

CHAMPION OF THE OPPRESSED

CIVIL LIBERTIES

Dr. Kandala Balagopal, 34, the Andhra-based civil liberties leader and a mathematics Ph.D., could, according to his professors, have by now won a Nobel Prize in mathematics if he hadn't decided to devote himself full-time to civil rights activism. Currently under heavy police surveillance, Dr. Balagopal has given up all his material wealth and former professorships to wage a silent but relentless battle against State violations of human rights.

By JOHN P. SINGH

IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE THAT THIS GAUNT, lean and undernourished wraith-like figure, buttoned up in a full-sleeved shirt and trousers, is a terror to the Andhra Pradesh Police. Last December at Vijayawada, the police used the muscle of five companies of the armed reserve force to keep the public away from him. But they did not succeed in stopping the civil liberties meeting organised by this magnetic rabble-rouser.

"You may call me whatever you want — unsung hero or sung, but if this interview helps the purpose of my life and the civil rights movement, I am game for it." These were the words with which Dr. Kandala Balagopal agreed to be interviewed — his first ever press interview. However, he is widely known not only through his prolific writings, both in Telugu and English, but also for his genius in mathematics.

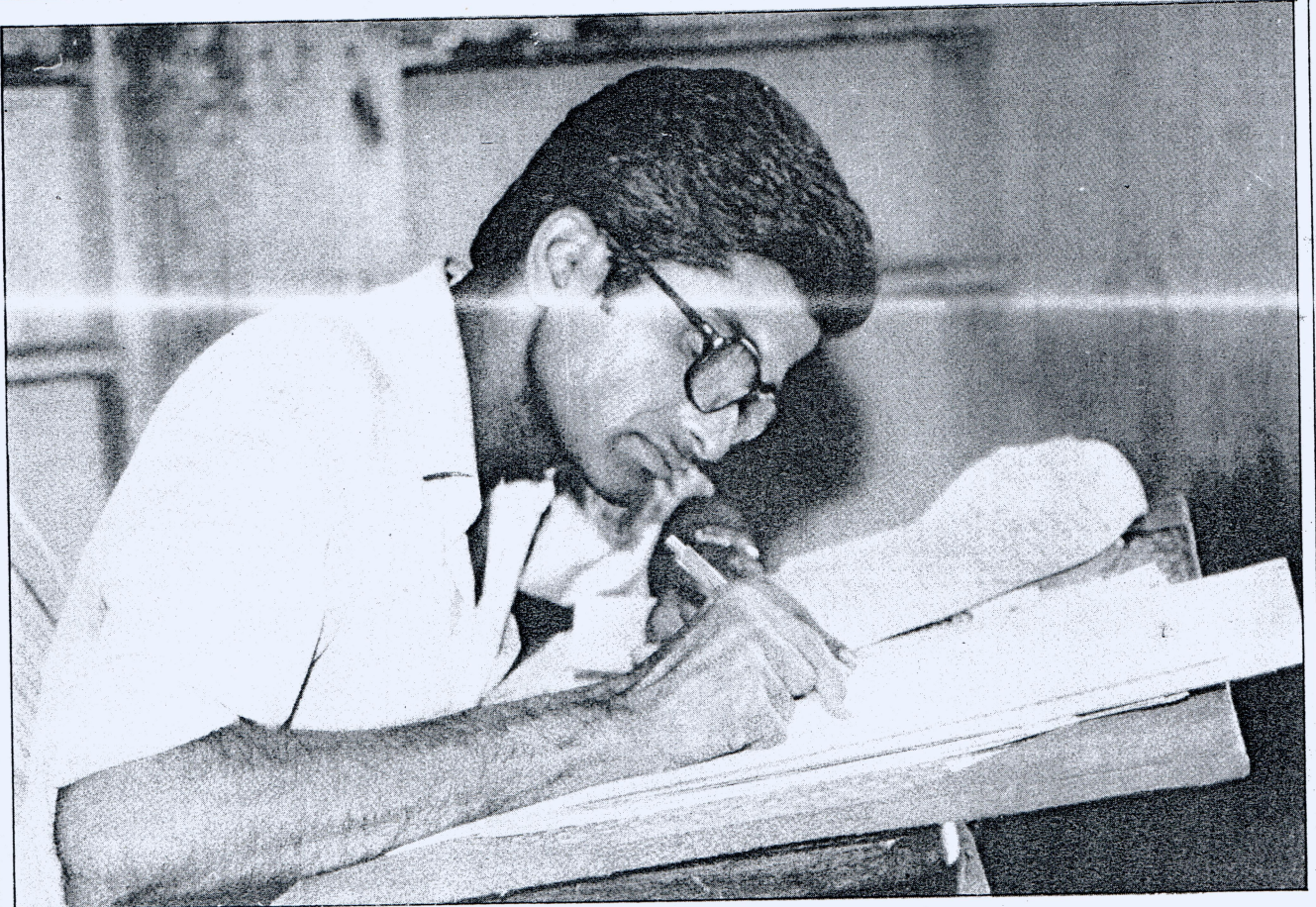
One of his close associates in the civil rights movement, K.G. Kannabiran, contends: "Whatever work he is doing is not for the objective of securing for himself a high social visibility. If at all he agreed for this interview it is only to enlist supporters for the cause of human rights." Balagopal's 60-year-old mother, K. Nagamani, put it aptly: "Not till two years ago when he was arrested and jailed did we know what he was doing and how famous he really was."

