Kuwait Research Journal of
Education and Literature (KRJEL)

ISSN Print: 2790-6469 | ISSN Online : 2790-6450 Open Access

Edappadi K. Palaniswami: Political Journey from a Common Man to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu

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Article History
Received: 01.06.2026
Revised : 15.06.2026
Accepted: 01.07.2026
Published: 04.07.2026

DOI:10.61705/KRJEL.5.3.2026.1.9

Keywords: Edappadi K. Palaniswami, Early Life, Political Growth, Political Challenges, Leadership Qualities, Governance Efficiency, Public Welfare, COVID-19 Management, AIADMK, Tamil Nadu Politics.

Abstract: Edappadi K. Palaniswami is a prominent political leader in the history of Tamil Nadu and one of the most influential figures in the state's political landscape. Rising from an ordinary background, he became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, marking a significant achievement in Indian political history. Popularly known as EPS, Edappadiyar, Puratchi Tamilar, Farmer, the Black Man of the Iron Land, Common Man Chief Minister, and the Fidel Castro of Tamil Nadu, he has earned widespread recognition among the people of Tamil Nadu.

EPS is regarded as the political successor to the AIADMK's legendary leaders, Puratchi Thalaivar M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) and Puratchi Thalaivi Amma J. Jayalalithaa. Following the demise of Jayalalithaa, he established strong leadership within the AIADMK through key leadership attributes such as self-confidence, effective administrative capability, a welfare-oriented approach, party discipline, and decisive decision-making skills. These qualities have contributed significantly to his emergence as a prominent leader within the party.

Under his leadership, the AIADMK, which comprises approximately 1.5 crore party members and supporters, has continued to function as a major political force in Tamil Nadu. This study aims to analyze his early life, political growth, leadership journey, political challenges, governance efficiency, and public welfare initiatives. Particular emphasis is placed on his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the 7.5% medical reservation policy for government school students, women's safety initiatives, and his strategies for overcoming political challenges.

The study further examines his leadership and administrative management during his tenure as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and highlights the significant transformations he brought to the state's political environment. Finally, it explores his enduring influence and leadership role among the AIADMK cadre and supporters.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Edappadi K. Palaniswami is one of the most influential political leaders in Tamil Nadu and served as the **seventh Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 2017 to 2021**. He was born on **12 May 1954** to **Karuppa Gounder** and **Thavasiyammal** in **Siluvampalayam, Salem District, Madras State (now Tamil Nadu), India**. He was the youngest son in his family. Notably, when Edappadi K. Palaniswami was born in 1954, **K. Kamaraj**, often regarded as a kingmaker in Indian politics, was serving as the Chief Minister of the then Madras State.

He has two siblings—an elder brother and an elder sister. He is married to **Mrs. Radha Palaniswami**, and they have a son, **Mr. K.P. Mithun Kumar**.

Early Life and Education

Edappadi K. Palaniswami completed his elementary education at the **Government Primary School in Koneripatti Village, Salem District**. During his school days, he travelled approximately five kilometres daily by bicycle from his home to the school. He pursued his secondary education at the **Government Higher Secondary School, Bhavani**, where he studied from the sixth standard through the SSLC level. During this period, he travelled nearly fifteen kilometres each day to attend school.

After completing his schooling, he enrolled at **Sri Vasavi College**, where he pursued the **Pre-University Course (PUC)** and later pursued a **Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) degree in Zoology**. During his college years, he actively participated in sports and was known as a talented basketball player.

From a young age, Palaniswami was a devoted admirer of **Puratchi Thalaivar M.G. Ramachandran (MGR)**. At that time, cinema theatres were limited in the Edappadi region. Consequently, he often listened to MGR's songs on the radio and watched his films through projector screenings. He became deeply familiar with MGR's songs and movies and was greatly inspired by MGR's personality, leadership, and public service. Over time, his admiration evolved into a strong sense of devotion, which significantly influenced his political aspirations and future career.

