Professor of education

EDUCATION, Prof Rajendra Srivastava proudly claims, is his family religion. It has seen him move from his family home in Lucknow to pastures unknown, imbuing on his way knowledge, first from India, then the United States and now Singapore.

The provost and deputy president of academic affairs at Singapore Management University is a soft-spoken, genial man who insists that one learns a lot by teaching. "I keep telling many executives that if you really want to learn something, try to teach it to your employees. To be a good teacher, you have to be a good listener. In listening to senior managers, I get some insights and then if you listen to multiple people on the same issue you start getting perspectives. The good thing about education is that you have the luxury of tapping multiple brains," says the man who did his undergraduate studies in mechanical engineering in Lucknow and moved to the University of Pittsburgh to do his master's in industrial engineering.

He went on to do a PhD related to operations research and that's how he ended up in the field of marketing.

According to Prof Srivastava, 58, the academic world tries to identify "next practices". The best practices, like in business consulting, are not good enough. To illustrate this, he says: "Say, if you are the best in class and if I try to catch up with you, all I achieve is parity. But I have to leapfrog you in thinking and try to do things which others are not doing."

Taking on a teaching position at the University of Texas in Austin after his PhD, he spent 25 long years there. Understandably, given that he met his wife Tricia there and their three children were born there, he is very fond of the American town.

His older son Rajendra John, 27, is a biologist working in Atlanta. His second son Ramesh McLean, 23, is a musician. His daughter Chandra Noel, 22, recently finished her double degree in economics and history and works part-time, something her dad attributes to the economic downturn in the US. He is trying to get her interested in doing a PhD in finance.

Before Prof Srivastava joined SMU last July, he was a senior associate dean at the Goizueta School of Business in Emory University. He is on a sabbatical from Emory right now. He was also a dean at the University of Texas.

When he visits the US, he considers Austin, where he has an apartment, his home: "When my wife and I leave Austin, my children look forward to using the condominium. The children have their own places but they prefer to use our place because it is right next to a river and in the centre of the music district."

Not surprising, since music resonates through son Ramesh's veins. Unlike his older brother, who is "getting bored with his job and is thinking of doing a PhD in medical research", Ramesh is wedded to music. He has an indie rock band named vox [of which he is the "heart and soul"].

Even though Ramesh did not subscribe fully to the family religion (education), Prof Srivastava seems to be quite proud of his son's talent which surfaced when the youngest was sent to a summer camp during his school days "to stop him from driving us crazy", confesses Prof Srivastava.

That was when he discovered his musical talent and has since picked up the guitar, piano and the drums. "He also does the singing for his band. I can never keep track of him. He is immensely talented and it is not coming from me. Probably he got it from my father or my wife's father," says the professor with a chuckle.

Prof Srivastava's father was an ophthalmologist who devoted most of his later days to running a free clinic. "I was told that, in his younger days, he was fond of music. At home, in a storage room, we had tablas and harmoniums... so I know he was passionate about music," he says.

Life in his family, he reveals, was much better before he was born. His father belonged to the zamindari class (landowners) but after India gained independence, the zamindars lost much of their land.

"My mother sold her jewellery to build the house, then she rented the house to put us through college and we lived in the servants' quarters. We were rich in knowledge but poor in circumstance. But that's okay, it's been a good investment," he recalls. His eldest brother is an ophthalmologist, two other brothers are engineers and his sister has a master's in political science.

His mother was among the first batch of women graduates from Benaras Hindu University and even though she was offered the job of headmistress in a local school, she turned it down as her husband was not in favour of her working.

Prof Srivastava loves to travel and visit places of historical interest. He is looking forward to his children's arrival later this year and intends to visit Angkor Wat with Ramesh in October and tour New Zealand with Chandra in December.

During their trips, Prof Srivastava and his wife pick up crystals, which she collects. She is also fond of geodes, which are natural rock cavities with internal crystal formations.

In Singapore, they spend time together eating out and hanging out after classes in SMU where the students always have something going on. Tricia also has friends at the National Museum and has joined the faculty spouses, who have a walking club. "She is there at the wine and cheese club in SMU. She is much more sociable than I am," he says.

So what brought him to SMU? "Education in Singapore is high priority. You won't find this focus on education in many countries," is his ready reply. It also goes with his belief. In Singapore, he says, the state religion is education.

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