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EMS AS A LITERARY CRITIC AND CULTURAL ACTIVIST

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When we ponder over the contribution made by EMS Namboodiripad (1909-1998) to the literary, artistic and cultural life of Kerala, and the intermittent interventions he made in the intellectual and literary controversies in Malayalam during the last seven decades or so, we are reminded of Frederick Engels' evaluation of the renaissance personalities of Europe: In his celebrated but unfinished work *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels spoke of them as the "giants in power of thought, passion and character, in universality and learning". After listing and describing a few of them he continues:

"The heroes of that time were not yet in thrall to the division of labour, the restricting effects of which, with its production of one-sidedness, we often notice in their successors. But what is especially characteristic of them is that they almost all live and pursue their activities in the midst of contemporary movements, in the practical struggle; they take sides and join in the fight, one by speaking and writing another with sword, many with both. Hence the fullness and force of character that makes them complete men".

If we resort to our ancient Indian usage EMS was a rare combination of the "Gnana Yogin" and "Karma Yogin". Besides being a working class revolutionary, Marxist-Leninist theoretician of eminence, a party-builder he could easily switch over from under-ground to over-ground, from prison to street demonstration, from editorial desk to legislature, from opposition to treasury benches and prove his versatility as an administrator par excellence. It is with all these heavy claims on his routine and energy, that EMS made himself a vibrant and seminal force in Malayalam literary life as a critic, historian and cultural activist. But his cultural and literary activism and prodigious number of articles, tracts, pamphlets, full-scale books, reviews, columns, and addresses resulting from them were in no way a diversion from his main concerns. Like all revolutionaries

in general, and socialist revolutionaries in particular, EMS was convinced, in his early social reformer stage by instinct and later political stage by deep study and experience, that culture was of decisive significance in human affairs, both for the cementing of power structure and for altering it.

With this deep understanding of the role of culture in society and social transformation, EMS was pleasantly surprised and inspired when he discovered the epoch-making Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. Though EMS knew of Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian anti-fascist martyr and Marxist for a long time, somehow he had missed reading him thoroughly till very late in his life. So when in the early nineties, he came across Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, he was almost overwhelmed by his range and depth of thought and the significance and relevance of Gramscian thought to contemporary Marxism and revolutionary practice. True to his character EMS called for his other works and after reading them, straightaway set out to write a book on Gramsci. This writer was asked to collaborate and the result is one of his last significant books Gramscian Revolution in Thought, (1996) in Malayalam (Gramscian Vichara Viplavam).

The reason why Gramsci so overwhelmed him is easily explained. For long decades EMS through deep study, wide experience and practice was actually groping towards the ideas and theories brilliantly worked out by Gramsci with help of his innovative concepts like civil society, political society, ideology, culture, hegemony -- or to be more accurate, with the new dimensions of meaning he invested them with. Instead of limiting the role of culture and ideology as a derivative superstructure, Gramsci seemed to confirm EMS's view of culture as a positive catalytic agent in social transformation. Though the idea of the superstructure positively acting on the basis is not alien to classical Marxism, it was Gramsci who worked out and enriched the idea in a more scientific and thorough manner, drawing from the rich experience of countries with bourgeois parliamentary systems. So EMS considered Gramscian insights particularly relevant to the Indian working class movement. This also shows how EMS's mind was alert and open to new ideas even in his mature age.

