Rajaji was born to Nallan Chakravarthy Iyengar in Thorapalli village in Hosur Taluk of Salem District on 8 December 1878. His parents named him as Rajagopalachari. He was not born in an affluent family but was born in a middle class family. He faced all risks cheerfully and underwent sufferings gracefully. Rajaji was born in a family, which not only accepted but also implemented various reforms in the caste and communal ridden society of India.

Rajaji had inherited a deep sympathy for the poor and the unfortunate, the lowly and the lost, from his father Chakravarthy Iyengar, a Sanskrit Scholar of the old school. The father of Rajaji freely mingled with the untouchable of his village, ever ready to help them with his advice and rendering them various services in an unostentatious manner. When the families of the so-called untouchables were in great distress Chakravarthy Iyengar was their only supporter and friend, for which he was ostracised by the Orthodox Hindus. This feeling for the friendless and forlorn ran in Rajaji’s blood.

With great difficulty the father educated his son in the local school. After completing his school education in his native village, Rajaji had his college studies in Bangalore. After securing his Degree Rajaji went to Madras and joined the Law Course. He got his Law Degree in 1900 and then went back
to his native district to start his career as a lawyer. There he conducted some cases himself. Very soon he made his mark in the profession and earned respect and recognition of the great Lawyer C.Vijayaraghava Chariar. He reached the top of his profession in 1900. Rajaji was married to Alamelu Ammal of Lakshmipuram village, Kuppam Taluk in Chittor District. He had three sons and two daughters. On 1915, his wife Alamelu died. Rajaji came to Madras and practiced in the Madras High Court. He undertook both Criminal and Civil Cases.

He then went back to his native district Salem and became the Chairman of the Salem Municipality in 1917. As Chairman he tried to break the Caste distinction and tried to practice his belief that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God. His liberal background and the teachings of Vivekananda inspired him to work for the removal of untouchability. However he was not opposed to the Varnashrama Dharma. In fact, he believed in it. His aim was to integrate the Harijans in the fold of Hindus, gradually but surely. He aimed to uplift Harijans socially and economically and bring about the integration of different Castes voluntarily without leaving behind any trace of bitterness or hatred between them.

When Gandhiji entered the political scene and assumed the leadership of the Congress, Gandhiji’s ideas on social reform attracted Rajaji because there was a lot of similarity in the ideas of both the leaders. Gandhiji’s ideas on prohibition, eradication of untouchability and Harijan uplift, promotion of
khadi and common language etc., appealed to Rajaji. He gave up his lucrative practice, joined the Congress and became an ardent admirer and follower of Gandhiji and his policies. When the Congress took up constructive work in the villages for rural uplift, Rajaji followed Gandhiji’s advice and started the Gandhi Ashram at Pudupalayam in Tiruchengode.

He participated in the Freedom struggle and faithfully carried out all the programmes of Gandhiji and the Congress. When the Congress assumed office in 1937 and after Independence when he again became the Chief Minister in 1952, he had a good opportunity to implement his policy of social reform. In these two periods when he was in power he introduced several measures to achieve his ideal of social equality between the Harijan and Caste Hindus. After 1954, his involvement in the Congress very much declined, he came out of it and formed Swatandra Party.

Thereafter he started criticizing both the Central as well as State Government policies and created awareness in the minds of the people and cautioned the authorities also.

Assessing a personality like Rajaji’s stature is not an easy task. The period and environment should be taken into account along with the nature of problems that existed during his time. He was a Statesman, thinker, writer and above all an able administrator. To say authentically that he was an
administrator par-excellence there were ample examples, and there were examples also to show that he was a committed social reformer.

Eradication of untouchability and temple entry, introduction of Prohibition, the Abolition of Zamindari system, the Agriculturalists Debt Relief Act and his services in the field of Khadi and Handloom development are but a few examples though there were many. To substantiate our finding we should seek the guidance of his contemporaries, who have expressed their views about Rajaji without fear or favour.

Untouchability in India is a curse. Though there are ethical treatises, which insist oneness of mankind, and which abhor untouchability they have not crept into the minds of some people and the problem of untouchability still exists in a veiled manner. No doubt that the laws are harsh towards untouchability and the Indian constitution says that ‘Untouchability is abolished’.

