

# The 'uncut diamond', **UNSUNG CM** of Madras Presidency

### CHANGE MAKER:

(Below) The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, was passed during OPR's tenure; (right) in 2010, a commemorative stamp was released



R S Raveendhren

**F**eb 1 marks the 130th birth anniversary of Omandur P Ramasamy Reddiar (OPR) who served as the premier of Madras Presidency (a post equivalent to that of a chief minister) between March 23, 1947, and April 6, 1949.

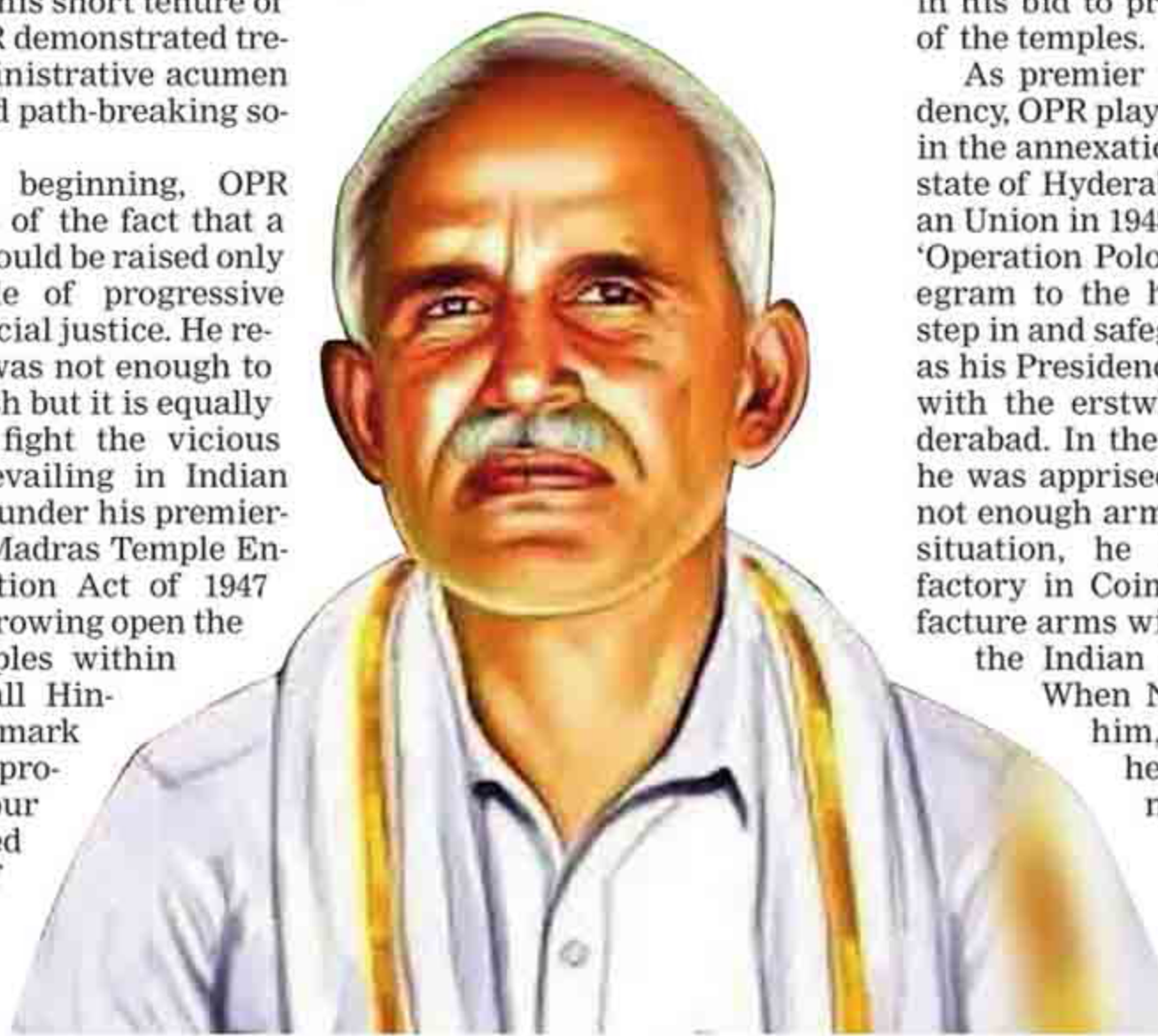
OPR was born in 1895 at Omandur village and did his schooling at the Arcot American Mission School in Tindivanam. One of his classmates was Swaminathan, who is today revered as His Holiness Shankaracharya Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Swamikal.

