In 1920s Tiruchengode became famous in the political geography and history of Tamilnadu because, it served as the headquarters for Rajaji for his political and social work. It was here that Rajaji’s pioneering efforts in social reform began.

In 1923 when there was a difference of opinion between the pro-changers and the no-changers in the congress, Rajaji sided with Gandhiji, opposed Council entry and settled down to implement Gandhiji’s constructive programme. This programme was of great value as it inculcated the much-needed qualities of dedication and discipline in the congress organisation and focussed the attention of public on the evils of drink, on the problems of rural poverty, on uplift of backward classes and on Khadi movement.

To implement this programme in the south, Rajaji started the Gandhi Ashram at Pudupalayam seven miles from Tiruchengode. It is in a dry area, rocky terrain with patches of fertile soil and scanty rainfall. Often even drinking water was a problem. Handloom weaving was the traditional occupation of the people to supplement their low agricultural income. In addition to chronic poverty, illiteracy and disease were other distressing feature.

The site for the Ashram was provided by the Mittadar Rathnasabapathy Gounder, a man of influence and power in the area and a great admirer and
follower of Rajaji. It was inaugurated in Feb. 1925 with the aim of propagating Khaddar and carry on propaganda against drink and untouchability that prevailed in the social set up.

The ashramites and the villagers lived as members of one family cooking and sharing the food together. In the Ashram itself the caste Hindus and Harijans mixed freely. The Ashram began with thirteen inmates of whom four were Harijans. This free mingling was not liked by the caste Hindus who became restive and soon milkmen stopped supply of milk. But one of them continued to supply secretly and within a week the boycott ended. Mr. Rathnasabapathy Gounder also advised the opponents to accept and follow Rajaji’s advice.

Khadi production was the main activity of the Ashram round which all other activities centred. Rajaji was very exacting in work and insisted that every spinner had to do his allotted work. Villagers were taught spinning in the charkha. Soon the village women took up spinning and this gave them part time work, enabling them to raise themselves above the poverty level. Soon Tiruchengode became a big centre for khadi production.

The Ashramites did prohibition propaganda every night and tried to wean the poor villagers from the evil of liquor. Every night Rajaji and his group of friends toured the villages. They tried to convince them about the evils of drinking through stories and songs. They also visited the people in their houses
and spoke to the addicts individually. In order to spread the importance of cottage industries and the evils of drink, the Ashram published two Magazines “VIMOCHANAM” (Liberation) in Tamil and “PROHIBITION” in English. These magazines contained fables, amusing tales, interesting incidents and absorbing articles. The language used was simple, direct, but at the same time forceful. Especially, Tamil Magazine catered to the needs of the villagers. As most of the villagers were illiterate arrangements were made to read out this magazine to them. Gradually their work was rewarded and more and more villagers gave up drinking. This was perhaps one of the reasons why Rajaji thought of introducing Prohibition first in Salem District and was also very successful in implementing prohibition.

The Ashramites also worked for the removal of untouchability. Besides the free inter-mingling in the Ashram and with the villagers, they worked for Harijan uplift in different ways. Rajaji also told the Harijans that they should maintain personal cleanliness and keep their surroundings and houses clean. The Ashram workers cleaned up the Cheries. Personal service of Harijans was one of the important item in the cleanliness campaign. Every week on Saturdays, the Harijan children were given oil bath and were served with boiled rice kanji. In this way the Ashram did quiet and steady work in persuading Harijans to change their way of life and give up anything repugnant to the others, while at the same time persuading caste Hindus to treat Harijans as equals.
However, the practice of untouchability was acute and this encouraged the Harijans in some villages to convert to Christianity. In the village of Kumarapalayam near the Ashram, Cheri of 55 families of Harijans decided to become Christian. Only one Harijan, Periyan refused conversion and continued to remain a Hindu. Each family had been given Rs.25/- as incentive and most of it was spent on drink. They were induced to sell the Hindu shrine in their care, inclusive of the idol and its adornments, to a Christian for Rs.450/-. 

The Christian mission proposed transforming the Temple into Church. On Rajaji’s protest the plan for altering the shrine into a Church was given up. One of the Birla brother wanted to give Rs.100/- to Periyan, but Rajaji discouraged the idea because it would demoralise the Harijans and demand money.