It is significant to note that Rajaji entered the field of social reform long before Gandhiji popularised social reform and SatyaGraha. R.Srinivasan while talking about Rajaji quote Rajaji himself: “Shortly after I started practice as V akil (Lawyer) at Salem I put two Panchama boys (Harijan boys) to school. Strong objection was taken to this. The teacher said ‘All the boys will stop away. Do you want two Panchama boys to be educated and 200 Caste boys to top away for that reason? Do you want education or notoriety? For God’s sake
do not insist on this. You will ruin the school. Please withdraw your boys’. But I insisted. Some of the Caste boys dropped away. But not many. One of the Panchama boys passed and got a Government appointment somewhere in the district. That quarrel also was forgotten after sometime. It became an ordinary thing in Salem for Adi-Dravida boys to sit with other boys and nobody raised any objection”.

Rajaji supported several depressed Caste youths by offering them jobs in the Municipality, helping them to purchase their books etc., He defended the right of Adi-Dravida students for being trained in the local Secondary Training School. The Headmaster a European opposed this and in this he was supported by the Inspector; both argued that these should be sent to Madras where there were special training schools. Rajaji said: “I was a quarrelsome man. I took up the rules. I insisted on admission in the Salem School and challenged the authorities to refuse admission. I had my way”.

Several Brahmins of the town were mustering behind Rajaji and upon them (as was on Rajaji earlier) were visited social ostracism and Caste penalties. In 1917, a depressed Caste saint and Sanskrit scholar, Swami Sahajananda, visited Salem. At Chidambaram he conducted a school and a hostel for children of the depressed Castes. Rajaji took the lead in welcoming him and in arranging to felicitate him. A grand feast was arranged and several Brahmins along with Rajaji participated in this. The Brahmin Community watched this with horror; even as in Poona, earlier, Ranade and others had to
pay a serious penalty, here too the companions of Rajaji found themselves ostracised. None would mix with them in weddings, funerals or other occasions that the Brahmins observe. The priests could not carry out funeral rites among these offenders. Rajaji and his friends had to learn the Complex Mantras to officiate as priests.²

In all these one is reminded of the passion that Ramanuja is said to have brought towards social reform. J. Sivashanmugam Pillai says that Rajaji can easily be compared with Sri Ramanuja the great reformer of ancient times, in that Rajaji like Sri Ramanuja reformed Caste system and worked for the removal of untouchability. In the matter of appointments also he was very particular that jobs reserved for scheduled Castes should be given to Harijans. No doubt the Justice Party introduced the communal rotation. But the flaw in that was that when proper Harijan Candidates, in the opinion of the Public Service commission were not forthcoming the job was assigned to the next community that is the Caste Hindus.³

Rajaji not only preached but also practiced. After enacting the temple entry legislation he along with Sri V.I. Munusami Pillai, the Harijan Minister, visited Palani temple. Having had Dharsan of the Lord, this was what he exclaimed: "Myself and Sri V.I. Munusamy Pillai had been to the hill temple this morning and had dharsan. We were both seated together when the Pujas were performed. This will be a memorable day in all my life. I have been the Prime Minister of the Province for 2 ¼ years and have been responsible for
many acts. But so far as I am personally concerned I am satisfied that this one act which has enabled Sri. Munisamy Pillai and me to offer worship to Him together is enough. I do not even want to be a Minister again".  

Rajaji was practically the first to start and the foremost to carry out the Movement for the uplift of the Harijans in this state. He helped and encouraged the late M.C.Raja to get the Madras Removal Of Disabilities Act, placed on the statute book and when he came into power he threw open the gates of Hindu temples to Harijans. This bold reform not only raised at one stroke the social status of Harijans to a level of equality with all other Hindus but in its operation, dealt a moral blow on the whole of the gradations of superiority and inferiority in the Hindu caste system. Even removal of untouchability would have been a futile reform, had it not been combined with measures for the education and economic uplift of the Harijans.

Rajaji's achievements in the field of social reform notably in the sphere of Harijan uplift, entitles him to be called radical but yet he is a wise conservative who can build a new structure without disturbing the foundations of the old Culture.

When the time came for assuming office in the Provinces the choice fell on Rajaji to head the Administration in Madras Presidency. He initiated drastic reform in all directions in order to help the people to attain a better living. He kept the administrative machinery in fine trim with high standards of discipline.
and correct conduct. He fully justified his expressive phrase that “the Corridors of the Secretariat should be kept clean.”