OPR arrived on the scene as an unconventional politician with a 'no-nonsense' attitude. He was a freedom fighter and a staunch

Gandhian. He was a devout man and it is said he accepted his political assignment only after getting consent from Sri Ramana Maharishi. In his short tenure of two years, OPR demonstrated tremendous administrative acumen and introduced path-breaking social reforms.

From the beginning, OPR was conscious of the fact that a healthy state could be raised only on the mantle of progressive politics and social justice. He realised that it was not enough to fight the British but it is equally important to fight the vicious hegemony prevailing in Indian society. It was under his premiership that the Madras Temple Entry Authorisation Act of 1947 was passed, throwing open the doors of temples within the state to all Hindus. This landmark legislation provided succour to suppressed sections of the faith. It became a milestone in the temple

**OPR played a key role in the annexation of Hyderabad during 'Operation Polo' in 1948. With borders shared between Madras and Hyderabad, he telegraphed the home minister to secure the borders of his Presidency and directed the Textool factory in Coimbatore to produce arms when resources were insufficient. When questioned by Nehru, OPR defended his actions as being in national interest**



entry movement in Tamil Nadu. The efforts of Dravidian stalwarts coupled with that of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy for women's rights culminated in the passing of the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947 during his tenure, which gave devadasis the legal right to marry and also abolished the system of dedicating girls to temples.

OPR is credited with bringing the Zamindari Abolition Act, 1947, resulting in a turnaround in the state's socio-economic condition. On the one end it removed remnants of colonial land policies and, on the other, it ushered in an era of equitable land distribution aiming at empowering peasants and addressing socio-economic imbalances that were long plaguing society.

OPR was a visionary. He commissioned a state emblem way back in 1948, one of the first states to have done it. When Nehru indicated that a temple tower would be against the secular nature of the govt, OPR had a ready repartee stating that it was a perfect depiction of the state's cultural and architectural heritage.

He brought several amendments in the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, 1926 (since repealed) to protect temple jewels by introduction of registers and by regulating leasing of temple properties to prevent losses to temples. As expected, this measure did not go down well with the heads of mutts who resisted it tooth and nail but OPR stood firm in his bid to protect the interest of the temples.

As premier of Madras Presidency, OPR played a dynamic role in the annexation of the princely state of Hyderabad with the Indian Union in 1948 popularly called 'Operation Polo'. OPR shot a telegram to the home minister to step in and safeguard the borders as his Presidency shared borders with the erstwhile state of Hyderabad. In the meantime, when he was apprised that there were not enough arms to face the dire situation, he directed Textool factory in Coimbatore to manufacture arms without waiting for the Indian govt to respond.

When Nehru questioned him, OPR replied that he took the step in national interest.

With tension mounting on both sides of the border, OPR feared militant in-

cursions within the Presidency in support of Hyderabad. He ordered searches in the homes of Muslims living along the border including inside 'Amir Mahal', home of the Arcot nawab and the residence of then chief qazi. Several of his actions at the time courted controversy but they went on to show his resoluteness and tenacity in the face of a volatile situation. He won the admiration of Sardar Vallabhai Patel and Nehru who named him "an uncut diamond". The events are narrated by V P Menon in his book 'The Story of the Integration of Indian States'.

OPR created the post of economic advisor to the state and set up the department of statistics even before the Central Planning Commission came into being. He went on to stress the need for land reforms in his book 'Agrarian reforms and parity economy', also mooting forward-looking schemes such as crop and

cattle insurance. He is credited with welfare schemes such as alcohol prohibition, development of khadi and other village industries, adult education, women and student development, communal unity, health care for leprosy-afflicted patients and the development of tribal areas. In 1948, he ordered purchase of a 'de Havilland Dove' touted to be the first airplane owned by the Madras govt. In 1949, it was his govt that sought to acquire rights to all works of poet Subramania Bharathi with a plan to release it so that it would be freely available for everyone.

OPR was a man much ahead of his time. He had many firsts to his credit, yet he remained grounded and out of the limelight for the rest of his life. What is unfortunate is that in spite of all these glorious achievements, this effervescent leader remains an unsung hero even today. If not anything, he deserves to be remembered and honoured for the rich legacy of social justice he left in a short term of two years.

*(The author is an advocate in the Madras high court)*

Email your feedback with name and address to southpole.toi@timesofindia.com

