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by V.K. Ramachandran
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‘A Short History of the Peasant Movement in Kerala’. E.M.S. Namboo-


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Publisher’s Introduction

E.M.S. Namboodiripad (1909–1998) left behind an enormous legacy, both in theory and in practice. As a young man, EMS was inspired by the freedom movement, to which he gave his energy in his native Kerala. Born into a family and community at the fortunate end of the feudal system, EMS threw himself early into undermining its foundation. His early writings in Unninamboothiri were against what EMS later called the ‘jenmi’-landlord system. Nothing would have pleased him more, he felt, than to make the Namboodiris into human beings. It was a vast assignment for a young man, but EMS was up to it. Not for him only scholarly combat. EMS threw himself into the movement for freedom, first into Gandhi’s Congress, then into the Congress Socialist Party and finally into the Communist movement. The political domain provided EMS with a wider canvas within which to push against the curious combination of feudal and capitalist power in colonial India.

EMS encountered Marxism in the mid-1930s, when he was already involved in building a socialist movement in Kerala. Within a few years, he had taken his lessons from Marxism to write a minute of dissent to the report of the Malabar Tenancy Enquiry Committee (‘The Question of Land Tenure in Malabar’, 1939, included in the present volume). Reading this dissent, even seventy years later, one is struck by the freshness of his insights, and the considerable work EMS did to use the Marxist method to analyze Kerala’s ‘jenmi’-landlord system. It was on the basis of this analysis that EMS threw himself into the peasant movement (see ‘A Short History of the Peasant Movement in Kerala’ in this volume), helping build one of the strongest Kisan Sabhas in the country. EMS would later be the Joint Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha and he would play a very significant role in the writing of the CPI’s 1954 resolution, Our Tasks among the Peasant Masses. There was no mechanical application of Marxism as dogma; for EMS, Marxism remained alive, a method by which to interpret the history and society of India.

It is this suppleness that defines EMS’s account of the history of the Malayalam-speaking people. Here EMS drew from the Marxist theory of nationalities to creatively apply it to the Indian context. The Malayalam essay, One and a Quarter Crore Malayalees (1945), was later expanded into English as The National Question in Kerala (1952). EMS drew from his own
historical research to provide the basis for his advocacy of Aikya Kerala, United Kerala (the unity of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar into the modern state of Kerala). See ‘The Indian National Question: Need for a Deeper Study’ in this volume, which summarizes his earlier approach. What is essential to grasp about EMS’s oeuvre is his spirit of infusing Marxism into history.

Already by the 1940s, EMS wrote on a range of issues, from agrarian relations to language questions, from Indian history to contemporary matters. This array would deepen as the years went on, with EMS writing with fluidity on questions of the ancient world to questions of immediate political relevance. He was able to engage with professional historians and professional politicians with equal gravity, and this is evident in the fifteen essays collected in this volume. Book reviews of works by Irfan Habib and K.N. Panikkar (‘Classes and Class Struggle in Indian History’ and ‘The Class Character of the Nineteenth Century Renaissance in India’ in this volume) are peppered with EMS’s generosity and his learning, his willingness to engage with professional scholars and the keen insights he could bring to their work from the trenches of political practice. When Ramakrishna Mukherjee felt that one of EMS’s essays was drawn from the work of Andre Beteille, EMS responded, ‘I tried to show that the conclusions drawn in my paper were independent of Beteille; in fact, I based myself on what I learnt in the course of my own practical activity, supplemented by what humble theoretical work I have been able to do’ (‘Once Again on Castes and Classes’ in this volume). The ‘humble’ work was not as modest as EMS claims. He read widely, from Indian historiography to the various currents in Marxism (including, toward the end of his life, the work of Antonio Gramsci). EMS also engaged with the questions of the general public, answering their queries in a daily column for Deshabhimani. Nothing escaped his attention; everything warranted a thoughtful response.

EMS’s writings cover a large number of themes. In this volume we have restricted the selection to essays on history, society and land relations. Even here there are remarkable asides on the general character of Indian social development, and on Marxist theory. But there is something that holds these essays together. The unity is not simply dialectical and historical materialism; it arises out of an understanding of the remarkable continuities in Indian history, where rather than revolutionary transformations we see ‘superimpositions’. How does one account for this continuity? European observers during the colonial times attributed this to the fact that Indian society was made up, according to them, of ‘village republics’, which remained
more or less unchanging even when there was political upheaval at the top which led, every once in a way, to change in ruling dynasties. Marx contemplated this question as well, and, to explain the lack of development of capitalism in India came up with the formulation of the Asiatic Mode of Production. EMS was drawn to this concept, but not uncritically. He was persuaded by the historical research (especially of Marxists like D.D. Kosambi and Irfan Habib) that Marx’s concept did not fit Indian society in quite the way Marx had formulated. Yet, EMS did not entirely abandon the kernel of the concept either—which was to seek an explanation for the continuity that characterizes Indian history (indeed, Eric Hobsbawm refers specifically to EMS in his writings on the Asiatic Mode). Central to this continuity, EMS felt, was the institution of caste. As EMS puts it in ‘The Indian National Question’, included in this selection:

