



An Aseema Story, Volume 3

“The Gold Mine”

The Whirlwind Teacher Behind Aseema’s Stunning Art Program

“I exist.”

This, Varsha Trivedi, explains, is one of the messages we send when we create art. Varsha is head of the art program at the Aseema Charitable Trust, where she has spent 19 years teaching art to street and slum children in Mumbai, India – without taking one rupee for her work.



Varsha Teaching at Aseema



*Varsha Trivedi Today,
Portrait in Oil by Dillon Samuelson*

On television and the silver screen, westerners see these children in India crowding together around taxis and pedestrians, hands held out. The sprawling slums are home to nearly 65% of Mumbai’s 20 million residents. Author Lynne Twist, in *The Soul of Money*, describes her first visit to the city in a manner familiar in western bestsellers, noting how “you literally have to walk over people who are living in the streets.” Her Mumbai guide, she writes, employs a coping mechanism whereby “to function he needed to not see those people; not engage them and not even acknowledge that they were there.” The guide had to “develop a certain kind of blindness in his everyday encounter with the overwhelming poverty in the streets.”

But this blindness, Varsha Trivedi could tell you, obscures a gold mine of human talent, where each student’s beautiful art attests, “I exist.”

The Little Girl at the Piano and A Retirement Lost

Varsha’s interest in art began as a child. Her parents noticed that when left to her own means, all she did was paint. She explains her destiny as an artist very simply: “I can’t do anything else.”

Varsha attended one of India's oldest and best art institutions, Mumbai's Sir JJ School of Art, founded in 1857. India's Parsi community is famously philanthropic, and the school was named after the great Parsi Indian Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, a self-made merchant whose parents both died when he was 16. He began his career buying and selling empty bottles. His understanding of hardship helped spur him to give back to society by financing schools, hospitals, reservoirs, bridges and public works in the city.

In school, Varsha's circle of friends included a fellow student, Arnavaz Parakh, another Parsi Indian. Arnavaz sometimes brought Varsha home to socialize. During some of these visits, the circle of friends coaxed Arnavaz's much younger sister Dilbur to play the piano for them. Little did Varsha know the impact the girl at the piano would one day have on Varsha's career.

In Varsha's fifth and graduating year at Sir JJ School of Art, she was surprised when a panel of esteemed artists judged the annual art competition for students in the final years of study and awarded her the school's most coveted prize – the Gold Medal. Today, Varsha admits with a wave of the hand, "I lost the Gold Medal somewhere." There was another painting that Varsha wishes she had won it for anyway.

Varsha went on to work in the private sector for 20 years. She gave private lessons and taught art for 14 of those 20 years in the same private school that her son attended, while her husband, Dr. Prakash Trivedi, worked (and still works) in polymer chemistry. It was after these two decades that she decided to retire completely. As she phrases it, "I had put up my feet."

But the little pianist was now all grown up and had other plans for Varsha.

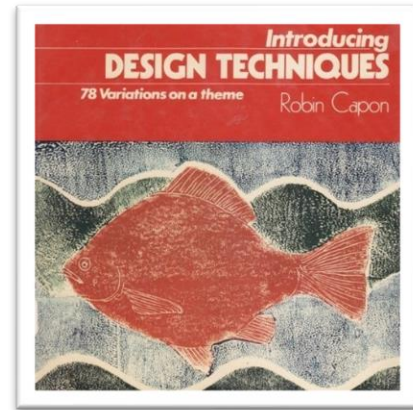
Dilbur Parakh had become a human rights lawyer, but in 1995, she gave up her prestigious job in the international community in Geneva, Switzerland, to come home to Mumbai and found the Aseema Charitable Trust. Dilbur was determined to help educate some of the city's poorest children, and she wanted an art teacher. Dilbur's sister reminded her of the one person most suited to the job. By 1997, the first small class was ready to go, and Dilbur's single-minded, selfless devotion was "very persuasive," says Varsha. Varsha's dreams of retirement then went the way of her Gold Medal.



Varsha's Personal Gold Medal Painting

78 Variations on a Fish: A World of Intrigue

In 1972, Robin Capon, originally of Wrotham, England, population 1,800, wrote a book called *Introducing Design Techniques: 78 Variations on a Theme*. The little book shows black-and-white panels of ways to portray a fish using limited materials. Varsha's husband Prakash, while visiting a bookshop abroad, somehow spotted the unassuming book, which then made its way to Mumbai to become Varsha's self-proclaimed "Bible" for teaching art at Aseema.



Varsha's Teaching Treasure



Varsha in the Early Years with Student Ramesh Ghayal, a "Leonardo" Who Works With Aseema Today

Varsha's methodology reveals that like many other Aseema teachers, she is anything but ordinary. Teaching poor children, she points out, requires an open mind and heart. Varsha quickly discovered that "these children could make art just as well as any other children." The differences lay in the children's life experiences. Some Aseema students have never seen a fish, which are expensive to buy, so Varsha introduced Aboriginal art from Australia, which shows fish from the inside, providing a springboard to lessons on natural history. Varsha captivated the students with stories of how the images of fish were painted onto rocks to serve as signals that an

area was rich for fishing. The children learned to make the basic shape of the fish, then add detail, plumbing the depths of the fish with each addition. How does the fish breathe? What are the gills for? What does the tail do? How does the fish move? How does the fish see underwater?

