

## THE PROBLEM OF BRAHMIN IDENTITY IN THE HISTORICAL WRITINGS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD

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It is hard to define what makes a truly great leader but EMS Namboodiripad was never in doubt about it. His prescient presence as leader, thinker and theoretician played a pre-eminent role in shaping a modern and cohesive Kerala out of its unsettling political and social history.<sup>1</sup> His tireless efforts as an analyst and commentator helped evolve a form of Communism that suited Indian conditions. In idealism and exhaustive pursuit of ideology, Namboodiripad stands out as a model for political India.<sup>2</sup> He thought differently from his contemporaries, lived dangerously to overcome the limitations of his times and worked constantly for the freedom of the individual and society from the clutches of imperialism, feudalism, fanatic casteism and more recently, abhorrent communalism.

The remarkable aspect of the personality EMS Namboodiripad which distinguished him from other leaders was his ability to fill the gap between precept and practice. Scholarship gave him the intellectual instrument to envision change, but it was his vast experience in actual life that gave Namboodiripad, the strength and personality to translate those ideas into action. Throughout his life he had remained a perceptive observer of life and society. Namboodiripad indoctrinated himself ideologically in socialist beliefs and values, but he never allowed his mind to become paranoid, or allowed blinkers to blight his vision.<sup>3</sup> He was practitioner of honest politics candidly accepting mistakes when they were committed, never fearing to correct them and never failing to subject himself to rigorous self examination about his politics and his action.

*Keralam Malayalikalude Matrubhoomi* written in 1948 was the first attempt to stand back from the exigencies of programmatic writing and engage with the problems of the history of Kerala. Dilip M. Menon analyzed three issues predominate in EMS' reconstruction of the history of ancient Kerala. First there is an engagement with the Dravidian critiques of the Brahmins as an immigrant into the egalitarian, civilized space of South India who introduced caste hierarchy and subordinated the indigenous culture. Second, the institution of caste re evaluated as a necessary stage in the transition from a primitive form of society to a more advanced one through a more efficient organization of production. Third, at a time when the ideology of language politics and of the linguistic reorganization of state was gaining prominence, it was claimed that the regional identity was promised on a unifying culture created by the Brahmins. So with *Keralam Malayalikalude Matrubhoomi* Namboodiripad stepped back from immediate political concern to articulate the twin concern of Marxism and the trajectory of Kerala history.<sup>4</sup>

The question of how the Brahmins came to Kerala was the primary one: was this process the Southern equivalent of the Aryan invasion supplanting Dravidian culture in the north? EMS distanced himself unequivocally from the Brahmin founding myth of Kerala in the *Keralolpatti*: the Parasurama flung his axe into the sea and reclaimed land which he settled with immigrant Brahmins.<sup>5</sup> To Menon, EMS went along with the Dravidian position that the existence of an indigenous civilization in Kerala preceded the coming of the Brahmins.<sup>6</sup> In speaking of the conflict between the two cultures the persistence of the earlier culture was recognized: neither the axe of Parasurama nor the *advaita* of Sankaracharya, or even 2000 years of continuous Brahmin power have been able to destroy non-Brahmin way of life.<sup>7</sup> However, to Menon the question of numerical and cultural strength of the Brahmins in particular regions complicated the picture somewhat.<sup>8</sup>

Comparing the different theories about the origins of the Nairs which locate their original home in places as far apart as Nepal, Chottanagpur and Southern India, EMS came down in favor of their being a Dravidian people. They were part of the civilization of the south proved by Tamil scholars to have been no less advanced than that of the Aryans.<sup>9</sup> One of the indicators of their level of advancement was the fact that they managed to retain the distinctive feature of their social organization i.e. matrilineal even after the clash with a people like the *Aryans* who possessed a superior civilization and culture.<sup>10</sup> When analyzing these statements Menon argued that throughout the text there is a constant movement between the term Aryan

implying a northern origin for the *Namboodiris* and being consonant with the Dravidian position and the more neutral term 'Brahmin' locating the *Namboodiri* as one among the Brahmin originating in the Southern peninsula.<sup>11</sup> Menon argued that EMS made an interesting and unsubstantiated connection between matrilineal and the caste regime. Since the *Namboodiris* were able to make the sharpest break from mother-right to father-right they became the heist caste while those who retained the maximum amount of freedom in marriage and preserved the mother-right became the lowest of the caste Hindus.<sup>12</sup> So here again the arguments about the superiority of Brahmin civilization was phrased in the language of Marxism.<sup>13</sup>

