

EMS: The Marxist Pathfinder

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We are celebrating the birth centenary year of EMS Namboodiripad, a remarkable communist leader and Marxist intellectual. EMS, as he was universally known, was born on June 13, 1909 and he died on May 12, 1998. EMS hailed from an orthodox Namboodiri Brahmin family. His first step in public life as a young student was to fight for social reforms against the moribund customs that prevailed within the Namboodiri community. From there he moved to join the freedom struggle and the Congress Party. Attracted to socialist ideas, EMS became one of the founding members of the Congress Socialist Party and Marxism brought him to the Communist Party. EMS was one of the founders of the Communist Party in Kerala. He was the Chief Minister of the first elected Communist state government in the country in Kerala in 1957. EMS had a second stint as Chief Minister from 1967 to 1970, heading the United Front government. EMS assumed the General Secretaryship of the CPI in 1963. After the split in the CPI and the formation of the CPI(M), EMS became a member of the Polit Bureau. He served as the General Secretary of the Party from 1977 to 1992. From the mid 1930s when he became the editor of the socialist paper *Prabhatham* to the end of his life, EMS had a distinctive contribution as an editor and writer in many communist journals and newspapers. No other communist leader in India has written as much as he has done in Malayalam and English. The collected writings of EMS in Malayalam which are being published run into 100 volumes.

This bare sketch of EMS's political activities does not do justice to the rich and varied contribution by him to the communist movement, to philosophy, politics, culture and history in India.

E.M.S. Namboodiripad is a striking illustration of how an individual's life and work acquires a tremendous impact when harnessed to the theory and practice of Marxism. When the individual is a person of EMS's exceptional intellectual ability and depth of vision, veritably, theory becomes a powerful force and in the hands of a creative practitioner like EMS, it produces the impulses for a powerful movement. The creative thought and practice of EMS moved the people and changed the history of Kerala in the twentieth century as no other individual has done. What made EMS a pre-eminent leader was his ability to stay ahead of his contemporaries in applying Marxism to the specific conditions of Kerala and India. The second unmatched capacity was his natural skill in communicating his ideas and that of his party to the people in a manner which moved them into collective political action.

In the sphere of theorising and putting into practice the policies of the Party of the working class, EMS made an unparalleled contribution. The flowering of EMS's talents in analysis of contemporary society is evident from the point when he became acquainted with Marxist theory in a rudimentary fashion. After being profoundly influenced by the socialist politics of Jayaprakash Narayan whose book "Why Socialism" opened the window to socialist ideas for the young radical Congressmen of Malabar in 1934, EMS and his contemporaries like P. Krishna Pillai, A.K. Gopalan, K. Damodaran and others, joined the Congress Socialist Party.

Contacts with the Communist Party through the CSP and the formation of the first Communist group in Kerala in 1937 made available some books on Marxism to EMS. From here began the efforts to study theory, apply it to the conditions of Kerala society and then extend it to the development of the revolutionary movement. In the early years upto 1945 we see the promising beginnings. The analysis of Malabar agrarian society, the historical development of Kerala society and the linguistic-nationality question of the Malayalees are all utilised to shape the left movement.

The creative vitality of EMS's political thought stemmed from the method he began applying early in life. He would study the concrete socio-economic conditions and their impact on the various classes in society and out of this analysis he would draw his theoretical conclusions which would be the guide for action.

Theorist for Agrarian Revolution

This was the method he first adopted in dealing with agrarian relations in Malabar. The result was his minute of dissent to the report of the Malabar Tenancy Enquiry Committee set up by the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1939. This document nearly six decades later still retains the brilliance of its insights into the nature of the Jenmi-landlord system in Malabar and its pernicious effects on the peasantry and society. Building on this analysis EMS provided practical guidance to the developing peasant movement against landlordism in the Malabar province. The militant anti-feudal struggles which carried on till the post-independence period made Malabar one of the strongest units of the Kisan Sabha in the country. It is based on the experience of this powerful movement, which became the spearhead of the anti-imperialist struggle in Kerala, that EMS made his contribution to the All India Kisan Sabha of which he became the Joint Secretary. When he joined the Party Centre at Delhi in end 1953, one of the responsibilities assigned to him was looking after the Kisan Front. The CC resolution of 1954 on "Our Tasks among the Peasant Masses" provided a broadly correct orientation for work on this front;

EMS played an important role in drafting this document.

