

INDIA'S INTELLECTUAL GOLIATH IS NO MORE

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K Balagopal died on October 8, 2009. And I heard about it today, 10 months after the event. What a shame! What have I been doing with my time? Rather unimportant things, surely. How else can I explain the fact that I did not catch the most significant Indian event of 2009? Those who have never known Balagopal would dismiss that statement as a hyperbole. Those who knew him would see it as an understatement.

That's Balagopal for you. In many ways, he was the country's best kept secret. A man whose intellectual clarity mesmerized people and turned them into thinkers. Yes, thinkers. I myself spent my childhood and youth under the illusion that I was capable of thought. And then I met Balagopal.

Here was a man who stood on a platform of unquestionable ethics and shone a torch of pure logic into the dark crevices of Indian society. Throughout his life, he ensured that his torch burned brightly and incessantly, illuminating the unfathomable for lesser beings. You will find this exact description in every eulogy written on the great man. Well, how could everybody who sought him return with the same impression? Maybe because he was that consistent. Why stop there? In a world where the rules changed everyday, I'd say that he was the rare constant. After all, the cold vein of truth does not bend with age. It remains what it is - an echo that resonates deep within our hearts. When I listen carefully, that echo sounds like Balagopal's rapid speech.

A rare constant

Just because he was a "constant man" does not mean that he was fixated with an ideology he formulated ages ago. I'd say that Balagopal remained constant because his truth became broader and shaper. When the Emergency happened, he shifted his paradigm of thinking to make sense of it. A little later, when the Maoists galvanized Karimnagar and Warangal to initiate mass movements, he found his romance with Marxism gaining strength. Next, when confronted by stark

examples of atrocities on Dalits, he felt compelled to widen his activities. Of course, he never doubted that Dalit oppression was an infringement of Human Rights - he just decided to do more about it.

A centrist, hence a humanist

I met and interacted with Balagopal for 18 months between early 2007 and mid 2008. I was then researching for my historical novel on the Naxalite movement (the as-yet unpublished *Red Curry*). Quite naturally, I travelled widely across Andhra Pradesh over a period of 12 months. I first based myself out of Vishakapatnam to find out as much as I could about the developments in Srikakulam in the late 60s and early 70s. After that, I went to Hyderabad. By now, I had already sensed the intellectual power of Balagopal (through descriptions provided by his fellow Human Rights activists, journalists, police officers, Naxalite sympathisers and sundry detractors). I was eager to experience the power myself. Moreover, I was quite disappointed not to have met a single centrist in the entire landscape. Almost everybody I met had a penchant to simplify the debate, turn it into binary evaluations. This was true even for some well-known "Left-leaning intellectuals" who inevitably revealed viewpoints dotted with personal prejudices and ignorance of the chronology of events. (The only exception to this, other than Balagopal, was fellow writer Mohan Ramamoorthy - more about him later.) But Balagopal was something else altogether. Within minutes of beginning my interview with him, my brain was struggling to expand at the rate of knots, so that it could absorb everything the man was saying.

I had finally found my centrist, one who had seen each planet, comet and asteroid in this terrifying galaxy fall into place. A man who could recall minor details at will and map them into trends and issues. As an erstwhile mathematician, Balagopal could take the binary views offered by others and divide them into, shall we say, quark numbers. I kept pitching long, rambling questions at him to throw him off the track. Each time, he put me in my place by identifying the nub of the matter. 'Let's do away with the superfluous and the incidental,' he seemed to be saying. 'What's the core issue here? Let's talk about that.'

'So we did.'

Over two evenings, he transformed the million facts I had at my disposal into lucid logic. I had finally - dare I say it? - understood the Naxalite movement. As much as my puny brain could, anyway.

A rarer moral courage

Despite his dazzling intellect, what impressed me even more was his moral courage. Here was a man who knew that in this "ding-dong battle" (his own words) between the state and the Naxalites, he was destined to play the referee. Not the easiest job in the world, is it? It meant that, every weekend, he was off to some inaccessible part of the country to investigate transgressions made by one side or the other - be it fake encounters conducted by the cops or summary executions orchestrated by the Naxalites. The only certainty in this bleak politics was that Balagopal would be on Ground Zero at the earliest, peeling layers of lies off the official version.

I myself had the good fortune to witness Balagopal in one of his fact finding missions. It was January 2008. A Naxalite had been killed by the Greyhounds in an obscure village 40 km outside the town of Jangaon. I spent the day with him and his team and experienced the frustration that comes easily when one is in the middle of a seemingly impossible task.

Balagopal, however, appeared unruffled. Once the team had identified the lies in the cop's description of the encounter, we met the family of the slain man, a few villagers and finally went to a tea stall where, upon getting the news of Balagopal's arrival, many vernacular journalists had gathered. Balagopal addressed them in a few words, gave his interpretation of the events, after which, we returned to civilization. On the way back, I remember asking him where the news would be featured. He replied: 'If we're lucky, maybe a 1-inch column on the bottom of Page 7.' Perhaps on a slow news day, the news would be elevated to the top of the page.

Back at the Jangaon bus stand, we lunched together and I said goodbye. I left for a 3-weekspell in Warangal while he returned to Hyderabad. It was the last I saw of the genius. I called him a couple of times after that, chiefly to know what he thought of my manuscript. 'I think it's good,' he replied. I don't want to know if he was being polite (perhaps not. Not him!). All I know is that those words mean more to me than a mention in the NYT bestseller list. I still cannot understand

why he gave people like me so much of his time. After all, I was not the only one descending upon him with a busload of ignorance. It occurs to me now that he must have given me his interview on autopilot. If I could do that interview all over again, I'd think of cleverer questions. At least one of which would stretch his brain. Wishful thinking, I know.

Sleep long and well, dear sir. Everybody you've met will miss you.