

# An Uncompromising Fight for Human Rights and Values

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**K** Balagopal's name has become synonymous with human rights not only in his home state, Andhra Pradesh, but in all of India. His work spanned almost three decades (1983-2009), from the early 1980s onwards.

This was the period immediately after the Emergency, when disenchantment with a variant of democracy that did not hesitate to use force against its own citizens had begun to find a voice. This was also the period, especially after 1990, when the political economy of the Indian state was becoming clearer, when we could at long last see for ourselves how our "public" state sided with the private interests of a few in furthering their power and profits over the interests of the larger majority of the Indian citizenry, and when neo-imperialism was not just part of some ideological rhetoric but had become a reality. The situation that did not exist even one generation ago now exists: two worlds within India in every respect – two worlds of education, health, opportunities, transport, housing, etc.

## Prolific Writer

Balagopal once wrote an article called "The Man and the Times" (about Chandrababu Naidu, then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh). The title comes to mind when one considers hundreds of articles (almost a hundred in EPW alone) written by Balagopal during the three decades in question. He was a prolific writer not only in English but also his beloved Telugu, in which he penned regular columns in local journals such as *Prajatantra* and *Andhra Jyoti*, one of Andhra Pradesh's leading dailies. In these, he systematically chronicled the public events and politics of his time, informing, arguing, castigating if need be, but above all helping to build public opinion. Not a man to mince words, these critical essays bearing a distinct style and language (with a certain penchant for a

curious turn of phrase, a sharp one-liner, or tongue-in-cheek humour) made him a much looked-forward-to essayist.

As with many other friends, my conversation with Balagopal is left incomplete. But whatever time I could spend with him in the last few years as a friend, work partner or fellow traveller is most precious and will remain so. I have participated with him in many fact-finding teams into human rights violations in Bihar, Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Chhattisgarh. In fact, even before I met him in person, I had seen a picture of him addressing a public meeting in *Mukti Marg*, a left journal in Patna, in relation to the Arwal massacre of 1986.

In Kashmir, where he had already made many trips, he was well known and his arrival was awaited. In Andhra Pradesh, of course, he had travelled the length and breadth of the countryside many times over. There are many places in Telangana, for example, where he must have been to most villages in the mandal. I remember in one fact-finding into a fake encounter in Manala (Nizamabad) in March 2005, quite impressed with all the stupams that one sees so readily in rural Andhra Pradesh (of Ambedkar with his arm extended pointing the right way with his finger, for example), I used to joke with him that after he goes they will make a stupam of him, in his slippers, a diary tucked under his left arm, and a pen in the pocket – all set for a fact-finding mission. As it happens, a stupam was announced soon after his death in Adilabad, to be constructed alongside that of the local legendary tribal hero of the adivasis of the district, Kumram Bhim.

Even though Balagopal had exceptional leadership abilities (and was respected by others as such) he was far from being the type who even as they try "to do good" end up dominating or controlling others. On the contrary he always tried, especially during our trips outside Andhra Pradesh,

to explain everything to his comrades in Telugu. And the extent to which he was loved and respected by his comrades made itself felt to an outsider, more so after his death, when thousands thronged to catch a last sight of him and could do little to control their grief and loss. Balagopal was less Balagopalgaru (ji in Telugu) and more "Sir" or just "Balagopal" to most.

Balagopal was an exceptionally fine human being. He was honest, down-to-earth, straight, simple and a man of immense and rare integrity and courage. He had many gifts – a brilliant intellect (an accomplished mathematician and recipient of many gold medals during his academic life), a unique capacity for hard work, and a rare ability to write and speak with power. All these gifts he put to good use not in self-interest but in the service of society.

## Shy and Sensitive

He was a shy and extremely sensitive person. Socially, he was quite reserved and often a man of few words but in every other way he had so much to say – which he said above all by the way in which he led his life on an everyday basis, often timed to the minute, for years on end. His commitment to justice, his vision for a society free from pain, oppression and suffering, a society where all human beings are respected and equal, was total. For him Truth was a very important vehicle towards this aim. And that is why he attempted to find, to understand, to analyse the facts on the ground as people felt them, and then based on this factual understanding of the ground reality – to speak out fearlessly, against all odds.

However, from 1993 onwards this meant going against the grain amongst the radical sections within the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), of which he was the general secretary since 1983, a position he continued to hold until 1998. For, based on understanding gained from years and years of full-time activism, he along with some other members within APCLC had come to the firm understanding that society suffered not only from class dominance, but also other forms of dominance and the oppressive practices therein.

