

When T.V. Sundaram Iyengar operated the first bus service in Tamil Nadu

With the money saved from a timber business, Sundaram Iyengar registered a company in 1911 and started South India's first passenger bus service in 1912. The buses ran on the Madurai, Thanjavur and Pudukottai routes, and the services were known for punctuality

Sangeetha Kandavel

TVS is synonymous with its two-wheelers – but it would interest readers to know that the first vehicle associated with the company was a bus in 1912. This was the first passenger bus service in Tamil Nadu.

During his visit to Madras, the group founder, T.V. Sundaram Iyengar, happened to hear a speech by Eardley Norton, a well-known lawyer, on entrepreneurship. This speech inspired Iyengar. He forayed into entrepreneurship and traded in timber. But he failed. He then worked for the Railways in Tiruchchi and Thanjavur before joining a bank.

Starting out as a clerk

“When he was employed as a clerk in the Bank of Madras (the Imperial Bank as it was then called), he was due for promotion to the post of ‘cash keeper’. That was in 1908 when his father passed away, and he had to go on leave to perform the last rites. On resuming duty, he found that the vacancy had been filled. Disappointed that he was denied promotion, he resigned the job and started a timber business again, with the money he had inherited from his father. Within four years, he earned a good reputation in this business. He became known at this time as ‘Marakkadai Sundaram Iyengar’ (timber merchant Sundaram Iyengar),” according to details documented in the book *Nuts and Bolts of Excellence-Fifty Years of Sundram Fasteners*, by historian V. Sriram.

With the money saved from the timber business, he started a bus service, in collaboration with Khan Bahadur Khadar Nawaz Khan Sahib, a local businessman and philanthropist.

Senior business journalist Sushila Ravindranath, in her book, *Surge*:



This man helped start a revolution in automotive transport in 1912

He was the first T.V.S. passenger



T. V. Sundaram Iyengar & Sons Private Limited, Madurai

45 years ago, it needed as much courage to travel in a bus as was needed to run it! The confidence of our first passenger, who boarded the bus ignoring the warnings of the timid, is the bedrock on which TVS builds its institution.

Today, TVS, with its several units, meets the increasing demands of the automotive industry in all its aspects in South India. As in 1912, it is the confidence of the customer that sustains its progress.

T. V. S. UNITS INCLUDE		
T. V. SUNDARAM IYENGAR & SONS PRIVATE LIMITED, Madurai	SOUTHERN ROADWAYS PRIVATE LIMITED, Madurai	SUNDARAM INDUSTRIES PRIVATE LIMITED, Pudukottai-Madurai
Motor Vehicle Division, Automobile Engineering & Body Section	Franchise & Retail Road Transport Undertaking	Tire Retention
MADRAS AUTO SERVICE PRIVATE LIMITED, Madurai	SUNDARAM MOTORS PRIVATE LIMITED, Madurai	THE MADRAS MOTOR INSURANCE COMPANY LIMITED, Madurai
Distribution of Motor Parts & Accessories	Distributors: Fire, Fireworks, Fertilizers, Motor Oils & Fertilizers, Tyres	SUNDARAM FINANCE PRIVATE LIMITED, Madurai

INDIA MOTOR PARTS & ACCESSORIES PRIVATE LTD. Madurai-2
Specialists of Old parts and accessories for all India.

Ushering in innovation: An advertisement that the company placed in *The Hindu*.

Tamil Nadu's Growth Story, notes that Iyengar registered a company in 1911 and started South India's first passenger bus service in 1912.

Family members whom *The Hindu* spoke to recalled the buses ran on the Madurai, Thanjavur and Pudukottai routes. The service was known for

punctuality. “Its efficiency and customer service were legendary and people are believed to have set their watches by the bus timings,” says Ms. Ravindranath in her book.

A source associated with TVS Group recollected an anecdote: the Kanchi seer Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati once woke up at 4 a.m. at Pudukottai, while his assistant was asleep. When the assistant apologised and wondered how the seer had woken up, he said he had heard the sound of the TVS bus passing the ashram every day at 4 a.m. – a testimony to TVS operating its bus service on time every day.

The TVS founder was also known for his innovative ideas. For instance, he himself took up the responsibility of maintaining the bus routes. Mr. Sriram, in the book, says that initially young boys were employed to collect horseshoes and nails lying on the roads where the TVS buses plied to prevent damage to the tyres. This activity was modernised later. A vehicle fitted with a magnet on its under-carriage was introduced to pick up all the iron items that could damage the tyres. This ensured that the wear and tear of the buses was minimised and the service adhered to its legendary time schedules.

“Passengers who were spared the ordeal of getting down and pushing the buses when they stopped, a frequent occurrence in rival services, gave TVS the ultimate compliment. The three letters of the company expanded to *Thalla Vendam Sir* [pushing not required],” according to the details in the book.

Gopal Srinivasan, chairman and managing director of TVS Capital Fund, said, “There are three lessons that one can learn from him [Sundaram Iyengar] – the ability to take risk, he did not know whether this would succeed or not, but he



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GOPAL SRINIVASAN,
CMD, TVS Capital Fund

wanted to experiment. The second thing is he was ambitious and wanted to make a difference to society. And third, he was focussed on customer delight.”

R. Dinesh, executive vice-chairman, TVS Supply Chain Solutions, said, “Innovation was always at the core of TVS right from starting our first bus service; be it the time-bound operation of buses or sending a magnet-fitted pilot vehicle that would pick up the remains of horse-shoes and nails on the road so that vehicles can run on time or providing meals to long-journey passengers; innovation was part of our DNA.”

The first set of buses that TVS ran were imported. Though the ticket prices could not be ascertained, family members said food was included in the ticket. And this is a tradition which TVS Group follows even today, providing food to its employees at a subsidised rate. The bus business wound up in a few years after which Iyengar opened a shop where he repaired bicycles and sold automobile tyres and accessories. In 1922, General Motors gave him the sole dealership for all its vehicles in South India.

Details on the TVS website show the group ventured into transport services again in 1946 and set up Southern Roadways in Madurai. It soon became the country's largest goods transport fleet in the private sector. The Passenger Transport Division was nationalised by the Tamil Nadu government in 1972.



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