Another argument put forward by Menon against EMS is about the Aryan invasion. According to EMS it is more logical to assume that the Brahmins came to Kerala in different groups from different regions and at different times than to suppose that there was a single immigration of one body of people from one region.<sup>14</sup> To Menon, as to when the Brahmins actually entered Kerala, EMS preferred the data suggested by R C Dutt rather than by William Logan. The migration was presented as the result of an internal movement from within the southern peninsula India i.e. from Maharashtra, Karnataka and the banks of Krishna and Godavari rather than an invasion from the north. By arguing this he was mapping onto the territory delineated by Dravidian ideologues and locating the Brahmin firmly within it, rather than as an outsider.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the idea that the Brahmins were conquering Aryans was subtly undermined at the same time, he was careful to avoid the use of the word Aryan and Aryan culture at this juncture, except for occasional slippage throughout the text. Menon pointed out that EMS's alternative history was presented as a surmise for which he offered no evidence.<sup>16</sup> He argued that the regional differences between *Namboodiris* within Kerala were seen as arising from their migration from different parts of southern India, e.g. the observances of the *Namboodiris* of north Malabar reflect their Maharashtrian past. However, here again there was a tension. EMS stated that the *Namboodiris* of central Kerala had had the most influence on the history and culture of the region. He traced their origin to the banks of the Krishna and Godavari because after the coming of the Aryan culture, the foremost civilization in southern India was in the Andhra region.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, even as the idea of northern Aryan origin for the *Namboodiris* was rejected, it was argued that the advanced sections among them were only one remove away from the superior Aryan civilization.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the text Marxism and its notions of historical development –the motor of the mode of production- was deployed against the Dravidian rhetoric of the Brahmins as aggressive immigrants.<sup>19</sup>

Menon observed that in the introduction of the second impression of *Keralam Malayalikalude Matrubbhoomi* EMS returned to an argument about Brahmins having come from North India, but the ramification of this reversal served radical purpose. EMS hypothesized that the Brahmins came to Kerala at a time when changes were coming about within marriage practice and family organizations.<sup>20</sup> This surmise regarding the origin of the *Namboodiri* was given a radical edge by the statement that they were the result of *jati samkara*.<sup>21</sup> The Brahmin was moved from originating within the Dravidian space, albeit of a different race, to becoming one among the Dravidians. The caste system was the marker of the superior organization which the Brahmins instituted allowing the shift from one mode of production to another. The Brahmin was seen as the prime mover at this system. The organization of caste as a superior form of the division of labor allowed for two possibilities which were expanded upon in *National Questions in Kerala*. The development of productive forces was given an impetus by the new social division which led to accumulation of wealth, division of labor and the division of society into classes. This finally paved the way for transition to father-right among the more advanced groups.<sup>22</sup> To Menon, while *Keralam Malayalikalude Matrubbhoomi* had argued for caste as a division of labor with people allotted professions which they then developed over generation, in *National Questions in Kerala* the argument was expressed in terms of differential ranking in terms of movement towards father rights.<sup>23</sup> He continued that if the national organization of production through the caste system was one of the innovations imported by the Brahmins, the other one was the landlord system. It helped institute the system of private property in Kerala and here EMS moves towards a curious blend of traditional *Namboodiri* myth and Marxist method.<sup>24</sup> Observing that there is a direct relation between Brahmin dominance and the prevalence of landlordism – least in north Malabar, most in central Kerala – he goes to ask.