As opposed to this two-stage transformation—slave to feudal and feudal to capitalist—in Europe, India remained tied to the same old order under which the overwhelming majority of the people belonged to the oppressed and backward castes. This is the essence of what Marx called India’s ‘unchanging’ society where the village was not touched by the wars and upheavals at the higher levels, the British conquest being the first revolution. (p. 74)

Caste society and the hegemony of brahminism had a most pernicious impact on Indian society. The caste system not only kept the oppressed masses in thrall, the ideological hegemony of brahminism resulted in a sustained stagnation of science and technology, and therefore, ultimately, of the productive forces as well. This comes out in his essay on Adi Sankara included in this volume. Following the Marxist philosopher Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, EMS sees the philosophical triumph of Adi Sankara as the triumph of idealism over materialism, leading, in the end, to the loss of national independence:

Why and how did our country fall from its brilliant antiquity to the degradation of pre-British days? The answer is that the defeat of the oppressed castes at the hands of the Brahminic overlordship, of materialism by idealism, constituted the beginning of the fall of India’s civilization and culture which in the end led to the loss of national independence. (pp. 39–40)
Pre-capitalist social formations, cultivated by colonialism and by the national bourgeoisie, had to be systematically undermined by the people’s movements of independent India. EMS traced the potentialities within Indian society, finding opportunities for social progress and brakes against it. Cognizant of the special oppression of caste and of religious majoritarianism in Indian society, EMS fought against the organizing of people based on these very lines; one cannot fight caste oppression on caste lines. Instead, caste oppression had to be fought by organizing people into unified class organizations that understood and emphasized the special role of caste in Indian society. As he put it in ‘Once Again on Castes and Classes’:

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 caste, communities and so on. (p. 107)

EMS did not seek to subsume the fight against caste oppression or religious majoritarianism beneath class organizations, but to use the platform of class organizations to openly attack caste oppression, religious fundamentalism and feudal male chauvinism. It is based on this analysis that EMS urged the provisions of reservations (both in 1957 and in 1989), and supported the women’s movement, which has become a crucial part of the struggle against feudal chauvinism. His writings both provide clues for this transformation as well as a method to continue the political and intellectual work that he conducted over six decades.

EMS was one of the most outstanding Marxists of his generation, not only in India, but around the world. Few others combined the depth of scholarship and the dedication of political work at the same level of sophistication. In this period of his birth centenary, LeftWord Books has published a series of books by EMS, of which this one you hold in your hands is one, a small window into his thoughts.
“We do not regard Marx’s theory as something completed and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that it has only laid the foundation stone of the science which socialists must develop in all directions if they wish to keep pace with life.”

V.I. LENIN
On Historical Materialism

Our historians once held the view that the Indian history began with the advent of the Aryans. However, historians in southern India argue that the Dravidian people have had a more ancient and developed civilization than the Aryans. Thus emerged the two streams of Indian history—one biased towards the Aryans and the other towards the Dravidians. Both the streams are largely based on mythologies. Instead of writing history based on myths, the present author attempted some time back to examine what instruments of production were existing at each historical epoch, what were the social relationships that governed production with such instruments, and how the changes in social relations led to political clashes, wars and revolutions.¹

Many scholars and historians have emerged now, who have examined history connecting it with the development of instruments of production, although all of them cannot be said to have fully assimilated the method of Historical Materialism. These scholars have none-the-less subjected the views and ideas of early historians to strong and effective criticism. For example, the very title of the Sardar Patel Memorial Lectures delivered by Professor Romila Thapar in 1972 was ‘Past and Prejudice’. There she has pointed out that there were two sections amongst the historians, one that tried to justify and uphold imperialist domination of India, and another sympathetic to anti-imperialist struggles. Historians of both these persuasions tried to examine history with a prejudice and to formulate ‘historical theories’ that went well with their respective political biases.

This holds good for the writing of modern Indian history as well. For example, the pro-imperialist historians described the situation prevailing in India during the centuries immediately preceding the advent of foreigners in such a way as to strengthen the claim of the imperialists that the traders from Portugal, Holland, France and England made ‘uncivilized’ India ‘civilized’. Nationalist historians, on the other hand, selected and interpreted historical facts in such a way as to establish that it was foreign domination alone which stood in the way of India’s modernization and progress and but for it, India would have achieved progress comparable to any civilized country in the world.

I have tried to show elsewhere that anyone who examines Indian history objectively would reject both these views which are subjective and suited to serve the narrow interests of the classes which their protagonists