

Unlike a politician

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FROM A RICH LINEAGE: Dr. Palanivel Thiagarajan, MLA with his family | Photo Credit: S.

James

Dr.Palanivel Thiagarajan is not your run-of-the-mill politician. Highly educated and a rich scion of one of the most respected and legendary political families of Tamil Nadu, he is possessed with love for public policies and service. He shares with Metroplus what makes him what he is

That he chooses to be a people-oriented leader – much like his father, the late P T R Palanivel Rajan and grandfather P T Rajan – is evident from the moment you step inside his sprawling ancestral house in Chokkikulam. Whenever Dr.Palanivel Thiagarajan, the 51-year-old MLA from Madurai Central, comes to his home in the temple town during weekends, the place bustles with visitors, friends, members of his extended family, informed and helpful cadre of staff, volunteers and supporters.

If enthusiasm and involvement is a measure, it shows in the deep level support for Thiagarajan. “Majority of the people who worked with my father in the DMK are now working with me,” he says, fully aware of his lineage and the legacy that he wears it with utmost responsibility and humility.

“My father had a huge capacity for conversing with people. I have great empathy as a trader, banker, consultant, lecturer, technical person having studied, lived and worked in the US for 20 years. The emotional connect with the people, I am still reaching there,” he is candid. If his family background gives him the privileged identity and makes him different, it is also Thiagarajan’s ability to adapt and absorb that gives him a clear edge over today’s politicians.

For someone who wanted to study commerce and fix the ancestral estates neglected for decades especially after learning that his wealthy landlord family had not acquired any property after 1895, Thiagarajan obeyed his father to do engineering. He made a leap from NIT Trichy to the State University of New York where he completed Master’s in Operations Research and doctorate in Applied computers. This was followed by MBA in Finance from the Sloan School of Management at MIT where Nobel laureate and renowned Italian economist Franco Modigliani was his teacher.

“In the US, nobody knew me and I was free. I made best use of the opportunities and experiences that came my way,” says Thiagarajan, who at the turn of the millennium turned into a hot shot investment banker with the Lehmann Brothers and later with Standard Chartered in Singapore. Decoding the complexities of money markets across 55 countries and getting exposed to a different spectrum of ideas, narratives and perspectives put him on a high.

From cracking balance sheets of high profile companies to returning to peoples’ complaints about unrepaired roads and water shortage do not unnerve him. Keen to implement what he learnt abroad, Thiagarajan brings his urbane civilised nature into the running of the system here.

Even if his father’s demise brought him back to India in 2007 and to politics in 2016, Thiagarajan says he knew he had to return to what his ancestors stood for and did and would have wanted him to do. “I have no guilt or regret for following my passion but always felt a weight at the back of my mind. Today, I have no unfulfilled obligation.”

Check him out on dynastic politics and he says, “Dynasty politics can be practised in multiple ways. I am a beneficiary of legacy but you cannot accuse me of coming here out of any need. I am a self-made rich man and financially secure for retirement. I have been blessed in many ways and I have the obligation of following the footsteps of my grandfather and father with a sincere desire to help people. If I don’t, it makes me selfish.” And he is also clear that if he fails at this job, he will not return here. “I have the out option. My education and training will take me somewhere. I am not dependent on politics to make money. I am still 10 years ahead of the curve with my competence, talents and skills alive.”

Blessed with a pleasing demeanour and cool confidence, he adds class and sanity to local politics while blending modernity with legacy. He cuts an incongruous figure and has changed the nature of debates in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. His openness and easy accessibility endures him to people and he loves to share stories about his father and grandfather because he believes it is the punniyam of his forefathers that gives him such an enriching life. “I need to repay their goodwill by working for the people and likewise it is my job to keep the ramp for my sons.”

But clearly he would want his sons Palani, 12, and Vel, 10, studying at The American School in Chennai, to find a passion and pursue it first. “Politics is a hard business to break into”, he says, and none other than his American wife, Margaret, understands it better. “I want to make sure that our sons imbibe the right values and at least one of them carries forward the legacy,” she says and fondly remembers her father-in-law who taught her to break coconuts. “He was such a big man and yet so humble and approachable. He loved to crack jokes and had a nice laugh.”



FROM A RICH LINEAGE: Dr. Palanivel Thiagarajan, MLA and his wife Margaret Thiagarajan
| Photo Credit: [Photo: S. James](#)

With her mother-in-law, Rukmini Thiagarajan, she loves the kitchen conversations and has picked up the art of running big Indian households, the skills of making dosais and vadais and the morning pujais at Meenakshi Temple once a month when she comes with her boys to Madurai. She dresses in a sari and takes on her adopted name Meenakshi to do the rituals. “I no longer feel like an outsider.”

With Thiagarajan shuttling between Chennai, where he attends the Assembly and Madurai, where he reaches out to his voters, Margaret lives in Chennai with the boys picking up a smattering of Tamil and moving around with the locals to do the odd charitable jobs. The love for animals is what the family shares and have adopted stray pups, three of them in Chennai and one in Madurai.

The values imbibed and imparted come by honing one's faculties by study and reflection. Even as Thiagarajan chooses to devote himself to public service, he is a thorough gentleman first. His diligent attention to duties and consideration and respect for others, including political opponents, and their points of view set him apart. He is a rare politician who says, "You can't just live for yourself. People should know you can do better."

QUOTE:

Arranged marriages are based on status, wealth and lineage and I had lot of pressure but outlasted it searching for character and capability. As the only child and hailing from a political family focussed on social justice, I always knew what I had to do. But as the youngest of six children from a small village in New York State, it was Margaret's instinctive trait to help and care for others that was the biggest decider. My parents were discerning enough to understand the value of a person over and above religion, caste and culture. I feel lucky. – Palanivel Thiagarajan

I can't pretend that I even understand the rich legacy he carries on his shoulders. But he does a wonderful job separating his political and family life. He is the one standing up for people and I only want to be of help to him. We respect each other and I love to hear the stories he shares after a day's work. I know his job is challenging but I never see him stressed-out. He is always at peace and confident – Margaret Thiagarajan