

# CoverStory

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## NEW DELHI: The Chinese Language Institute

When her son Akshay first suggested to Purnima Garg that she quit her job as the head of the political science department at the eminent Air Force Bal Bharati School in New Delhi and start a Mandarin school, she thought he had gone mad.

"Are you crazy?" she exclaimed. "My subjects are political science and history. I know nothing about Mandarin."

"Don't worry, I will send you trained teachers," he said in reassurance. "All you'll have to do is run the school."

Though Garg eventually gave in, she had misgivings and decided to try out the experiment for a year first, taking a sabbatical from her school.

Today, seven years after the plunge, she is firmly ensconced as director of the Chinese Language Institute in the upscale Lodi Road opposite the Safdarjung tomb, the garden mausoleum of a powerful 18th century prime minister and a prime tourist attraction.

The school's pride is its "Survival Chinese Course" that promises to enable students to communicate in

China in the local language "the minute they get off the plane".

The students are mostly working professionals and youngsters who want to study medicine or other courses in China and the classes are held on the weekend to accommodate them.

With people living outside Delhi also showing interest in signing up, the school has begun an online course. The 50-lesson course in conversational Chinese uses audio and interactive texts and can be subscribed to using a credit or debit card.

The founder of the school, Akshay Garg, grew his Chinese roots when he joined Kunming University as a young graduate to teach economics and English.

"He taught himself Mandarin," Purnima Garg says of her son with pride. "With the help of a couple of books."

During his nearly three-year stay in China, Akshay Garg witnessed the difficulties faced by Indian visitors — businessmen, executives and students — while moving around, ordering food at hotels or shopping.

"Communication had become a big problem for the community," Purnima Garg says.

"With trade and collaboration between India and China growing, the number of Indians in China is growing as well as the number of

Chinese in India. It is becoming increasingly important to know Mandarin and Akshay thought the school would help fill the gap."

In the startup days, the school faced problems in getting teachers. Getting a teacher from China was expensive; plus there were problems over getting visas. Purnima Garg solved it in her own way.

"A native Chinese speaker will not necessarily always have the skill to teach Chinese," she says. "Speaking and teaching a language are different ball games. Having been a teacher for 35 years, I decided to train Indian Mandarin speakers to teach Mandarin."

She has been sitting through classes to observe and guide the teachers. Currently, the school has a teacher from Taiwan and three from India. Garg interacts with final-year students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University, where Mandarin is taught, and grooms them into becoming satisfactory Mandarin teachers for her courses.

The school, which she was once reluctant to start, is her baby now, Akshay having shifted to Singapore where he works with a digital advertising organization.

When Purnima Garg visited China, the 61-year-old loved her trip, having no communication problems, thanks to her Mandarin-speaking son.



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

The Chinese Language Institute in New Delhi offers a 'Survival Chinese Course'.



Purnima Garg (right) started the school with misgivings but left her job for it.

## CHENNAI: Chinese Institute of Chennai

Most people from southern India's Tamil Nadu state speak Tamil when they are children. Narayanaswamy Balakrishnan was fluent in a dialect spoken in Fujian, the southeastern province in China that saw its residents fan out outside the country for their livelihood.

"I grew up in Penang in Malaysia," says the sexagenarian, popularly known as Bala. "It is a Chinese-majority state with the immigrants mostly coming from Fujian. So I spoke 'Fujian' along with Tamil, Malay and English."

But the London School of Economics doctorate thought nothing of his linguistic skills till his travels took him back to his roots in Chennai and he discovered a lack of Chinese language comprehension in the traditional state.

"Though a lot of Chinese companies were setting up shop in India, not many Indians knew Chinese in the early 2000s, especially in South India. I saw a business opportunity in teaching Mandarin in the south."

So in 2009-2010 the investment adviser, who now flies between Hong Kong, where he is a permanent resident, and India, opened the pioneering Chinese Institute of Chennai, eventually starting a branch in the neighboring state of Karnataka as well.

"Mandarin is the most widely



The Chinese Institute of Chennai has an agreement with an Indian university to conduct online courses as well.

spoken first language in the world," Bala says. "One-fifth of the planet speaks it. China is the second largest economy in the world today and India's largest trade partner. There is a commercial need for Indians to learn Chinese."

The institute's students are mostly corporates and professionals who want to work in China or traders who

want to import from China. Besides the language classes, it also offers services to facilitate doing business in China. These include organizing trade delegations to explore particular industries or cities in China, helping set up offices and factories there and even customizing software into Mandarin for higher sales in China.

The institute now has an agree-

ment with the Indira Gandhi National Open University, a New Delhi-headquartered distance learning university, to teach Mandarin through online virtual programs. They include a six-month and a 12-month course in Chinese language and culture.

While the institute seeks to promote business and corporate com-



Narayanaswamy Balakrishnan

munication, it has also found itself in the limelight for nurturing emotional links.

Among the students is a 49-year-old businessman of Chinese origin. Eugene Lee, who runs the Xin Lai chain of Chinese food restaurants in Mangalore city, enrolled after letters left behind by his father — which he couldn't read — were discovered to have been sent by Chinese relatives in Hebei.

"Lee's father had come to India in the 1930s and settled down in Mangalore, marrying a local woman," Bala explains. "But he had an earlier marriage and family in Hebei that his Indian family was not aware of."

With the discovery after his father's death that he had cousins in Hebei, Lee began to learn Mandarin. He has been to Hebei to meet them and now wants to stay in touch with this part of his flesh and blood who were lost and have been found again.