

Shaping destinies in classrooms

CHATLINE Velammal Education Trust Chairman M.V.Muthuramalingam tells SOMA BASU about his passion for overall development of every individual and improving the quality of education.

Schools are closed for vacation. But one man disinclined to rest is M.V.Muthuramalingam. "I am chasing a goal," the Founder-Chairman of Velammal Education Trust tells me point blank.

In the last four decades he has dabbled in many jobs, earned and lost money and has ultimately risen like the proverbial phoenix with his reputed chain of schools and colleges across Chennai and Madurai.

"My aim is to enrol another 5,000 students over the next two years and cross the landmark figure of 50,000. For, 2011 is our silver jubilee year in existence as education providers. I am planning a grand combined celebration and will probably invite the President, Mrs. Pratibha Patil," he reveals. And promptly quips: "I always invite celebrities for my institution's publicity."

Social responsibility

What started as a "pure business" with 30-odd students on a 60x40 feet plot in Anna Nagar, Chennai in 1986, slowly turned into social responsibility. "Now it is like charity at a time when everybody else is commercialising education," says this no-holds barred petite man, who started learning English at the age of 50.

Today at 63, Muthuramalingam runs an empire worth Rs.1,500 crores. He is at the helm of 11 matriculation schools (8 in Chennai, 3 in Madurai), three engineering colleges (2 in Chennai, one in Madurai), and one each CBSE, international and residential school besides a management institute in Chennai. Besides, he plans to start a medical college and hospital in Madurai and schools in Coimbatore and Tiruchirappalli soon.

Humble beginning

For this pre-independence born man who always dresses in white, nothing can be more "soul-satisfying" than this enormous tribute to his mother, Velammal. A Sri Lankan Tamil lady who was widowed at 23 and did all kinds of odd jobs — from a roadside vendor, a farm worker to an ayah in a primary school — to raise her two sons respectfully. Her statue and painting adorns every institution of his.

Like his first school, Muthuramalingam started his life's journey from a small thatched hut (see picture) in Ladanendal, 30 kms East of Madurai. "I used to walk three kms daily through slush, weed and thorns to reach the primary school. Life was full of misery. My mother used to toil day and night to feed us. My father was a police constable who died suddenly travelling in a bus while on duty. My mother's loneliness and sorrow affected me. In the evenings I used to sit with her trying to sell plastic toys or jewellery and earn some extra money."

Unlike his younger brother who quit before SSLC, Muthuramalingam tried to live his mother's dreams and pursued studies even under hardship. He joined the Government Higher Secondary School in Thiruppuvanam but doesn't



TAKING ON CHALLENGES To spread knowledge (anti-clockwise) M.V. Muthuramalingam by his mother's portrait, With his wife outside the small thatched hut in Ladanendal and the house he built for his mother, in one of his schools in Madurai. PHOTOS: (COVER AND CENTRESPREAD) S. JAMES.

forget to mention that he failed in his SSLC Maths paper because he went for a movie the previous evening.

Success and failure come and go. The essence of living is to remain motivated, come what may," says this short (in height) man who indeed stood tall against several odds. After selling the family's lone buffalo for Rs.500 in

order to pay the college fee, he became the first and only child from his village to study engineering. "After completing Polytechnic, I made daily rounds of the Employment Exchange causing much annoyance to the man at the counter. His anger drove me to business."

And what an out-of-the-box idea it was. With no experience or invest-

ment, he simply approached a practicing lawyer in Madurai and requested him to add a small name board of 'contractor/consulting engineer' outside his office. "I needed a place to sit and the gentleman agreed," he says with his self-confidence intact.

Muthuramalingam literally started from a scratch but he had a Midas

touch on his business. "I used to plan, estimate and construct wells for cooperative societies and charge Rs.20 per project." Later, he worked in Power & Works Department in Chennai for a few years before a tiff with a contract engineer made him resign. He lost lot of his earnings fighting battles but still was "left with enough to start a small

school" at Mugappair in 1986. It continues today with 108 students. His second school in Mugappair West started with 600 students, has 12,500 children on date. Ever since has cracked records and scripted history and now manages 16 locations with his three sons. "We are growing but I am aging," he smiles. But the way he walks

and talks, show no signs.

So what is the secret behind his roaring success? "In the initial years, I strictly followed the policy of admitting all without digging into family background or conducting any entrance exam. Now, I endeavour to see every student excels in some field. I discourage private tuitions and provide coaching after school hours. I am able to attract a good faculty...he lists out matter-of-fact. The reason behind the academic excellence of his institutions and 15,000 applications up for sale every year boils down to one simple fact: "Individual care given to all".

"Nobody is unhappy after entering Velammal premises. I believe if a child is not good in academics, he or she surely has some other potential. It is our duty to discover that talent and turn every child into achievers in any field," he declares, asserting that sports, extra-curricular activities or any vocational skill, all are given equal importance in his institutions.

"I have no other business or interest and not many friends either. I spend all my time and energy with my students, staff and family. That is why I am able to look into every aspect and detail," he assures, also aware of the problems that can crop up with such a huge strength.

"Criticism is bound to come and I don't turn shy away from it. Rather I know how to convert negatives into constructive advertising," he oozes confidence.

Muthuramalingam lost his mother at the age of 72 three years ago. But is immensely happy that he could introduce her to former President Dr.A.P.J.Kalam at a felicitation function. Her moist eyes only "strengthened her belief in what I do."

Hard work

"My mother taught me the value of hard work, punctuality and time management. I never fail in these. I did not declare a holiday the day my mother expired," he shares.

Still deeply rooted to his village and people, Muthuramalingam also takes care of his villagers. He calls them "my relatives" and has employed majority of them in his schools and college in Madurai. All the children from Ladanendal are provided free education in his schools. He has built a community hall and a 10-bedded general hospital with two doctors in his village.

"I was never a bright student nor did excel in anything. But I have always had a positive attitude. The feeling of 'I' drives me through my difficulties," is this "gutsy" man with an evident 'accept me or leave me attitude'. He may have rubbed many people the wrong way but it has taken him to new heights and earned him many more admirers on the way. And that includes a better half too who coyly reveals slyly kanji, tender coconut water and work* keeps her man going tough.

