



Social Change in Kerala

Author(s): P.K. Michael Tharakan

Source: *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2/3 (SUMMER-MONSOON 1995), pp. 215-224

Published by: India International Centre

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23003948>

Accessed: 25-04-2016 17:38 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



India International Centre is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *India International Centre Quarterly*

*EMS Namboodiripad talks to
P.K. Michael Tharakan*

If you are unfamiliar with Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, where EMS Namboodiripad, Polit Bureau member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), stays, and ask for directions, you are likely to be guided to the Gandhari Amman Kovil, a temple and popular place of worship. After a few twists and turns from the temple, you will pass the impressive building of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU), named after the late B.T. Ranadive. These two locations seem to represent important aspects of EMS's life—known as just EM for persons who are close to him. Born and brought up in the Namboodiri¹ community, perhaps the most tradition-bound and ritualistic group anywhere in India, he moved away to a life of uncompromising struggle. The harmonious blending of these two apparently contradictory streams is noticed immediately. The heritage of priestly scholarship and of popular struggles seem to have strengthened him enormously.

On a Friday afternoon I walked into his middle-class home in a rented building, tucked away from the main roads of Thiruvananthapuram. One is struck by the extreme simplicity of the house, and surroundings: a small room filled by papers and books as his study, where there is a cane "cosy chair" and a few straight-backed chairs. The desk is tiny, and covered with a table cloth which has seen better days. The circumstances in which the leader of one of the biggest political movements in Kerala works and lives are austere to the level of being spartan—in striking contrast to the avarice attributed usually to today's political leaders.

An octogenarian who has passed his 86th birthday a few days ago, EMS is intellectually alert, courteous, and very humane. His face reflects extreme gravity and intense concentration, but breaks into an occasional open and warm smile. He literally "dictates" his answers without hesitation. His mastery over what he is saying, clarity, diction, are all astounding. Throughout the interview, EMS had to correct himself only once; he added 'young' to the words 'men' and 'women' at one point. The sureness must have come from the testing of opinions on the anvil of an extremely public life.

After the interview I asked his opinion about a documentary film recently made about him. His answer was revealing. He felt it was good; though some reviews were not so favourable. He thought the reviewers wanted the political aspects of his life to be played down; but in his opinion, his life cannot be portrayed without politics. "After all, am I not a very political person?" he asked. There you have the quintessence of EMS.



Drawing by Kutty

P.K. Michael Tharakan *You started public life as a crusader for social reform.*

EMS Namboodiripad: I began my public life not as a social reformer in general but as a social reformer in the Namboodiri community; though later I extended my activity to social reform in general.

MT: *What would be the result of the stream of reform of which you were once a part?*

EMS: The outcome of my social reform activity is that the separate existence of the Namboodiri community is being overtaken by a new generation in which the members of the community live and work like members of any other community. This is particularly true of women who at one time were excluded from education and jobs.

MT: *Would you also reflect upon the specifically cultural aspects of such social action; changes in customs, attitudes and rituals?*

EMS: This is reflected in the family life and property during the last half century. All the joint families were partitioned and the modern nuclear family is becoming a reality. The custom of young girls being married to old men has almost ceased to exist. As a matter of fact I had once given the slogan "make the Namboodiri an ordinary man". That is rapidly becoming a reality.

MT: *In spite of these achievements of earlier struggles, would you agree that some of the worst forms of casteist, communalist and anti-women attitudes are creeping back?*

EMS: While it is true that some of the worst forms of casteism, communalism, and anti-women attitudes are coming back, it is true that the resistance to these is also increasing.

MT: *Would you offer some explanations for their reappearance?*

EMS: I think it is basically due to the degeneration of the cadres and activists of the socio-political movement. It is well to remember that Mahatma Gandhi was concerned about the degeneration among his followers in the freedom movement who became corrupt and self-serving. This degeneration took place in the social field as well. But it is important to repeat that resistance to these evil forces is rapidly growing.

MT: *Could you specify the role of popular struggles in all these?*

EMS: It is in fact popular struggles that have brought about such achievements. To take one example, the picketing of shops selling foreign clothes and toddy shops by Mahatma Gandhi was applied in the social reform movements of the Namboodiris, by way of picketing bigamous marriages and marriages of young girls to old men. In one of these I myself have participated.

MT: *Do you think that policies of income distribution such as land reforms and minimum wages have made the facilities for literacy and healthcare—two of Kerala's much heralded achievements—accessible to the people? Would you comment on the argument that if all resources were devoted to investment and growth, it would have been better for Kerala?*

EMS: Progressive socio-economic policies have certainly helped the spread of literacy and popularisation of widespread health practices. This is certainly an achievement of Kerala. I however, disagree with those who hold these as the so-called Kerala model. These improvements in the educational and social fields have unfortunately been at the expense of the development of agriculture and industry. The

result is that in the so-called Kerala model, what is produced is not material values but unemployed young men and women and exportable commodities—both at cheap rates. This, therefore is a typically colonial society which is being white-coated with the spread of education, health facilities, and so on.

MT: *Do you mean to say that the investments which went into education and health could have been switched automatically to industry and agriculture?*

EMS: No, there is no question of automatic development. There was no balanced approach to integrating the socio-cultural development with economic development. I feel the entire mental attitude should change.