In *National Questions in Kerala* EMS wrote that even before the coming of the *Namboodiris* land had already gone for towards being turned into private property.<sup>25</sup> To Menon it is not told how he arrived at this reversal of the earlier assumption. The argument had shifted from seeing the *Namboodiris* as the harbingers of a new economic order, which would associate them also with the deeply ambivalent heritage of caste and landlordism.<sup>26</sup> It was in another context that EMS took up what was lying beneath the surface of this benign delineation of the development of the caste system: the question of inequality.<sup>27</sup> Menon continued that in an attempt to locate the history of Buddhism in ancient Kerala he argued for a clash between those who espoused Buddhism and those who welcomed the never immigrant Brahmins.

Buddhism was seen as having arisen in response to the subordination of the majority of the people to a tiny minority despite the social advancement brought about by the division of labor through caste.<sup>28</sup> The victory over Buddhism of Sankaracharya and the *Advaita* philosophy represented not only the triumph of an ideology but a shift in the relation of production. For EMS this was a crucial watershed in the history of Kerala and he went along with the tradition held by the *Namboodiris* in the *Keralolpathi* that the Malayalam era which begins in 825 AD commemorated this event.<sup>29</sup> His preference for this *Namboodiri* myth is interesting considering the other options available to him. Buddhism perished because it represented an older order which may have had greater equality between people as a premise but was tied to a stagnant mode of production.

EMS's work is a powerful example of the Brahmin coming of age in south India, emerging out of the trenchant critiques of the Dravidian movement as well as the soul searching within the *Namboodiri* community to forge a history that restored the Brahmins to their rightful place.<sup>30</sup> On the face of it, EMS's use of Marxism and its concepts is idiosyncratic at best and instrumental at worst.<sup>31</sup> EMS argued that in medieval Kerala the basis was European feudal while the superstructure was Brahmin i.e. Asiatic and it was this Brahmanical superstructure which was responsible for the further development of productive forces.<sup>32</sup> To Menon, EMS's was a purposive history which misunderstood Marxism for the political programmed of the *Malayali* region of Kerala?<sup>33</sup> It was necessary to counter the Dravidian critique to imagine a unity within the region of individuals constructed as *Malayalis* rather than as Brahmin or non-Brahmin. EMS's attempts to leap away from history by asserting the pastiness of caste and morality denied their tangibility in the present and their continuing legacy.<sup>34</sup>

According to T K Ravindran the misuse of Marxian methodology can be illustrated in the writings of EMS Namboodiripad. He pointed out that in *National Questions in Kerala* EMS applied Marx's idea of Asiatic Mode of Production to explain the social formation in ancient Kerala. Practically with no observed data Namboodiripad has written a shout chapter based on wispy speculation about the primitive economic process and structure of society.<sup>35</sup> He realized eventually that the whole exercise was vain or frivolous and wrote a long tract in self criticism in his later book *Keralacharithravum Samskaravum Oru Marxist Vikshanam*. In this book he has applied the materialistic conception rather wrongly making it stand on its head. Here economic determinism is made to yield up the ghost and we find caste determinism standing in its place.<sup>36</sup>

When analyzing the history of Kerala Namboodiripad introduced and elaborated a concept of *jati janmi naduvazhi medhavitwam* to explain the social formation in Kerala. According to Ravindran in doing so from materialism of Marx he goes off at a tangent and came to rest in the opposite camp of Marx Webber's religious interpretation for the rise of capitalism.<sup>37</sup> Namboodiripad takes caste as the basic factor that determines the course of history in Kerala. His reading of the historic situation is absolutely correct based on the dependable and veritable facts but to call it a Marxist perspective is patently wrong when caste is made the determining factor in history, economic elements has to seek a place in the superstructure.<sup>38</sup> Caste in fact was the real causation for the rise of *janmi naduvazhi* domination. Namboodiripad's intension is to expose, the *janmi naduvazhi* dominance that grew up under the tutelage of caste. However in this attempt he was unintentionally caused to extend legitimacy to what Engels derogated as a primitive nonsense and Marx condemned as the barbaric egotism.<sup>39</sup> The factors of production and relations of production, social religious and judicial relations, art and literature were all controlled and protected by caste. This way of interpreting historical evolution cannot be considered as materialist because economic factor is not the ultimate one when caste dominates the scene.<sup>40</sup> Neither were there any specific classes that were antagonistic in the economic sense, nor any class conflict that ushered into an epoch of social revolution.