2. POLITICAL CAREER

Puratchi Thalaivar M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) founded the **All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)** on **17 October 1972**. Inspired by MGR's ideology and leadership, **Edappadi K. Palaniswami** joined the AIADMK as a volunteer at the age of 18. In **1974**, he was appointed as the **Branch Secretary of Koneripatti Village**, marking the beginning of his active political journey.

After completing his college education, Palaniswami entered the jaggery trading business in and around Salem. Due to his involvement in this trade, local people affectionately referred to him as the "**Jaggery Man**." Meanwhile, he remained actively engaged in political activities and grassroots organizational work.

On **30 June 1977**, MGR formed the first AIADMK government in Tamil Nadu. During this period, Palaniswami continued to strengthen the party's presence in Salem district through dedicated service and organizational activities. Recognizing his commitment and leadership abilities, the party entrusted him with greater responsibilities. In **1982**, he was appointed as the **Union Secretary of Edappadi Union**. In **1985**, he established the **Jayalalithaa Peravai** in Salem district and actively organized public meetings and party functions along with senior AIADMK leaders, including Transport Minister **S. Muthusamy**. His dedication, hard work, and organizational skills earned him considerable respect among party cadres and leaders. Consequently, his name gained recognition at the AIADMK headquarters.

In **1986**, Palaniswami contested his first election in the local body polls, further expanding his political experience.

Rise During the AIADMK Split

Following the demise of **M.G. Ramachandran** on **25 December 1987**, the AIADMK split into two factions: the **Jayalalithaa faction** and the **Janaki faction**. Palaniswami remained firmly loyal to **J. Jayalalithaa** and continued to work as a dedicated party cadre under her leadership.

At that time, Jayalalithaa enjoyed the support of only a limited number of legislators, while **V.N. Janaki Ramachandran** briefly served as Chief

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Minister. However, her government lasted only a short period before being dismissed by the Central Government, leading to the imposition of **President's Rule** in Tamil Nadu.

First Legislative Victory

The Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly elections were held on **21 January 1989**. The AIADMK contested the elections as two separate factions. Palaniswami sought the party nomination from the **Edappadi Assembly Constituency**, and his candidature was announced by **Puratchi Thalaivi J. Jayalalithaa** under the AIADMK (Jayalalithaa faction) symbol, the **"Cock"**.

Palaniswami won the election by a margin of **1,364 votes** against the DMK candidate **L. Palanisamy**. At the age of 35, he entered the **Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly** for the first time as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Following the election, the two AIADMK factions reunited under Jayalalithaa's leadership, restoring party unity.

Growth Within the Party

After assuming leadership of the united AIADMK, Jayalalithaa undertook efforts to strengthen the party organization and accommodate leaders from both factions. During this period, Palaniswami intensified his political activities and emerged as a committed organizational leader.
In the **1989 Parliamentary Elections**, held a few months after the Assembly elections, the **AIADMK–Congress alliance** won **38 out of 39 seats** in Tamil Nadu.

Recognizing his dedication and organizational capabilities, the party appointed him as the **Joint Secretary of Salem North District** in **1990**, and subsequently as the **District Secretary** in **1991**.

Second Term as MLA

The Tamil Nadu Assembly elections were held on **15 June 1991**. Palaniswami was once again nominated from the **Edappadi Constituency** and secured a decisive victory against **P. Kolandai Goundar** of the PMK with a substantial majority. Consequently, he entered the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly for a second term.

During this period, **J. Jayalalithaa's first government (1991–1996)** assumed office in Tamil Nadu. Palaniswami was entrusted with several important administrative responsibilities. He served as the **Chairman of the Temple Board** in **1992** and later as the **Chairman of the Salem District Aavin Milk Producers' Cooperative Union** in **1993**.

Electoral Setbacks and Resilience

Palaniswami lost the **1996 Assembly Election** from the same constituency. However, he remained committed to public service and party work. His perseverance was rewarded in the **1998 General Elections**, when he was elected as a **Member of Parliament (MP)** from the **Tiruchengode Constituency** to the **12th Lok Sabha**. He won by a significant margin against DMK candidate **K.P. Ramalingam**.