Formative Years

This long process of the evolution of EMS's thought on art, literature and culture, which may be said to have rounded up with the discovery and interpretation of Gramsci, began in the twenties of this century when he was a student activist in the social reform movement in his Namboodiri Brahmin community. "Yoga Kshema Sabha", formed just a year before the birth of EMS, was the main organisation of the Namboodiris for social reform. It was in the hands of moderate conservatives when EMS and a band of young radicals like V.T. Bhattathiripad, M.R. Bhattathiripad, M.P. Bhattathiripad and others began to be active in the Sabha. Women's education, right of widows to remarriage, abolition of polygamy etc., were on the militant agenda of the youngsters. Thrissur was the centre of the young Namboodiri activists. EMS joined St. Thomas College in 1929 for his intermediate course and immediately found himself in the whirlwind of action. In the same year Unninamboodiri, the monthly organ of the Sabha, began to appear as a weekly and it was almost taken over by the young group. Though some older people were in charge, 20-year old EMS became its de facto editor and main contributor. Even before he turned 20, EMS was noted as a contributor to the magazine and so they were all very confident that this young man could fulfill the task credibility - and he did. Articles, columns, reports on activities, book reviews and literary dissertations flowed in succession from EMS's pen. EMS wrote in his autobiography that the Unninamboodiri was the workshop where he had his apprenticeship in writing and editing including literary criticism. He also said that his apprenticeship in public life was complete in the three years (1929-32) that he spent in college. Though he was a very brilliant and hard working student, winning admiration of both his teachers and class-mates, he was unable to resist the call of the civil disobedience movement raging all over India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and left the college before taking the degree. He went to Kozhikkode and offered Satyagraha which landed him in prison. The Gandhi-Irwin pact of 1932 which brought the movement to an abrupt end deeply disappointed EMS alongwith the radical and young elements in the Congress all over India. EMS and his close colleagues like P. Krishna Pillai, A.K. Gopalan and others came out of prison very disillusioned with Gandhi and the right-wing leadership of the Congress. In Kannur central prison these young radical Congressmen had opportunities to meet a number of militant revolutionaries from Bengal, dubbed "terrorists" and a new world of Left-wing and radical thought was opened up before them.

Coming out of prison EMS found himself a famous man, distinguished much more than his age and experience would warrant. Moothiringot Bhavathrathan Namboodiripad, a well-known man of letters and very senior to EMS in age and experience invited EMS to write an introduction to his landmark novel "Uncle's Daughter" (Aphante Makal, 1933). The novel depicts the plight of younger brothers in Brahmin families due to the system of primogeniture and the emotional and legal contradictions resulting from its system of inheritance. Though EMS was not yet a Marxist, his introductory essay shows very well how he was groping towards Marxist concepts of social and literary criticism.

It is during these formative years that EMS and his young colleagues began to explore the potential of the performing arts in social and political struggle. In the same year EMS joined the college (ie, 1929) his senior colleague in the Yogakshema Sabha, V.T. Bhattathiripad wrote a play named "From Kitchen to the Arena (Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku). It vividly portrayed the inequities and oppression suffered by Namboodiri women and the revolt against them. Though EMS did not venture into creative writing after some adolescent exercises in poetry, he was a live-wire organiser of drama troupes and performances. V.T.'s play was a tremendous success on stage and its successive performances created quite a stir in the community. It was followed by some others like "The Great Hell in Face-covering Umbrella" (Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam) and the "Pubescent Girl" (Ritumathi) and others. The climax of these series of resurgent plays was K. Damodaran's "Arrears of Rent" (Pattabakki) (1937).

Jeevat Sahitya

Unlike the earlier ones which dealt with social and family problems, Damodaran's pioneering play directly took up the issue of class struggle between landlords and tenants. It was preceded by the first narrative poem on the same theme by the young rebel poet Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, "The Bunch of Bananas" (Vazhakkula). This progress from VT's social classic to Damodaran's saga of class struggle coincided with the metamorphosis of the social and political climate of Kerala. The decade from 1929 to 1939 marked a crucial turning point in the history of Kerala -- we may even say that the contours of modern Kerala were drawn during this

decade. In this decade of flux and ferment, the year 1937 may be characterised as the fulcrum. In 1937 the northern part of Kerala which was directly under the British rule in Madras Presidency (unlike the native princely states Kochi and Travancore in the south) had a foretaste of democracy -- Rajagopalachari formed the Congress Ministry in the Presidency under the Government of India Act of 1935. The year witnessed the formation of the first unit of the Communist Party of India with P. Krishna Pillai (Secretary), EMS Namboodiripad, N.C. Shekhar and K. Damodaran. A year before, all the Hindu temples in Travancore state were thrown open to the so-called untouchable castes and next year witnessed massive struggle of Travancore for representative government.