MT: *Your first government of 1957-59 had a comprehensive policy approach, ranging from basic structural changes to taking care of details like generating green manure and ensuring new types of nutritional food items. This is found wanting in later governments, including governments led by the Left. Would you comment on this, as well as on the nature of the so-called liberation struggle against your government?*

EMS: What you said is true. The lead given by our government in the years 1957-59 was not followed subsequently. After one term in office, our party along with other political forces in the state, was embroiled in the struggle for power which began with the liberation struggle. For over a quarter century it was a question of who would form the government. This drove to the wayside the questions of socio-economic and cultural developments in the state.

MT: *Will you also in this context reflect upon the elements of communalism, casteism and violence in present-day Kerala society?*

EMS: Casteism and communalism have two dimensions. First, they are the reflections of what is called pre-capitalist society, whose economic basis has been knocked out by emergent capitalism, but whose cultural roots have continued. Secondly, the situation could be one in which rival groups of the ruling classes fight one another for power, and they use casteism and communalism. This in short is the basis of the growth of communalism and casteism. Violence plays a major role in this process.

MT: *What about political violence?*

EMS: Violence and non-violence should not be seen in isolation. When there is social violence, it is bound to be reflected in violence all around.

MT: *Do you think there is increase in violence?*

EMS: Increase in the consciousness of the people can also lead to increase in violence. There has for long been violence of the rich against the poor; now the poor are resisting. This is taken as a sign of greater violence.

MT: *There is a feeling that the comprehensive land reforms, in my opinion the most important piece of post-independent legislation in Kerala, did not result in the expected economic gains. What could be the reasons?*

EMS: This of course is true. The follow-up action that should have been taken in fact was not taken, mainly because of the struggle for power between the Congress and Communist party since the days of the liberation struggle.

MT: *Do you think that the agricultural labourers, of whom a significant section belong to the scheduled castes and tribes, have benefited much from land reforms? Except for increase in wages.*

EMS: I think the major benefit from land reforms for the agricultural labourers is that they have been enabled to have a new sense of self-confidence, in getting organised in the struggle against injustices. The increase in wages is only a part of that.

MT: *The dismissal of your government by the central government points out the importance of decentralisation, in favour of the state governments and further down. Will you reflect upon this in general, and with specific reference to decentralised planning?*

EMS: This is perfectly true. As a matter of fact our 1957-59 government had made the beginning of democratic decentralisation. The first District Council Bill was drafted by us, and introduced by me in the Legislature. The effort could not come to a successful conclusion only because of the liberation struggle. The struggle against the centre came on the scene only during the second government headed by me in 1967-69. The fight put up by us then and the introduction of the District Council Bill during the first Communist government, together made a programme of decentralisation from Centre to the state and from state to lower levels.

MT: *Do you think that the village level resource mapping now being experimented in Kerala is a step in that direction?*²

EMS: I have not studied the report produced by the Committee on village level resource mapping. I am however certain that it is a step in the right direction.

MT: *Will you reflect upon wider questions involved in the debate on environment and development?*

EMS: On the environment, I find two extreme trends. One tends to dismiss the danger from environment pollution; the other considers environmental questions as the sole issue. The point is to make a balanced approach in which experts and laymen have to cooperate.

MT: *What will be the possible line of industrialisation that you suggest for Kerala?*

EMS: Industrialisation, according to me, should commence by providing help to the panchayats, municipalities and the district councils, to start medium and small scale industries based on local resources. This of course should be supplemented by whatever the state and central government can do by way of building larger and modern industries. Limited success has been registered in this sphere by the West Bengal government. We will have to learn from it and apply it concretely to our conditions.

MT: *What about private investment in industries?*

EMS: A backward country like India has certainly to use private capital—both Indian and foreign. The question is whether this private capital will be controlled by a democratic state or whether this private capital will dominate the state. This was how Lenin formulated the problem when he evolved the new economic policy. In India too Jawaharlal Nehru talked of a mixed economy in which the public sector would occupy the commanding heights. The approach to the private sector should therefore be political—based on democracy in a country like India and on socialism in Lenin's Russia.

MT: *What do you think of a human resources based initiative like tourism development?*

EMS: Whatever development has to take place should no doubt be based on human resources. For that however, I am of the view that our education system itself should be recast. Passing of examinations being the main criterion of academic evaluation, and the absence of vocational training are, according to me, the major evils to be exorcised.

MT: *Do you think that our agricultural sector itself can produce much more and generate greater employment opportunities than at present?*

EMS: I agree with this view. For this, again a recasting of the educational system is necessary. At least a sizeable portion of young men and women who go out of the state and even out of the country for jobs should be enabled to live in their own villages and be engaged in useful avocations. School education should be particularly oriented to this. That of course, was the thrust of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of basic education, though it was too oriented towards what were known as "dead and dying" rural industries and avocations. Modernising that aspect of Gandhi's notion of basic education, and encouraging education oriented towards enabling the pupil to live a useful life in his or her own village is in my view what is needed today.

MT: *Will you agree that if local administration and planning are to succeed, civil society requires further strengthening? If so, do you see major roles for non-government, non-political and non-communal organisations in this process?*

EMS: It is obvious that developmental activities cannot be properly undertaken unless the resources of the civil society and the state are pooled. The role of the non-governmental, non-political and non-com-

munal organisations is therefore of greater importance, to which I would add that those religious communities and organisations— Christian, Muslim and Hindu—which view their commitment to God and religion as laid down in their religious precepts should not allow their religions to vitiate the social atmosphere, and should use their enormous influence upon the common people to enable the process of development.

Notes

1. Malayali Brahmin
2. This is a programme being experimentally tried out in 25 village panchayats of Kerala, jointly by the Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishat—a people's science organisation—and the Centre for Earth Science Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, with financial support from the Department of Science and Technology, Government of Kerala.