Foundations of modern Kerala

In contrast to the one nation single culture model put out by the dominant bourgeois leadership of the national movement, it is the communists who pioneered studies on the linguistic--nationality question in India. EMS undertook the job of tracing the development of the linguistic-nationality of the Malayalam-speaking people and provided the theoretical basis for the creation of a unified state of Kerala. His publication in Malayalam titled "One and a Quarter crore Malayalees" in 1945 was subsequently revised and developed into a full-fledged study published in English in 1952 as "The National Question in Kerala. This was the first concrete application of the Marxist-Leninist approach to the nationality question to a specific nationality in India. His advocacy of "Aikya Kerala" was similar to the works which appeared on the formation of Vishalandhra by P. Sundarayya and Natun Bangla by Bhowani Sen, but the significance of EMS's work lay in the deep historical insight into how the socio-economic formation in Kerala developed at different stages upto colonialism. This provided the basis both for championing the formation of Kerala as a linguistic state merging Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, and also getting rid of antiquated socio-economic relations and fetters on production necessary for the emancipation of the people from feudalism and imperialism.

Class analysis of caste

The same approach can be seen in the manner in which EMS tackled the caste question in India. After studying the role of caste historically in ancient Kerala society upto the time the British colonised India, EMS concluded that the feudal system in Kerala consisted of a jati-janmi-naduvazhi medhavitwam (landlord-upper caste-chieftain-domination). Having been an active participant in the anti-caste and social reform movement and then moving forward to the building of class based movements and the Communist Party, EMS with his intellectual abilities was able to synthesise this early experience and formulate the correct position on class-caste relations. The basis on which he advocated tackling the question of caste by the working class movement has an abiding relevance in the contemporary period where caste divisions are acute in society.

EMS spelt out the basis of the Marxist approach to caste and class. He wanted the working class movement to identify and channelise the aspirations of the most oppressed castes particularly the dalits, in their struggles for social emancipation and an end to caste oppression. Studying Kerala society, in the forties he had shown the close correlation between caste, class and property

relations and underlined the vital importance of harnessing the anti-caste revolts to the democratic and agrarian revolution. While doing so, he resolutely worked for the building of the class organisations and the unity of the oppressed sections of all castes and communities. While being supportive of the struggles of the lower caste organisations against upper caste domination, the Communists in Kerala gave priority to the united movements and organisations of the working people.

EMS talked of the two-front struggle that had to be waged:

"We had then and still have to fight a two-front battle. Ranged against us on the one hand are those who denounce us for our alleged "departure from the principles of nationalism and socialism," since we are championing "sectarian" causes like those of the oppressed castes and religious minorities. On the other hand are those who, in the name of defending the oppressed caste masses, in fact, isolate them from the mainstream of the united struggle of the working people irrespective of castes, communities and so on." (Once Again on Castes and Classes, p.184, Selected Writings, Vol. 1)

Throughout EMS maintained:

"Our Party and myself as one of its activists have thus been basing ourselves on the Marxist theory of class struggle and subordinating the problem of caste oppression to the needs of uniting the exploited against the exploiting classes, irrespective of the caste to which each belongs." (Ibid, p.190)