The introduction of the Prohibition, the Agriculturalists Debt Relief Act, the abolition of the Zamindari system and the dramatic introduction of temple entry for Harijans are but a few of his outstanding achievements in office. He had no frowns or favours for any one and worked in the true spirit of detachment. Corruption and nepotism were seen banished into their hideouts.

Harijans were kept away even from the streets adjoining the temples. The Vaikom Satyagraha organised by the Congress led soon to the temples of Travancore being thrown open to all castes. On this occasion Rajaji was to lead the first batch of Harijans into the temple and he has described the scene: “I must say that my wonderment and joy over this Proclamation has only increased by what I have seen with my own eyes of the way in which it is being loyally given effect to. As I watched the Pulaya boys, who were thus received into the Hindu family, from which they had been so long kept out, and as I saw the joy that suffused their faces, my eyes were filled with tears, and I felt like a mother that found her child again. The whole thing is too great for words. A feeling of deep thankfulness overwhelms one when one realises that all this has been achieved without paying the price of violence, and strife that in the history of humanity hitherto such changes have demanded.”
Rajaji regarded the temple entry Proclamation as the “most important and historic event that has happened within the last hundred years”.

In all battles for religious reform he was always on the side of the reformers. In 1932 in the Madras legislature two Bills were brought in for the right of all castes and communities to enter temples and places of worship. The Governor-General refused to give his sanction for these Bills on the ground that the issue of Harijan entry was one that had an all-India character, which could not fall, within the scope of a single Provincial legislature. Here again Rajaji was to write a pamphlet Our Plighted Word to educate public opinion on this issue against the decision of the Governor-General and to argue that Madras Government had all legitimacy to do what it sought to do. The real opportunity came ultimately in 1937 when Dewan Bahadur M.C.Raja seeking to remove disabilities in the way of Harijan entry into the temples introduced a Bill. Rajaji, who had given his consent to the Bill later opposed it and the grounds for his change of mind are of great interest for they are part of his general political philosophy.⁸

With the resignation of the Congress Ministries, Rajaji’s active work in social reform almost ended. But the theme of reform was carried on in books, stories, pamphlets, and all of them in Tamil. Thirty-six of these stories have been translated and collected in a volume called Stories for the Innocent. Six of these are in form of dialogue. Five of these focus attention of the dangers and evils that arise from the practice of untouchability; four draw attention to
the evils of drink and the need to desist from it. One-third of these castigate violently and vividly the attitudes of the dominant castes.

"Rajaji appears to be convinced that disabilities can be done away with and social reform brought in only when it is genuinely attempted at the personal level. In all his endeavours in the sphere of social reform, we see essentially a basic conservatism. The conservative does not set store all the time by Governmental action. He trusts the individual to improve himself, is prepared to be slow prefers to work with society, rather than against it". Edmund Burke stated that "a state without means of some change is without the means of its conservation." And Rajaji believes that Hindu society has ample elbow-room for change- ample room for social reform.9

In the field of administration and politics tremendous analytical skill and great prescience have been the hallmark of his genius. Some people have regarded him as cynical and cold blooded. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He is a man of great human compassion and the basis of all his thinking his entire political philosophy is a compelling sense of justice to the poor and the downtrodden.

Rajaji is masterful in his intellectual analysis of problems; his mind is that of a surgeon, whose dissection is both skilful and profound. There is no problem great or small, which is not subjected to this process of vigorous analysis.10
The period 1937-39 was a period of transition but it retained all the best traditions of good administration of the British minus the imperialism, which was quietly on the way out. This spell of administrative experience was obviously valued by Rajaji. For, when Lord Wavell formed the provincial Government at the centre later, out of the bunch of Jawaharlal Nehru, Liaquat Ali Khan, Vallabai Patel and others he was “the only one with any real experience of administration”.

One of the outstanding problems in the economic situation of the state then was the mounting agricultural indebtedness due to the depression in the inter war years.

The agriculturists relief Act of 1938 was an outstanding legislative action to give relief to the rural population. Although there were grousers from mirasdars (land lords) it was the first breakthrough for a “new deal” to agriculturists.