To crown all these historic events, Kerala Jeevat Sahitya Sanghom (Association for Kerala's living literature), the initial form of the Purogamana Sahitya Sanghom (Progressive Writers Association, PWA) was established in 1937. The inspiration for this came from the founding conference of the Indian Progressive Writers Association under the chairmanship of the famous Hindi writer Prem Chand at Lucknow in 1936. The initiative was taken by a group of young Left-wing Congressmen including EMS, K. Damodaran, A. Madhavan, K.P.G. Namboodiri and K.A. Damodara Menon. EMS was the ideological head of the group which met at Thrissur. He published an article in the Mathrubhumi weekly (19 July 1937) titled "Jeevat Sahithyavum Soundarya Bodhavum" (Living Literature and Sense of Beauty) which served as the initial manifesto of the movement. In this article EMS replied to the criticism that progressive literature denied or at least downgraded the role of beauty. This was perhaps the first serious attempt to apply social, historical and Marxist criteria in the evaluation of art and literature in Malayalam. Both the founding of the PWA and EMS's article in 1937 were epoch-making events which served as the launching pads for the great take-off movement in Malayalam literature and arts during the next 60 years.

In his introduction to a collection of his early articles in 1974 EMS evaluates these events and the development that followed thus:

"When the Jeevat Sahitya movement took shape in 1937, the central controversial issue between its founders and traditional writers was this": "Whether art is for art's sake or for the sake of social progress?" The protagonists of Jeevat Sahitya argued that the aim of literature should not be just social progress in general. The central

thrust of social progress should be politics of anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism and socialism, they asserted. The other side opposed this.

"Those who took initiative to form the Jeevat Sahitya Movement were actively associated with Left-wing politics and peasant and working class movements including those who participated in the civil disobedience movement of 1930-32. Later by about 1943-44 many writers of established fame joined the movement and accepted the policy of "writing for social progress" with "definite social ideals". With this changed scenario an expanded Progressive Writers Movement was formed in which both the Left-wing political activists and those who were not so active participated. (In 1944, at the instance of EMS the name of the organisation also was changed to Purogamana Sahitya Sanghom -- Progressive Writers Association -- in tune with the all-India practice -- PG)

"By this time it may be said that the controversy around the slogan "Art for Art's sake" almost subsided. But differences again arose on the question of what constitutes social progress. These differences became still more acute after the British left the Indian shores and the regime fell into the hands of Congress". (Marxism and Malayalam Literature, 1974)

Freedom and Repression

These differences developed into a furious public controversy which took overt political dimensions. The literary and philosophical attacks on Communists coincided with the reign of terror unleashed by the Congress governments against the Communists and the mass movements led by them. From underground shelters and under pseudonyms, Communists hit back at their detractors. The bloody clashes which took place in various centres in Kerala like Kavumbai, Munayankunnu, Padikunnu, Pariyaram, Onchiam and the heroic tales of the Telengana struggle gave a particularly sharp edge to the spirited response of the Communists. The political line of the CPI adopted at the 2nd Congress at Calcutta which was later to be given up as sectarian, rendered a self-righteous tone to the Communists repartees. All these led to a split in the PWA in 1949 and some of the highly respected supporters and leaders of the movement such as critics M.P. Paul and Joseph Mundassery, creative writers like Thakazhi Siva Sankara Pillai and P. Kesavadev crossed over the fence to the other side and Communists and their close associates were

isolated. EMS alongwith a band of highly talented Marxists like M.S. Devadas, C. Unniraja, K.K. Warriar and others put up a stiff fight on behalf of the Marxists. Though the Communists' position was flawed on a number of points the controversy was not a futile exercise. That is why even while accepting the mistakes of those days EMS ventured to republish those articles without any correction. Though EMS was very frank and unreserved in owning up the mistakes he and his comrades committed in those traumatic years, he was totally opposed to those among the friends and foes who could see only the negative aspects and no positive elements at all. In politics as in cultural thought and practice the Communists, even when they occasionally deviated, were basically driving towards the chosen ideal. A judicious balance sheet of those years, as well as perhaps the later years, could never show the debit out-balancing the credit. EMS says:

"In the period 1947-52, we were participating in literary debates without fully understanding the current developments in Marxist-Leninist theory of literature. Besides, as was admitted earlier, there were serious deviations in the political practice followed by the Communist Party. These two factors contributed to the mistakes in the first four articles of this collection.

"Considering all these circumstances it might seem surprising that more mistakes and deviations did not enter these writings. There is reason for that. The reason is that Communists had a basic class approach which could not be neutralized by just a few ideological lapses and practical deviations. The socio-political outlook they held on firmly to was one based on the toiling sections of the people in general and the working class in particular. The mistakes and deviations occurred in the course of practical activities based on this outlook. Communists ought to have realised these mistakes and tried to strengthen this outlook overcoming those drawbacks. But instead of doing that there was a revisionist attempt to give up the class outlook altogether. It was this which led to the split in the Communist Party.

