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TRIBUTE

Literary critic and cultural activist

Rarely in history has a man of action been a man of letters as well. EMS was one such rare combination.

P. GOVINDA PILLAI

THE new and fast developing discipline of cultural studies and post-modernist insights have accorded greater importance to culture in public life and the power structure of society. The history of the working class and socialist movements testifies to the fact that the pioneers of these movements recognised the decisive role of culture, literature and the arts in the preservation and transformation of social structures.

Although no socialist activist would dare deny this position, we often come across leaders and cadres who are more devoted to cultural activities and, by contrast, others who are rather indifferent to cultural activities. The former - among whom can be counted P.C. Joshi, Muzzaffar Ahmed or Sajjad Saheer - unfortunately constitute a minority. E.M.S. Namboodiripad not only belonged to this illustrious galaxy, but had gone much ahead as a literary critic, cultural activist, organiser and administrator.

EMS began his public career as a student activist and a social reformer who sought to abolish the social abuses in his own Namboodiri Brahmin community. Along with a band of young rebels such as V.T. Bhattathiripad and M.B. Bhattathiripad, EMS took up causes such as widow remarriage and women's education and fought against polygamy and primogeniture. Stories, plays and novels were their tools in this struggle. To the chagrin of conservatives, they staged plays against social abuses and discrimination. EMS organised the staging of plays such as *From the Kitchen to the Arena and The Pubescent Girl*, which even led to occasional clashes. They also brought out a journal called *Unninamboodiri*. Most of EMS' early articles, including the literary ones, appeared in this journal. In 1932, a well-known reformist author invited EMS, who was only 23 years old, to write the preface to his novel *Uncle's Daughter*. By that time EMS was accepted as a literary critic.

Reading Lenin.

SHAJU JOHN

In 1936, the first conference of the All India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) took place in Lucknow under the chairmanship of the Hindi novelist, Premchand. EMS, who drew inspiration from the Lucknow conference, was the moving spirit behind a conference of young writers and political activists at Thrissur in 1937. Always a theoretician, EMS wrote on the aims and methods of progressive literature in the nationalist weekly, *Mathrubhoomi*. This is generally considered the first attempt in Malayalam to apply Marxist criteria to literary and art criticism.

Traditional scholars, older than EMS, such as Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, Joseph Mundassery, M.P. Paul and the great nationalist Mahakavi Vallathol gave EMS their support. Outstanding short story writers and novelists such as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Muttathu Varkey and P. Kesavadev were drawn to the movement. Young poets who were later hailed as mahakavis such as Changampuzha Krishna Pillai and Vailoppily Sridhara Menon associated themselves with the progressive movement. This led to a cultural efflorescence in Kerala; a late modern era had dawned in Malayalam literature and arts.

All was not smooth, and a fierce controversy began on progressive literature in general and Marxist literary theory and practice in particular. The *status quo*-ists of culture, supported by the establishment media, declared war on the PWA. Although there were non-Marxist critics to defend the PWA and its activities, it was EMS who led the brigade of the progressives. In 1948-49, controversies between the Marxists and nationalists led to a split in the PWA in Kerala. Although the organisation split, the movement went ahead and committed younger writers of the post-Independence period; O.N.V. Kurup, Vayalar Rama Varma and Thirunelloor Karunakaran came to the forefront.

The 1950s, which historians called the Red Decade in Kerala, witnessed major advances in literature, the performing arts and the new medium of cinema. With inspiration from the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the Communist Party of India formed the Kerala People's Theatre Association (KPAC) in 1951. EMS was the mentor and ideological defender of the KPAC.

Thoppil Bhasi's *You Made Me A Communist* was the most significant play staged by the KPAC. It saw hundreds of performances before the Congress Government in Travancore-Cochin banned it. EMS led the campaign against the ban and questioned the Dramatic

Performances Act under which the play was banned. Finally the ban was lifted and the Act abolished. The result was still greater popularity for the play and hundreds of further performances.

