

# Cover Story

## 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.