E.M.S. Namboodiripad

The Mahatma and the Ism
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by Prakash Karat
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Prakash Karat

The Mahatma and the Ism by E.M.S. Namboodiripad was the first full-fledged attempt by an Indian Marxist to evaluate the role of Gandhi in the epochal struggle for Indian independence. The book was first published in January 1958. E.M.S. Namboodiripad had earlier written a series of 14 articles in New Age, the monthly journal of the Communist Party of India in 1955–56. EMS was at that time a member of the Polit Bureau stationed at the Party headquarters in Delhi. These articles were a review of and commentary on the monumental eight-volume biography of Gandhi by D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma: The Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. These articles, along with subsequent additions and revisions, constitute the kernel of the book.

The Mahatma and the Ism remains important not just for its pioneering effort to assess Gandhism, but also for its rich content and sensitive handling of a great personality, while also subjecting the ideology and politics of that personality to incisive critical appraisal.

A few months after Mahatma and the Ism was published, another book appeared on Gandhi by a Communist leader. Hiren Mukherjee, the Communist parliamentarian, wrote Gandhi: A Study. This book was wider in scope than EMS’s, and dealt with Gandhi’s life and political activity in greater detail, but in its

1 S.A. Dange published a pamphlet titled Gandhi vs Lenin in 1921. This comparative study of the two leaders cannot be taken to be a comprehensive study of Gandhi as it was published at the beginning of the Gandhi’s leadership of the national movement.

essentials, the assessment of Gandhi by Hiren Mukherjee closely parallels that of EMS.

I

EMS was uniquely positioned to analyse the various phases of the national movement and the role of Gandhi. He began his political life as an ardent Gandhian. Throughout his life, while adhering to the Marxist world outlook, he practised many of the Gandhian principles of simplicity and personal austerity that are cherished by Indians.

EMS was one of the young Congressmen who were radicalised after the 1930–31 civil disobedience movement was withdrawn. Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayaprakash Narayan were the initial stimuli for the leftward move that led EMS to the Congress Socialist Party, of which he became one of the all-India joint secretaries. By the time EMS assumed the leadership of the Congress in Kerala in 1936, he had broken with Gandhism. In 1937, he joined the Communist Party, encouraged by the example of another former Gandhian Congressman, P. Sundarayya.

The organizational break with the Congress took place in 1939, when, under the guidance of Gandhi, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee, of which EMS was General Secretary, was dissolved. The All India Congress Committee disbanded the Pradesh Congress Committee, which was dominated by Left Congressmen, for its persistence in militant actions against the War.

EMS became an organizer of the Communist Party and of the peasant movement in Kerala during the period of the War. From 1943, EMS was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, having been elected at its First Congress in 1943. He was also an office-bearer of the All India Kisan Sabha in the pre-independence period.

It is this experience of his work in the Congress and subsequent turn to the Communist Party that EMS drew upon when he set out to review Tendulkar’s biography of Gandhi, which appeared
between 1951 and 1954. That EMS himself considered this work to be of some lasting value is clear from his autobiography, *Reminiscences of an Indian Communist.*

The merit of EMS’s book is that it analyses the role of Gandhi in a way not done before. It does not underplay the individual role of Gandhi and the unique contribution made by him to developing the mass national movement against British rule. At the same time, it also fully takes into account the social and historical forces that shaped Gandhi and Gandhism. It sees Gandhi as a leader and his personality in the context of the class he represents; thus Gandhi as a historical figure and mass leader emerges in the context of the class relations that shaped the national movement.

Although EMS was critical of Gandhism, he did not share the early Communist sectarianism of the 1920s, which viewed Gandhi as nothing but the leader of the right-wing bourgeoisie. In that period, as EMS has pointed out elsewhere, the early Communist groups engaged themselves in mainly exposing the policies and programmes of the bourgeois leaders including Gandhi without participating in these struggles and sharing their bitter experience. The result was that the bourgeois leadership and the people were getting closer to each other.

By contrast, EMS and a whole crop of Communists emerged subsequently from within the Congress-led national movement and went on to build the independent movement of workers and peasants and their political party.

However decisive his break from Gandhian politics, EMS, like many others of his generation, retained some Gandhian

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The critique of Gandhism by EMS includes a strong appreciation of the courageous and noble fight that Gandhi conducted in the final period of his life. His non-acceptance of the Partition, his valiant efforts to douse communal fires by staying at Noakhali and his last fast demanding that Pakistan be given the Rs. 55 crore due to it from the Indian government, all put him on a plane different from other Congress leaders, who were more concerned with sharing the spoils of office than anything else.

