

From garbage to garden

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: She calls it 'Breakfast for Brooms', remembering the piles of steaming idlis, dosas and sandwiches she would prepare to feed the hungry youngsters in return for their help. Starting small, planting a few saplings, Kasturi Padmanabhan encouraged the junior residents of MIG Colony in Bandra (east) to converge on a filthy ground every Sunday morning, armed with just jhaadus and enthusiasm for Operation Clean-up. Or Mission Impossible, as cynics dubbed the huge task of creating a garden out of the pig-infested rubbish dump that doubled up as a parking lot.

Tired of seeing the compound beside her home deteriorate into a weed-overrun wasteland, the retired teacher went from house to house. Gradually, she coaxed families in the area to convert the space into something that would benefit the local children. "Things don't happen on their own," I told them. Growing up an armyman's daughter, I'd lived surrounded by a garden full of mango and chickoo trees ring-

Shriram Vernekar



Kasturi Padmanabhan with children of MIG Colony in Bandra (east).

ing a pond. Cooped up in such a concrete jungle, there was no outlet for our kids, and that really was a matter of concern," says 60-year-old Ms Padmanabhan. It wasn't even as if the project would help her two children, who were abroad by then, past the age to really enjoy their mother's effort.

It was no easy garbage-to-garden story for Amma, as the neighbours refer to her. Consider what her dedicated band was up against—apathetic voices warning of the futility of it all, threats from local goons who had other plans for the vacant plot, suspicious souls from the colony wondering whether she might eventually take over the land. The doubts were end-

less. "Try explaining to people that it's good enough addressing an issue which doesn't directly affect you," laughs Ms Padmanabhan. It was only the society's children—blessed with uncomplicated minds typical of the young—who welcomed the idea of a play area.

Identifying school children upwards of sixth-graders as being able to handle the work, Ms Padmanabhan joined them on weekends to clear pebbles, cart away rubble in a wheelbarrow, pluck weeds and cut waist-level grass. The youngsters eagerly fetched and carried, bounding about to help. Once the mosquito menace

SPARK AVENUE

and snakes infesting the plot were tackled, a gardener was appointed. "Many days found me, housecoat hoisted to the waist, holding a water hose over new plants when the maali didn't show up. I must have looked a sight," chuckles Ms Padmanabhan.

Petty obstacles repeatedly cropped up. Ms Padmanabhan recalls cementing a short barricade to prevent stubborn residents who continued to park cars in a paved games court. Enraged by the structure, a man from the adjacent building tried to hack it down with a hammer—till he shamefacedly discovered that his little son was one of the happy youngsters who rushed out to play badminton in the court.

"True, nothing succeeds like team work," Ms Padmanabhan observes. The dirty stretches were gradually spruced up to hold swings, slides, see-saws, a roundabout, jungle gym, sandpit and parallel bars for budding athletes. Amma's park blossomed, becoming the busy hub for Divali and Holi revelry. Not to mention the most popular local Christmas party, complete with food, gifts and a pantomime performed in the crisp air by aspiring young actors.

Of course, various kill-joys began to ask why the colony party was centred around Christmas. "It's obvious that December is the best time of year for an annual concert in the park, both because of the weather and the fact that kids are through with exams. Some people will give anything a communal tinge," Ms Padmanabhan says.

Widely respected today, Ms Padmanabhan collects a modest contribution from residents towards basic maintenance costs, while play equipment is often donated. A brightly painted wall borders the garden, which resounds with the squeals of children. Over the years there have been numerous additions—karate sessions for the young, yoga and walks for elders, something for everybody. Ms Padmanabhan's challenge, at the moment, is to make the park more lush and green. "You start off thinking you're alone," she says, adding that many Bandra (east) colonies are now working towards upgrading hygiene and facilities. "But realising you're straightforward, people slowly come around. There's hope, but it's tough going."

(This column chronicles the brave initiatives and sunshine stories which light up corners of the city.)