



An Aseema Story, Volume 4

“School? Give Us Water.” Pioneering Tribal Education

India is home to more than 200 tribes of indigenous people, making up about 8.6% of the population or more than 104 million people. This means there are more tribal people there than the whole population of Germany or the United Kingdom. When India gained independence 75 years ago, its new constitution built in protections for the tribal people, whose oppression was exacerbated under British rule. However, words alone do not create realities, and regulations can be formidable or even impenetrable to navigate.

In this sense, tribal life is not so different from that of Native Americans. In the U.S., Native Americans suffer the highest poverty and unemployment rates and generally occupy the bottom tier of health and mortality measures.

In India, the tribes are marginalized from mainstream society, both economically and geographically, living in forest and mountain areas. In 2013, a government ministry attempting to report on tribal health faced a lack of information because tribal people are marginalized even in data collection.

As the government ministry report described it, in the minds of mainstream India, tribals are “those semi-naked wild people who live somewhere in the forests and mountains, and who sometimes appear in the news because their children are malnourished.” Mumbai tribal scholar Indra Munshi once characterized them as “the nowhere people.”

For instance, while they are guaranteed a certain number of seats in higher education, they can rarely use this benefit due to a lack of

education in their earlier years and the need to focus on daily survival.

Tribal people are sometimes called the “Adivasis,” which means original inhabitants. They are twice as likely as the average Indian to live in abject poverty, and under 2% obtain higher education. Less than 10% have access to safe drinking water—which is why, when Aseema’s chairperson first began talking to tribal people around the town of Igatpuri about education, they said, “School? Give us water.”



Using Scarce Water

Igatpuri is a town of about 30,000 inhabitants northeast of Mumbai.

It is surrounded by nine hamlets spread out across the surrounding hills where the people of the Thakar tribe reside.



Aseema Chairperson Dilbur Parakh Explains Tribal Wear

An Aseema door-to-door survey revealed lives of extreme deprivation, with 80% of the inhabitants earning less than 5,000 rupees or about \$80 per month for their families.

Water scarcity impairs farming, one of the few means of earning and one which brings in little to begin with. Therefore, most residents try to find work on a day-to-day basis as daily wage laborers.



Take a Short Tour of Village Life Here.

In the early 2000s, Dilbur Parakh, Aseema's chairperson, came to Igatpuri and grew determined to help the struggling tribal people. However, this soft-spoken, fiercely intelligent, middle-aged woman hit a wall of distrust more fortified than the one she had first encountered in Mumbai's slums. Centuries of exploitation and predatory practices had left the tribals suspicious of

outsiders with offers of help. Author Indra Munshi in her book *Adivasi Life Stories* reported the illuminating warning of a tribal man in another region near Mumbai: "Don't ask for water. They will take your land to build a dam that will provide water for some other area."

The unusually persistent Dilbur decided to use the same technique she had in Mumbai to slowly gain the trust of slum dwellers: patient presence in the region and the nurturing of relationships. The persistence went something like this ...

"How can I get my clothes to dry?"

Dilbur asked herself. It was a fair question for this former lawyer to ask in monsoon season in Igatpuri. Seattle, known in the U.S. for its rainfall, averages about 37 inches yearly. In contrast, Mumbai and its environs get doused with twice that amount, mainly concentrated between June and September.

A fan could have helped, but in Igatpuri, Dilbur could expect daily power outages lasting anywhere from three to nine hours.



Village Life in Awalkheda

Navigating the tribal communities was itself a challenge. In the dry months of the year, the villages transformed into endless rolling hills of desiccated grass. The road from town ended near the tribal villages.

For a time, a rickshaw would ply the path uphill where the road ended below the outlying village of Awalkheda. Arrival often depended on a wing and prayer as the rickshaw tended to break down en route, stranding the passengers already spilling out of its overcrowded bench.

During the monsoons, the rains turned the area lush and green, but the beauty had a tradeoff: the paths, when not wholly impassable, left the lanky, 5-foot-8 Dilbur only one option: wading in mud through water up to her waist.

Two retreat centers allowed Dilbur and her colleagues to stay in their simple, clean accommodations. Nonetheless, recalled Dilbur, while the surroundings were lovely, “even the mattress felt damp and soggy.” The experience was memorable: “It was very

difficult to wash clothes as nothing would dry—even a handkerchief, sometimes for over a week!” But if she became a trusted presence in town, the tribals might let her help. She resigned herself to her living conditions and doggedly returned.

For years.



Igatpuri's Soaking Monsoon Season

It could have been different.

In the 1990s, Dilbur, a young lawyer, landed a plum job in the international human rights community of Geneva, Switzerland. Geneva is a gleaming city wrapped around the Lac Léman, a lake whose sky-high fountain, or Jet d’Eau, graces most postcards of this city on the French border surrounded by the Alps. It is not a place to visit on a budget. It summons a certain pedigree of tourists. A major travel website once proclaimed that “the dazzling surroundings are a playground for skiers, snowboarders, hikers, and sailors. In the city, cobblestone streets lined with cafés, luxury boutiques, grand monuments, and museums beckon to foodies, shoppers, history buffs, and art fiends.”

Marginalization is certainly not an Indian phenomenon, but Aseema has provided an ongoing model of change. As author Derrick Bell wrote of U.S. society in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*,

“Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society’s well. Even the poorest whites, those who must live their lives only a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down on us. Surely, they must know that their deliverance depends on letting down their ropes. Only by working together is escape possible.”