"This tendency became wide spread in the literary and cultural field, as it did in the practical politics. The trend of totally condemning the ideological struggle carried on by the Communists against non-Communists went to the extent of even rejecting the basic Marxist positions altogether". (Ibid)

Contentious Issues

Apart from the overt political controversies between the Communists and non-Communists, there emerged two contentious issues which were more of a literary character than political. The first of these, as we saw earlier was around the slogan of "Art for Art's sake". Though the controversy subsided to a large extent by 1943-44, when the PWA was reorganised with the widest possible participation of writers of different political and ideological persuasions, some points still remained unresolved. The post-independence period, and especially 1950s brought in a number of Marxist classics and writing on Marxist aesthetics by authors like Christopher Caudwell, Ralf Fox, Georg Lukacs, Franz Mehring and others. All these helped EMS and other Marxist critics to deepen their understanding of literary issues. Armed with these new insights and enriched by the experience of literary activism of about a decade and half, EMS introduced some new ideas in Malayalam literary criticism. These may be summarised in his own following words:

"That literary production should have a social ideal to realize, that the writer should write with the objective of social progress -- all these are incontrovertible. But the problem is not resolved by asserting this alone. Because, there are great men and women of letters in world literature, who were not conscious of the ideals which emerge out of their creations. But the creations of many of them directly serve the cause of social progress. But when they were composing their works they may not have been conscious of any such ideals. On the contrary, there are instances of writers who were subjectively holding views opposing social progress but wrote works which went against their subjective predilections".

To prove this argument, EMS relied on what Marx and Engels wrote on the great French novelist Honore de Balzac and Lenin on Leo Tolstoy. Though Balzac was a royalist and feudal loyalist, his great realistic novels depicted the degeneration of feudalism and the vibrance of the new classes of bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The possibility of the subjectivity of a writer coming into conflict with the objectivity of his text opens up wider vistas of literary and artistic evaluation. EMS cited the examples of the outstanding Malayalam novelist Chandu Menon and the great innovator of Malayalam poetry

in the 20th century, Mahakavi Kumaran Asan to prove his contention. The 19th century novelist Chandu Menon was subjectively a supporter of the joint family system and matrilineal inheritance. But his great novel Indulekha happens to be a sharp critique of these outdated and harmful practices. Kumaran Asan who revolutionized 20th century Malayalam poetry was a great fighter against the caste system, himself belonging to an "untouchable" caste. He distrusted the upper caste leaders of the national movement and gave the impression of being a supporter of the alien rulers, receiving presents and titles from them. But Vallathol, a contemporary of Asan was an ardent nationalist both in his life and poetry. It was conventional wisdom of the literary critics to extol Asan for his anti-casteism, but condemn his alleged anti-national stand. EMS did not agree with this. He pointed out that the freedom movement was a multi-faceted and multi-stream phenomenon and the anti-caste struggle was an important strand which strengthened the movement for national liberation. To under-estimate the role of the struggle of the Dalits in the freedom movement is like underestimating the role of workers' and peasants' class struggle in the fight for freedom. In fact, Gandhi and the right-wing leaders opposed such class struggles alleging that such antagonisms will alienate the bourgeoisie and landlords who could be mobilised against the British.

This Marxist position advocated and applied by EMS helped to give a new dimension to literary criticism in Malayalam and more thorough and analytical attention to the text proper. This also paved the way for broadening the base of the united movement of writers and artists and to heal the wounds inflicted by sectarian infighting.

Form and Content

The second important issue which in the late forties and early fifties led to furious controversies was about the relative primacy of form and content. The Left-wingers in the movement with EMS at its head argued for the primacy of content over form. Though in his landmark article in 1937 EMS took a judicious and balanced position with regard to the question of form and content, his articles from underground with the pseudonym "P.S.", tended to take an extreme position on the decisive role of content in a work of art. The opponents under the able captainship of Prof. Joseph Mundassery who was later to be the Education Minister in the first EMS Ministry, and a powerful supporter of PWA, and the Communist movement,

took an equally extreme position on "form". He coined the phrase "Roopa Bhadrata" as against "Bhava Bhadrata", "perfect form" and "perfect content" respectively. The controversy, quoting "chapter and verse" by both sides raged on for months and years.

