

ACTIVITIES REPORT

2004 - 2005

A man never stands as tall as when he kneels to help a child.

Knights of Pythagoras

Introduction

It is time, once again, to place before you our Annual Report. You may find some ideas and topics recurring, but a little overlapping is unavoidable.

In the words of a former Australian Prime Minister, Robert James Lee Hawke. "The foundation of a clever country is its education system."

In any school organisation, autonomy has the strongest influence on the overall quality of education. Newspaper reports inform us that schools in Japan enjoy considerable autonomy - they set their own fees, have a say in the prescription of syllabus and appointment of teachers. India may need a different policy - free primary education, nutritious mid-day meals, and schools where children are taught and nurtured with love and affection. Education should enable children to learn something important, exciting and practical.

Today, we are beset with myriad problems - corruption, red tape, exploitation of women, child labour, illiteracy, poverty. A lack of teaching of moral values is a cogent reason for this vicious circle of problems. Life without values is like a body without a soul.

The simplest path to enrich our nation on a permanent basis is to educate the youth. One can satisfy the hunger of the stomach by taking food. If one can remove the hunger of the mind with knowledge and of the soul with moral values, it is an enduring solution. Education is the best provision for old age.



Children on the newly installed play equipment at the Pali Chimbai Municipal School.



Education Programme

The Pali-Chimbal Municipal School

Our children - the underprivileged - look forward to attending school, with their satchels in tow, and enjoy studying with us. We have now arranged for a school bus to bring them to the Pali-Chimbal Municipal School (PCMS) that Aseema has adopted, and to reach them home, when school is over for the day.

This year we appointed an Education Officer who oversees the work of all the teachers - those at the PCMS and Aseema's Support Centre which functions from St. Joseph's Convent. The number of teachers Aseema has appointed at the PCMS this year is four - from Stds. I to IV - as well as teachers for extra-curricular activities like art, judo and gymnastics, sports and needlework.

The adoption of the PCMS is an important landmark for Aseema. By working closely with the BMC it is our endeavour to show that a public-private partnership can work effectively to provide quality and meaningful education to the most underprivileged sections of society. Our heartfelt gratitude to those donors who are assisting us in making this possible.

This year's main highlight was the Sports Day on 5 March. The grounds of the PCMS was agog with excitement from early morning. All the boys and girls were busy setting up and marking the grounds for the various events; making seating arrangements for the spectators and the parents many of whom took time off from their daily chores to witness their wards taking part. Prizes were given to all the children, irrespective of their winning or otherwise. The morning was rounded off with sumptuous snacks provided by one of our well-wishers.

It was possible to organize this event because of the work by a generous and committed donor to develop the playground - which has been renovated and play equipment installed. This makes it great fun for the children to be outdoors. The drinking water area and the toilets on the ground floor of the school have also been repaired and renovated by the donor.

The Pre-Primary Centre

The Montessori centre continues to operate in two batches - morning and afternoon. The children enjoy attending, and are learning well under the able guidance of our trained and dedicated Montessori teachers with the help of excellent Montessori apparatus and other teaching aids.

The Balwadi, started in July 2004 to cope with the increasing number of children enrolling at Aseema, also operates in two batches - Junior and Senior - and is run on Montessori lines. It was possible to obtain Montessori apparatus for the Balwadi thanks to one of Aseema's very generous donors.

The Support and Activity Centres

Our Support Centre caters to the older children, who are helped with their studies, which seem to be getting difficult day-by-day, as the children move ahead year after year. The Activity Centre caters mainly to girls in their teens, who produce simple and yet beautiful and useful pieces of needle-work.

Only a few weeks ago one of our older boys passed his Std. X Board Exam from the NIOS and has now secured admission for Std. XII. He is Aseema's first student to have completed school, the rest of our children being much younger, and we are very proud of his success.

Extra-curricular Activities

Besides studies, our children get their well-deserved diversion in co-curricular activities - yoga, judo & gymnastics, singing, drama, music and sports. Judo demonstrations are performed with utmost enthusiasm. At the slightest hint, the young boys and girls are ready with their mattresses, and demonstrations start without the least hesitation. Yoga has calmed the young, stormy minds which in turn helps them in their studies. We will soon be resuming computer training because the world is moving towards Information Technology and we do not want our children to lag behind. But we are also wary of what an anonymous person has said :

I like my new telephone,
My computer works just fine,
My calculator is perfect, but
Lord, I miss my mind !

All co-curricular activities help in the building up of values, informality, openness, and bring about a cohesion among students and their teachers.

We consider it our duty to teach under-privileged children to read and write, and to attend to their basic needs. We do not wish to make an excuse of poverty for the omission. Needless to add, we would not be able to do our mite without the help, support, and encouragement which we receive from all our funders, donors, teachers, volunteers and members of our staff who do their utmost for Aseema. To all of you our heartfelt gratitude.

The activities at Aseema continue as always unabated. If we were to list all of them here, this Report would create a pressure on your time and would become quite lengthy ! Hence, we are mentioning only some of the highlights.

