

Chennai-based Vidya Shankar is out to change the course of the future. One child at a time.

Vidya Shankar is a woman who dons many hats. But she is, first and foremost, a child rights activist. In 1998, she set up an NGO called Relief Foundation, to find rehabilitation solutions for children in distress and in institutional care. From 2001-2005, she held important portfolios within the government, as a chairperson of the juvenile welfare board, Chennai, and member magistrate of the juvenile justice board. She is now the honorary project head and trustee of Shriram Foundation and the honorary chief of Project GIVELIFE. At present, she is actively engaged in strengthening rural education using Teacher's Lab, a programme designed to channelise youth with committed hearts and intelligent minds, into becoming change-makers who will work towards serving rural schools after a period of intense training. Through its various projects, her foundation reaches over 10,000 children and families every year. Vidya Shankar gets talking with Postnoon about her incredible journey.

Tell us a little bit about your background.

I started my career as a chemical engineer in 1986 after graduating with a BTech degree in chemistry. After a four-year stint in the industry, subsequent to marriage and two children, I started an NGO in 1998 called Relief Foundation because I felt that there was a big need for new kind of thinking and direction in many areas related to adoption, child welfare and juvenile justice.

But how did you come to be associated with women and child rights movements?

Adopting a child was my first experience that evoked feelings and thoughts beyond my family. From there, when my children grew up, I started Relief Foundation and moved into locations where children were rescued and housed in government homes. In time, I got completely involved in the rehabilitation and restoration of children into their families, which threw up a host of issues that revealed real needs of children and families in crisis.

You have essayed various roles, that of a judge, an activist, an author, a social entrepreneur and more. Which among these have you enjoyed the most and why?

Working directly with children is what I love to do the most, and I cherish my times with children in the juvenile homes who taught me a lot in life. Now, after the AMI Montessori International Diploma and with my involvement in rural education, I long for time I can spend with children, telling them magnificent tales of the world around them, and to see their eyes pop out in wonder as they listen.

Where are we lacking in providing for and safeguarding children in India? What should be done?

Priorities have been on paper most of the time. Budgets, systems in governments and NGOs alone do not ensure safety for children. Even today, there is a debate on who decides the best interest of the child as per Article 3 of UNCRC. Leaders with children's safety in the centre of all their discussions and actions need to hold positions of power with responsibility. Reforms in this sector have happened because of such people. We need updating of children's needs as of today. Many schemes offered by NGOs and governments are still outdated — like orphanages are still in existence hijacking public sympathy in our country where adoption and foster-care is now a law.

Likewise, women's safety is being talked about a lot in the media and social platforms today. Do you think the core problems are adequately addressed in these discussions?

Unless the level of volatility among youth and people (who have had deprivation and bad upbringing as their baggage) is addressed by multiple means with a singular focus and agenda by people in power, nothing will change for the better even 10 years from now. Women must be permitted to introspect on their strengths and given the freedom to exercise choices that safeguard her own nature —motherhood, even if she is not a birth-giving mother. These choices in family building and good familial relationships will ensure spread of goodwill which alone can lessen the risk of transgression and deprivation. Though this may sound philosophical, it is a tangible outcome in many families in my experience.

How, do you think, a layman can help improve the system in our country?

To think of one's own family and expounding energies into bringing in sanity of relationships and stability from within the family is the way to go. Eschewing violence and exercising patience and faith within is a huge effort thanks to multitude of bombardments families and children receive these days.

What would you say has been your greatest achievement and your greatest challenge?

My greatest achievement is that I have been able to discover life truths early, and get clarity on my cosmic purpose of existence. Trustworthy associates join me from somewhere and pledge their lifetime to a mission that seems to be theirs. I am still eager to learn and am learning from children. The challenge has been to be objective when I see misery that I have no influence to change.

Going forward, what will be your areas of focus?

Providing access to excellent education to all segments of children and making parents aware on how to help their children grow into productive and happy citizens.