

'At heart, each of us is a mathematician'

Prashanth G N , May 19, 2010, 12:00am IST

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Marcus du Sautoy is the Charles Simonyi professor for the public understanding of science and professor of mathematics at the University of Oxford, succeeding Richard Dawkins. He's also a popular TV personality bringing science to the general audience. He has appeared on several radio and TV channels worldwide and is a prolific author. In Bangalore recently, he spoke to **Prashanth G N** about mathematics and life:

What is the importance of mathematics in everyday life?

Mathematics hides beneath the surface of every action we undertake and behind every technology we use. You need maths to build codes, to change voice to electrical signals on mobiles, for Google to search and retrieve precise answers, to buy books through credit cards, to predict climate change and predict projections in cricket score. What's the Duckworth-Lewis method all about?

How does mathematics play a role in our actions like washing vessels, cleaning the car or dusting windows?

Very simple. Maths brings a pattern to all our actions on any given day. A close look at our actions reveals patterns and a structure to everything - this is nothing but maths. At heart, each of us is a mathematician looking for patterns, structures, connections everyday.

What should one do to be good at maths?

It's a combination of two things being disciplined and being imaginative. Be careful at every step but also be a dreamer. Plan but think out of the box, think natural.

What are the advantages of being good at mathematics?

An analytical brain can get out of any situation. The ability to sort out specific elements in a complex network is what makes one different. A good mathematician can understand complex business plans, work out the logic of laws and regulations and be a good lawyer, be a contributor to medicine, help to analyse the mind... A mathematician finds short cuts in a maze. Short cuts make for efficiency as you arrive at a given point the quickest way possible.

Mathematics is connected to things as far apart as biology and the stock exchange...

Yes. Maths will tell you how the heart works. Chaos theory, for instance, is used to develop pacemakers for the heart. Maths will also map the brain, tell you how it is structured. Maths will also help you make tonnes of money on the stock exchange. You just have to get everything right about hedge funding.

What are students looking at new theories or money on the exchange?

Many students are deeply interested in theory and the basics. Without basic mathematics, you don't get breakthroughs. Maths buffs could get into applications, make money and plough it back into the basics. That'd be good for maths.

What in mathematics has been your major passion?

Prime numbers. I've always wondered why prime numbers get rare as you go higher and higher and why there is a lot of distance between one prime number and the next on an increasing scale. This is one of the unresolved mysteries of mathematics. I was in India to talk to top mathematicians on how best we could understand the phenomenon.

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