He noted that with the development of capitalism and the breakdown of the old order, sections of the upper castes who were property owners had become pauperised and joined the ranks of the urban and rural proletariat. At a later stage, he pointed out that sections of the backward castes (or Other Backward Classes) had also benefitted from the socio-economic changes and gone up the ladder either through access to education, jobs or improved economic conditions. It is this understanding which EMS first put forward in the report of the Administrative Reforms Committee that he headed when he was Chief Minister of Kerala in 1957. In this report it was recommended that reservation continue for other backward classes and that the elite sections from these classes be excluded from the benefit of reservation. Much before the "creamy layer" issue became a controversy, three decades before that, EMS had already formulated such an approach. The stand on reservation which EMS elaborated after the Mandal Commission Report was implemented in 1989 was based on the above class understanding which stressed the importance of the unity of all sections of the working people. But within this mass of the working people, Marxists should recognise that there are some sections who are historically and

socially disadvantaged and oppressed by the caste system. This oppression has not been eliminated even after decades of capitalist development and political independence. It is in order to draw these masses into the common movement and to eventually break down caste barriers that reservation is supported by the Marxists as a concept for a period of time with limited aims. EMS firmly took on upper caste chauvinists who oppose reservations and also warned the Party of the working class not to "allow itself to be turned into a tailist hanger on of the bourgeois-landlord elements growing within the 'backward' communities."

Women's Movement: Emancipatory Vision

EMS made an original contribution to the development of a correct perspective for the democratic women's movement. In his first public activity against the hidebound orthodoxy of the Namboodiri community, a major issue was the status of Namboodiri women. The young EMS who participated in the social reform movement focussed on the oppression of Namboodiri women who were even deprived of the right to marriage and had to observe a form of purdah. The emancipation of Namboodiri women from gender oppression in a feudal set-up was the theme of the early writings and the plays prepared by EMS and his colleagues in the Yogakshema Sabha.

Later in the development of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles in Malabar, EMS paid particular attention to the increasing participation of women in the democratic movement. Writing in 1942 about this aspect, he noted that rights were accorded to women in most communities in traditional Kerala society unknown in other areas. He hoped this tradition would be renewed in the modern context which would enable them to play an equal role with men in the social transformation of society. When he was first working at the Party Centre in the period 1954-56, EMS was responsible for guiding the work on the women's front. At that time, he set out the broad outlines of the nature of the women's organisation. It should encompass all sections of women belonging to different classes as they all suffer from a common gender oppression, at the same time, women coming from the working class and the peasantry would constitute the bulk of the membership as they suffer from the double oppression, both class and social.

Later, in the leadership of the CPI(M), drawing from experience, he set out the basis for the building of a powerful democratic women's movement. He pointed out three aspects that have to be taken into account. Firstly, of women as women who irrespective of their class status suffer from gender oppression in a bourgeois and semi-feudal society; secondly, women as workers who suffer from the class exploitation given their position as agricultural or industrial workers and thirdly, women as citizens who have to struggle along with men

for democratic rights, democracy and a just society. It is these three aspects combined together, which provides the correct orientation to draw in all sections of women in the struggle for women's equality and against class and gender exploitation.

Perspective on parliamentary activity

EMS held a unique position as far as communist participation in parliamentary democracy is concerned. Having been the head of the first elected communist ministry in the country in 1957, he had the direct experience of working within a constitutional set up where real State power did not rest with the state governments but with the Centre.

The 28 months of the first communist ministry in Kerala headed by EMS saw policies being implemented which had far-reaching implications. The first act of the government was to issue an ordinance banning evictions of tenants. This was followed by the Agrarian Relations Bill which provided for fixity of tenure, lower rents and right to buy ownership for the tenants; for the landless labourers security of tenure on homestead land and distribution of surplus land was proposed.

While the legislation on land reforms and the education bill are well known and became the focus for the landlord and reactionary interests to gang up and topple the government, there was another policy measure which is equally significant. This was the police policy adopted by the EMS ministry. For the first time in post-independent India a government proposed a democratic police policy. The essence of the policy was that the police had no role to play in labour disputes or in disputes between landlords and peasants. The police was not an instrument for capitalists and landlords to break up the struggles of workers and peasants. The police intervention should come into play only if there was a problem of law and order created with any side trying to take the law into their own hands. Explaining this policy, EMS wrote:

"The crux of that policy is that it is not the job of the police to suppress the trade union, peasant and other mass activities of any mass organisation, or a political struggle waged by any political party; it is the job of the police to track down and punish those who commit ordinary crimes." (Twenty-eight months in Kerala, p.134, Selected Writings, Vol. 2)

This policy which could not be fully put in place by the first EMS government was developed further by the CPI(M) when the United Front governments took office nearly a decade later in the 1967-70 period.