Having restored freedom to the growers of food grains, Rajaji tried his best to alleviate the position of handloom weavers, five million of them. He campaigned for prohibiting mills to manufacture dhotis and saris. He said “Giant Competitor in the shape of mill-made cloth, which has choked the handloom and, like an ungrateful child seek to kill the mother. Our handloom weavers are the best craftsmen in the world. Buy handloom cloth and feed the families of the handloom weavers who follow an honest and noble profession”.

The handloom industry he considered was a national asset and should not be lost.

He considered that it was obscurantist metaphysics to make any harsh distinction between handloom and Khadi. Both workers weaved with hand, the one preferred to use mill-yarn to handspun-yarn to produce more cloth. ¹¹

Another welfare legislation introduced in Rajaji's time was the Tanjore Tenants and Pannayals (Protection) Bill. He said, “Production cannot be improved unless you give the tiller of the soil sufficient interest in cultivation. I am not advising you to give away the land to the Cultivators. It is to prevent such a calamity that I have brought in the Ordinance. If the tenant has a feeling that he will not be disturbed from his place for five years he will put forth his best effort and improve production. I can say you will want your tenant to remain permanently.” To the tenants of Tanjore he said, “I shall visit you on the anniversary of the Ordinance and if you are able to show increased paddy it will also be happy to receive a garland of paddy straw instead of flower garland.” Just as his minutes on files were like domestic letter writing to brothers or sons, so also his public utterances were free from set phrases or high faulting, just think of the statement that “Change should not frighten people”
Rajaji was waggishly called a Chanakya in Politics but in administration he had all the simple casuistry and persuasion of Tiruvalluvar whom he had admired and studied.

Rajaji was not merely a Chief Minister who shed his wisdom on files and from platforms and in the Legislative Chamber. When a severe cyclone affected the districts of Tanjore and Tiruchirapalli in November 1952, he made a four-day tour covering 400 miles and saw things for himself. Of the newly introduced Five-year Planning, Rajaji, though skeptical, pointed out the difficulties. He said “I am convinced that we can succeed only if we make men feel that it is dishonourable and unpatriotic and bad policy for each one of us, even from the most selfish point of view, to fall below standards in work... Our basic shortage is a shortage in the patriotic urge to work. This shortage is observed at all levels and affects all aspects of national life”. He pointed out that work and not money was the ultimate reality of resources and that this was the unwritten chapter in the Five-year Plan.12

In another connection, Rajaji pointed out that the existing administrative machine was built entirely round a system of education, which was not rooted in self-education and manual work and inventiveness. This was the cause of failure in practical undertakings. He said, “I know from bitter experience how our official machine breaks down most miserably, when Government has to handle stores or run a workshop or a transport or a business in grains or cloth or steel or cement. People are apt to attribute the failure to all sorts of things and
live on arguments freely formed on some exceptions. But the disease is traceable to the wrong early education, the habits formed in childhood which persist through life and which characterise those who man Government departments”.

More than anything else Rajaji’s contribution to administration was the great moral fervour he introduced in the daily tasks of Government. “If I could see an improvement in the moral atmosphere around us, it would be the greatest joy of my life” he said.

Inspite of age he worked very hard and attended to each and every paper personally. He preferred to work in the cooler afternoons and would sit up late poring over files, occasionally sipping coffee from a bakelite cup. He had a memory for names said N. Murugesa Mudaliar, a retired deputy Secretary Tamil Nadu Government. He said further: “I pointed out that it was not proper to make ‘token grants’ for any “new scheme” unless the Legislature was told of the exact financial commitment. At the end of the discussion he said that he agreed with me.”

Rajaji expected higher officers to work with personal attention. Seeing that Government cases fail in courts sometimes due to defective affidavits, Rajaji ordered that such drafts should be personally scrutinised and approved by the highest officer before sending them on for filing. He had an equal regard for junior as well as senior officers. He chose as his Private Secretaries very
young men and drafted two or three able and old retired officers for special work. He wanted to send away to districts senior officers who were too long occupying the same posts in Madras City and lost touch with District Administration. He was considerate and indulgent to honest men but took a firm line with persons charged with corruption and never hesitated to recommend the severest punishment if charges were proved. He had his own ideas about essentials of a good public administration, which he later expressed as “Recipe for good Government”.

