

## A weighty lineage rests easy on his shoulders



Political passion Palanivel Thiagarajan, DMK candidate for the Madurai Central constituency BIJOY GHOSH

Father and grandfather of the DMK's Palanivel Thiagarajan, a former investment banker, played a key role in TN politics

Palanivel Thiagarajan is aware of his lineage and the legacy that comes with it. His father, the late PTR Palanivel Rajan, was a respected Speaker of the Tamil Nadu Assembly and a minister for a brief while before his sudden death in 2006.

His grandfather PT Rajan, a doyen of the Justice Party — the ideological forerunner to the DMK — was a chief minister of the Madras Presidency.

Thiagarajan has impeccable individual credentials to boot. He holds an engineering graduate from NIT-Tiruchi, a Master's in Operations Research and a doctorate in the then emerging field of computer interface design, both from the State University of New York, followed by an MBA in Finance from the Sloan School of Management at MIT.

Thiagarajan spent close to two decades as an investment banker in Lehman Brothers and then in Standard Chartered, before following in his father's footsteps.

He is the DMK's candidate for Madurai Central constituency, from where his father got elected in 2006.

Following his father's death in May, within a month of getting elected and a few days after he was sworn in as minister, the party offered Thiagarajan the seat in the by-election. Then,

Thiagarajan, who was in the US with Lehman, could not take up the offer due to personal and professional commitments. But, he knew that following in his father's footsteps was his destiny.

### **Counting blessings**

Talking to *BusinessLine* in his palatial ancestral home in the heart of Madurai, Thiagarajan goes further and says: "...not doing it, would make me a very, very small person indeed. I have been blessed in many ways, starting from where I was born."

He points out that he has been extremely successful in whatever he has tried his hand at, and "I know that cannot be because I am so uniquely talented and hard working." There are, he says, many talented and hard working people, but "the outcome is determined by divine things beyond your control."

He uses the Tamil word — *punniyam* — or good deeds of his forefathers that gave him this life. He says his life so far has been outstandingly successful and financially enriching.

"...that must be because of the good deeds of my ancestors. For me, not repaying them by honouring their memory to come back to continue this trail of goodwill to my children would be irresponsible and petty. I have to be a really short-sighted, selfish human being to not try to do this," he says.

What is his commitment to his constituency? He is quite candid when he admits that everything he has done so far has been a breeze compared to what he is going to take up. But he is undaunted.

He has the operational and execution capabilities to solve complex problems, having worked in large corporations and with even bigger clients. Getting the funds is not a problem, provided the plan is good.

He will draw up a master plan for Madurai to restore it to its ancient glory. The perfect scenario for him would be one where he gets elected to the Assembly, the DMK forms the government and also wins the Madurai civic body elections. "If I get these three in a row, then I am very confident that I can fundamentally resolve many of what I think are structural problems."

He promises his voters that he will make their lives noticeably better, if he has these three things and the city would have changed for the better in 10 years. In many ways, he says, in parts of

Madurai — barring the pucca houses that it has — the poor live like those in the Kibera slum near Nairobi, without any basic amenities. “An old woman told me she has to walk a kilometre to use the toilet,” he points out.

His message to his voters: “I am like my father. I am a self-made man. I am a rich man. I have not come here to earn off you, I have come here to help you.” He goes further and says: “If it turns out I cannot do it, don’t worry, I won’t come back here in five years and ask you, because it means I am a failure at this job. For people who have only this job, they have to come back to you. I have been successful as a lecturer, consultant, banker... there are enough jobs for me to do. Why should I do what I fail at and fail you?”

Married to an American, Thiagarajan, 50, is a father of two boys, aged 11 and 9. Has his wife got used to the fact that he may become an MLA?

She was part of the family when his father was alive, so she knows what it is like, he says. His wife and children live in Chennai, where his boys attend school, and they come during weekends to lend him emotional support and to campaign.

### **Hi-tech tools**

Thiagarajan says the number of voters in his constituency has increased from 1.32 lakh in 2006, when his father was elected, to about 2.33 lakh now. He is employing innovative methods — running a call centre, running a missed call instant survey and even a CRM tool to map complaints and the complainants — to reach out to the voters, apart from having party volunteers on the ground doing door-to-door canvassing.

He says if he gets elected, he will go and tell his *thalaivar* (leader) that every DMK MLA should have a call centre and missed call campaign to reach out to voters and record their grievances.