



An Aseema Story, Volume 1

How to Feed 9,900 Starving People While Stuck at Home

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the planet and country after country shut down to stem the viral tide, millions found themselves, in an instant, out of work, out of money and facing hunger. For the children served by the Aseema Charitable Trust, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that provides high-quality education through schools enrolling thousands of impoverished children in Mumbai's slums and a remote tribal region, the threat of starvation was real.

Aseema immediately moved to intervene, but just how to do this was not obvious. Enter



Asmita Kakade

Asmita Kakade, whose ingenuity combined with the rush of help from donors and Aseema's Community Work Cell, to stand between nearly 10,000 people and the suffering severe hunger inflicts.

On March 25th, India's government issued a strict lockdown order to combat the spread of COVID-19. With just four hours' notice, Indians entered a months-long confinement to their homes, able to leave only to seek increasingly scarce essentials. Asmita found herself trapped in her second-floor apartment in Mumbai's Santacruz area.

In this homebound existence, Asmita, 46 and a single parent, has had to tend to her ailing father and shop, cook and clean for him, herself and her son while also caring for the family's pets. She has only been able to leave for the ill-provisioned store across the street. And yet, ducking off when possible to the relative quiet of her bedroom, armed with a phone and a computer, Asmita has re-tooled herself from a designer to a logistics expert working to feed masses under a hailstorm of obstacles.

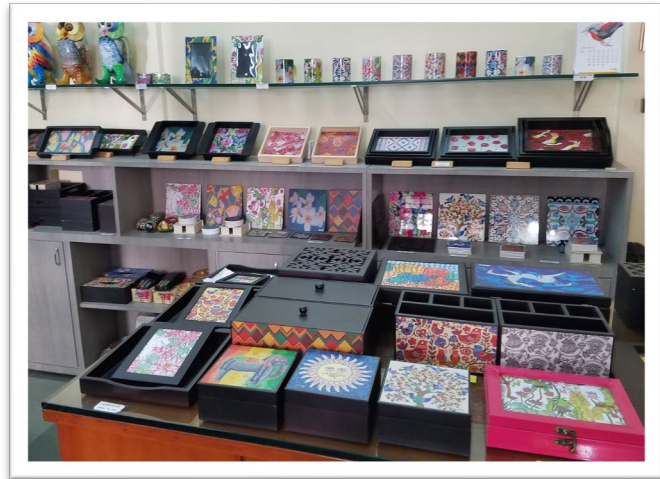


Asmita and Her Friend "Rock"

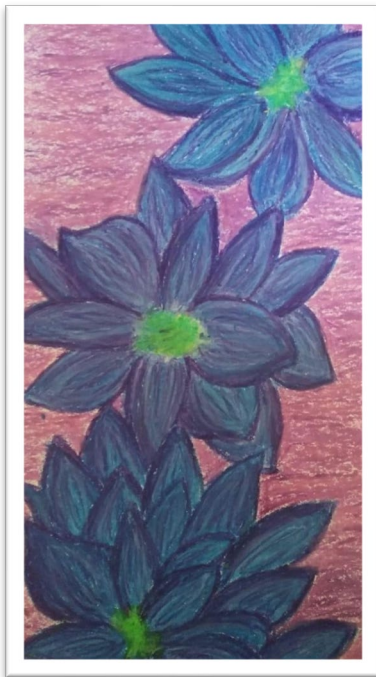
Life Before COVID-19: Design and Art for Mumbai's Impactful NGO

In the decade before the pandemic struck, Asmita played a critical fundraising role for Aseema by helping its Products Division. There, she applied her design talent to create products like trays and tote bags adorned with Aseema students' lively artwork, with proceeds from sales supporting the NGO's mission.

Asmita's day had structure. During her autorickshaw commute each morning, she responded to the day's barrage of emails so she could hit the ground running once she arrived at work. Among a typical day's challenges were sourcing and negotiating with manufacturers to make the products she designed. Her design satisfaction was far outmatched by witnessing the children's thrill at seeing their art put to use, invariably sparking "them to ... do more quality art."



Display of Aseema Products



Asmita's "Scribbling"

As a child, Asmita dreamed of becoming a doctor or designer. Although she earned a bachelor's in zoology followed by post-graduate studies in computer science, art remained a serious passion, and even today she carves out moments to sketch (what she calls "scribbling"). To her, life without art is like "life without water."