Although he subsequently lost the **1999** and **2004 Parliamentary Elections**, as well as the **2006 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election**, he continued to work tirelessly for the party. His political journey during this period exemplified resilience and determination in the face of electoral setbacks.

Reflecting this spirit, his career aligns with Abraham Lincoln's famous observation:

> *"My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure."*

Demonstrating unwavering commitment, Palaniswami continued his political efforts without becoming discouraged by temporary defeats. Recognizing his loyalty and organizational capabilities, **J. Jayalalithaa** appointed him as the **Propaganda Secretary of AIADMK** in **July 2006**, and subsequently elevated him as the **Organizing Secretary** in **August 2007**.

Cabinet Minister Period (2011–2017)

The **Fourteenth Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Election** was held on **13 April 2011**. Edappadi K. Palaniswami was re-elected from the **Edappadi Assembly Constituency**, securing approximately **104,586 votes** and defeating the PMK candidate, **M. Karthi**. Following the formation of the AIADMK government under **Puratchi Thalaivi J. Jayalalithaa**, he was appointed as the **Minister for Highways and Minor Ports**.

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As Minister for Highways, Palaniswami played a significant role in the development and modernization of Tamil Nadu's road infrastructure. Several road expansion, bridge construction, and connectivity improvement projects were undertaken during his tenure, contributing to the state's economic growth and transportation efficiency.

In addition to his ministerial responsibilities, he served as the **District Secretary of the AIADMK Salem Suburban District** from **June 2011 to April 2022**. His effective organizational leadership and commitment to party development further strengthened his position within the AIADMK.

Recognizing his loyalty and administrative capabilities, the party appointed him as a **Member of the AIADMK Disciplinary Committee** in **2014**. His growing influence within the party organization reflected the confidence reposed in him by the party leadership.

In the **2016 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Election**, Palaniswami was once again elected from the **Edappadi Constituency**, securing approximately **98,703 votes** and defeating PMK candidate **N. Annadurai**. The AIADMK retained power, making history by becoming the first party in Tamil Nadu since 1984 to return to office consecutively.

Following the formation of the new government in **2016**, Palaniswami was entrusted with the important portfolio of **Minister for Public Works Department (PWD)**. In this capacity, he oversaw key infrastructure projects related to water resources, irrigation systems, dams, and public buildings across the state. His administrative performance in both the Highways and Public Works Departments enhanced his reputation as an efficient and result-oriented leader.

In the same year, he was appointed as the **Headquarters Secretary of the AIADMK**, further consolidating his position within the party hierarchy and preparing the ground for his subsequent rise to the highest office in the state.

This period (2011–2017) marked a crucial phase in Edappadi K. Palaniswami's political career, as he emerged as one of the most prominent leaders in the AIADMK through his administrative competence, organizational skills, and dedication to public service.

3. CHIEF MINISTERIAL TENURE (2017–2021)

Following the demise of **Puratchi Thalaivi J. Jayalalithaa** on **5 December 2016**, the AIADMK underwent a period of political transition. During this crucial phase, **Edappadi K. Palaniswami** was elected as the leader of the AIADMK Legislature Party and was subsequently chosen to serve as the **Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu**. Rising from a humble background, his elevation to the state's highest executive office was widely viewed as a remarkable achievement in Tamil Nadu politics.

Edappadi K. Palaniswami assumed office as the **Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on 16 February 2017**, along with a council of ministers. He also held charge of key portfolios, including the **Home, Prohibition, and Excise Departments**. Popularly known as **EPS** or **Edappadiyar**, he served as Chief Minister until **May 2021**.

His administration emphasized **agricultural development, educational advancement, industrial growth, infrastructure expansion, and public welfare**. The period of governance under his leadership is noted for the implementation of several policy initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of the people of Tamil Nadu. Particular attention was given to enhancing opportunities for students, strengthening healthcare services, supporting farmers, promoting industrial investment, and expanding social welfare measures.

