

Proponent of temple entry, critic of Hindi policy: Story of C. Rajagopalachari, with new statue in Rashtrapati Bhavan

Rajaji was respected by both Gandhi, who called him his conscience keeper, and Jawaharlal Nehru. His statue replacing a colonial-era one is in sync with the cultural nationalism espoused by the ruling BJP.

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C Rajagopalachari (right) with Gandhi. (Wikimedia Commons)

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President Droupadi Murmu unveiled a statue of C Rajagopalachari in the central courtyard of the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Monday (February 23), replacing the bust of British architect Edwin Lutyens.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced the change on Sunday, saying that “Rajagopalachari was among those who saw power not as a position but as a service. His conduct, self-restraint, and independent thinking in public life inspire us even today.”

Here's what to know about Rajaji, his politics and its [enduring significance](#).

Early role in Independence movement

C Rajagopalachari, popularly known as Rajaji or CR, was born in December 1878 into a Tamil-speaking Brahmin family in the village of Thorapalli in Krishnagiri district, [Tamil Nadu](#) (then part of the Madras Presidency). Called Rajan by his parents, he attended the village school before moving to Madras in 1896 to study law.

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His years in Madras marked his earliest brush with political ideas. CR travelled to Calcutta for the December 1906 session of the Indian National Congress and later attended its [Surat](#) session in December 1907. In 1911, at the age of 32, he was elected to the Salem Municipal Council. Five years later, in 1916, he joined Annie Besant's Home Rule League and organised a unit in Salem. “Increasingly playing a political

role, C.R. was also elected, in June 1917, Chairman of the Salem Municipal Council,” notes biographer Rajmohan Gandhi in the biography *Rajaji: A Life* (1997).

In January 1919, CR decided to move to Madras, finding Salem too limiting for his expanding public role. It was there that he would meet Gandhi two months later during the latter's visit.



Rajagopalachari as Governor-General of India proclaims the Republic of India on January 26, 1950. (Wikimedia Commons)

Role in Quit India Movement and CR formula

C Rajagopalachari was among Mahatma Gandhi's closest associates. One of the earliest movements he supported was the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919. The following year, the Non-Cooperation Movement gathered momentum in Tamil Nadu under his leadership. CR gave up his lucrative legal practice and committed himself fully to the programme — boycotting elections, educational institutions, government posts, and official titles.

In April 1930, he led the Salt Satyagraha in the South, marching from Trichy to Vedaranyam on the Tanjore seaboard. He was arrested there for holding prayer

meetings, was released briefly, and jailed again because he would not agree to a bond specifying peaceful behaviour. He was released in 1931, only to be sent back to jail in 1932 for distributing satyagraha leaflets.

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Yet Rajagopalachari did not shy away from dissent. During the Quit India Movement in 1942, he publicly disagreed with Gandhi. “There is no reality,” CR declared, “in the fond expectation that Britain will leave the country in simple response to a Congress slogan.” Instead, he argued that a Congress–Muslim League understanding was the “golden key.”

While Gandhi acknowledged the nobility of the aim of unity, he described CR’s proposal as wholly unnatural. He later wrote that there would be no more “wordy warfare” in the press.

In the weeks that followed, C Rajagopalachari laid before Gandhi a proposal for a Congress–League agreement that came to be known as the Rajaji formula. Gandhi said he would assent to it.

The plan required the All-India Muslim League to cooperate with the Indian National Congress in forming a provisional national government, provided Congress agreed to abide by a plebiscite on the question of Pakistan. The formula set down that the plebiscite be held after the transfer of power from Britain, in contiguous Muslim-majority districts in the North-West and East of India. In the event of separation, it proposed mutual agreements to safeguard defence, commerce, communications, and other essential interests.

In April 1944, Rajaji informed Muhammad Ali Jinnah of the Mahatma’s acceptance of his Pakistan proposal. As Jinnah studied the document, CR waited for a favourable reply. It did not come. Jinnah quickly realised that CR’s conception of Pakistan was smaller than the League had claimed and was contingent on a plebiscite and a treaty of separation. “Your scheme does not satisfy me,” Jinnah told CR.

Rajagopalachari’s stance on Hindi and temple entry

Rajaji's approach to Hindi is best captured by the simile he used to describe its introduction in high schools when he was premier in 1938 — it was like 'chutney on a leaf, to be tasted or left alone'. In March 1938, he introduced a scheme for Hindi in classes 6, 7, and 8 wherein attendance was compulsory. Students were not to be detained for failing in Hindi, though. Yet, the scheme evoked intense protests in the presidency.