Like most of Aseema's long-time staff, Asmita's innate altruism led to the recognition that she was "not meant for corporate jobs." In 2011, she submitted a resume to Aseema's Chairperson, Dilbur Parakh, the former lawyer and humanitarian dynamo whose vision took Aseema from an unfunded idea in 1995 to an overwhelmingly successful NGO. Aseema's severely underprivileged children routinely outperform their private school counterparts by significant margins on national exams.



Aseema Students Prior to Covid-19

Asmita saw in her future boss a role model and became very “inspired by a lot of women – women who can make things happen, change their lives, create a difference, change their society, speak for others, take risks, overcome challenges.” As a single parent and NGO stalwart, Asmita fits the bill herself. But she could not have guessed what challenges she would face as 2020 rolled around.

The Pivot to Food-Distribution and Logistics Expert

It happened in the blink of an eye. Aseema’s destitute children depend on their schools for meals. As Asmita explains, “The children come from really economically challenged backgrounds, where parents are migrants who focus on survival.” Parents often engage in low-wage day labor to scrape by on a family income of \$2 per day. When COVID struck, they were suddenly confined to their meager homes with no means of purchasing food.

Taking a lead role, Asmita gave herself a crash course in how to find food and distribute it in the eerie, police-patrolled quiet of the so-called Maximum City. And now, starting on May 17, she’s taking it from the top with a second round of distribution. Here is how she described the process.

Q: What do you find most challenging about your current role?

A: Finding vendors who can help us fill our hampers. There are times when vendors do not have sufficient stock and when that happens, we have to think of other options.

Q: How much did Aseema distribute during the first half of the lockdown?

A: Aseema has distributed 1,808 ration kits for the benefit of 9,986 people.

Q: What challenges did you face during the initial distribution?

A: There have been many. Initially, we reached out to vendors we’ve used in the past, but being located in the main market area, they were closed down for safety reasons.

We had to think quickly and creatively. We began calling our friends and families, asking them if they knew of any stores that might have stock on hand.

Eventually, we found five vendors, though we never met any of them other than talking to them via phone. There was a lot of trust on everyone's part, and we're very appreciative of their support.

Q: How were the hampers distributed?

A: Social distancing rules made that process challenging as well. Aseema's Community Work Cell and School Management Committee members worked tirelessly to contact parents and encourage them to come to distribution center sites to pick up their hampers.

Q: This work is obviously outside your area of expertise, but you've done it well! How do you feel about it?

A: When we managed to distribute the first five hampers, I received photos of the families and saw how happy they were to receive the food and soap. I felt that my efforts really made a difference and after that, there was no turning back.

Q: And you managed to do all of this from home?

A: Yes! I was constantly on Google in search of new vendors. Then on the phone talking to vendors, giving them assurance and explaining our hamper distribution drive.



Tribal Distribution

Q: What was the day-to-day distribution like?

A: It involved a lot of communication and steps. For example, I called vendors and confirmed the availability of provisions based on the number of families that were receiving food the next day. I also discussed timing, as each day's situation was unique.

There were also calls to be made to the Aseema parents before distribution started for the day to answer questions and confirm pickup times.

School Management Committee members were present with the vendor at each distribution site in order to confirm which families collected provisions – and also to snap and share photos. And parents weren't left out of the process. Once they were home, they were asked to check the hamper items they received and call the social worker with feedback.

Finally, at the end of the day, social workers from each site shared with us distribution details of the families who received provisions that day.

Q: Did the process get smoother the longer you did it?

A: Yes. We started distributing to five to 10 families per day. Now we're able to distribute to 125-150 per day.

Q: To what do you attribute this successful and unprecedented outreach?

A: Our Chairperson, Ms. Dilbur Parakh, has encouraged us and guided us at every point. She was instrumental in ensuring that payment to our vendors was prompt, which instilled confidence. And of course, our Donor team is working so hard to encourage and collect donations from supporters, so this work can continue.



Friends of Aseema applauds Asmita's spirit and the Herculean efforts of Aseema's social workers and other staff.

Aseema's relentless and selfless kindness makes us proud to work to support them.



When I was a boy, and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." – Fred Rogers