The new political climate of the 1950s, celebrated by some historians as the "Red Decade" of Kerala, took all these controversies in its stride and it is hard to pinpoint when these controversies concluded. Actually issues did not die out and were to raise their heads again and again during the next decades.

EMS watered down his extreme position on content and went back to his original stand of 1937 in the early fifties itself. But a final solution to the problem of form and content and the whole controversy with Mundassery and others had to wait for few more decades.

In a series of lectures (1975) at Chennai EMS made a sharp correction of his view on the primacy of form. He borrowed the ideas in Engels' letters to Minna Kautsky (1885) and Margaret Harkness (1888) to adduce support for the correction. But it was in 1995 in course of a lecture in Perinthalmanna that he made a full assessment of the whole controversy. In it he turned upside down the very terms of the controversy as it was carried on in the late forties and early fifties. He resurrected the classic philosophical stand of Marxism and asserted the unity and complementarity of form and content and rejected as un-Marxian the dichotomy of form and content. Form is the mode of existence of content and content is what is contained in the form. Though it is quite legitimate for us to consider form and content apart for the purposes of analysis and study, it would be absurd and unscientific to tear one from the other as irreconcilable categories. Therefore, not only the "Bhava Bhadrata" like himself but also "Roopa Bhadrata" like Mundassery were in the wrong, EMS said. To quote him in detail:

"When we own up our mistakes some people interpret as if we alone were in the wrong. The fact is that just as we did, they also committed mistakes. If in the debate on Roopa Bhadrata we erred, people like Mundassery also erred equally.

"It is the fact of life that a truth emerges out of a conflict between two wrongs. The development of society is through contradictions.

Thus the Roopa Bhadrata argument which arose out of our conflict was wrong, in another sense it was correct too. Evaluating the worth of literature we should never confine ourselves to content alone. Mundassery was correct in insisting that form too is to be evaluated. In his own words it is not enough to have perfect content, it must also have perfect form. That is Roopa Bhadrata. Is that not correct? Yes, it is. We accept that we were wrong on that count. Those of us who founded the Jeevat Sahitya Sanghom were political workers. We looked at literature too through political eyes. So we did not pay sufficient attention to the artistic structure of literature. That was our mistake.

"But when people like Mundassery tried to correct us, they viewed form and content as two separate categories and argued for perfection in both. That was their theory. In fact the form and content are not so separate of conflicting categories. For progressive content there must be progressive form. The progressive form is the same as perfect form. Those like Mundassery did not realize the relation between the two." (Literary Debate -- Sahitya Samvadam, 1996)

This argument is not hair-splitting or pettifogging. The dichotomy of form and content and evaluation of each separately is based on an unstated assumption that in order to make literary and artistic creation perfect there are some hoary rules of composition and styles of presentation and any deviation from them would be unsuitable. Such assumptions do not accept as legitimate the continuous process of change in artistic and literary forms, to suit the changing ethos and values of society, and the resulting changes in people's taste.

Stereotypes and Life

Not only did EMS theoretically accept the concept of perfect form for perfect content. He applied these criteria in evaluating progressive literature and arts and sharply criticised works of progressive art when their form failed to do justice to the progressive content. For example, his criticism of the Communist hero in the famous play "You made me a Communist" is well-known. "You made me a Communist" was the first significant production of the Kerala Peoples Art Club (KPAC) organised by the CPI in the 1950s. It was a tremendous success on stage and people went to the extent of claiming that the victory of the Communists at the hustings in 1957 was due to the

whirlwind campaign that this play conducted. The Congress government of the erstwhile Travancore-Cochin state was stupid enough to ban this play and lifted the ban when a furore of popular protest shook it to its roots.

The play was written by a well-known Communist play-wright Thoppil Bhasi. His is a name to contend within the annals of Kerala's performing arts. In spite of all these points in favour of this play EMS with his keen eye could detect a major flaw in the characterisation of the Communist hero. EMS summarises his criticism as follows:

"A brief reference may be appropriate here to a particular flaw in the progressive plays staged in Kerala. A large number of these plays are acknowledged even by non-Communist critics to be of high artistic value. They are openly tendentious, conveying the message of working class or peasant struggles.