Rajaji wanted to start a hostel for Harijan boys studying in Tiruchengode’s High school, under the auspices of Gandhi Ashram. But nobody in town came forward to rent out room for such a hostel. It was at that juncture the Ashram requested the District Board, which controlled the School, to lease a portion of the school’s open ground; but the District Board refused to oblige, and the Madras Government refused to interfere.

Some of Rajaji’s Ashram colleagues suggested that they could have the hostel in the untouchable quarters. But Rajaji totally rejected that proposal. He even thought of keeping the boys in the Ashram itself, but transporting them four miles to School and back was a problem. In the end Rajaji’s friend
P. Subbarayan gave a piece of land and the Hostel was built there by the Ashram and it was opened by Rajendra Prasad in 1935.

The Ashram had a foot-wear unit where shoes of different patterns were made. The Ashram foot-wear was sturdy and durable and became famous as “ASHRAM SHOES”.

All the Ashramites were trained in fire-fighting as there was constant fear of fire. Sometimes, they also undertook fire fighting in the near by villages.

Under Rajaji’s inspiration and guidance new activities were started. These were bee-keeping, soap making, utilizing non-edible oils, conducting of night schools for adults and primary schools for village children, improving village sanitation and instilling habits of cleanliness among the villagers.

The Ashramites also helped to improve drinking water facilities by helping the villagers to sink wells.

A dispensary was also setup at the Ashram to provide medical relief to the Ashramites as well as to the villagers.

Thus, the Ashram by its simple living, community living and comradely living became the symbol of solid service catering to the needs of the Pudupalayam and the nearby villages and helping them in their uplift and happiness. The Ashram stands as the living monument of Rajaji’s devotion and service to humanity.
APPENDIX - II

TRAVANCORE MAHARAJA’S PROCLAMATION

By his Highness Sri Padmanabha Das Vanchi Pala Sri Rama Varma
Kulasekhara Kirrtipati Manney Sultan Maharaja Ramaraja Bahadur
Shamsheer Jang, Knight Grand Commander of the most eminent order of the
Indian Empire, Maharaja of Travancore issued under date 27th Thulam 1112
corresponding to the 12 November 1936 profoundly convinced of the truth and
validity of our religions believing that it is based on divine guidance and on all
comprehending toleration, knowing that in its practice it has, throughout the
centuries, adopted itself to the needs of changing times solicitous that none of
our Hindu subjects should, by reason of birth or caste or community, be denied
the cosolations and solace of the Hindu faith. We have decided and hereby
declar ordain and command that, subject to such rules and conditions as may
be laid down and imposed by us for preserving proper atmosphere and
maintaining their rituals and observances, there should henceforth be no
restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering or worshipping
at the temples controlled by us and our Government. We are hereby pleased to
enact the following rules.
1. The expression "Temple" occurring in these rules shall include not only the Temple and sub shrines but also mandapams and other buildings as well as tanks and wells appurtenant to the Temple.

2. The expression "Chief Officer of the Devaswom" occurring in these rules shall mean the officers in charge of the Devaswom. It shall also include every officer superior to him and having jurisdiction. When such superior officer exercise the powers of the chief officer of the Devaswom.

3. In order that the customs and usages obtaining in the several temples under the control of his Highness the Maharaja and the Government in regard to the Poojas, Nivedyams, Vazhivadus, Nityavidhanam, Masavisesham, Attavisesham, Utsavam and other ordinary and special ceremonies rituals shall continue to be observed as here to fore, it shall be competent to the Chief Officer of the Devaswom to give consistently with the objects of the aforesaid Proclamation such direction as may be necessary from time to time for regulating the time of entry and worship at a time or maintaining such special customs and usages as are applicable to certain individuals and communities for specific purposes.
4. The permission to enter a temple not be exercised so as to empower entrance into the Srikoil, Tidapally (Kitchen) and other portion of the temple where specific restriction even now exist in regard to all persons except those who are allowed to use those portions by custom.

5. All worshippers are bound to conform to the directions given by the Chief Officers of the Devaswom in regard to the carrying out of the objects of the aforesaid Proclamation and the Rules and in regard to places which have to be reserved for the time being for the proper conduct of the rituals in the temple or observances such as the feeding of persons as hither to preconducted.

