

# CARING AND SHARING



Vidya's passion for children has crossed the realms of her home and hearth to encompass a horde of destitute children. **Pratima Sundararajan** met her

**N**ot content with taking care of two children — one of whom is adopted — and madly possessed by an urge to widen their horizon, Vidya and her like-minded husband, Shankar, formed Sudatta, an adoptive parents network in Tamil Nadu. They met regularly to share views and discuss various approaches to adoptive parenting. This was in 1995. A chapter of Sudatta was also started in Bangalore during their brief sojourn in the garden city between 1996 and 1998.

In September 1998, Vidya, a chemical engineer, decided to break free from her predictable life to start the Relief Foundation, dedicated to child welfare. Her brother Vinod and her husband joined her as well.

She says, "We started in a small transit shelter, helping small groups of children. We initially concentrated on the rehabilitation of slightly older children, pulling them out of other childcare centres and police stations, and placing them in foster homes where they could grow up in a family environment. We then wanted to expand... to go out to where these children are, find out what factors had forced them to be thrown out of their homes."

Soon, the Relief Foundation, with Vidya as its chairperson, developed into a cost-effective and powerful organisation, acting as the hub of a network of government organisations, other NGOs, schools, donors and volunteers. The foundation also began mobilising a wide range of resources to empower

children and ensure them a safe and better future.

By the time Relief Foundation found its feet in early 2000, the Juvenile Justice — Care and Protection Act came into force. Within a year-and-a-half, Vidya had been appointed chairperson of the Juvenile Welfare Board in Chennai, a position she served in an honorary capacity. In 2002, a new Act took over which mandated the appointment of two sets of jury members — one for children who are being exploited and the other for children who have committed offences. She was again selected to become a member of the Juvenile Justice Board. Her growing involvement with the juvenile justice system helped the Relief Foundation better understand the reasons for juvenile delinquency and develop new preventive projects.

"There would be six court sessions every week, and I would have handled at least 800 cases, including those of victims of child labour, begging and prostitution," recalls Vidya. "Each day is a new day," she adds. "The morning rejuvenates me; I think of how many more I can reach out to. Between sleep and being awake, visions of children crowd my mind. If I have no problems and there is still so much energy within me, I think I have to do more. The mantra is to spread the passion around. Children have always craved to receive unconditional love and a feeling of security. These are the keys to a happy childhood." **F**