The "Kerala way" advocated by a reformist view of the electoral advance in Kerala was refuted by EMS much before the 1964 split in the Party. He did not believe, having seen the dogged pursuit of the ruling class interests by the Nehru-led Congress, that any parliamentary road to power had opened up. There would be no successive Kerala-type victories leading to power in Delhi. Instead he foresaw increasing electoral success of the Communists resulting in intensification of the class struggle.

The experience of the first Communist ministry was explained by EMS as follows:

"If the "experiment" in Kerala showed anything, it is this: The struggle in the parliamentary arena, including the formation of state governments when a majority is secured, is one specific form of class struggle in which the struggle on the parliamentary arena would have to be subordinated to, though being integrated with, the extra-parliamentary struggle." (Reminiscences of an Indian communist, p. 177)

It is this experience which helped the CPI(M) subsequently in formulating its tactics regarding participation in the state governments within a bourgeois-landlord system. When the 1964 Party programme was formulated, as pointed out by Harkishan Singh Surjeet, a paragraph defining the participation in state governments was included at the instance of EMS. Subsequently, the Central Committee in its document "New Situation and Tasks" (1967) elaborated on the nature of this participation with regard to the formation and functioning of United Front governments headed by the CPI(M) in West Bengal and Kerala in 1967. After becoming the Chief Minister of Kerala again in 1967, EMS was instrumental in formulating the tactics of administration and struggle while being in the state government. The idea being that participation in the state government should be utilised to initiate and implement policies which will help the development of the mass movements and democratic struggles. At that time this slogan was opposed by the CPI. EMS countered this by defending the concept of using the state government headed by the Left as an instrument of struggle.

It would be wrong however to limit EMS's understanding on participation in parliamentary forums to just this role. He had a more fundamental understanding of how the Communist Party should work in the parliamentary system clarifying and defining the role of the Party which participates in governments where it has popular mandates while continuing to keep its major focus on developing mass movements and the struggles of the working people. The work of the Party at all levels in elected bodies whether it be legislatures

or other institutions in society should be part of the overall strategy and tactics of developing the democratic movement.

Tactics of fighting communalism

EMS's mastery of political tactics was a result of his remarkable ability to grasp the essence of the changes that were taking place both in relation to the immediate situation and long term strategy. There was none to rival him in foreseeing the line of development once a political phenomenon appeared and he was able to analyse it in class terms. This became evident time and again when he formulated the next stage in a tactical line or, initiated a change in the existing tactics. Very often, his colleagues and the Party took time to come abreast with his changing understanding. A good example is how EMS translated the understanding of the growing danger of the communal and divisive forces formulated by the Party in the 11th Congress in 1982 to the concrete situation in Kerala. He was in the forefront as the General Secretary of the Party in leading the struggle to break links with communal parties who were till then part of the united front politics practiced by the Party. The break with the AIML (a splinter group of the Muslim League) came about in 1985 as a result of the firm struggle initiated by EMS who understood that any concession to a communal based party in Kerala would compromise the all - India struggle against the forces of majority communalism and other divisive forces. The 1987 assembly elections saw EMS conducting an intensive campaign, posing the basic question before the people of Kerala that caste and communal politics should become an anachronism and should find no place in modern democratic Kerala society. The victory of Left and Democratic Front and the Party line in these elections was one of the finest moments in EMS's political career.

