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## TMS Sir, the math demon slayer

TM Soundarajan, 58, has been married to mathematics longer than to his wife and the sum of all his parts is a legendary teacher who kills the fear of the subject in the minds of children.

The inviolable saying — much like a theorem — in Chennai is mathematics phobia is history once you have been touched by TMS Sir, as Soundarajan is known among students and their parents.

“People break the chain of learning and each day spent hiding from mathematics adds to the fear,” says TMS Sir, who teaches at Sri Ahobila Mutt School — which serves the poorest of the poor — even after retiring from the institute in West Mambalam, a centrally located colony in the city.

After school, the classroom shifts to the mathematics teacher’s house in the same colony. He charges for teaching at home, but does not insist on a specific fee and teaches poor students for free. He routinely pays for books for poor students, but is not comfortable talking about it.

Andal, the domestic help who has seen his philanthropy from close quarters, however, spills the beans.

The 52-year-old has been with TMS Sir and his wife, Parimala Ranganayaki (also a teacher), for ages. “Years ago, TMS Sir took my son, Senthil Kumar, under his wing and mentored him as he grew up.”

Kumar went on to earn an engineering degree from the Madras Institute of Technology. He excelled in his first job with a leading software company that placed him at its Seattle office in the US two years ago.

Andal is well off now and doesn’t work anywhere else except at TMS Sir’s, where she insists on taking care of daily chores. “I will not allow them (TMS Sir and his wife) to take help from anyone else,” says Andal.

So what makes TMS Sir tick? His passion for mathematics. His wife — who teaches accountancy at the local government school — has been a constant, as he has indulged his passion. “When I met him, what impressed me was his intense dedication to his subject and his work,” says Ranganayaki. They got married in 1984 and their daughter, Gayathri, was born a year later.



■ Andal's son Senthil, taught by TMS Sir, is now in the US. HT PHOTO

His process begins with striking at the root of fear. “Even if a student is in Class 12, if I find his conceptual level

is still in say Class 7, I start from there and lift the student to the desired level. Slowly, but surely.”

“Teaching mathematics has to be made interesting. Children must be made to understand and learn with practice, practice, and more practice. Repetition is the only technique to learn mathematics,” he says.

TMS Sir knows what he is saying. He has authored 11 books on mathematics, is a member of the state’s panel on curriculum, sets question papers and is an advisor for state government schools on mathematics teaching methodology.

Youngsters from every strata, including the much sought-after Church Park Convent school — alma mater of chief minister J Jayalalithaa, Union minister Jayanthi Natarajan and DMK Rajya Sabha member Kanimozhi — troop in to TMS Sir’s house for his master touch.

Dr Sangeeta Ramesh, whose daughter Sanyukta, a Class 10 student of Church Park Convent, learns from TMS Sir, says, “He is one person who has made a difference in mathematics teaching. My daughter was mortally scared of mathematics. But now, she has developed an analytical ability and is super confident.”

Now, TMS Sir wants to reach out to even more children. His student Pavithra Srinivasan, a Stanford graduate, has founded entrayn.com, an online learning platform.

Another former student, Navin Kumar, director in a real estate firm, has offered to host his teacher on this website in a structured manner. “This is our tribute to TMS Sir.”

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