

**T**WENTY-EIGHT years ago, I got my first two-wheeler. It was an old MAC 175, made by the now-defunct Automobile Products of India, the first company to bring scooters to India.

Some people told me then that MAC stood for the initials of Mr M.A. Chidambaram, the founder of the company. Since those were not the days of the Internet, I could not verify it. Then, two weeks ago, I met Mr Ashwin Muthiah who confirmed it. He is the grandson of the late Mr Chidambaram and scion of one of south India's big business houses.

Mr Muthiah is now managing most of the family business, with his father A.C. Muthiah gradually easing into a supervisory role. But what is unique is that the younger Muthiah runs the global operations of the M.A. Chidambaram group from his office in Singapore – remarkable when 70 per cent of the group revenue is generated from businesses in India.

"I wanted to pursue international business and I had to choose a place to anchor myself to do that. We chose Singapore because it was very much like a home away from home, absolutely suitable for Tamil-speaking Indians, safe environment, very good for the family and not too far from Chennai. It also gave a lot of neutrality to position yourself and do business in other parts of the world. I could have gone to Dubai on the other side but then it would have been totally new to me," says Mr Muthiah, 44, sitting in his office in Suntec City.

The businesses include integrated logistics, engineering services, fertilisers, petrochemicals, trading and shipping and offshore services.

His Sical Logistics and Singapore's PSA International jointly operate the Tuticorin container terminal and until recently another terminal at Chennai port, which Sical sold back to PSA.

The Singapore PR's latest venture is all set to take off here. He is investing more than \$200 million in a petrochemical plant – a Singapore-India-Japan venture – which will produce paraffin for the detergent industry and provide employment for almost 100 Singaporeans.

His new venture apart, Mr Muthiah emphasised why he chose to make Singapore his base since 1998. For one, he says, a family office here helps him make long term plans for the family as a free thinker.

"The plan is not to be all the while India-centric. India is a large market and a growing one and we have to remain focused... I can use Singapore to grow my business in India and also to project my business in India to other countries," he says in a calm and assured manner – a demeanour he exhibited throughout our conversation.

That could come from the confidence his parents gave him.

"In family business when new generations come, the previous generation will have to empower and give trust and confidence to their successors. That is very important to maintain harmony and growth of the family business. That is something my father has enjoyed from his father and

I have enjoyed from my father. So I am very free to think for my companies and I am very free to grow my companies



**ASHWIN MUTHIAH**  
Principal investor,  
Proteus  
Petrochemicals

## Business in the blood

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– Mr Muthiah on setting up office here

PHOTO COURTESY OF  
ASHWIN MUTHIAH

wherever I want to," he says of the trust he gained.

It is only in sports that Mr Muthiah has steered differently from the path taken by his father and grandfather, both of whom were presidents of the powerful Board for Control of Cricket in India. The stadium which hosts international cricket events in Chennai is named after his grandfather.

Mr Muthiah did play cricket in his younger days. He was a leg spinner who turned his arm over for his school (Don Bosco) and in the city's fifth division league. But his interest shifted to polo and he set up his own team called MAC in Chennai. He got professionals from the UK to play for him and even imported ponies from Argentina.

Once he entered the field of business, the former Loyola College student who went on to do an MBA from Philadelphia University switched to sports he could pursue for a longer period. He took to cycling and running. These days he keeps himself fit with regular workouts and light weight training.

Cycling on Singapore roads, he says, was causing his wife Valli a lot of worry and so he couldn't actively pursue it. She is someone who, according to him, is a great support to him both personally and professionally.

"She is someone with whom I can talk about my good and bad things. She has an innate flair for design and keen eye for art and all things aesthetic," says the father of two girls. Their daughters Devaki, 15, and Alagu, 10, are in Class 10 and 5 respectively at United World College.

The children enjoy life here and have "international" friends, something he says they would not have had in India. "They have a lot of Indian friends but they also have international friends. And I think that makes them more worldly."

Over and above his office and home interests, Mr Muthiah has one other job. He is also the honorary consul general of the Philippines in Chennai. This was a position he was appointed to in 1993. His grandfather, who held the position, recommended him to the post when he retired.

That is not the only thing that he inherited apart from the business acumen. His family is known for its philanthropy. His great-grandfather Sir Rajah Annamalai Chettiar set up the Annamalai University and founded the Tamil Isai Sangam to promote music in Tamil. His grandfather contributed substantially to the Voluntary Health Service and supported deserving institutions in the field of education, medical and cultural activities.

"My parents have a foundation which supports a lot of temples. They have done a lot of renovation and spent money to rejuvenate old temples and construct facilities at old temples. In a small way I have brought that here by supporting a few Hindu temples here. I thought that is some way in which we can bring our social commitment here to Singapore and I intend to continue doing it here," says Mr Muthiah.

When I ask him whether his daughters show interest in the family business, he smiles and says Devaki is showing a lot of promise: "She is doing business studies in school and she looks promising. Living in a family when day in and day out there is some conversation on business, it sort of gets naturally into them and I think they will not find it difficult to adapt to it."

It seems it is not just business that runs in the family blood. Confidence, too, in their children.

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