

# Slum-dweller welcomes HIV-positive orphan

*AIDS is spreading from traditionally high-risk groups, such as sex workers, drug users and homosexuals, to large rural and urban areas with big migrant populations such as truck drivers*

**A**N Indian slum dweller has opened her heart and home to an HIV-positive orphan, setting an example in a country where AIDS victims are shunned despite having the world's second-largest number of cases.

The wife of a lowly paid porter in the southern city of Madras, Surya Gajendran, 30, said she fell in love with one-year-old Subha when she visited an HIV children's shelter last year as part of an AIDS education programme. Now Subha, who arrived at Gajendran's home a skinny child last December, is chubby and bounding with mischief as she plays with her two brothers, nine-year-old Surender and seven-year-old Narender.

"She was so thin, so frail when we brought her home," said Gajendran with a broad grin, showing off the child whose parents died of AIDS.

Gajendran happened to visit the children's shelter run by the Community Health Education Society

(CHES) non-governmental organisation, as part of counselling she received about HIV infection risks. Indian HIV/AIDS cases total 5.1 million, putting it just below South Africa, which has the most with 5.3 million people living with HIV/AIDS. As part of their education efforts, field workers encouraged the slum women to insist on husbands using condoms and asked them to visit orphaned children living with HIV/AIDS at the CHES shelter, which is run by doctors, in Madras.

"Subha ran to me and held me as though I was her own mother, yearning for love," recounted Gajendran, whose husband works as a porter in a truck transport firm and earns less than 50 rupees a day.

"I came home and told my husband. We have two little boys already and we were worried whether we could give her a good life. But I couldn't forget her and the way she responded to me." Gajendran said she had a tough job persuading the children's home, Malligai (jasmine), founded by gynaecologist Dr P Manorama, she would be able to care for Subha.

"I went back to the shelter to convince myself that she needed me and she did. Then I pleaded with Dr

Manorama to let me take her."

After nearly six months of counselling and training about how to care for an HIV-positive child — the virus is spread by transmission of blood and other bodily fluids — Subha went home with Gajendran.n.

The arrival of Subha in the teeming slum has been an education

health," said Chidambaram, hugging the child tightly. The families get vitamins and other medications from the shelter for the children but no financial help.

When the girls reach 18 months, another test will be done to see whether they are HIV positive or only tested positive at birth because

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for neighbours who feared even coming near an HIV-positive child.

Inspired by Surya's action, another slum mother, Motchamary Chidambaram who has two boys has taken an HIV-positive baby girl, Nitya, from the AIDS shelter.

"We're just back from a temple where we prayed for her good

of the presence of the virus in their mothers' bodies, Dr Manorama said.

If they test positive they will receive Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) if their immune systems are unable to cope with ordinary ailments, she said. Thanks to research advances, many children born with HIV can now live into at least their

teens with drugs, doctors say.

Dr Manorama said she founded the shelter in 1994 because there was no place for HIV-positive children. The shelter now has about three-dozen children.

"Not much attention is being given to infected children and AIDS orphans which most orphanages don't accept," she said. Since many AIDS parents are among India's poorest, "these children literally are on the street once they're orphaned. That's why I started this shelter.

She praised the slum women for taking the children. "No such initiative has come from the well-to-do," she said.

The syndrome is spreading from traditionally high-risk groups, such as sex workers, drug users and homosexuals, to large rural and urban areas with big migrant populations such as truck drivers.

But still a report by Human Rights Watch notes "many (Indian) doctors refuse to treat or even touch HIV-positive children". It has called on India's government to outlaw discrimination against HIV-positive children and called for the state to care for such children if their parents cannot. AFP