

Global Indian Times: What is Aseema? Could you give GIT's readers an overview of your activities?

Dilbur Parakh: Aseema is a Public Charitable Trust. In Mumbai we educate children who live in the slums and in Igatpuri, about 70 miles from Mumbai, we educate tribal children.

In Mumbai we work with three English language schools run by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) under a public-private partnership. We have also built our own Marathi language school for tribal children in the remote village of Awalkhed, near Igatpuri.

Our vision is to realize human potential through quality education. While that sounds grand, we are a grassroots organization. Our children are among India's poorest and a lot of attention needs to be given to every child. While our focus is education, in the course of our work we find many other issues. Children fall sick, they lack nutrition, and family problems have an adverse impact on a child's emotional wellbeing. We cannot ignore these; they all directly impact a child's learning.

This led us to provide mid-day meals, medical help and have trained counselors at our schools. We try to build a close bond between a teacher and a child so s/he feels secure and cared for. It is only then that true learning can take place. The most empowering gift we can give a child is to let them know that s/he is valued.

GIT: What inspired you to launch Aseema? How and where did you start?

Parakh: In 1995, after five interesting years working with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva, as their Legal Officer for Asia and the Pacific, I returned to Mumbai. Though I appreciated and respected the work done

by ICJ, in Mumbai I wanted to take a grassroots approach to protecting human rights.

And so, with two close friends -- Snehal Paranjape, a lawyer at the Bombay High Court and Neela Kapadia, a documentary filmmaker -- I decided to look at ways to protect children's rights.

We began by studying legislation and court judgements pertaining to children in India. We found that they promoted and protected children's rights but alas, the reality on the ground was so different! So, we decided to work with Mumbai's poorest children – street (homeless) and slum children and provide them a high-impact education. We started our work in Bandra, a suburb of Mumbai where I live.

None of us had any background in social work or teaching, and we were not at all sure what the outcome would be. The only thing we were very sure about was that Aseema's intervention should be simple and practical. We did not draw up an elaborate plan; we only wanted to do things well and systematically.

“In the beginning there was no clear road, nor a destination in sight. There was only a problem that needed a solution,” as our process was aptly described in a 2006 **case study about Aseema** in *Knowledge@Wharton*, the online research and business analysis journal of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

We visited the traffic signals in Bandra where scruffy children in tattered clothes were begging. Many of them were accompanied by their mothers. Almost all the mothers said that they had never been to school. But, they added, they did not want their children to grow up like them – begging on the streets. One mother suggested that we visit the slums at Bandra Reclamation, where they lived.

We went there the next day, to find a big community, living on the streets. There were lots of children who greeted us cheerfully. But the adults viewed us with suspicion. When we told them we were hoping to educate the children, one of the mothers said, “You are not the only ones to come here; many others have visited in the past. They have started *balwadis* (pre-primary schools for children aged three to six), but nothing has continued for long. People like you show up here for about six months and then you are gone.”

Those words have stayed with me. I resolved then that, once we start, we would never let the children or their parents down. Over the years we have faced financial

obstacles and bureaucratic and other problems. But we do our best to educate the children, with a long-term focus.

GIT: Aseema serves children in Mumbai as well as Igatpuri. How many children does Aseema serve and in what ways?

Parakh: We started by educating 18 children, ages three to 12, in a classroom of a reputed school, **St. Stanislaus High School** in Bandra. The head of the school allowed us to use the room every evening from 4 pm to 6pm after his school was closed for the day.

Now we educate about 4,400 children. Of these, 2,700 study at one of our four schools. Three are schools owned by the Mumbai city administration and the fourth is one we built in the remote village of Awalkhed, Igatpuri, serving children from local tribal communities.

We also educate about 1,700 students indirectly. These are our alumni, and other children learning to use computers and conduct laboratory experiments. And we train teachers of a school in Kanpur which also serves poor children.

Our education programs focus on both academics and drawing, painting, sports, music and other creative and fun activities. Every child plays an hour of sports daily. Last year, our students won 106 medals in volleyball, handball, rugby, athletics, kho-kho, wrestling and judo, at school competitions and also at the state and national levels.

All the children have art as part of their regular school work. In addition, we encourage those with talent to take additional classes in a studio. Every school has a studio, Aseema Room 13. The **Room 13 movement** started in 1994 in a school in the West Highlands of Scotland and has now become a network of similar studios worldwide.

In Aseema Room 13, children study the works done by both Indian and Western masters and learn about their techniques and lives. Students discover, explore, question and create their own works of art.

GIT: What have been the graduation rates? How do these compare with graduation rates at other schools?