On the question of communalism, EMS made another important contribution. At the national level when he was the General Secretary of the Party, the danger of majority communalism grew rapidly in the latter half of the eighties. The rise of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement targeting the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, the spate of communal riots organised by the RSS and its allied outfits and the growing aggressiveness of the Hindutva forces alerted EMS to the new threat to secular democracy. Well before many of his contemporaries in the secular camp, EMS traced the growing assertiveness of the BJP to the backing of the RSS and the Hindutva ideology which ran counter to the whole orientation and traditions of the anti-imperialist freedom struggle. The communal threat which existed before independence and its revival again in post-independent India in a big way after four decades was related by EMS to the class nature of the bourgeois-landlord system which compromised with the very forces which sustain such ideology. Therefore, EMS saw the BJP-RSS combine not as a communal force alone but also in class terms as representatives of right reaction in India.

It is this clear understanding which enabled EMS to provide the firm leadership to the Party Central Committee and Polit Bureau to pursue a two track policy. Firstly, to target the BJP-RSS-VHP combine as a threat to the secular democratic fabric of the country and to work for its isolation; secondly, together with the Left to unitedly strive to gather all the secular opposition forces so that the wider unity of the Left and secular opposition could be forged to fight the Rajiv Gandhi government at that time and also to demarcate from and isolate the BJP which was seeking to intervene and join the anti-Congress struggle. EMS firmly led the struggle of the Party to foil all efforts to build an "all-in opposition unity" inclusive of the BJP to head the rising mass discontent against the Congress. When the National Front was being formed, initially some of the bourgeois parties wanted to include the BJP. Efforts were made to unite with the BJP on specific issues like support to Giani Zail Singh against Rajiv Gandhi. In all these questions the political stand and intervention of the Party expressed through EMS played a major role in demarcating the National Front from the BJP and laying the foundations for cooperation between the National Front and the Left.

For proletarian hegemony

Another sphere in which EMS made a distinctive contribution was in articulating the role of the Left as a distinct force in Indian politics, tracing its roots from the anti-imperialist struggle. Having been an active Congressman in his early political career, then a leading Congress Socialist Party worker and eventually a Communist leader, EMS sought to put the whole experience of the anti-imperialist movement in a systematic manner in which the role of the Left could be delineated at every stage of the development of the anti-imperialist movement. The struggle within the Congress between the Right and the Left, from the Lucknow session when Nehru became president in 1935 to the Tripuri session when Subhas Chandra Bose won the elections; the role of the fledgling Communist Party; the impact of the October revolution and later the anti-fascist struggle; the formation of the AITUC and other class and mass organisations ---- these events were put together to provide a coherent narrative of how the proletarian/Left stream developed in the freedom struggle vis a vis the bourgeois dominated movement.

Here again there was no mechanical analysis or simplification. While characterising the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi as essentially bourgeois in class terms, EMS made a sophisticated and insightful analysis of the role played by Gandhi in the national movement. The Mahatma And The Ism first published in 1958 was a product of a number of articles written in the New Age monthly in the period 1955-56. It was the first serious attempt by a Marxist leader to analyse the crucial role played by Gandhi in developing the Congress-

led mass movement for freedom. Gandhi's positive role and its serious limitations were seen not in individual terms but put within the framework of the overall interests of the national bourgeoisie. The unique tactics adopted by Gandhi such as individual satyagraha and civil disobedience were understood in this context. While acknowledging the greatness of Gandhi and his contribution, the book also sets out the divergent approaches to the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal tasks which the Communists and the bourgeois leadership of the Congress had.

From this seminal work, which EMS himself recognised as one of his major works, the idea of the two streams, bourgeois and proletarian, within the freedom struggle, complementary to the overall aim of fight against imperialism but divergent in its class interests was worked out. Thus began the quest for constructing the proletarian challenge to the hegemony of the bourgeois political forces. Tracing the heritage of the Left in the anti-imperialist struggles and demarcating from the bourgeois and petit bourgeois trends of the Congress leadership, EMS subsequently paid a great deal of attention to the whole question of countering the ideological hegemony of the ruling classes. Not by economic struggles and political slogans alone can the ruling classes domination be countered. EMS right from the beginning of his revolutionary career recognised the importance of the role of the media, culture and intellectual work to project an alternative Left perspective. His lifelong and fruitful association with media and cultural activities was nurtured by this comprehensive understanding of a proletarian movement.

