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Teaching them young: Tots learn to say 'ni hao' to Mandarin

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Hong se, huang se, lu se... (red, yellow, green)," two-and-a-half-year old Sriana rattles off the colours of the rainbow in Mandarin when her mother points to a picture at their Powai residence in Mumbai. Another Mumbai toddler, three-year-old Rishaan, can sing Zhuni shengri kuai le (Happy birthday to you) in Mandarin with ease. Kolkata boy Ved, 6, insists that his parents call him 'Da Ji'—a Chinese name he fancies.

Around the time they are learning to prattle in their mother tongue, quite a few urban tots are being enrolled in Mandarin classes. "These lessons are a gift to my daughter for her future," says Sriana's mother Chetna Kumar. The international business lawyer hired a tutor to teach Sriana the "language of the world's fastest growing economy" when she was just 19 months old.

When Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg wooed China with a 30-minute interview in Mandarin last week, Kumar felt vindicated. Apart from spending Rs 700 per session on the tutor, she has also filled their home with books and puzzles with Chinese characters. She even wishes she had Chinese children in the neighbourhood for Sriana to play with.

In Mumbai, around 200 kids under 16—90 of them between 3 and 6 years old—are attending after-school Mandarin classes

conducted by 'Yeh China' institute at eight schools. Founded by Usha Sahoo in 2010, Yeh China offers a special 'Fun and Learn Chinese for Preschoolers' programme that introduces tots to Mandarin through singing, stories and craft.

Eighty students have already enrolled at JBCN International, which tied up with Sahoo just last month to introduce a Mandarin class at their schools in Parel and Oshiwara. "At least 20 of them are just four- or five-year-olds," says managing trustee Fatema Agarkar.



Apart from evening classes, Da Vinci Montessori School, which has centres at Babulnath and Marine Drive, and Shining Stars playschool in Andheri have also included Yeh China's Mandarin course in their regular curriculum. "The worth of learning French and German is diminishing. Most parents were thrilled when we included a weekly Mandarin class because it will enhance their children's future CVs," says founder Ashani Hirway.

While Yeh China is the only institute that teaches toddlers, many others cater to children aged four and above. Han You Institute in Delhi's Hauz Khas area is currently teaching 18 children aged 6-8 years. Inchin Closer in Mumbai is training 40 children aged between 5 and 12 years under the Young Chinese Learner's Test programme. Around 20 children of the same age have signed up for the winter batch at the Chennai Chinese Institute and eight are enrolled at The School of Chinese Language in Kolkata.

"Three to four years ago, there was not a single child in our classrooms. Only adults and that too mostly those with business interests in China wanted to learn Mandarin," says Charisma Saraff, vice-principal of the Kolkata school.

Today, Shiv Shankar Nayak, business development head at the Chennai institute, says he has had to turn down requests for classes from parents of younger children—some as young as 18 months—due to lack of infrastructure. "Several play schools have asked us to train their teachers so they can in turn teach Mandarin," he says.

This year, the CBSE board introduced Mandarin as an optional subject in Class VI but parents consider it wiser to start younger. After all, the language is notoriously tough to pick up—one needs to know at least 5,000 characters to be proficient. "My husband and I had tried to learn Mandarin but we found it too difficult," says Dinky Shah, whose son Rishaan attends the Mandarin class at Da Vinci.

Several studies by neuroscientists and linguists have indicated that children are capable of learning multiple languages in the

first five years. Enrolling toddlers for foreign language training has therefore become a norm in the US and UK. But Nazia Vasi, founder of Inchin Closer, believes the same trend should not be "blindly followed" in India. "Unlike American children who speak only English, our children already grow up speaking English, Hindi and their mother tongue so adding another language to the list can put undue pressure on them," she says. Inchin Closer does not teach children under five.

Kumar, however, says there is no question of burden as there are no set goals. "We let Sriana set the pace of her class. If she is bored, the lesson ends."

Sahoo says her module attempts to make children fall in love with the language. Walk into her session at the Da Vinci Montessori and you will see tots trying to eat noodles with chopsticks. Ask them about their favourite food and they scream in unison, "miantiao" (noodles). A Chinese puppet called Papa Miantiao — he has noodle-like orange locks — is a regular feature in their class.