There is a need to reassess the secular heritage left behind by Gandhi. Communists are uneasy with the Gandhian use of the religious idiom; with, for instance the harking back to *sanatana dharma*, and his exhortation to the people to fight for *Ram rajya*. EMS was thus critical of the anti-modernist stance of Gandhi as set out in *Hind Swaraj*, and considered Gandhi’s views on modern medicine, science and technology as obscurantist. However, while deeply appreciating Gandhi’s resolute fight against communalism during his last days, the book does not take into account adequately the secular aspects of Gandhi’s outlook.

Gandhi was consistent in his stand that all religions be equally respected and all religious communities be treated equally. He also spoke about the need for a secular state in India and was of the view that religion and the state should be separate. He was against proposed state funding for the renovation of the Somnath temple.¹⁹

The Gandhi-Nehru legacy has been the mainstay of Indian secularism, however flawed it may be. The effort by the RSS to appropriate Gandhi and disembowel his inherently secular outlook by incorporating his religious world-view within the ambit of Hindutva is a diabolic move by the very forces who considered Gandhi anathema and who were instrumental in his death at the hands of a Hindu fanatic.

Whatever political differences the Communists had with the

Mahatma, his assassination was deeply mourned by the Communists of EMS’s generation. One of the last public acts of P. Krishna Pillai, legendary founder-member of the Communist movement in Kerala, just before he went underground and subsequently died of a snake-bite, was to lead a rally in Kottayam to protest Gandhi’s killing. This was in contrast to the celebrations by the Hindutvawadis, an act that Nehru summed up thus: ‘The evil has not ended with the killing of Gandhi. It was an even more shameful thing for some people to celebrate this killing in various ways.’

EMS captures the idealism, the grandeur and the tragedy of the last days of Gandhi. The book seeks to answer the question of how Gandhi rapidly became a prophet outcast. In the days when the masses had to be mobilized to fight British imperialism, Gandhian methods, particularly the technique of non-violent resistance, were found useful by the bourgeoisie. ‘However, once the struggle against imperialism was crowned with success in the sense that the bourgeoisie and its class allies got state power, [Gandhism] proved a hindrance to the self-interest of the bourgeoisie.’ EMS points out that Gandhi remained true to his values. The new rulers rejected his views on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity and on the need for the dissolution, on account of its corruption, of the Congress Party.

While EMS remained consistent in his views on Gandhism till the end, he continued to hold that there were possibilities for joint action by Marxists and Gandhians, a fact that is mentioned at the end of the book. With the menacing growth of the Hindutva forces, the Gandhian heritage must be protected from the saffron efforts to appropriate it. Though enfeebled and institutionalized by official patronage, there are some in the Gandhian stream who are ranged against the processes of liberalization and privatization ushered in during the nineties. When the ruling classes have firmly

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Preface to the Second Edition

The first fourteen chapters of this volume had originally been serialized in the *New Age* monthly in 1955–56. After necessary revisions and additions, they were brought out in book form in January 1958. A second edition was subsequently brought out with no changes in the text but with the addition of an introductory note by the author.

The present edition has dispensed with the introductory note carried in the second edition but has added a final chapter briefly reviewing the developments of the last 23 years. As regards the text, some minor revisions have been made – mainly of an additional nature.

This edition is being brought out, since the earlier ones have, for several years, been out of stock and there is persistent demand from those interested in the subject. I take this opportunity to thank the publishers for having brought out this volume.

New Delhi

E.M.S. Namboodiripad

March 25, 1981
Introductory

Time was when even eminent Gandhians like Dr. J.C. Kumarappa and Pandit Sunderlal did not escape from being denounced as ‘communist fellow-travellers’ for merely telling the truth about the Soviet Union and China, of the remarkable progress that these countries have made in bettering human relations and providing a decent living standard to their peoples. Genuine Gandhians that they are, they could not help speaking out that what was happening in these countries was ‘Gandhism in action.’

Those were days when the then Madras chief minister, Shri C. Rajagopalachari, had declared war on the communists, whom he described as his ‘enemy number one.’ Those were days when the then railway minister banned the sale of Soviet books and magazines at railway bookstalls as ‘tendentious’ literature while, at the same time, permitting the free circulation of all the decadent and pornographic stuff imported from the ‘free world.’ Those were days when the then commerce minister stood up on the floor of the parliament and opposed the resolution moved by communist MP Sundarayya, advocating trade agreements with the Soviet Union.