Varsha sought to "stimulate their minds in every way possible." She took a group of students to see the Disney movie *Finding Nemo* and another to an aquarium. Because the children's lives are marked by deprivation, when teaching them, you are "teaching art, but you gather all you can and tell them as much as you can." That includes passing on "life lessons through art. Whenever there is a possibility, you give that."



Student Mural Work

Of Art, Fairness and Perseverance

Varsha designed her lessons for maximum impact. Varsha describes how in making room for displays and work areas, sometimes the benches on which the children sat were slowly moved further and further back. This meant the children in the back row became crowded, with too little space for comfort. She told the children, “You have to fight for your rights.” But not by just any method: “You don’t pressure anybody, but don’t take from them either.” Instead, Varsha had the children rotate their seating arrangements, so that everyone got to feel what it was like to sit in the back.

In a workshop that alumni could attend, Varsha highlighted the style of Henri Matisse’s later years, in which he used paper cutouts to make images. Matisse worked heavily in this style after undergoing disabling surgery for abdominal cancer that impaired his ability to sculpt and paint more traditionally. He clutched scissors and created art from construction paper. Varsha chose this period in Matisse’s work so she could teach the children “the value of life. If you cannot paint with your hands, you paint with your mouth. You find a new way. Out of his sickness, Matisse made craft legitimate. He found a new way.” In other words, she instructed the class: “You don’t give up!”



Children in Art Class at Aseema



“Violin,” by Sunitha Gaddam at Age 21

For the Matisse class, Varsha chose musical instruments as a theme and arrayed photos of famous musicians with their instruments all around the room. A live musician played. One student in the room was Sunitha Gaddam, one of Aseema’s earliest graduates, who experienced violin music in that workshop for the first time at the age of 21. Sunitha’s work focused on that violin, which she made black so that it rose to prominence in her piece.

Varsha used the lesson to discuss the interplay of positives and negatives in imagery and life. She made sure the children never threw out their leftovers from an art project, saying, “Your negative is somebody’s positive.” The children were instructed to put all of

the materials that some might consider scraps into a bin, which Varsha labeled “The Gold Mine.”

Wings

Sunitha grew up in the infamous Bandra Reclamation slum, which some would likely consider a negative in the world where, as author Lynne Twist says, you have to “walk over people who are living in the streets.” Ignoring the slums does not make them less real. As Artist John Gardner once said, “Art, of course, is a way of thinking, a way of mining reality.”

Sunitha learned art at Aseema and remains an artist and art lover. She now has a bachelor’s degree in Business Management Studies and an MBA. She has been working for many years in Bangalore as a senior human resources executive at Wipro Technologies, an India-based multinational software and technology company. Her gratitude to Varsha remains imprinted in her very being.



Street Living in the Bandra Reclamation



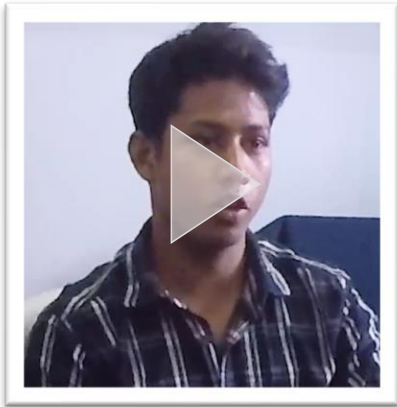
Sunitha Gaddam, MBA

“I’m so grateful to her for teaching us art and recognizing and helping us explore our talent and for giving it wings. I am and will always be grateful to her for supporting me and my brother, for helping us with education and for having always been kind to us so we could become what we are today.”

- Sunitha Gaddam

Varsha is famous among the alumni as an ongoing source of support.

Varsha contrasts her time in private schools by emphasizing that everything at Aseema comes from the heart. In part, she attributes this to the leadership of Dilbur Parakh, who remains Aseema's chairperson. Varsha readily admits that "if it weren't for Dilbur, I wouldn't be here." Still working, Varsha confesses: "I was happy teaching, and I am happy today. You have to put in everything."



To Varsha Teacher:

"I have all the fondest memories of you teaching us art with so much enthusiasm and love."

- Sunitha Gaddam

Click on image to hear more alumni commentary on Aseema teachers and their ongoing support

Aseema is part of the Room 13 movement, begun in Scotland, and which encourages an exchange of ideas between teacher and student. In keeping with this philosophy, Varsha says, "My favorite moments were when students surprised me by showing me something new, and I could say, 'You have become my teacher.'"

- Varsha Trivedi

Varsha Trivedi on the Tree of Life: "The Tree of Life is a form adapted by all cultures, in different times, in different materials, but for one reason. It represents life. My favorite form."