In later years, particularly during the 1965 anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu, he strongly opposed the imposition of Hindi as the sole official language. Author Vasanthi Srinivasan wrote in *Gandhi's Conscience Keeper* (2009), "he retaliated by calling Hindi a poor and undeveloped language, a 'conqueror's language' that cannot and ought not to replace English, which was serving as an efficient official language," adding, "It is not hatred for Hindi per se but hostility to its imposition by the force of numbers that dominates his writings."

CR was also a leading advocate of temple entry for marginalised castes. In August 1938, when M. C. Rajah, one of the South's foremost Dalit leaders, introduced a Bill to remove social disabilities imposed on the community, CR, as Premier of Madras, gave it his full backing. The legislation made discrimination in employment, access to wells, public conveniences, schools, and colleges a punishable offence.

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CR also promised Rajah support for a measure allowing worshippers, by majority vote, to open temples to the Dalits. Later, however, he limited its application to the Malabar district. Why the caution? Rajmohan Gandhi suggests that he may not have wished to provoke orthodox opposition while already facing sustained criticism over the Hindi issue. Disappointed, Rajah declared, "I have been deceived," yet he continued to support the Malabar Temple Entry Bill, which passed in September 1938 despite strong opposition.

A dramatic development in Madura pushed CR further. A majority of the trustees and priests of the famed Meenakshi Temple expressed willingness to admit Dalits but feared prosecution for "offence to religious sentiment." C.R promised protective

legislation “in eight days” if they took the initiative. On July 8, 1939, his old friend Vaidyanatha Iyer led a group of Dalits into the temple, and the authorities permitted their entry.

Receiving the news in Madras, CR was “beside himself with delight”, Rajmohan Gandhi wrote, and reportedly did not sleep that night. Others reacted less favourably: a criminal case was filed against the temple’s executive officer, and a purification ceremony was demanded. Within days, a Temple Entry Authorisation and Indemnity Bill (1939) was drafted, followed by an ordinance indemnifying officials who had opened, or might open, temples with government approval.

By that time, Tanjore had opened all 90 of its temples, and the temple in Courtallam had followed suit. At Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, a pandit declared, “the shastras do not permit [temple entry].” To this, CR responded, stating, the shastras were “like the infinite ocean from which ... one can draw pearls and coral as well as mire and shark.”

Rajaji’s Swatantra party

CR had served as Home Minister under Jawaharlal Nehru (1950–51). By the mid-1950s, however, he grew concerned that Congress’s dominance could undermine democracy, believing that the party increasingly pursued statist and centralising policies.

In Rajaji’s view, the burden of opposition must be borne by a “brake” party that could correct the statist policies of the Congress: “The only Opposition that can be a true democratic balance to the ruling party in [Delhi](#) is a conservative party...” The new party was formed in August 1959 as the Swatantra Party, or Freedom Party. Rajaji, however, preferred to describe it as a constitutional rather than a conservative party.

The party grew out of the Forum for Free Enterprise (1956) and the All India Agriculturalists’ Federation (1958). It championed free enterprise while rejecting 19th century *laissez-faire* capitalism. Rajaji stressed that he was not opposed to planning per se, only to “coercive Soviet-type planning,” favouring regulation and direction over state ownership. Despite its liberal vision, it was criticised by

contemporaries, including Nehru, as a party representing the “middle ages of Lords, castles and Zamindars.”

Rajaji's enduring significance

Replacing a colonial-era statue with one of C. Rajagopalachari at the Rashtrapati Bhavan is in sync with the cultural nationalism espoused by the ruling BJP, which has criticised and changed several British-era landmarks and names across cities.

In many ways, Rajaji's accomplishments reflected the transition from colonialism. He became Premier after the Congress won elections under the Government of India Act, 1935. In 1948, he succeeded Lord Mountbatten as Governor-General, becoming the only Indian to hold the office before India became a republic. He later served as Chief Minister of Madras state from 1952 to 1954. Rajaji is also celebrated for his retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Moreover, he embodies much of the conservative vision that resonates with the BJP today, which includes an opposition to Nehruvian socialism.

Respected by both Gandhi, who called him his conscience keeper, and Nehru, Rajaji was awarded the Bharat Ratna in 1954 and given a state funeral in 1972. “The important point which Rajaji's political career and ideas make evident is that a principled flexibility is possible in politics,” notes Srinivasan.

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