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Vidya Shankar, founder and chairperson of Relief Foundation, Chennai. An engineering alumna of Anna University, Shankar worked in the IT industry for two years before quitting her job after the birth of her daughter in 1990. Subsequently she signed up for a postgrad diploma in child rights law at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore and an international diploma in Montessori education.

Institutional objective. “We encourage village youth to promote and run ‘micro schools’, train teachers and provide seed capital for these schools. Our micro schools in Reddivaripalli in Andhra Pradesh and Vichur in Chennai have 50 pre-primary and primary students each, and are growing rapidly. Last December we inaugurated a well-equipped resource centre named Creating Alternative Systems for Children and Aiding Development Experientially (CASCADE) in Thiruvannamiyur, Chennai, which serves as a home education academy for students, teachers and parents,” says Shankar.

History. Shankar’s initiative to promote micro schools in rural Tamil Nadu to provide free education to neglected children is the culmination of 15 years of work with children. Her love for children led her to adopt her second child in 1992 and together with her husband Shankar, she started the Adoptive Families Association in 1995 to aid, advise and prepare adults for adoption. “Shortly after that I began investigating the existence of a large number of orphanages and started to research underprivileged children and their problems. This prompted me to set up the Relief Foundation in 1998 together with two other adoptive parents — family friend R. Kumar and her brother C.V. Vinod — and we began to work for rehabilitation of children in juvenile and observation homes in Chennai,” recalls Shankar.

Currently, as trustee of the foundation, Vidya implements development projects and imparts teacher training for its three rural schools with an enrolment of 10,000 underprivileged children and manages its Give Life Trust which supports 8,400 children studying in 100 government primaries by providing nutritious food, tuition fees and coaching facilities. “CASCADE is a treasure trove of 10,000 books with a science laboratory and other facilities. From June, it will be open to students and parents opting for home schooling. They can choose from a variety of subjects offered by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and will be trained to write the NIOS exam,” says Shankar.

Future plans. Vidya has ambitious plans to scale up the foundation’s activities. “We want to invite more schools to partner with us for overall improvement, systemise teacher education programmes even as we continue to promote micro schools in villages to provide meaningful education,” she says.