Celebrations, Field Trips and Outings

Celebrations are always looked forward to - birthdays, and festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali, Christmas, Ids, and national days like Republic Day and Independence Day. Considerations of caste, creed, religion and any other barriers are ignored.

A very enjoyable outing was the three day picnic-cum-study trip to Lonavla during the Diwali vacation last year. The children look forward to such trips, because they seldom get an opportunity to do so on their own or with their parents. A hundred children accompanied by some parents and teachers went in two buses and stayed at the beautiful St. Stanislaus Villa, set among woods. Staying overnight was an experience which they are not likely to forget. They visited places of interest like the Walvan and Bushi Dams, Karla Caves and a Poultry Farm. Their return to Mumbai was heartbreaking. But they had to, there being no alternative.

A Study trip was arranged to the Prince of Wales Museum, Gateway of India, Hanging Gardens, Nehru Centre and Nehru Planetarium. A handwriting competition was organized by Hotel Taj Land's End, Bandra for the students of the Pali - Chimbai Municipal School.

A Birthday party sponsored by Kripa Foundation, Bandra, was enjoyed by the children of the Activity and Support Centres. Reef Watch India, together with the Indian Navy, organized an Ocean Clean up Camp in which the children from the Activity and Support Centres took part. One of our budding artists, Sunitha Gaddam won a drawing competition which was held on that occasion. The tiny tots at the Balwadi were invited for a Christmas party to Peridot Nursery. These little children also visited Juhu Beach as part of their learning activity on 'transport'. The Parle Mahila Sangh invited the Pre-primary children for a puppet show which they watched with great interest.

The children were invited to film screenings and plays by some of our well-wishers, and in the course of the year saw Spiderman; "Baaza"- a documentary film on a 10-year old boy and the changes that occur in his life when he leaves his village to live in the city; "Dark Chambers" a Science Fiction Film; "Gandhi"- a ballet; the Annual Play organised by the Sophia teacher training college; "Swaranandwan"- an orchestra by physically challenged children; a Puppet Show at the Mumbai Mela Festival; "Hope"- a concert in aid of the Tsunami victims and the annual Milan Mela organized by the Peridot Nursery.

We consider it essential that our children are also given an exposure to the big, wide world outside of their school walls and therefore participate in as many events as possible.

Fund Raiser

In September last year, Aseema, for the first time, organized a musical evening to raise funds. The show, "Night of a Thousand Stars" under the able stewardship of Felix Flor, was a grand success, considering the full house at St. Andrew's Auditorium in Bandra. Mr. Flor's team of excellent singers, musicians and dancers entertained the audience which was also delighted to see our children on stage, when they presented a brief choral item. The funds generated will help Aseema to continue to provide quality education to street children and also reach out to more underprivileged children.

Parent-Teacher Meetings and Training

Parent-teacher meetings continue to be held regularly. A training programme on teamwork, time management and efficient work ethics was organized for our helpers, many of whom are parents of our children.

A session on drug awareness and the ill-effects of narcotic drugs for all parents and children was conducted by Dr.Jyoti Badakare of the Tata Memorial Hospital.

International Women's Day on 8 March was celebrated by Hotel Taj Land's End, Bandra, when some of our children's mothers were invited for a simple cookery demonstration by their well-trained staff and chefs.

A meeting was held with all parents who were eager to improve their earning prospects. We are considering conducting a training on "Housekeeping" for those who are interested.

Training Programmes

We had organized a training programme for all our teachers and office staff which was conducted by a resource person from the Continuing Education and Training Institute. The programme was on Interpersonal and Communication skills and all the participants found it to be extremely interesting and useful and have asked for more such programmes to be conducted.

A workshop organised by Ideosync on 'Growing Up' was also attended by two of our teachers.

Health and Hygiene

Health camps are conducted at regular intervals. We have a paediatrician who attends to the children, prescribes treatment, which is carried out with the help of our teachers, who instruct the parents on giving the requisite medication. Eye check-ups and dental camps are another regular feature.

Thanks to a generous donor, a nutritious mid-day meal is provided to all the children at PCMS and dinner to those at the Support and Activity Centres.

With the generous support of organizations like the Rotary Clubs, Lodge Freedom, Peridot Nursery, among others, provision of raincoats, footwear, slumber kits, and other school paraphernalia carries on.

Product Division & Exhibitions

Aseema's exhibition routine continued unabated. We were invited by banks, schools and hotels to display and sell our products, which have become quite popular and which are made from our children's art. Our customers appreciate the beautiful designs and quality of our products which we have maintained over the years.

For the third consecutive year the students of the Wharton Business School and the S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research studied the product initiative of Aseema and have taken the project forward. Pursuant to their recommendations, we have decided to launch a new web page with an e-commerce component. This will enable us to sell our products online to customers all over India, the USA and Europe.

The Harmony Show - an annual feature - ensures Aseema's presence. The gracious Mrs. Tina Ambani, makes it a point to give us a platform at this Show. Our children's paintings and products are greatly appreciated by both artists and visitors and this year the focus was on tribal art in view of our proposed Rural Education Centre for tribal children in Igatpuri.