4. MAJOR INITIATIVES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

(a) Education and Healthcare

7.5% Medical Reservation for Government School Students

One of the most significant policy initiatives of his administration was the introduction of a **7.5% internal reservation** for students from government schools in undergraduate medical admissions. The scheme was designed to improve access to medical education for students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and was widely regarded as a milestone in educational inclusion.

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Establishment of New Government Medical Colleges

His government initiated the establishment of **11 new Government Medical Colleges** across Tamil Nadu within a single academic year. This initiative significantly strengthened the state's healthcare infrastructure and expanded opportunities for medical education in underserved regions.

(b) Agriculture and Water Resource Management

Kudimaramathu Scheme

In **March 2017**, the government expanded and strengthened the **Kudimaramathu Scheme**, a participatory irrigation restoration program aimed at desilting, rehabilitating, and maintaining lakes, ponds, canals, and irrigation tanks across the state. The scheme contributed to improved water conservation and agricultural productivity.

Protected Special Agricultural Zone

Recognizing the importance of the Cauvery Delta region as Tamil Nadu's agricultural heartland, the government declared it a **Protected Special Agricultural Zone**. The policy sought to safeguard agricultural lands from industrial encroachment and protect the interests of farming communities.

Uzhavan Mobile Application

To support farmers through technology-driven services, the government launched the **Uzhavan Mobile Application**, providing access to information related to weather forecasts, crop insurance, subsidies, market prices, and agricultural advisories.

(c) Infrastructure and Economic Development

Industrial Investments and Employment Generation

Under his leadership, Tamil Nadu attracted significant domestic and international investments. Major companies, including **Pegatron**, **Ola Electric**, and **Amazon**, expanded their operations within the state. These investments contributed to industrial development, employment generation, and economic growth.

Economic Management During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the challenges posed by the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the government implemented measures to maintain economic stability, support public health systems, and attract foreign direct investment (FDI). The administration focused on balancing public health priorities with economic recovery efforts during this unprecedented period.

(d) Social Welfare and Administrative Reforms

Enhanced Maternity Assistance

The financial assistance provided to pregnant women under state welfare programs was increased from **₹12,000 to ₹18,000**, with the objective of improving maternal and child health outcomes among economically disadvantaged families.

Creation of New Districts

To improve administrative efficiency and facilitate better public service delivery, the government reorganized several administrative regions and created new districts, including **Chengalpattu, Kallakurichi, Ranipet, Tirupattur, and Tenkasi**. This initiative promoted decentralized governance and enhanced accessibility to government services.

Women's Safety Initiatives

The administration introduced **"Amma Patrol"** vehicles to strengthen the safety and security of women and children in public spaces. These patrol units were intended to improve law enforcement visibility and provide greater protection for vulnerable groups.

Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A defining challenge of Palaniswami's tenure was the outbreak of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. His government implemented a range of measures, including public health surveillance, testing and treatment facilities, quarantine management, and awareness campaigns. Special attention was given to healthcare preparedness, medical infrastructure, and welfare support for affected populations. The administration's response was aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic while ensuring continuity in governance and essential services.

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5. OTHER NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING THE CHIEF MINISTERIAL TENURE (2017–2021)

In addition to the major policy initiatives undertaken during his administration, several other welfare, agricultural, educational, healthcare, and infrastructure measures were implemented under the leadership of **Edappadi K. Palaniswami**. These initiatives contributed significantly to the socio-economic development of Tamil Nadu.