According to EMS Namboodiripad it was the supremacy of *jati* that caused the Namboodiris and Nairs to become *janmis* and *naduvazhis* and the leaders of culture. The caste Hindus were able to appropriate the pickings of the labor power of the *avarnas* and non-Hindus and to dominate over them by the superiority of their caste. They gained economic power only because of their caste authority.<sup>41</sup> To Ravindran this shows that Namboodiripad is historically correct but ideology wrong. If he could have established that it was their firm holds on and control over the means of production that made the *Namboodiris* and Nairs, the lords and rulers his historical materialism would have been on safe ground.<sup>42</sup> EMS argued that the superior caste could establish their sway over the three fields of social, economic and administrative affairs simultaneously. The untouchable caste and caste Hindus were forced to submit to that superior caste authority. Because of their religious and ideological superiority, the *Namboodiris* were able to dominate over other caste Hindus. This is the social reality behind the idea of *Namboodiris* supremacy.<sup>43</sup>

This clearly indicates that the Marxist doctrinaire has strayed way from the economic determinism by installing caste as the basic factor of historical evolution.<sup>44</sup>

As according to K N Panikkar history had a central place among the intellectual and scholarly interest of EMS Namboodiripad.<sup>45</sup> A substantial part of his voluminous writings deal with history. They mainly cover two areas: the history of Kerala and the history of the national liberation movement. To the study of both he brought an analytical mode to bear that was refreshingly original.<sup>46</sup> His engagement with history was not academic but an inevitable part of his involvement with politics. Concerned with the transformation of society on democratic and egalitarian lines, he could not but be interested in the way the present was historically constituted. But his scholarship did not remain confined to the political purpose, is scaled heights and reached out to areas which became the area of many a scholar.<sup>47</sup> His works generated intense debate, within both popular and academic circle. The historical writings of EMS Namboodiripad cover two areas- the history of Kerala and the history of the liberation movement. Through this he achieved two objectives- first he outlined the course of social and political transformation from ancient time through feudalism and colonialism towards a people's democratic Kerala. Secondly he traced the formation of identity and personality of Kerala as embodied in the democratic struggles of the laboring castes and classes. While doing so he focused on the material imperatives which made social transformation possible and the role and intervention of different social classes which either facilitated or retarded their process.<sup>48</sup> He was dubbed by some as a feudal socialist and as a *Namboodiri* who was not able to overcome his caste prejudices.

Namboodiripad attracted criticism particularly because of his characterization of pre Aryan society and his description of the process of caste formation in Kerala. His critics were of the view that EMS did not give due recognition to the achievements of pre Aryan culture. They held that his sympathies lay with Aryan culture, because of which he tended to lionize it at the expense of the pre Aryan. They also attributed this to his upbringing and identity as a Namboodiri. Responding to this Panikkar argued that both according to him were untrue and unscientific. He questioned the wisdom of counterpoising Aryan against pre Aryan and suggested that such attempts were part of the process of legitimating of vested interest.<sup>49</sup> The second issue related to the process of caste formation in Kerala. In contrast to the then existing view that migration was the main cause of caste differentiation. EMS focused on social changes internal to society. Migration and invasion; EMS held were only catalyst which facilitated and hastened the process of differentiation.<sup>50</sup> EMS's main interest was to identify the forces which enabled the realization of a united Kerala.<sup>51</sup> He was in this political project the expression of the democratic aspirations of the people, which were expressed in a variety of struggles, oriented around both caste and class. His analysis of Malabar rebellion of 1921 and the reform movement inspired by Sree Narayana Guru are rooted in this perspective. According to EMS Namboodiripad it is far from the truth to say that the Malabar rebellion was a communal riot, that the objectives of the rebels were the destruction of Hindu religion and that the six months of rebellion were six month of anti-Hindu atrocities. All this, however, does not mean that religious fanaticism was totally absent in the rebellion. The numbers of forced conversion which did take place cannot by any stretch of imagination be explained by any other motive than religious fanaticism. However one can and should state explicitly that the main force behind the rebellion was not fanaticism which was simply a by-product.<sup>52</sup> When analyzing this statement Panikkar pointed out that EMS was the first to highlight the anti imperialist and anti feudal character of the Malabar Rebellion and at the same time to point the danger inherent in a rebel consciousness circumscribed by religion.<sup>53</sup> To EMS the rebellion was both a call for action and a warning.