The exhibitions and sales we have taken part in during the year are as follows:

2004 :

- 19-20 January : World Social Forum, Goregaon
- 2-11 April : Harmony Show, Nehru Centre, Worli
- 25 July : Ex-Students Association's Monsoon Mela, St.Joesph's Convent, Bandra
- 31 July - : St. Andrew's Church, Bandra
- 1 August
- 13 August : India Day Celebrations organised by Lintas at Express Towers and Phoenix Mills.
- 19-22 August : Culture Collection organised by Introductions Exhibitions & Fairs.
- 25 September : St. Andrew's Auditorium, Bandra.
- 11-12 October : Helping Hands exhibition organised by HSBC at their Bandra and Fountain branches
- 15-16 October : New Work Centre for Women organised by Women's Empowerment NGO
- 26 October : Indian Merchants' Chamber, Ladies Wing
- 31 October : Ecole Mondiale
- 4 November : "Spread a Smile" exhibition organized by Pradhan Dental Centre, Juhu.
- 5 November : Festival of Nations organised by the American School of Bombay
- 5 November : Rain Restaurant, Juhu
- 17 November : Holiday Charity Mela organised by The American Women's Club of Bombay, J W Marriott Hotel
- 4 December : Indus International
- 12 December : St. Andrews Womens Cell

15 December : Taj Lands End

17-18 December : The Christmas Bazaar, Bandra Gym

2005 :

14-18 January : Cache Art Gallery, Bandra

21-22 January : "Synergy 2005" organized by St. Francis Institute of Management

5 February : Time and Talents Club, Colaba

15 February : Concern India, Ongoing NGO Mela

17 February : Inner Wheel Club of Bombay West

19 February : American School of Bombay

23 March : Tata Institute of Social Sciences

Film on Child Rights

Our animated film on Child Rights continued to win several international awards viz., The Seagate Technical Awards for Excellence in Digital Technology for Films and Television - Best 2D Animation at Broadcast India 2003, Mumbai, India in October 2003; Grand Jury Prize for Best Animated Film at The New York International Independent Film and Video Festival, New York, in November 2003; Golden Conch for Best Animated Film at Mumbai International Film Festival, in February 2004; BAF Trophy for Best Animation in a Short Film at FICCI Frames BAF, Mumbai, in March 2004; UNICEF Campania Regiona Prize at Cartoons On the Bay, Positano, Italy in April 2004; Festival Award for Best Animation at Through her Eyes: Women of Color Film Festival, New York, in June 2004; The Alan Fortunoff Foundation Humanitarian Film Award at the Long Island Film Expo, Long Island, USA in July 2004 and ASIFA-India's 'Award of Excellence 2004' at ASIFA India Animation Day Celebrations, Mumbai, in October 2004.

We sincerely feel that this film should be shown in all schools and colleges as well as in movie theatres to make more people aware of children's rights, particularly the right to education.

At the time of writing this report, we have received the news that "Raju & I", produced by Aseema, has bagged the National Award for the Best Animation Film at the recently announced 52nd National Film Awards.

Achievements

Our Chairperson was conferred an award by Airtel and the Continuing Education Training Centre at the "Working Women's Forum for Building Partnerships" on the occasion of Women's Day on 8 March 2005 for her "exceptional contribution to the upliftment of street children".

In May 2005 the International Centre for Ethnographic Studies Published a book "Inside Mumbai - Children of the Balwadi - Changing the Face of Education." The author, Asha Saraswat, writing about all the persons she has met in the course of her visits to over twenty balwadi's says, "The atmosphere is very informal and easy at Aseema. Among all the teachers I have come across, Nicola is the most charismatic. Her love for the children oozes out of her every action." She concludes the chapter on Aseema with, "Aseema has become a model for changing the face of education in Mumbai".

Set-back

In December 2004, a major fire in the community where our children live, disrupted their lives totally. They lost everything they possessed, their homes being reduced to ashes. One of our brightest students, a girl of 12, came pain-stricken to her teacher the day after the fire and said, "what am I going to do teacher, all my books are gone !" The teacher almost wept when she realized that this young girl lost not only her books but everything she possessed, and did not have even another dress to change into.

With help from our supporters who donated in cash and kind, we were able to help the families of our children to some extent. A very thoughtful principal of a neighbouring school opened her doors to give the children a safe shelter at night. What the families needed most - someone to talk to and empathise with - was provided by Aseema's teachers, social worker and volunteers who went day after day to the devastated site till some normalcy was restored.

Future Plans and Conclusion

Much work still remains, and much will remain. Our proposed Rural Education Project at Igatpuri is due to begin very soon and we are looking forward to all the help we can get to provide quality education to the tribal children of this remote rural area.

We look to the years ahead with confidence. In the end, it is only hard work and dedication coupled with the warm-hearted support of our donors and funders, which will witness Aseema marching along. Our gratitude to you, our teachers, volunteers and all members of the staff for their unstinted support which sustains us and keeps us going at all times.