Much water has since flown down the Ganga as well as the Volga. In less than a year after the commerce minister’s opposition to the communist resolution on Indo-Soviet trade relations, the Indo-Soviet agreement was signed. Innumerable delegations from the two countries have visited each other—cultural delegations, delegations of technicians of various types, of parliamentary and political leaders, delegations of representatives of mass organizations, etc. The very Rajagopalachari who declared the communists to be his ‘enemy number one’ has made some of the most forthright statements praising the Soviet Union’s role in the struggle for peace and its attitude towards the banning of atomic and hydrogen weapons. Above all, the unprecedentedly warm
and enthusiastic welcome accorded to our prime minister in the Soviet Union, followed by a similar welcome accorded to the Soviet leaders in our country, has made the air reverberate with the inspiring slogan, ‘Hindi-Russi Bhai-Bhai.’

These friendly relations between the two countries have become possible because the leaders of both have accepted ‘peaceful coexistence of states following different social systems’ as the basis of international relations. As Sriman Narayan, general secretary of the Congress, wrote:

> We have not the slightest intention of interfering with the ideologies of other countries, nor can we afford to allow any other country to interfere with our way of life. (AICC Economic Review, 1 December 1955)

Both the Indian and Soviet leaders have, at the same time, pointed out that the social and state systems existing in the two countries, and the philosophical outlook guiding their governmental leaders, are different from each other. Bulganin and Khrushchov combined their warm call for mutual cooperation between the governments and peoples of the two countries in the cause of peace with a spirited defence of the philosophy and practice of Marxism. The leaders of the ruling party in our country, in their turn, have also made it clear that they stick to the philosophy and practice of what is generally referred to as Gandhism. One of them, Sriman Narayan, declared unequivocally:

> It must always be remembered that the means or methods employed for the achievement of these objectives (world peace and cooperation on the basis of the Five Principles and improvement of the economic lot of the common man by eliminating exploitation and bringing about economic justice) are fundamentally different in India and in the Soviet Union. . . . There can be no compromise between the ideologies of Lenin and Gandhi. (Ibid., emphasis added.)
This makes it clear that while enormous possibilities have opened out for mutual cooperation between India and the Soviet Union in the field of foreign relations—beneficial to the peoples of both countries, as well as to the cause of peace in the world—the internal struggle between the ruling party in our country (which claims to base itself on the teachings of Gandhism) and those parties of the democratic opposition (which claim to base themselves on Marxism-Leninism) will continue unabated. Peaceful coexistence between states and cooperation between them for purposes of solving international problems does not resolve conflicts between different classes inside our country which find expression in different ideologies. For example, the unity of the Indian people that was magnificently shown in the warm welcome given to the Soviet leaders has not resolved such questions of internal policy as:

1. Can the land problem in our country be solved through the Bhoodan movement, or does it require the development of an organized peasant movement strong enough to smash the power of the landlords and other reactionary classes?
2. Can the programme of rapid industrialization (to which the whole country is now committed) be brought about on the basis of compromise with, or determined struggles against, foreign monopoly capital?
3. Is the objective of rapid industrialization itself a correct objective, or, does it come into conflict with the Sarvodaya ideal to which the leaders of the ruling party seem to be committed?

Differences and conflicts continue on these issues not only between Gandhism and Marxism-Leninism, but even between various trends claiming to base themselves on Gandhism.

It has become necessary under these circumstances that Marxist-Leninists try to make a correct appraisal of the philosophy and practice of Gandhism. Such an examination has been facilitated by the appearance of the eight-volume biography
Early years

Appropriately enough, Tendulkar begins the first volume with a twenty-five page account of our history—from ‘Plassey to Amritsar.’ He presents great events and personalities—the revolt of 1857 which ‘brought forth among others the inspiring figure of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi who died fighting on the battlefield’; the famines which enveloped India under British rule, beginning with the Bengal famine of 1770; the great Ram Mohun Roy, who insisted on visiting a French ship as a mark of homage from his motherland to France which had raised aloft the banner of revolution for liberty, equality, fraternity; scholar-politicians like Pherozshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji, Ranade, Tilak and a host of others; the inspiring scene at the Amsterdam session of the International Socialist Congress in 1904 at which the Grand Old Man of Indian nationalism, Dadabhai Naoroji, represented the people of India and ‘the delegates leapt to their feet and stood uncovered before him in solemn silence to mark their respect for India’s representative’; the call of Swaraj from the platform of the Indian National Congress; the appearance of the new radical school of politics led by the well-known trio: Lal, Bal, Pal (Lala Lajpat Ram, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal); the historic trial and the barbaric sentence on Tilak against which there was nationwide protest, including a protest strike by the textile workers of Bombay, probably the first political strike of workers in India, hailed immediately by Lenin; the new upsurge of anti-imperialism which emerged in the period of, and immediately after, the First World War, etc.

It was in such an epoch, an epoch in which the Indian people were slowly getting unified in and through the anti-imperialist struggle, that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born as the last son of Karamchand Gandhi. Uttamchand, the grandfather,