6. The Classes of person mentioned hereunder shall not enter within the compound walls of a Temple, or its premises in case there is no compound wall:

a) Persons who are not Hindu;

b) Persons under pollution arising out of birth or death in their families;

c) Women at such times during which they are not by custom and usage allowed to enter temples;

d) Drunken or disorderly persons;

e) Persons suffering from any loathsome or contagious disease;
f) Persons of unsound mind except when taken for worship under proper control and with the sanction of the Chief Officer of the Devaswom concerned and;

g) Professional beggars.

7) No person shall enter into any temple premises unless he wears clean clothes of such materials and in such Mannaas may be customary. The decision of the Chief Officer of the Devaswom concerned shall prevent until set aside by a higher authority. None shall be allowed to enter temple premises with any footwear, except those who are allowed to do so by custom and usage obtaining in the temple.

8) No person shall, within the temple and premises, spit, chew betel, tobacco or any similar article or carry with him any article for smoking, or take with him fish, eggs, meat flesh, toddy or other intoxicants or any other article or animal inappropriate to custom and usage to be introduced into the temple.

9) No person shall enter the Belikkalpura, Valiambalam, Nalambalam, or the Elamatil, which in some temples take the place of a Nalambalam, with any coat, shirt or such other garment, except woman who may wear their usual dress. No head-dress shall be worn except by those who are allowed to do so by custom and usage obtaining in temple. No one shall take
there in any cloth-umbrella, kerosene-light or other article in appropriate to be introduced into such places by custom or usage. in temples where the above restrictions obtain even in regard to entering with in the compound walls, the same shall be observed.

10) 1) No one shall enter the portions of a temple specified in the last preceding rule without having, in accordance with custom and usage bathed and without the customary caste mark and without wearing clean clothes of such material and in such manner as may be customary in the temple concerned.

2) No one except a Hindu shall enter a tank appurtenant to a temple; and every person permitted to enter a tank shall obey such directions as may be given by the Chief Officer of the Devaswom concerned. The direction of the Chief Officer of the Devaswom shall prevail until set aside by a higher authority.

3) Tanks reserved for the exclusive use of a particular functionaries of the temple shall continue to be so reserved.

11) Restrictions as to entry and worship, which according to usage and custom apply to all communities alike, shall continue to apply.
12) No one shall interrupt the worship in a temple by loud conversation or other demonstration which would derogate from the solemnity and the proper atmosphere of the temple.

13) It shall not be lawful to any person to use the temple buildings and promises for purposes not connected with or arising from the worship, usage and observances of such temple.

14) No one should do any art which would tend to derogate from the purity and the cleanliness of the temple and its premises.

15) If any doubt arises in regard to the applicability of, or conformity to, any of their provision, the decision of the Chief Officer of the Devaswom concerned shall prevail until set aside by a Higher authority.

16) It shall be lawful for the Chief Officer of the Devaswom concerned to direct that any person who contravenes or is suspected or believed these rules, or disobeys any lawful direction given by him, shall remove himself from the temple, and incase such person does not so remove himself, to cause him to be removed from the temple. In case he resists such removal or in case when asked to give his name and address, he refuses to do so or gives information which is not believed to be true shall be liable to be arrested and removed by any Police Officer not below
the rank of a Head Constable and to be dealt with as if he had been arrested under section 38 of the code of criminal procedure.

17) If any person contravenes any of the provisions of these rules or disobey any direction lawfully given in pursuance there of and thereby renders necessary any purifactionery ceremonies, according to the customs and usages of the temple, such person shall be liable to cost of the necessary purifactionery ceremonies at the approved rates and the same shall be recoverable from him as arrears of public or land revenue or otherwise. A person thus contravening or disobeying shall, besides being subject to any penalty to which he may be liable under other law, he also punishable on conviction by a magistrate with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three months or with fine or both.

18) No prosecution under these rules shall be except as a complaint by a Gazetteer Officer having jurisdiction in respect of the temple.

19) No action shall lie against any Devaswom Officer or other public servant who bonafide does any act in pursuance of these rules and no action in a criminal court shall lie without sanction of Government.
20) In case of any doubt or dispute regarding the interpretation or the carrying out of any provisions of these rules, the decision of the Devaswom shall be final.