"You Made Me A Communist, for instance, took the people of Kerala by storm. All sections of the people, from the illiterate agricultural labourers to the most sophisticated intellectual, paid enthusiastic tribute to the author, producer, actors and to other artists connected with its staging. There was, however, one major defect in this particular play as well as in most other plays produced and staged by the revolutionary progressive writers and artistes in order to convey the message of the struggle of the toilers.

"In contrast to those characters in the play through whom the author succeeded in portraying realistically the various manifestations of social conflicts, the characters who present the cadres of the Communist Party are invariably lifeless. The landlords or capitalists at one end; and the oppressed agricultural labourers, tenant cultivators, industrial workers and other toiling people at the other, with their families and surroundings -- these are all portrayed true to life. The class and social struggles through which they live are realistically portrayed. But when it comes to portraying a live, active cadre of the Communist Party the author fails, making the 'comrade' talk and behave in such a way that we are led to exclaim: "If the leading Communists are so boring, how did this Party take roots among the People?"

"In other words, the thoughts and emotions of characters typical of

ordinary men and women engaged in class and social conflicts in general are expressed in live images but the characters representing the cadres of the Communist Party are created not from life but out of the author's preconceived notions. The thoughts and emotions of the author regarding the Party are conveyed abstractly, not in live images.

"Communist writers and critics must apply themselves as much to the study of the laws according to which man's capacity to imagine develops as to the study of the laws guiding the development of man's thinking capacity". (Marxism and Literature, Chennai, 1975)

Basis and Superstructure

Another important theoretical issue EMS had to clarify in defence of Marxism was the relation between basis and superstructure. From a superficial reading of Marx's class description of basis and superstructure in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) a section of Marx's followers as well as opponents have come to the conclusion that the superstructure of ideology is only a derivation of the economic basis, it was no more than a lifeless mirror reflection. Such an understanding tend to deny art, literature and culture any positive role in social life or transformation. This oversimplification reduces dialectical materialism to mechanical materialism and distorts historical materialism to a deterministic dogma or a teleological construct.

Quoting Engels' letter to J. Bloch in 1890, EMS refuted this simplistic understanding for the benefit of both friends and foes. Engels clarified in this famous letter:

"According to the materialist conception of history the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract senseless phrase".

EMS frankly admits that among those who misread Marx in this fashion were himself and other comrades in the early years. He says:

"It would be a grievous error -- and this was precisely the error committed by us in our polemics against our non-Communist colleagues -- to think that aesthetic production is more or less an exact copy of class struggle in its economic or political forms." (Marxism and Literature)

Then he goes on to explain the intricate and sometimes elusive relation between class struggle and social realities on the one hand and aesthetic production on the other. He says:

"Class struggle is, of course, relevant and crucial to aesthetic production and appreciation, as it is to every other form of social activity. This is a truth worth repeating and emphasising, since it is denied by non-Communists. It should be clearly borne in mind, however, that the class struggle manifests itself in the field of aesthetic production in a way different from other fields, and that aesthetic production and appreciation have their own laws independent of, though related to, laws in other fields".(Ibid)

Besides silencing the detractors, this clarification of EMS has helped young Marxist writers and critics to steer themselves clear of the pitfalls of crudity and easy sloganising.

The Red Decade

All these explorations, discoveries and clarifications in theory and practice of Marxism was possible for EMS and his comrades not by delving deeper into the classics alone but also from the experience of building the literary and cultural movement of Kerala. We have already seen how the PWA was born as Jeevat Sahitya Sanghom in 1937 and registered phenomenal growth in the next decade and then split into Communist and non-Communists pieces towards the close of the forties. We have also seen that the reason for the split was partly the faulty line pursued by Communists and partly the inevitable new alignments of forces after the transfer of power, mainly the split in the anti-imperialist front of pre-independence era. We have also dealt briefly with the process of introspection of self-criticism undertaken by EMS and other comrades and the series of steps taken by them in the following decades to enrich the Marxist and progressive understanding and practice of literature and arts.