When the Communists attained power after the formation of the United Kerala State, many attributed their victory in 1957 to the immense popularity of this play - which of course was an exaggeration. However, the play and a number of other KPAC plays, together with stirring revolutionary songs by O.N.V. Kurup and Vayalar Rama Varma, played a major part in the election of the Communist Party to power and its political campaigns.

The factors that contributed to the demise of the PWA in the 1960s included the dismissal of the EMS Ministry in 1959, the formation of a new anti-Communist front in politics and the arts and the split in the Communist movement. The new wave of modernism in the State's literary circles was strongly anti-Communist. Social commitment in the arts was condemned and elitist theories emerged.

Although the Marxists and progressives were faced with new challenges and needed to search for new cultural idioms, EMS had other urgent political duties such as defending the party, which was attacked as being a "pack of Chinese spies". Most party leaders and cadres were driven underground or thrown into prison. EMS and Jyoti Basu were freed in 1967. In the interim decade, forces of anti-Communism and neo-conservatism became entrenched in the State's cultural arena.

EMS became the Chief Minister of Kerala for the second time in 1967. Again he took up a firm stand against the modernist novelists - O.V. Vijayan, Kakkanadan and M. Mukundan - and poets M. Govindan, K. Ayyappa Panicker and N.N. Kakkad, among others. A group of writers was organised around the *Desabhimani* daily and weekly. This group became known as the Desabhimani Study Circle and EMS himself wrote a book-length manifesto for it.

During Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule in 1975-77, the Desabhimani Study Circle organised writers and cultural activists against the totalitarian onslaught. Apart from a large number of young writers and artists, senior poets such as Vyloppilly and Kassery and novelist Cherukad responded to the call of revolt by EMS. Outstanding writers such as M.K. Sanu and Thayattu Sankaran, who were until then considered critics of the PWA and opponents of Communism, were drawn to the movement. Thayattu Sankaran, who began his career as a Gandhian critic of EMS in the 1940s and 1950s, later accepted EMS as his mentor. He dedicated his work on Mahakavi Kumaran Asan to EMS. By the end of the 1970s, there was a revival of the PWA. The Desabhimani Study Circle expanded into the Progressive Association of Arts and Letters (PAAL) under the presidentship of Vyloppilly. EMS attended all the major functions of PAAL. Today PAAL is the most vibrant and widespread literary and arts organisation in Kerala.

As Chief Minister, EMS guided the establishment of the Kerala State Institute of Languages, the Kerala Lalita Kala Academy, the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi and

a number of institutions in honour of cultural personalities, including Kumaran Asan. EMS has written about every significant literary issue or personality in Kerala. Some of his early writings suffered from sectarian and dogmatic blemishes. In an introduction to a collection of his early essays titled *Marxism and Malayalam Literature,* which included his seminal work of 1937, EMS frankly admitted the drawbacks. He did not want to drop or amend any essay. His stand was let the people decide. On looking back, we realise that each essay in spite of their drawbacks, contributes to the main thread of ideas and evaluations that marked a turning point in the onward march of progressive literature and the arts in Kerala.

During the last decade and a half, EMS wrote a regular column on contemporary books. He reviewed books of all type - poetry, criticism, novel, shortstories, history and so on. The weekly series was like a running commentary on Kerala's literary panorama. Rarely in history has a man of action been a man of letters as well. EMS was one such rare combination. He said often that the struggle for a new culture and people's literature is as important as the struggle for jobs and wages, land and livelihood. He said that each strand of struggle complements and strengthens another strand.

One of his last wishes was to build a national forum for culture and the arts on the lines of IPTA and the PWA of the 1940s and 1950s. The new forum, he said, should take into consideration the current revolution in the media and the resultant growth and spread of cultural artforms. May we live up to the heritage of the Master and follow his footsteps into a 21st century world of art and letters.

P. Govinda Pillai, a Left intellectual, is a former Editor of the Desabhimani *newspaper.*