21) In case of emergencies and unforeseen difficulties that may arise in carrying out the provisions and objects of the aforesaid proclamation or of those rules, shall be competent to pass such orders as he may deem fit.
APPENDIX – III

Government Order Number 293, 11 September 1939

The following Act of the Madras Legislature received the assent of His Excellency the Governor General on the 4th September 1939 and is hereby published for general information.

Act No. XXII of 1939

An Act to authorize and indemnify trustees, officers and other persons in respect of entry into and offer of worship in Hindu temples by certain classes of Hindus who by custom or usage are excluded from such entry and worship.

Whereas there has been a growing volume of public opinion demanding the removal of the disabilities imposed by custom and usage on certain classes of Hindus in respect of their entry into and offering worship in Hindu temples.

And whereas it is just and desirable to authorize the trustees or authorities in charge of such temples to throw them open to, and permit persons belonging to the said classes to enter into and offer worship in such temples, and that no persons should any civil or criminal penalty or disadvantage by reason of anything done in connection with such entry and worship.

And whereas a situation has arisen in the City of Madurai and elsewhere in the province of Madras in which it has become necessary to indemnify and protect officers of Government, trustees, priests and other persons in respect of acts done, steps taken or alleged failure of duty on the 8th day of July 1939 and there after of the nature above said;
It is there by enacted as follows

1) This Act may be called the Madras Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnify, 1939.

2) It extends to the whole of the province of Madras.

3) No officer of Government, no executive authority officer or servant of any Local Board or Municipality no trustee officer or other authority constituted or acting under the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Acts 1926, or any other law no priest or person officiating as such and no person entering or offering worship or assisting or acting under the authority of or with the permission of such officer, servant authority, trustee, priest or person officiating shall be prosecuted, sued or otherwise proceeded against in respect of any act done or step taken or any alleged failure of duty on the 8th day of July 1939 or on the any subsequent date up to the commencement of this Act, in furtherance of, or in connection with, the entry into and offer of worship in the Sri Meenakshi Sundreswaran temple in the city of Madurai or any other Hindus temple in the province of Madras by any other person belonging to classes of Hindus hither to excluded by custom or usage from such entry or worship.
And all officers, servants, authorities, trustees and other persons above said are hereby indemnified and discharged from all other liability in respect of all such acts, steps and alleged failure of duty.

4) If the opinion of the trustee or other authority in charge of any Hindu temple in the province of Madras the worshipers of such temples are generally not opposed to the removal of the disability imposed by custom or usage on certain classes of Hindus in regard to entry into or offer of worship in such temple, such trustee or other authority may with the approval of the provincial Government and notwithstanding anything contained in the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Acts, 1926 or any other law, throw open the temple to such classes shall have the right to enter into and offer worship in such temple.

Provided that in the case of the temples specified in the schedule to this Act and other Hindu temples in the province which have been thrown open to the classes above said before the commencement of this Act, such approval shall not be required and the said temple shall be deemed to have been thrown open to the classes above said under the provisions of this section.

Explanation: If more persons than one are the trustees are constitute the other authority in charge of temple a majority of them shall be entitled to decide and set in terms of this section.
5) No person who enters or offers worship in any temple thrown open or deemed to be thrown under the provisions of section 3 shall by reason only of such entry or worship be deemed to have committed any actionable wrong or offence or be said prosecuted thereof.

6) No suit for damage injunction or declaration or for any other relief, no prosecution for any offence and no application or other proceeding under the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act 1926, or any other law shall be instituted in respect of any entry into or worship in any temple thrown open or deemed to have been thrown open under section 3, on the ground that such entry or worship is against the usage or custom which excludes certain classes or Hindus from such entry or worship and no suit or other proceedings shall be instituted in respect of such entry or worship on the ground that there has been any irregularity or failure in complying with the provisions of section 3, without, the previous sanction of the Provincial Government. No suit, prosecution, application or proceedings of the nature aforesaid instituted before the commencement of this act shall be continued thereafter without the sanction of the Provincial Government.

7) In Section 40 of the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act 1926, after the words and figures "subject to the provisions of the Malabar Temple Entry Act 1938" the words and figures and the Madras Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Act 1939, shall be inserted.