But after five years, Dilbur became unsure that the work had the impact she wanted. Needing to be sure that her efforts had meaning, she returned to Mumbai without even a job and took up grassroots efforts to educate poor children. The Mumbai schools had posed a challenge but none like in the tribal region.

And then came the question of funding.

Finding land and funding was the next big hurdle. Tribal lands cannot be purchased. Aseema started a preprimary school through the help of Sitabai Kavji Mengal, an early believer in Aseema's sincerity who shocked Dilbur one day by offering up land when Dilbur was encountering nothing but barriers. But Dilbur recognized the obvious: how could Aseema abandon the children after just early education? They would have to build a full-blown school. But how would they attract donors to this project or get equipment out to a remote hilltop for these all-but-forgotten people? Dilbur decided that Aseema staff should approach everyone who had ever supported Aseema to ask for help. Aseema did not want any interruption in the children's education, although it could be a hard sell. Here is a scene of the difficulty in persuasion ...



Igatpuri's Landscape

“I think it is beautiful even in the dry season, with different shades of brown everywhere!”

Dilbur's vision of Igatpuri was clear, but to some, Igatpuri seemed a wasteland.



Entering Igatpuri

The elderly gentleman in his 80s was smartly dressed. He was a businessman and well-to-do. He had just tolerated a nearly 3-hour drive to cover only 75 miles of highway from Mumbai to Igatpuri. Much of that time was consumed by the patience-building exercise of breaking free of the Indian megalopolis, a city so densely populated with people and vehicles that the average speed is about 12 miles per hour—when moving at all.

His traveling companions were Dilbur and an Aseema social worker she had asked to join them. Dilbur was taking the man to Igatpuri as a potential funder. He had some predisposition toward her seemingly quixotic quest to educate the most marginalized children she could find, having contributed to Aseema's efforts in Mumbai.

Igatpuri does not have much to draw a visitor from the endless allures of Mumbai. There is a

bit of life near the entrance, thanks to the presence of an impressive gate and a meditation center, but the road that passes by the center and several small shops quickly gives way to empty, rolling hills.

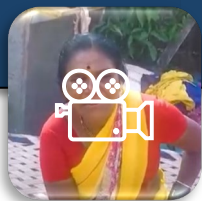
But the rich man had said, “I want to see it.”

As the car reached the edge of town, the road abruptly disintegrated into a rough track where the vehicle had to stop. The passengers climbed out of the car onto the rocky and uneven surface, and the elderly man tripped and almost fell. Dilbur and the social worker rushed to help him regain his balance, but it was anger that grabbed hold of him.

He turned to Dilbur and shouted, “Where have you brought me? There’s no road! There’s no water! There’s no anything!” The man demanded an immediate return to Mumbai. “He didn’t fund us after that. He didn’t give us anything,” said Dilbur, looking back on the incident a decade later.

Fortunately, many other donors stepped up. Thinking of all it had taken to transform the nothingness, she smiled: “There really was nothing.”

Bhagubai Pawar, a resident of the villages, and Punit Chandak, a respected local, were instrumental in gaining the trust of the tribal community. Bhagubai, a member of local government, “believed so much that education could change the lives of the children in her village—and equally, she believed in us,” said Dilbur. Here, she describes the village before Aseema.



[Take a Drive Through to the Remote School.](#)

Today, a beautiful school enhances and transforms the entire Igatpuri community and tribal living.

The construction faced many setbacks. Throughout, Aseema carefully continued the children's education to avoid interruptions although, as Dilbur described, it was "very messy. Very messy. All that drilling noise. But everybody cooperated." Aseema procured a donated bus and ran a bicycle project to help the children reach the school from other hamlets.



Building the Impossible

And now, as one drives through Igatpuri’s surroundings, suddenly, a gleaming structure

impossibly appears. There, nearly 500 children play and learn with fun Montessori materials.



[Watch the Joy That the School Brings.](#)

Students receive medical care and lovingly planned nutrition. Teachers and staff are gleaned from the local population, and student families work in the school. Aseema is now working with parents on vocational training to help enhance earnings.



Medical Care at School

Aseema has built check dams and water tanks at the school to ease the water scarcity, which

remains a problem. Days of communal planting aim to help water retention.

The school has spartan but sufficient quarters on site for the chairperson to live part-time so that, in Aseema fashion, the lives of the children and their families can be monitored and their needs understood and addressed through direct interaction and observation.



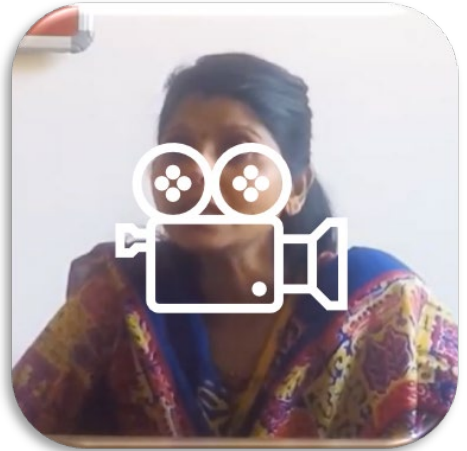
Enhanced Living

The building won several awards and was finished and inaugurated in 2018. To date, 15 students have completed the 10th standard there. All of them took and passed their SSCs, a major test in India with an enormous impact on a student's future. Conversely, the school is a model of what human talent could be brought to bear on the future of a country.

You can be a part of this with
high-impact giving through
Friends of Aseema at
www.friendsofaseema.org

Here is a request from
the tribal school's assistant
head and longtime teacher.

Thank you all in advance!



Krushika Anare, Assistant Head



The official registration and financial information of Friends of Aseema, Inc., may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.