Of all the best safeguards he provided in his time was immunity of the public services from political interference. This was a great blessing. The corridors of the Government offices were never more empty either before or after his regime. His conviction was that there should be a healthy separation between the work of officials who carry out day to day administration and that of elected representatives of the people who are responsible for directing policy and the other to maintain right ethical standards in doing so.\textsuperscript{14}

He proved to be an able and honest administrator. In 1937 Rajaji as the premier or Prime Minister (as the Chief Minister was then designated) of Madras took up Prohibition in this Province in all earnestness. Many other Congress Government did the same. Dr. Sushila Nayar says that Rajaji was vigilant like Pussy Fort W.E. John who brought about Prohibition in the U S and saw to it that saboteurs of Prohibition did not get a chance.\textsuperscript{15}
Rajaji is a fine specimen of a conservative mind. He is also the best warning that we should not brush away the point of view he represents by merely dismissing it as reactionary. Rajaji has been insisting on what he regards as the essential priorities of social change. These priorities are the built-in attitudes and traditional responses, which reflect the level of social awakening and the compulsions of backwardness. The danger that such a view may put undue premium upon Status quoism has however never to be lost sight of.¹⁶

People who were close to Rajaji say that his life has been a simple open book- of plain living, high thinking of moral grandeur. C.S.Venkatachar says about Rajaji under the caption A Humanist Foremost the following things. “His curiosity is wide ranging; he is always inquiring, not so much of the past, for too often past can be disjointed but of what is happening in the present society – his inquiries span a wide range: BCG; the evil effects of smoking and alcohol; birth control; sexual morality virtues and vices of people-nothing is too trivial for his inquiring mind. In this respect, by making the past an eternal present, the mind not aging with his body inquiring and philosophic mind than people half his age, intensely concerned with the shape of things to come in a much – troubled but progressing world”.

“His free mind is subtle, sharp as razor edge; it cuts through thick cobwebs of meaningless slogans and political rigmaroles. His acute perception makes him shift his stance – not his fundamental principles; he rarely sticks to
an untenable line, for his mind has already moved away from it. He may seem indifferent to logic; he may uncharitably be called a political gad-fly (he does not sting or worry a person); he only asks you to look afresh at the perspective from a vantage position of a better or a clearer understanding. In the age of emotional mass politics, he has campaigned to secure freedom to advocate a same policy.

The path of understanding of great contemporaries is invariably strewn with misunderstanding, prejudices, preconceived notion, and snap judgments. That Rajaji should often be misunderstood is natural. In his case such misunderstandings often have a sharper edge for he is not exactly a popular hero. An aspect of his controversial image dates back to the days of the freedom movement. It lingers on even in the seventies. For example a well-known Delhi journalist, in his recent memories, covering half a century of his own professional and political life, has this to say of Rajaji: 17

Bhulubhai Desai and Rajaji were two of the most astute and outstanding brains of the Congress. But the two were completely different. C.R. was a victim of his own cleverness. He thought in Circles and argued in spirals. In argument he was a master quibbler. As a negotiator he evoked more suspicion than confidence. Above all he lacked that generosity to friend or foe, which made one likeable even to those from whom one differed. He was master in the use of language, which could only hurt but leave his victim mentally lacerated.
Rajaji has not, of course, ridden on the crest of the popular wave during his lifetime. He has been adored, criticized, suspected and even execrated; but he could never be ignored. He has been at his task, often self-imposed, with a singleness of purpose that has always commanded attention.

Ever since he entered public life there has hardly been anything of importance or national significance on which he did not leave the impress of his cool, clean and incisive, intellect.

Life is a play of several social forces and various human temperaments. In this play, there is little which is fixed, rigid or static. No dogma would or could survive this constant unceasing change. Rajaji has been singularly free from dogma in his dealings with human affairs. It was therefore, that he came out from time to time with new formulae to deal with new or difficult situations.

It would be apt to conclude with the views of N.S. Varadachari that “Rajaji is a statesman, without being egotistic, a scholar without being ambiguous, a man of letters without being pretentious and a preceptor without being pedantic”. Besides this he is an administrator par-excellence.

2. Ibid.


5. Ibid., p.245 A Friend of the Poor - R.V.Krishna Ayyar.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., p.133. The Leader Who Knows the People - H.V.R. Iyengar.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., p.139. The Crusader For Prohibition - Dr.Sushila Nayar.