Socialist internationalism

It is not necessary to dwell at length on the internationalist outlook of EMS which he shared with the collective leadership of the CPI(M). A characteristic feature of this outlook, as distinct from the CPI stream, was the adherence to proletarian internationalism which was not circumscribed by loyalty to any particular communist party in working out the international understanding and application of Marxism-Leninism. While defending socialism from the onslaughts of imperialism whether it be in the case of the Soviet Union or China, the CPI(M) leadership, of which EMS was an integral part, firmly stood for an internationalism which was partisan towards socialism and unremittingly hostile to imperialism. However, it also refused to accept any direction or guidance on how the communists should work out their strategy and tactics in India. To EMS fell the difficult task of putting out the principled communist position in 1962 during the Indo-China border conflict and in 1965 during the Indo-Pakistan war when most of his colleagues were in jail. He became the spokesman for the Party for a line which opposed national chauvinism and which stressed peaceful solution of disputes with both the neighbours.

His understanding of the socialist countries and the international working class movement had two distinctive trends in the later period -- after the splits in the international communist movement and in the post-Soviet Union era. In the first instance, while opposing revisionist and sectarian manifestations in the communist movement, he firmly maintained that each country and the revolutionary party there will have to find its own path to socialism and this cannot be strait-jacketed into any single model of revolution in the name of Marxism-Leninism or proletarian internationalism. Thus he could appreciate the immense contribution of the Chinese revolution and urge a more serious study of Mao Zedong's contribution to the theory and practice of Marxism, while at the same time, resolutely opposing any move to mechanically transpose them to Indian conditions. It is this consistent approach which led to the naxalite movement and Maoist ideologues in India targetting him for attack in the late sixties and early seventies.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he began the process of looking back at the whole experience of building of the Soviet Union in order to come to some deeper understanding of this first experiment of a socialist society. In a number of articles he stressed the necessity of going back to the period of Lenin and the New Economic Policy (NEP) and to then trace the roots of dogmatism and revisionism in the Soviet model. He was in this context sympathetic to the Chinese efforts to reform the economy so as to avoid the mistakes made in the Soviet Union. He did not agree with the view that the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping were primarily a negative development for the future of socialism in China.

EMS in his last years urged the Party to undertake a thorough reappraisal of the experience of the building of socialism in the Soviet Union and the causes for its downfall and integrate it with a contemporary and comprehensive approach to the development of the international working class movement and the struggle for socialism.

The personal life of EMS was also remarkable. He was a man devoid of ego and given his enormous intellect, extremely modest. He lead a life of utmost simplicity having given away his ancestral property to the Party in the nineteen forties. As he himself admitted "elements of Gandhism were by and large inherent in my lifestyle" even after becoming a Marxist. As a leader, he had a democratic style of functioning. By sheer example, he exercised a great moral influence over the cadres to make them live upto the expectations of the people.

Dialogue with the masses

Unmatched by any other Communist leader, EMS was the most successful communicator of ideas giving practical guidance to the mass of the people.

This was a unique phenomenon basically confined to Kerala where EMS could use the mass media of the Party as the vehicle for his dialogue with the masses and for polemics with rival political circles. Even when he was based in Delhi he would intervene in the political debates raging in Kerala through the medium of his columns and articles. The prodigious output which he sustained till the end of his life through daily articles, weekly columns, editorials, review of books and cultural events constitutes a chapter in the public life of Kerala which will be unique in the annals of the Indian communist movement. No other political thinker in post-independent India could acquire this stature and access to the people which EMS had. This was possible because his was a political thought and practice which exemplified the best Marxist synthesis of theory and practice.