

# POWER OF ONE

## Ahead Of Teacher's Day (Sept 5), We Look At Educators Who Single-Handledly Spread The Light Of Learning Across State

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**IGNITING MINDS:** R Premalatha doubles up as teacher, 'doctor' and counsellor for her school students in Kiloy village; (right) wheelchair-bound Gunasekharan tutors 25 school children everyday in Kancheepuram

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In Kiloy, a tiny hamlet with a population of 1,000, two hours outside Chennai, is a ramshackled single-roomed grey house, from where R Premalatha, "a Class 10 pass", heads a little school. Premalatha is the only teacher in the 'single teacher school' that has been functioning for the last five years. An enthusiastic teacher, Premalatha is also a quick learner, having figured out how to don numerous roles for her students. "They look to me for everything as I am from this village," she says.

So, to the intrepid bunch of six-year-olds in the front row, R Premalatha is the teacher who has taught them to count. For the twins in ragged clothes staring wide-eyed at her from the second row, Premalatha is the 'doctor' who helped cure their mother's fever. To the boy in torn track pants at the back, she is the counsellor, having helped him deal with the images of his alcoholic father thrashing his mother. Premalatha is part of the 'Single Teacher School' (STS) programme —

in its 10th year — run by Swami Vivekananda Rural Development Society across 650 schools in TN. The school, which is free of cost, runs for three hours in the evening. "It complements government schools," says M S Janardan, project coordinator. "The idea is to prevent drop-outs. We provide education in math, Tamil and science up to Class 5 and then try and integrate the students into a mainstream school," says Janardan.

The schools are provided with a blackboard, solar lights, and teachers take home around ₹2,000 a month. "It is not about the salary I earn but the respect I have earned over these years," says Premalatha. "I am known as the village teacher and it fills me with pride. Maybe to teachers in private schools who earn a lot of money being a teacher means something different. But here, to me, it is respect and I will not give that up," says Premalatha as she gets ready to switch



from math teacher to PT master, bringing out the Frisbee and the chess board.

Three hours away, in a village called Paramasiva Nagar in Kancheepuram district is Elumalai Gunasekharan, a wheelchair-bound, 24-year-old BBA graduate who decided to turn the outside of his home into a school. Gunasekharan, another proud employee in the STS programme, says

it was a tough road to education for him, literally and metaphorically. "It was difficult to get to school and college on a wheelchair. I always needed someone to help me. So, after I got my degree, I decided I was going to make the path of education easy for students in my village," says Gunasekharan, adding that his biggest source of pride was when one of his students finished his ITI training diploma after graduating from school and landed a well-paying job.

Before Gunasekharan became a teacher, no one paid much attention to the man in a wheelchair struggling to get from one place to another, but now, everyone goes out of their way to ensure he never feels left out. "Teaching has given me a sense of belonging. No other job would have given me that," he says.

Rubaselvi, the one-woman teaching army at Sivankoodal, a village in Kancheepuram district, is the first-ever female graduate from her village. When she completed her BSc Math degree her parents told her she could leave the village to work.

"But I decided to stay back and help other girls get educated," says the 24-year-old, who is currently doing her BA in Education. "I love teaching the children in my village because I want them to make something of their lives. My father, a daily wage earner, and my mother, a cleaner in a government

### COMPLEMENTARY ROLE

school near the village, inspired me to study and I want to inspire others," says Selvi, adding that her school has no fixed timings. "Sometimes classes go on till 9pm, even on Saturdays and Sundays," she says.

At the offices of the education department in TN, officials say any help in the area of school education is welcomed. According to data from the Sarva Shiksha Abhyan or education office, there are 31,000 primary schools in the state, and 97% of TN has a primary school within a 1km radius of a habitation. "Access is not an issue, but the biggest challenge we face is retaining children in school, especially children of migrating parents," says an official from the state education department. Though the enrolment rate in TN primary schools as of 2015-2016 is 99% and the dropout rate is less than 1% (as against a dropout rate of 4% ten years ago), retention is still the biggest challenge for the department.

"That's why we think concepts like our single teacher school can help," says Janardan. "We pick teachers who have grown up in the village. So they understand their students better and vice versa," he says. After all, he says, it's at least one step in the right direction.