



An Aseema Story, Volume 2

“I always love to help”

An Aseema Alumnus Gives Back

Nargis Dutt was one of India’s most famous actresses and a charity supporter. She was best known for the 1957 film *Mother India*, where she portrayed a mother striving to remain principled in the face of poverty and mistreatment. The film was a reply to a 1920s book with the same title, written in the U.S., which blatantly peddled anti-Indian stereotypes.

After her death in 1981, the Bombay authorities named a road after Dutt in the the city's Bandra district. “Nagar” means town or enclave, and over time, the nearby slum communities became known as Nargis Dutt Nagar. An Indian photographer once remarked that the film star must writhe in her grave over the neighborhoods bearing her name.

Then again, maybe not.

Meeti Kapadia, of Aseema Charitable Trust’s donor relations team, recently said of the slums: “I know bad things happen in there, but good things happen in there, too.”



*Mother India, an iconic Indian film*



*Shahnawaz Rashid Shaikh*

This is a story of one of those good things ...

**Shahnawaz Rashid Shaikh**, now 22, grew up in Nargis Dutt Nagar in a tiny room with his mother, father and seven siblings. When Shahnawaz was six, his mother Akhtari made a move that forever altered the trajectory of his life and that of his four-year-old sister Shabanaz. Their mother had learned of Aseema’s schools through the family of a neighborhood boy who studied there. Wanting that for her own children, she took Shahnawaz and his little sister for admission.

Aseema is a nongovernmental organization formed in 1995 that provides high-quality education for thousands of impoverished children from Mumbai slums, as well as a remote tribal region in Igatpuri northeast of Mumbai.

Shortly after enrolling Shahnawaz and his sister, their mother died, and before they finished school, the children lost their father. The siblings did their best to pull together. Shahnawaz recalls that his elder sister Kehkasha “nourished us from the time our parents were no more, and my elder brother took the place of my father and worked really hard to fulfill our needs.”

Shahnawaz does not really remember life before Aseema, but he vividly recalls starting at the Pali-Chimbai school: “My first day at Aseema was awesome. We came to know our class teacher Massarat Ma’am, a very nice person. She used to teach us with care and love,” and worked there all throughout his years at Aseema.

Shahnawaz thrived. He showed leadership skills at an early age and identifies his happiest moment as being selected class leader.

Twice, the entire student body elected him to the coveted role of Head Boy, a position he won at two different Aseema schools.

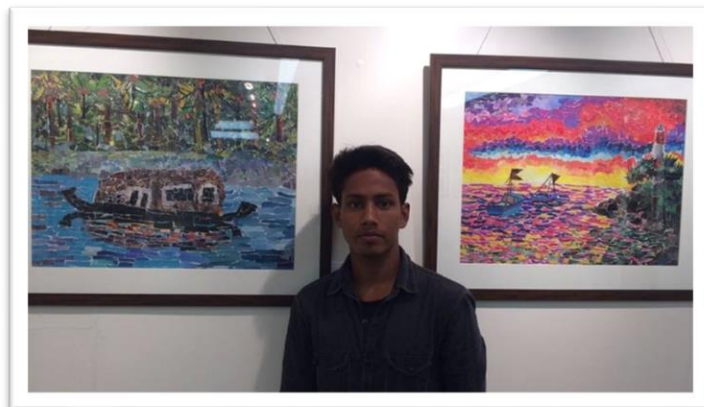


*Shahnawaz as Head Boy*

### **A Passion for Art**

Aseema provides excellent academics, with instruction in English, and features a robust program that includes art, dance and sports. As a child, Shahnawaz possessed a strong imagination, and Aseema’s broad curriculum permitted him to discover his passion for art. “Art,” he explains, “allows me to make my imagination turn real.”

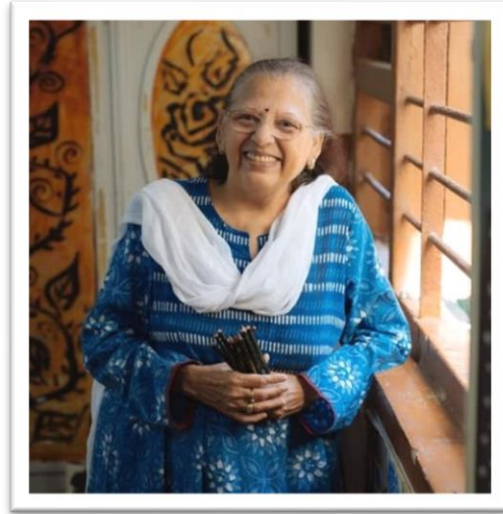
At Aseema, art teacher Varsha Trivedi, a top graduate from India’s prestigious Sir J.J. School of Art, ignited Shahnawaz’s creativity. Under her guidance, the children were exposed to artists from around the world. Shahnawaz’s favorite was Salvador Dali. Dali showed him an alternative way to portray reality: “Dali, sir, in



*Shahnawaz as an Aseema student at an art exhibit*

one of his paintings, created a melting clock. He changed the state (solid to liquid) of the clock. This was something epic. Wow, I just love it!”

Today, Shahnawaz is studying commercial art at the J.K. Knowledge Centre of Art and Design, with two more years until he completes his degree. Aseema teachers, especially Varsha, the art program’s driving force, continue to support him, to his overwhelming gratitude. He describes Varsha as “the most important person in my life who always treats me like her child.” His sister Shabanaz, who now attends the Sophia College for Women in Mumbai, affirmed the crucial support system that Aseema’s teachers still provide.



*Beloved art teacher Varsha Trivedi*

For her part, Varsha describes Shahnawaz as a “hardworking, thinking artist, wanting to go far.” He was, she says, “special and needed to go to art college” because his work was anything but ordinary; it was done with “great sensitivity.”



*Left: Nature study by Shahnawaz*

*Above: Collage by Shahnawaz*

*Both courtesy of Varsha Trivedi*



## Reading, Writing, Arithmetic — And Character

Aseema teachers teach, of course, but they also model love and altruism. Shahnawaz himself illustrates the teachers' success. Although his older brother Mojahid worked to provide for Shahnawaz and his siblings, food was scarce. Aseema met the siblings' need for sustenance because Aseema provides meals to all of its students, which played a critical role for Shahnawaz.

When Covid-19 necessitated an extended stay-at-home lockdown, Aseema's students lost access to their daily school lunches, and their parents and family members were unable to work day-labor jobs for even meager income. Reacting quickly, Aseema rushed in, with help from Friends of Aseema, to raise funds to distribute food to the children and their families, ultimately reaching more than 9,980 people.



*Shahnawaz on Aseema's food program*

When Shahnawaz received a call from an Aseema teacher looking for help with this massive undertaking, he jumped at the chance. "I always love to help," he says. Understanding the experience of food scarcity, Shahnawaz recognized the gratitude on families' faces, as he helped pass out ration kits.



*Above: Shahnawaz with Covid-19 food relief*

*Right: An Aseema family with their food ration kit*



### **Giving and Giving Back**

Shahnawaz is steadfast that he will help any time the teachers ask: “Whenever I get a chance, I never miss it, and I will always do it. I go there whenever [a teacher] texts me to help.”

Shahnawaz still resides in Nargis Dutt Nagar while studying, and his presence there demonstrates the folly of blanket judgments of entire communities. He is living proof that caring gives rise to caring and that a broader vision of the human family is possible. He credits Aseema for helping him transform his life.

*“I want to thank Aseema for everything they have done for me, and I am ready to help Aseema in every possible way.*

*Lots of love, your child,  
Shahnawaz Shaikh.”*



*Shahnawaz today, drawing*