But as an organisation the PWA did not survive long after the split in 1948-49. Outstanding leaders of all-India PWA like Mulk Raj Anand, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Kishan Chander, K.A. Abbas, and Balraj Sahni visited the state several times and spoke to young audiences. EMS with the able assistance of M.S. Devadas, Unni Raja, Damodaran, Achutha Kurup and others with the blessings of the patriarchal figure Mahakavi Vallathol carried on their ideological and practical literary campaign. All these gave a great fillip to the movement and salvaged very much the damages inflicted by the split. A new generation of young writers, poets and play-wrights like Vayalar Ramavarma, ONV Kurup, Thoppil Bhasi, P.J. Antony, K.T. Muhammed emerged on the scene. Old pioneers of the PWA like Thakazhi, Basheer, Varkey, Cherukat, Pottakkad and others who were only short-story writers blossomed into powerful novelists. A number of highly talented poets like Vyloppilly Sreedhara Menon and Edassery Govindan Nair, who were younger to the famed trio of 20th century Malayalam poetry, viz, Asan, Ulloor, and Vallathol but senior to Vayalar and ONV like Vyloppilly and Edassery significantly contributed to revolutionising the Malayalam poetic life of the latter half of the century. A new set of innovative writers like M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Madhavikutty (Kamala Das), T. Padmanabhan entered the arena of story telling. They were not associated with PWA, and were not content with the old realism of pioneers, but their innovations enriched the corpus of progressive writing.

Performing arts like theatre and visual arts like film and plastic arts like painting and sculpture also showed new signs of awakening in 1950s. We have already mentioned KPAC among the performing arts groups. Others which made a mark in this field in the 1950s were the Pratibha Arts Club of P.J. Antony, (Bharat Award winner for acting in Cinema) Kendra Kala Samity of K.T. Muhammed and others and Sakti group of Cherukat. In all these and the slowly growing Malayalam cinema the most influential creators and performers were all under the influence of the PWA. To crown all these developments in literary and art fields the political scene in Kerala was assuming a deep red hue.

In 1956 the united Kerala state was formed as part of the all-India state reorganisation and in the general elections which took place in 1957 Communists came to power in the state with EMS Namboodiripad, the most articulate theoretician of and campaigner for the unification of Kerala, as the Chief Minister. No wonder some

authors dubbed the fifties as the Red Decade of Kerala. With all these all-round advances in literature, arts and politics it may seem strange, but is true that, the PWA as an organisation did not take any roots. But as we have seen the movement flourished and progressive literary and artistic production increased unprecedentedly.

Decline and Rise

The red dawn of the 1950s began to fade by the 1960s before reaching its apoqee and the literary sky was overcast by dark clouds. This decline started from the rise and temporary victory of the anti-Communist front in getting the duly elected government of EMS undemocratically dismissed. The political anti-Communist front comprising Congress, social democrats, communalists and casteists with the support of the church and mullas, spread out to literary and cultural fields. Ex-Communist forums and anti-Communist writers associations, some with the support of the CIA-financed Congress for cultural freedom made their entry into the state for the first time.

The India-China border conflict, in 1962, the split in the Communist movement, and the consequential developments threw the Left movement into temporary disarray. Some weak-kneed Leftists and opportunists found it safe and advantageous to cross over to the right. Some Communist writers like Thoppil Bhasi and Vayalar Rama Varma found greener pastures in commercial films.

Some talented writers like O.V. Vijayan, M. Mukundan, Kakkanadan, M.P. Narayana Pillai, and Kakkad who were known for their Left-wing association adopted the socalled modernist garb and virtually adopted the leadership of hide-bound anti-Communists like M. Govindan and C.J. Thomas. The split in the Communist party and the incarceration of thousands of CPI(M) leaders and cadres were a further blow.

Though EMS was still occasionally writing on literary and cultural issues, the major share of his time and energy was claimed by other pressing duties. A large section of the Communist writers like Damodaran, Induchoodan and Devadas found themselves in the revisionist camp and were given to the intellectual pusillanimity of which EMS warned us in the name of self criticism they were even giving up the basic class positions. They sought to put all the blame

for the split and decline of the progressive literary movement on the head of EMS and his followers.

The release of comrades from prison and the general elections which proved the greater mass base of the CPI(M) and the formation of the seven-party United Front government under the Chief Ministership of EMS made a qualitative change in the political as well as literary situation. Despite all his preoccupations, with Party and governmental duties, EMS set himself to pick up the broken threads of PWA and began mending the fences. The first step in this direction was to found an illustrated cultural weekly as a supplement to Deshabhimani daily. With the prospect of a serious split in the anti-Congress front in the offing, and most of the established Left writers having deserted the Marxist fold, it was a tough job to mobilise sufficient number of writers to run a regular weekly.