Agriculture and Rural Development

- Approximately **six lakh farmers** associated with **6,000 Farmer Producer Groups (FPGs)** benefited from the purchase of **25,228 agricultural machines** with financial support amounting to **₹300 crore**.
- A long-standing issue concerning the sharing of **Cauvery River water** witnessed institutional progress through the establishment of the **Cauvery Water Management Board** and the **Cauvery Water Regulation Committee**.
- The **Cauvery Delta Region** was declared a **Protected Special Agricultural Zone**, safeguarding agricultural lands and protecting farmers' interests.
- Under the **Kudimaramathu Scheme**, **5,586 water bodies** were desilted and restored at an expenditure of approximately **₹1,132 crore**, improving groundwater recharge and irrigation facilities.
- The government also undertook extensive restoration and maintenance of thousands of lakes, ponds, and irrigation tanks across Tamil Nadu.
- The **Athikadavu–Avinashi Project**, a long-awaited irrigation scheme, was implemented at a cost of **₹1,652 crore**, providing irrigation facilities to approximately **24,468 acres** of agricultural land.
- The **Uzhavan Mobile Application** was introduced to provide farmers with access to information on subsidies, weather forecasts, crop insurance, and agricultural services. The application has been utilized by more than **nine lakh farmers**.
- A large number of farmers were enrolled under the **Crop Insurance Scheme**, resulting in compensation benefits amounting to approximately **₹9,257 crore** over four years.

Women's Welfare and Empowerment

- Financial assistance of **₹25,000 and ₹50,000**, along with gold for the *Thali* (mangalsutra), was provided to support the marriages of approximately **12.51 lakh economically disadvantaged women**.
- Under the **Amma Two-Wheeler Scheme**, approximately **2.85 lakh working women** received a subsidy of **₹25,000** each, with total assistance amounting to **₹740 crore**.
- Maternity leave for women government employees was increased from **three months to nine months** with full salary and service benefits.
- **Fifty percent reservation for women** was implemented in local government bodies to promote greater political participation and leadership among women.
- Loan assistance amounting to approximately **₹81,052 crore** was extended to **45.77 lakh women** belonging to **3.32 lakh Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, contributing to women's economic empowerment.
- To improve the livelihoods of rural women, **111,444 dairy cows** and **5.29 million goats and sheep** were distributed under various welfare schemes.

Education and Youth Development

- The government provided **52.31 lakh free laptops** to students at a total cost of approximately **₹7,322 crore**, supporting digital learning and educational access.
- Around **59.77 lakh bicycles** were distributed to students over a ten-year period at a cost of **₹2,119 crore**, helping improve access to education.
- The government established **11 new Government Medical Colleges**, significantly expanding opportunities for medical education and healthcare services.
- **Twenty-one new multidisciplinary engineering and technical institutions** were established to strengthen higher education infrastructure.
- **Forty new Arts and Science Colleges** were opened across the state to enhance access to higher education.
- The government announced that it would bear the tuition fees of students admitted to medical

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colleges under the **7.5% reservation quota for government school students**.
- **Kalvi TV (Education Television)** was launched to provide educational content and learning support, particularly benefiting students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The annual income ceiling for eligibility under certain educational benefits for **Backward Classes (BC)** and **Most Backward Classes (MBC)** students was increased from **₹25,000 to ₹72,000**, enabling more students to access government assistance.

Healthcare and Social Welfare

- The **Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme** was enhanced by increasing the coverage limit from **₹2 lakh to ₹5 lakh**, benefiting economically vulnerable families.
- Approximately **2,000 Amma Mini Clinics** were established to provide accessible primary healthcare services, especially in underserved and rural areas.
- The **Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Benefit Scheme** was strengthened, increasing maternity assistance from **₹12,000 to ₹18,000** for eligible beneficiaries.
- During the COVID-19 lockdown period, approximately **2.1 crore family card holders** received essential commodities through the Public Distribution System (PDS) for four consecutive months.

Fisheries, Weavers, and Employment

- Financial assistance provided to fishermen during the annual fishing ban period was increased from **₹2,000 to ₹5,000**.
- Free electricity continued to be provided to approximately **2.38 lakh weavers**, supporting the traditional textile sector.
- To encourage sports participation and provide employment opportunities, **3% reservation** was introduced for sportspersons in government and public sector employment.
- Government employees received revised **Dearness Allowance (DA)** benefits in accordance with the recommendations of the **Seventh Central Pay Commission**.
- The retirement age of government employees was increased to **60 years**.