Parakh: Up until the pandemic hit, our graduation rate was nearly 100%, with many exceptional students. In May, for instance, 18 students passed the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams with distinction (scoring 75% or higher), 40 got a first class (60% or higher) and 27 second classes. Not a single student got a third class, less than 45%. Our worst result was in 2019, when 93% of the students passed the SSC exam. It was well above the state average of 77% and the 56% average at Mumbai-city run schools.

GIT: What kind of post-graduation impact have you seen for Aseema's programs? What careers do the graduates pursue, and what level of incomes do they earn?

Parakh: Most of our graduates continue with their education. Some pursue degrees in science, commerce, liberal arts, management, medical, engineering, film making and graphic arts. They are graduates of Jai Hind, KC, Sophia, National and other colleges in Mumbai and even from **Whistling Woods International**, a film Institute in Mumbai.

Some take up vocational courses in nursing, tailoring, auto mechanics, electronics, fashion design, beauty and yoga. They study at the Don Bosco Training Institute, ICICI Academy, Tata Strive, Nalini and Yasmin Academy and other institutions.

While we don't have detailed information, anecdotally we know that they earn between Rs 8,000 (\$108) and Rs 36,000 (\$489) a month. So, not only are many of them the first in their families to go to school, they are also breaking out of the cycle of poverty - not doing manual work or begging.

In 2015, we started the Aseema Alumni Association to help our graduates pursue college degrees and find work. As a result, we are in contact with 546 alumni. Our alums also want to give back to Aseema as volunteers. We provide financial assistance to alums in need. In turn, they do 60 hours of voluntary work with us every year that they get the grants.

GIT: How does Aseema fund its activities? How has that changed over time?

Parakh: We have a staff of more than 300 teachers, social workers, counselors, support and office staff. Luckily, for the past 22 years, we managed to find funds to run our schools.

We are funded by individuals, other charitable trusts and foundations and companies. While we have some very generous individual donors, most of our

funding comes from companies. In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs have been an important source of funding.

Every year we prepare our budgets and approach our donor companies. Some give us more than the previous year and some the same. Some even discontinue, usually because the company's mandate changes to supporting disability, old age or other programs. Or they simply say, "We have funded you for three years and now we would like to support newer, smaller charities."

In April though, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our funding declined significantly. This was in part because a big, regular donor said, "Sorry, we can't give you anything this year. We'll see what we can do next year." Another reason was that all companies had cut down on their regular funding.

This made us realize that depending entirely on donations is risky. So now we would like to find alternative sources of funding, including raising funds for an endowment.

In 2003, we undertook a project with the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and the S.P. Jain Institute of Management in Mumbai. Our children did beautiful art which we put on a wide range of products. The students at Wharton and S.P. Jain recommended setting up a Product Division to produce, market and distribute these products. More importantly, we thought we could help nurture marketable, commercial skills in our students, skills that would complement the education they receive in the Aseema schools.

In 2005, we set up a Product Division. We sell the children's amazing paintings through exhibitions at leading galleries in Mumbai, such as Cymroza and the Nehru Centre, where for seven years we took part in the Harmony Show organized by Tina Ambani. Also, through a store and on our site, we sell **paintings** as well as **wallets**, **greeting cards** and other items, which display the art work.

We show what India's poorest and most vulnerable children are capable of. Yet we do not want folks to buy the paintings or products out of sympathy or pity. We want them to buy because they are works of art by remarkable children. And, when the Aseema children see the wider impact of their work, it motivates them to do better.

But running the Product Division has not been easy. Our focus is on education, and we have no great marketing skills! So far, we have been unable to hire talent, with

management and marketing skills, because we cannot pay the high salaries they command.

GIT: What is Friends of Aseema? How do you work together?

Parakh: In 2019, Friends of Aseema was founded by Christine Biancheria, a lawyer from Pittsburgh whom I met while working at the ICJ. It is registered as an **independent U.S. nonprofit**, meaning donations to it can be tax deductible. Biancheria's work has already raised sizable funds for our school programs in India. Recently, our American friends have helped fund the food we provide to the families of our students.

GIT: When the coronavirus crisis struck this year, what was the impact on Aseema and the families of the children it serves? How did you respond?

Parakh: Following the lockdown, most of the parents of our students lost their jobs. They live in homes that are barely 10x12 feet, sharing it with five to eight family members. One mother told us, "We usually plan our day, so that only some of us are here. It is so crowded now, there is no place even to sleep."