It is in this gloomy situation that EMS called this writer, then the Chief Editor of daily and weekly and asked to build up a team of writers around the weekly. He asked us not to depend too much upon big and established writers. Once we get on the rails and move on, the big ones would follow suit, one by one. But our anchor must be young and new writers, whom we must teach, train and promote.

Thus was born the Deshabhimani Study Circle with a dozen or so youngsters and two or three seniors like M.N. Kurup, Cherukat, E.K. Nayanar and of course EMS.

By 1969, the Congress split into two and some allies including CPI left the seven-party front to join a Congress front. The second EMS Ministry fell and he had much more time to spare for art and literature. In the Republic Day special issue of Deshabhimani weekly in 1971, EMS wrote an important article titled "Progressive Literature and Communist Literature". It was a panoramic review of 34 years of PW movement assessing both the deviations and achievements. He also charted out a path forward to revive the movement.

This article was widely discussed in literary circles, study circle units and debated in the columns of the weekly. As a sort of rounding up of the widespread discussions and debates, an all-Kerala conference of the activists of the circle and some invited guests not associated

with the circle was held on May 27-28, 1971 at Elamkulam, the home village of EMS in central Kerala. Besides EMS's article the veteran Marxist M.S. Devadas also presented a paper. Nayanar presided over the deliberations.

After frank and thorough debates, interspersed with self criticism and some times complacent of self-justifications EMS summed up the findings. Though the study circle was a designed as a loose organisation, with a lot of freedom for participation and dissent, central committee with the famed activist, dramatist, and novelist Cherukat as the President and poet-journalist M.N. Kurup as the General Secretary was elected. Thus the wide road was opened up for the revival and as ward of the defunct PWA.

Circle to PAAL

The onward march of Deshabhimani Study Circle in the turbulent decade of 1970s was spectacular. EMS's prophesy proved correct. Alongwith a number of young writers, poets and play wrights trained and promoted by the circle a number of established writers gave their weighty support to the circle. The non-sectarian openness which was the hall-mark of the circle from the very beginning had its salutary results. Outstanding men and women of letters, who were no longer young and some of whom began their literary career as anti-Communists and critics of PWA, joined the movement and gave it wide spread acceptability. Among them may be mentioned the critic Thayatt Sankaran, M.K. Sanu, M.N. Vijayan, M.S. Menon, Erumeli Parameswaran Pillai, Parappurath Sukumar Azhikkode and many others. Though there are still criticise the movement as a Communist outfit, such critics do not have their former credibility.

The role of the study circle during the suffocating oppression of Emergency Declaration (1975-77) was bold and fruitful.

The movement took the next long step forward on 14 August 1981, the seventieth birth day of Mahakavi Vyloppilly Sreedhara Menon, to transform and expand and rename the Study Circle as Purogamana Kala Sahitya Sanghom -- Progressive Association for Art and Letters, PAAL for short. Mahakavi Vyloppilly, the greatest 20th century Malayalam poet after Kumaran Asan and Vallathol was elected President. Vyloppilly, besides his poetic brilliance and progressive

commitment, earned a special niche in the heart of Malayalees as a forth-right opponent of Emergency. There were not many senior writers in Kerala who can claim this title, though there were many younger ones.

As the name indicates the PAAL does not confine itself to literature. Performing arts, plastic arts, music, film, architecture and all other forms of art comes under PAAL's purview. Separate camps, workshops and conferences are being held for different forms of arts. PAAL now is the most powerful and influential organisation fighting communalism and fascism in Kerala. And it is one of the heritages left by EMS.

The various comments, self criticisms and the theories from EMS which we quoted were all part of the consistent campaign EMS carried on to resurrect and strengthen the PW movement. Though he was eminently successful in reviving and strengthening the movement, two items on his agenda remained unimplemented. One was to transform PAAL into a still broader body to make it a common organisation of all writers, artists, painters, actors, film-makers etc., without any sectarian barrier among them. Another, and more important ambition which was close to his heart was to build up an all-India forum of Artists and writers.

Let us hope that these unfulfilled items of his agenda will get the attention they deserve from his comrades and admirers.