

After Lehman Brothers and StanChart, it's DMK time!

Why is an NRI banker with an MBA from MIT canvassing votes in Madurai?



IMAGE: Palanivel Thiagarajan has a ready smile, and seems earnest to connect with voters. Atop the jeep is his wife Margaret alias Meenakshi and his son. All photographs: Saisuresh Sivaswamy/Rediff.com

Palanivel Thiagarajan is perhaps the most unusual candidate in Tamil Nadu.

The 49 year old is highly educated -- an engineering graduate from the Regional Engineering College Tiruchi, has a master's and a PhD in cognitive processing and computer interface from

the State University of New York and an MBA from MIT's Sloan School of Management -- was an American Green Card holder, having lived in that country for two decades, and although not germane, has an American wife.

You wonder why such a person, who could have had the pick of corporate top jobs after his stint as an investment banker at Lehman Brothers and then Standard Chartered Bank, would choose to come back to India and enter the murky world of politics.

Tamil politics, at that, which at times gives the impression of being murkier than the rest.

"My father P T R Palanivel Rajan was a minister in the DMK (*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*) government (*who died in 2006, soon after taking the oath of office*)," says Thiagarajan. "My grandfather (*P T Rajan*), a member of the Justice Party, was chief minister of the Madras presidency. Given this lineage, I knew I had to come back to serve the public."

"It was never a question of if I, but when I would choose to come back," he says.

As evidenced by his Facebook page, Thiagarajan leads a very organised campaign, doing the right things such as hugging kids, visiting hospitals, undertaking a padyatra through his constituency, Madurai Central.

And on Friday, May 13, evening, he, his wife and two children in tow along with party workers took out a motorcade in R V Nagar, around the Mathi theatre.

The DMK candidate rode in an open jeep along with his wife Margaret alias Meenakshi, his two sons Palani and Vel, and local party workers. Madurai is famous for its Meenakshi temple, the centrepiece of the city, as well as Thiagarajan's constituency, and his wife's name will no doubt ring a positive bell among voters.

As usual with such convoys, the jeep also had a town-crier announcing the candidate's arrival through the PA system, mouthing the usual lines talking about the nominee.

"Ungal veettu pillai, panbaalar PTRin magan, Thiagarajan ungal idam vote kekka varugirar, avar kudumbathodu varugirar, manaiivi Margaret endra Meenakshi, pillaigal Palaniyul Vel Thiagarajanudan udan varugirar (the lad from your own home, PTR's son, is coming to seek your votes, accompanied by his wife Margaret alias Meenakshi and his two sons, Palani and Vel)

"Ungal ponnana vaakkugalai Udayasuriyan chinnathukku aliyungal (Please cast your golden vote for the Rising Sun symbol)," the announcer said through the time we ran alongside the jeep through the congested bylanes of Madurai.

The candidate himself said nothing apart from greeting his constituents with folded hands symbolising 'Vanakkam' and flashing his innocent smile.

The baby-faced Thiagarajan comes across as someone sincere and earnest to connect with voters. Perhaps conscious of his Tamil laced with an American accent in the capital of ancient Tamil culture, he chooses not to say anything himself.



IMAGE: Dressed in the DMK attire, Thiagarajan listen to voters' problems and replies politely with folded hands, but at no point does he get down from his vehicle to mingle with the crowds.

Marching alongside was a group of young boys from the DMK and its alliance parties waving their respective party flags. The announcer continuously chided these young boys, "Stop waving

those flags so close to the jeep, you are blocking the view, the people cannot see the candidate, why don't you go a little ahead?"

The campaign on Friday evening seemed to have only one aim, and that was to showcase the candidate's family to the people of Madurai Central.

As is common in Tamil Nadu, Thiagarajan received innumerable *ponnadais* (shawls) on the way, as did his sweet family which accepted the shawls with wide smiles. The wife and sons were clearly amazed at the reception and were clearly enjoying every minute of it.

Dressed in a *salwar-kameez* (a departure from the *selai* (sari) we heard being discussed earlier in the candidate's home), Margaret alias Meenakshi, a qualified engineer who gave up her career to power her husband's, would do the *Vanakkam* sign, wave to the crowds, and played the perfect politician's wife.

Thiagarajan himself was dressed in the party attire. White shirt, a white *angavastram* with borders in the party colours of red and black strung on his shoulders, and wearing what is known locally as *kara veshti* (the Tamil white dhoti with the borders in DMK colours).

As the small motorcade -- comprising just the jeep, with two vehicles trailing behind -- passed by with its announcements, people on the streets stopped to watch the spectacle. Those on the balconies would wave at it, with the family waving back.

The children are named after Thiagarajan's father, Palanivel Rajan, with one called Palani and the other Vel. To keep the family connection alive, the announcer kept repeating the names of the candidate, his wife and sons as well as PTR.



IMAGE: From left, Margaret, children Palani and Vel, clearly amazed at all the attention, and Palanivel Thiagarajan. The children are named after their late grandfather.

At many places where the jeep would halt, people asked Thiagarajan questions, some told him their problems, and he replied politely. But as long as we were around, at no place along the way did he take the mike in his own hands, or get down to mingle with the crowds.

The Congress is the DMK's junior alliance partner in this election, contesting from 41 seats after weeks of haggling. A group of Congress party workers were also canvassing for Thiagarajan in the same area at the same time and, perhaps indicative of what lies ahead, did not join his campaign trail but marched off in the opposite direction.

The jeep he was travelling in was packed with party workers, all eager to be seen with the rising star in the party firmament. At certain points some of them got down and others would get on board; a planned exercise in which local leaders accompany the candidate when he was in their area.

Thiagarajan was sweating profusely even though the sun had set. He kept wiping his face, the innocent smile not revealing any discomfort with the summer heat. "Four more points to go," he told us from above.

With a day to go for campaigning to end, it was the last lap and Thiagarajan was giving it his all. A corporate top gun in his earlier avatar, he is used to doing things in an organised manner, and his election campaign, usually reflective of the hurly-burly of Indian life, was also being run in the same way.

The campaign trail on Friday evening was clearly to pitch him not only as a family man but also that his family was behind him solidly in his political ambitions, and as a candidate who would stay in their midst and not run away to another country at the first opportunity.

Going by the number of selfie-seekers who flocked his jeep, the intention was clearly achieved.