As according to Rajan Gurukkal the most important peculiarity of the historical writings of Namboodiripad was that he subjected social issues and analyze these issues on the basis of Marxism. Historical approach with realization makes EMS's writings scientific.<sup>54</sup> EMS did not interested in the details of the historical facts and to him it is not necessary for the interpretation of social formation and nature of metamorphosis.<sup>55</sup> He did not care about objectivity in his writings. To Gurukkal his historical writings are only a Marxist reading of available historical resources and it is not a scientific and theoretical interpretation of history on the basis of Marxism.<sup>56</sup> EMS was one among rare personalities in Kerala who wanted to change the ideologies which was existed in the field of literature and history. He used history as a tool to liberate the working class in the stance of nationalism.<sup>57</sup> He understood that transition was the basic nature of history and the class conflicts which existed in the society played a predominant role in this transition. He realizes that production forces are the important factor which controlled the course of history and he tried to analyze Kerala history on the basis of this theory. We can see the transition of history into political philosophy in the writings of EMS Namboodiripad. He approached history in a scientific way. K K N Kuruppu pointed out that EMS find out the social, economic and cultural history of Kerala differ from

colonial approaches and the role of the working class in the construction of this new type of history. Perhaps it was the first attempt to evaluate Kerala history in a scientific and secular way.<sup>58</sup> EMS wrote history for social and political purpose. He learned lessons from events and he used these lessons for his political activities efficiently. He understood that the production forces and the changes were taking place due to this production forces in each phase of history.<sup>59</sup> On the basis of this changes EMS analyzed political struggles and revolutions.

Like Ramachandra Guha argued that as a historian Namboodiripad interpreted everything through the lenses of class struggle and the inevitable victory of revolutionary communism.<sup>60</sup> To him Namboodiripad was a craven follower of a crude despot but as a practicing politician EMS was one of the finest in the land.<sup>61</sup> He went on to lead a double life of bankrupt ideology and meaningful practice. This was the tragedy as well as the achievement of Namboodiripad.<sup>62</sup> The main aim of the historical writings of Namboodiripad was that to create a new historic explanation based on working class sobriety.<sup>63</sup> For this he used the Marxian methodology. At the same time he realized that it is not possible to study the history of Kerala as well as India on the basis of the theory of Marxism and so he used a devised version of it.<sup>64</sup>

The circumstances which prevailed in society led EMS to the writing of history. He was greatly influenced the colonial modernity. He had come out an involvement with the reform movement within the *Namboodiri* community before his encounter with Marxism. He was in all probability, the most important revolutionary figure modern India has produced. He was certainly the most accomplished, the most original and creative, and the most enduringly influential on the larger stage. His analysis of landlordism and land relations, nationality formation in India and Kerala, the character of the Indian state and society, evolving Indian politics, the opportunities and limits of Indian parliamentary democracy, the caste system and the tricky class-caste equations, the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and various aspects of history and culture are contributions of unsurpassed originality, brilliance and influence in the Indian left. According to EMS working class alone can develop history as science. It is the only class who was not interested in hiding historical facts and can be objective. So we can see class identity in the place of Brahmin identity. Consciously he did not approach history on the basis of Brahmanism.

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