Administrative Reforms and Economic Development

- The **Global Investors Meet** attracted substantial investment commitments and was expected to generate approximately **83,837 employment opportunities** across various sectors.
- The Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC) upper age limits were revised for Group 1, 1-A, 1-B posts:
    - From **35 to 37 years** for candidates belonging to **SC, ST, MBC, BC, and DNC categories**.
    - From **30 to 32 years** for candidates in the general category.
- Responding to public demand, **Thaipusam** was declared a government holiday, recognizing its cultural and religious significance.

The administration of Edappadi K. Palaniswami (2017–2021) was characterized by a broad range of initiatives spanning agriculture, education, healthcare, women's empowerment, infrastructure development, social welfare, and economic growth. These measures aimed to improve public service delivery, enhance socio-economic opportunities, and strengthen the overall development framework of Tamil Nadu.

6. AWARDS AND HONORS

Edappadi K. Palaniswami has received recognition for his contributions to public administration and public service during his political career.

Honorary Doctorate (2019): In recognition of his significant contributions to public affairs and governance, Edappadi K. Palaniswami was awarded an **Honorary Doctorate** by the **Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute (Deemed to be University), Chennai**, in 2019.

Paul Harris Fellow Recognition (2020): On **11 July 2020**, he was conferred the prestigious **Paul Harris Fellow Recognition** by **The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, Chicago, USA**, in appreciation of his contributions to public affairs and public service.

These honors reflect the recognition accorded to Edappadi K. Palaniswami for his leadership,

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administrative achievements, and service to society.

7. POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Like many prominent political leaders, **Edappadi K. Palaniswami** encountered several challenges throughout his political career, particularly during periods of organizational transition and internal party developments. Following the demise of **Puratchi Thalaivi J. Jayalalithaa** in 2016, the AIADMK experienced a phase of political uncertainty, during which Palaniswami was required to navigate complex political circumstances while maintaining party unity and administrative stability.

Despite these challenges, he demonstrated resilience, determination, and leadership by steering both the government and the party through a period of significant transition. His political journey reflects his ability to address organizational issues, manage political pressures, and sustain governance during challenging times.

A key source of strength throughout his career has been the support of AIADMK party members, cadres, and supporters across Tamil Nadu. His long association with the party, beginning at the grassroots level, helped him establish strong connections with party workers and constituents. The confidence and trust reposed in him by many party members have contributed to his continued prominence within the AIADMK.

Supporters often regard Palaniswami as a leader who rose through the ranks of the party through dedication, perseverance, and organizational commitment. His leadership style, administrative experience, and ability to adapt to changing political circumstances have enabled him to remain an influential figure in Tamil Nadu politics.

His political career illustrates how effective leadership, organizational discipline, and strategic decision-making can help overcome challenges and sustain political relevance. Through his ability to manage difficult situations and maintain the confidence of party members and supporters, Edappadi K. Palaniswami has established himself as one of the notable leaders of contemporary Tamil Nadu politics.

8. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that **Edappadi K. Palaniswami** has been a significant and influential leader in contemporary Tamil Nadu politics. Through dedication, perseverance, and political commitment, he rose from a humble background to occupy the office of the **Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu**. His leadership qualities, including self-confidence, determination, administrative capability, decision-making skills, and people-oriented governance, contributed to his emergence as a prominent political figure in the state.

During his tenure, several welfare initiatives and developmental programs were implemented with the objective of improving the socio-economic conditions of the people, particularly those from economically disadvantaged sections of society. His administration focused on areas such as agriculture, education, healthcare, infrastructure development, women's welfare, and industrial growth, which contributed to the overall development of Tamil Nadu.

The study further highlights that Palaniswami's leadership demonstrated important characteristics associated with contemporary leadership theories, including resilience, organizational management, strategic decision-making, and public service orientation. His ability to navigate political challenges while maintaining administrative stability played a crucial role in his political journey.

Overall, Edappadi K. Palaniswami's political career represents an important chapter in the political history of Tamil Nadu, and his contributions to governance and public welfare continue to be recognized by many citizens, supporters, and political observers across the state.

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