It was essential for a human rights organisation, therefore, to struggle for rights that emerged as a consequence of all these forms of dominance, institutionalised and non-institutionalised, and not prioritise a single domain. This group saw the role of the human rights movement as one which worked as a partner of all such democratic movements and attempted to articulate their grievances and aspirations in the universal language of rights. Further, they felt that in order to play such a role it was important that the human rights movement be credible (and seen to be credible) for which the movement had to retain its independence. Importantly, such an autonomous human rights movement that saw itself as accountable to the people should not hesitate to question political movements for their actions that may be committed in the name of “struggle” or “revolution” but which may violate principles and values of human rights. Till today many of his friends who are closer to the other stream have not forgiven him for speaking out and calling a spade a spade.

In 1998, after five years of democratic debate within the APCLC, Balagopal and other like-minded members left APCLC and formed the Human Rights Forum (HRF). In the last decade, HRF has expanded from a 32-member organisation to a 300-member organisation with a presence in nearly all districts of Andhra Pradesh. At the theoretical level, HRF thinking represents a third perspective on human rights in India (the first two being represented broadly by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties and the People’s Union for Democratic Rights, respectively, along with similar thinking organisations).

### As a Lawyer

After ceasing work as a full-time activist of APCLC and with the formation of the HRF, Balagopal started working as an advocate in the Andhra Pradesh High Court during week days, and every Friday – without fail – would be out of Hyderabad on HRF related work. Like everything that he did, this work too had his full attention and commitment. He only took cases of the marginalised sections: the dalits, adivasis, minorities and women, charging only a small fee that he kept in a box in his work room at home since most of it was spent on his

weekend travels (though a few years ago he was most happy to use the savings he had to buy a new computer for his son, Prabhata, whom he loved very much, while he continued to use an old donated system). He typed all the petitions himself – with only his index finger – so that his clients were not burdened with the extra cost. In the last decade of assiduous practice I am not sure how many cases he handled, but they must have been many judging from the fact that he has left behind 800 pending cases. His effort to use law for justice paid off in many cases in getting significant orders, for example, that only adivasi teachers would be appointed to teach in the schools in adivasi areas in Andhra Pradesh or that reservations for the backward castes among students as well as teachers had to apply also in the universities.

### Incisive Thought

As an intellectual, Balagopal reminds one of Ambedkar on the one hand and Chomsky on the other. His incisive political thought, writings and speeches, especially those in Telugu made him a much-respected leader of the people in Andhra Pradesh. He would step out of Andhra Pradesh only when the call of human rights called him elsewhere, be it to Kashmir, the north-east or some other state. Balagopal did not have a passport and had no desire whatsoever to go abroad. He would often joke that he had made only one exception in this regard and that was – Kashmir.

Because of openly voicing his differences with Marxism, there are some who believe that he had ceased to be a Marxist. He did not comment on this, though, I think he cared less for labels and more for the quest for understanding and knowledge. In whatever time that he could spare from his activism, advocacy as a lawyer, and the regular writings that he was otherwise engaged in, he was also working on a critical appraisal of Marxist theory.

Balagopal is going to be missed especially now when in the name of “internal security” the Indian state has begun its “Operation Greenhunt” to “wipe out” the Maoist movement starting from Bastar and where the Maoists are speaking the same language as well. Balagopal had observed that the rulers of India had gained a new courage after the fall of Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s army and had begun to favour physical elimination over peace talks and political solutions. In a recent article he observed: “Ordinary people might indeed wonder if the immorality of the ruling parties, their unfair governance, and economic systems that are perversely feeding the growth of inequalities, are in fact not greater dangers to the internal security of the country.” That is why, he said, “it is important that we raise our voices to demand that the government stop this hunt, just as it is necessary to ask that the Maoists behave in a manner that would put pressure on such a direction.”

The very first time I met Balagopal in 1996 (in the Delhi School of Economics after an open air lecture by Noam Chomsky), I had noted how many people came and shook his hands – most of them were “ordinary” people. This was also apparent amongst those who rushed to Hyderabad upon hearing about his untimely death. The throngs of people in thousands who came to catch a last glimpse, their palpable grief, their heart-rending cries as they saw him, as they touched him through the glass cover of the coffin for one last time, and as they hugged each other desperately in search of some comfort as they tried to come to terms with their disbelief and shock, did not need words.

As Anwar, a mine employee and now one of the four state secretaries of HRF, said: “If you ask me to say something about Balagopal, what can I say? Can there be words to describe the sun?” Ganesh, an erstwhile cadre of the People’s War Group and now a journalist, said: “He was our hope. Our hope has gone.” His example, of one who many knew to be extraordinary but who lived a simple life, every moment of which since 1981 was devoted to the progressive movement shall live on.

If we want to pay homage to a person such as Balagopal there is only one way and that is to fight relentlessly for human rights and values until our last breath – we need to do double the work, what would have been his as well as ours, for he left before his time – for herein lies the key to India’s democratic future and the hope for her millions.

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