

A black and white portrait of Dr. Ravi Kasi Venkatraman, a middle-aged man with a mustache, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a dark, collared shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a window with vertical bars or a screen.

EDUCATION

BUILDING HOPE BEFORE BUILDINGS

How Dr. Ravi Kasi Venkatraman is redefining what it means to lead a government school.

By Meera Shivashankar



There is something quietly reassuring about meeting an educator who has never forgotten why he chose to teach. At a time when conversations about education are dominated by board results, rankings, infrastructure and technology, Dr. Ravi Kasi Venkatraman gently steers the conversation back to a truth that is both simple and profound: education begins with people.

Soft-spoken, reflective and deeply grounded, the Headmaster of Maraimalai Adigal Government Higher Secondary School, Pallavaram, speaks less like an administrator and more like a teacher who still finds his greatest reward in watching young lives blossom. As our conversation unfolds, it becomes evident that the remarkable transformation of his school was never merely about buildings. It was about restoring confidence - first in children, then in teachers, parents and, eventually, the community itself.

Looking back on his long career, Dr. Ravi describes teaching not simply as a profession

but as a calling inspired by his father. Every school he served became as much a classroom for him as it was for his students, teaching him lessons in resilience, empathy and the extraordinary potential hidden within ordinary children.

"The first responsibility of a school is to make every child feel that they matter," he says.

Putting that philosophy into practice became his greatest challenge.

When Dr. Ravi took charge of Maraimalai Adigal Government Higher Secondary School, it faced challenges familiar to many government institutions. Admissions had declined, infrastructure required urgent attention and public perception of the school was poor. While many would have begun with large-scale renovations, he started with something far more fundamental.

His first initiative was to ensure students had access to clean, functional toilets with a reliable water supply. The improvements

were practical, but they carried a deeper message. They told every child that they deserved dignity, care and an environment that respected them. When children are given a school that reflects their worth, they begin to believe that their education matters. Before they could believe in education, they first had to believe that education believed in them.

Instead of immediately pursuing ambitious development projects, Dr. Ravi chose to listen. He spent time speaking with students about their fears, aspirations and dreams. He wanted them to understand that education could reshape their futures. He recognised that every classroom contained children with different stories. Some excelled academically. Others found confidence through sports, music or art. Many simply longed for someone to recognise their potential.

Discipline imposed from outside is temporary, he believes. Responsibility that grows from ownership lasts a lifetime. Gradually, the atmosphere within the school began to change. Students who had once

remained detached became active participants in school life. Teachers found that patient conversations often achieved what punishment never could. Trust replaced fear, and the school evolved into a community where children felt seen rather than judged.

Only then did the physical transformation begin.

Armed with decades of experience and a doctorate in Physics, Dr. Ravi approached organisations with a compelling vision of what a government school could become. "They are not investing in buildings but in children," he says.

That conviction led to one of the school's defining milestones. Through a partnership with the HCL Foundation, Maraimalai Adigal Government Higher Secondary School established the Young Kalam Science Centre, one of Tamil Nadu's pioneering experiential science learning spaces. Designed for students from Classes VI to XII, the centre encourages curiosity, experimentation and hands-on learning





rather than rote memorisation. More than twenty thousand students from schools across the state have already experienced the facility.

The Science Centre's success inspired confidence among other organisations. The Shriram Group renovated classrooms that once lacked basic amenities. Madras Round Table constructed additional classrooms as enrolment increased. Mobis India Foundation committed to building an auditorium and more classrooms. Several other organisations quietly joined the movement, each strengthening the school in meaningful ways.

Yet the transformation cannot be measured merely in bricks and mortar. It is reflected in the confidence of parents who now choose the school willingly for their children. Student enrolment has nearly doubled, crossing fifteen hundred.

One achievement, however, fills Dr. Ravi with particular pride. The number of girl

students has risen from barely one hundred to around four hundred and fifty. He says, "Education gives girls confidence, choices and independence." Parents began trusting the school because they saw it as a safe and nurturing environment for their daughters. That trust became one of the institution's greatest achievements.

Recognising that education flourishes only when schools and families work together, the school strengthened communication with parents through regular IVRS voice calls updating them on examinations, school events and their children's progress. During board examinations, early morning messages encouraged parents to motivate and support their children before they left for school.

The initiative was simple. Its impact was profound.

Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of Dr. Ravi's leadership lies in his refusal to give up on children whom others have

already written off. Many schools hesitate to admit students labelled as troublesome or disruptive, fearing they may affect the institution's reputation. Dr. Ravi chose compassion over convenience. "If schools refuse these children, where will they go?" he asks quietly. "Education cannot become selective. It must remain inclusive and compassionate."

Rather than turning them away, the school welcomed them. Teachers counselled them, involved them in some responsibility in school and helped them rediscover their own worth. Several of those very students are today pursuing undergraduate education because one educator chose belief over judgement.

There are days, he admits candidly, when the weight of responsibility feels overwhelming. Administrative hurdles, difficult students and unexpected setbacks can leave even the most committed educator questioning why he chose this path.

On such days, however, he reminds himself of one simple truth: somewhere in those classrooms sits a child whose life may change because someone refused to give up on them. That thought has always been enough to bring him back the next morning.

He also recalls a simple image that has guided him throughout his career - two parallel lines, one shorter than the other. Most people instinctively try to lengthen the shorter line. But there is another way. "You don't always have to extend one line," he reflects. "Sometimes you simply shorten the other." Instead of allowing obstacles to become overwhelming, he chooses to reduce their power over him. Administrative problems eventually pass. Challenging behaviour can be understood and transformed. But a child's future, once neglected, may never return.

Listening to him, one realises that authentic leadership rarely announces itself through

grand gestures. It reveals itself in quiet acts of faith - a patient conversation, a second chance, an encouraging word or an unwavering belief in a child who has stopped believing in himself.

Even today, despite the recognition the school has received, Dr. Ravi remains focused on what lies ahead. The institution is preparing to establish a competitive examination centre under the Vetri Palligal programme, creating greater opportunities for students aspiring to higher education and government services.

Great schools are shaped by educators who recognise that every child is more than a mark sheet, every classroom is more than four walls and every school is a promise made to the future.

Buildings will age. Technology will evolve. Policies will change. But the confidence planted in a child - the quiet conviction that they matter, that they are capable and that their dreams are worthy - outlives them all. Perhaps that is the true measure of educational leadership - not the schools we construct, but the futures we awaken.

Dr. Ravi Kasi Venkatraman has certainly built classrooms, laboratories and opportunities. Yet his greatest achievement lives in the confidence of children who now walk into school believing they belong.

Before we build schools, we must build hope. Because once hope takes root, classrooms come alive, communities rally together and futures begin to change. One child at a time. One opportunity at a time. One act of faith at a time.

For quietly building that hope - never losing sight of those who need education the most - Dr. Ravi Kasi Venkatraman, the physicist who chose to become a builder of lives, stands tall as a true Champion of Chennai.