Thrice so far, through a 'Together We Can' campaign, we have provided more than 1,800 families with baskets of food and other essentials, reaching about 10,000 people on each occasion. We have also provided education kits to all the children.

In June, when schools normally re-open for a new academic year, through another campaign we supplied smartphones to our students and laptops to students in grades nine and 10. We also cover the costs for their internet access.

GIT: During the two decades that you have run Aseema, what is the biggest leadership challenge you have faced? How did you deal with it? What did it teach you?

Parakh: I have great difficulty thinking of myself as a leader. I am just doing what I enjoy best. I only hope that, besides a good school education, we can help students realize the value of love, compassion, humility, truth, patience, perseverance and loyalty.

We face the typical bureaucratic and political hurdles. Also, the official emphasis is on pushing kids to learn from textbooks and passing exams. In contrast, Aseema

encourages students to be curious and think critically. So, I waste a lot of time in government offices, lawyers' chambers and the courts.

Our biggest, and most heartbreaking, challenge though is when some people say, "Why are you giving these poor students good art paper and paints." Or, "Why do they need such good desks and chairs and books," they ask. "Just take this – it is not such good quality but it will do for them." "Why", I think to myself, "Why will it do for them and not for you or your children?"

What has kept us going is our faith and belief in the children and in ourselves. "Keep on keeping on" has been our motto. In a recent interview, one of our alums who is studying at Sophia College and preparing for the civil service exams said, "There is a difference between education and quality education. I would say that what I received at Aseema was quality education. We had very good teachers and facilities and, along with that, we had exposure to a lot of art and sports and other extracurricular activities. When you don't know where you have to go and when someone really guides you, then you get hope that you can achieve that in life. It's like you are in a family, you can say. We are so free to come and speak to our teachers, even after we have left school, and they are so very good. You know that if you are in trouble, they will come to help you out. That is something which goes beyond boundaries." She was referring to the fact that Aseema, in Sanskrit, means limitless or without boundaries.

This is what makes me keep on keeping on.

GIT: How do you define success?

Parakh: I would like to share a poem that explains it all for me:

Ithaka

When you set out for Ithaka

Ask that your way be long

Full of adventure, full of instruction.....

Have Ithaka always in your mind

Your arrival there is what you are destined for

But don't in the least hurry the journey

Better it last for years

So that when you reach the island

You are old

Rich with all you've gained on the way

Not expecting Ithaca to give you wealth

Ithaca gave you the splendid journey.

- P.F. Cavafy

Editor's Note:

Friends of Aseema is collaborating with Artrepreneur, a NYC startup that has a platform to help artists sell their work online, to launch on October 12 a global online auction for the children's art. Artrepreneur has generously agreed to pass along 100% of all auction proceeds to Friends of Aseema.

To support the auction, several celebrities, business leaders, educators and artists have agreed to donate a 15-minute online conversation with the highest bidders.

*To get involved and pre-register for the auction, please go to: **Artrepreneur**.*

***Guests Donating Time for Friends of Aseema-Atrepreneur Art Auction**

- **Danny Boyle, Academy-Award-winning director of films such as *Slumdog Millionaire*, *28 Days*, *Yesterday* and *Trainspotting***
- **Joanne Rogers, wife of the late children's television personality Fred Rogers; honorary chair of the Fred Rogers Center**

- **Dr. Shashi Tharoor, member of the Indian parliament, former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, acclaimed writer and Oxford scholar**
- **Nitin Rakesh, CEO of Mphasis, an IT services firm headquartered in Bangalore, with \$1.1 billion in revenues in fiscal year 2020**
- **Navin Valrani, CEO of Arcadia Education and CEO of engineering services at the Al Sharawi Group, a major conglomerate in Dubai**
- **Anjolie Ela Menon, India's leading contemporary artist.**
- **Amish Tripathi, author, columnist and diplomat, described as "India's Tolkien" by BBC**
- **Anita Dongre, fashion designer and founder of House of Anita Dongre, an Indian fashion house**
- **Dr. Jerry Wind, an emeritus marketing profession at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania**
- **Vanessa German, award-winning multimedia performance artist, sculptor, and poet**
- **Colonel Terry Virts, astronaut and former Commander of the International Space Station**
- **Senaka Senanayake, a contemporary Sri Lankan painter**
- **Raghava KK, a multidisciplinary artist and storyteller**
- **Tulio Milman, Opinion Editor and a Columnist with RBS Media Group, one of the largest media companies in Brazil**
- **Al Gury, Chair of the Painting Department at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia**
- **Elizabeth Grimaldi, Executive Director at Fleisher Art Memorial, the oldest community art school in the U.S.**