So who is this man? And what is the secret of his magnetic appeal? Kandala Balagopal was the sixth among his four brothers and four sisters. His parents, K.P. Sharma and K. Nagamani, had given their best years to their children. His mother Nagamani, the daughter of Rallapalli Anantkrishna Sharma, a well-known Sanskrit and Telugu scholar, was the first *kalaprapoorna* of the Madras Music Academy and had

many works of literature to her credit. That is perhaps the reason Nagamani says: "Balagopal's interest in literature is hereditary." K.P. Sharma, an officer in the Life Insurance Corporation of India, was also a well-educated man who ensured the best education to his sons and daughters.

Born on June 20, 1952, at Bellary, a district town which was a part of Rayalseema region of Andhra earlier but is now in Karnataka, young Balagopal schooled at various places in the state depending on where his itinerant father was posted. His primary schooling was in Guntur, Kakinada and Vizianagaram; his higher secondary education was at Visakhapatnam and Tirupati. The schools were very ordinary municipality schools and the medium of instruction was Telugu. Despite the backwater schools he attended he was a gold medalist in the 10th standard in the entire Chittoor district. In his mother's words: "He was always active. He was a good artist and cartoonist. He had a good poetic style. He wrote the *Raghu Vamsam* in Telugu. He was also the best cricketer in the entire district."

When Balagopal's family shifted to Kavali from Tirupati, young Kandala stayed with his maternal uncle, R.A. Jayantha, a reader in Tirupati University, where he continued his college education getting a B.Sc. degree in 1972. Then he opted for Warangal where he joined the Regional Engineering Centre (REC) and completed his M.Sc. in 1974. He went on to do a doctorate in mathematics, specialising in the applied probability theory. Subsequently, he did post-doctoral research as a senior research fellow at the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi, where he produced nine papers in various journals, including two British publications, *Journal of Applied Probability* and *Advances in Applied Probability*. Between 1977 and



BALAGOPAL USED TO WRITE SHORT STORIES
Now, he has given the police much food for thought

1980 Balagopal was on the board of reviewers of the bimonthly journal, *Mathematical Reviews*, published by the American Mathematical Society from the University of Michigan. One of his close former associates, Dr. G. Hargopal, a researcher in CESS (Centre for Economics and Social Studies, at the University of Hyderabad), who has known him from the REC, Warangal days, says: "Balagopal has no parallel. He is a rare intellectual with a high level of abstraction. Had he pursued his career in mathematics with the same zest as in civil rights he might have won a Nobel Prize. But mathematics' loss is society's gain."

Balagopal's entire family is highly educated. His elder brother, Dr. K. Ravindranath, works at Dariba Mines, Udaipur, Dr. Lt. Col. A.S. Kandala, his second brother, is head of the Ambulance Corps and is based in Rajasthan. During Balagopal's arrest in November 1985 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, it was Lt. Col. Kandala who alone was allowed to meet him. The third brother, K. Raghunath, B.E., is an electrical engineer posted in Madras. Of his sisters, one is a double M.A., another an M.Com, the third an M.Sc. and the fourth an M.A., M.Phil and Ph.D. It was his last sister, a journalist, who was subjected to harassment by the state police.

His eldest sister is suffering from a brain tumour and had given up all hope, but ayurvedic treatment has given her a temporary reprieve. Nagamani, his mother, requested GENTLEMAN not to publish the names of her daughters, saying: "I don't want the police to harass these innocents. Already the

last daughter who is a journalist has had a taste of police tactics. They ransacked her place without a warrant or even a senior officer present."

Balagopal's exposure to a bookish family life prodded him to think and read a lot. He also used to write reams of short stories. He confesses: "I was sympathetic to leftists but regarded communists and their ideas as exaggerated. I was under the influence of non-Marxist leftists like Bertrand Russell and thought that India had a progressive democratic government that would solve the problem of poverty and prove that the communist theory of class struggle and repressive state apparatus were wrong. However, the proclamation of the Emergency and the killing of Janaradhan, a CPI-ML activist in Warangal, shook my beliefs."

The historic town of Warangal altered the course of Balagopal's career and gave him a purpose in life. "A variety of influences gave me a direction, the sharpest of them being the environment around me." He came into contact with students who had a CPI-ML bent of mind and were active in organising not only the students in the campus but also agricultural labourers and farm workers in the neighbouring villages. Warangal had been the seat of agrarian struggles as far back as 1946 and by 1970 the problems had grown enough to cause concern to the establishment, especially at the time the city registered a rapid growth in the number of student sympathisers of the communists.

"It was the leftist periodical *Economic and Political Weekly* and the works of D.D. Kosambi which convinced me



BALAGOPAL IS A SIMPLE MAN
He told students not to make him a hero

of the truth of Marxism. Then I read the three volumes of Karl Marx's *Das Capital* and came to understand Marxism."

After the Emergency was lifted in 1977, Balagopal went to Delhi to work as a post-doctoral fellow at the Indian Statistical Institute where he spent three years. He immersed himself in research in the first year and wrote many research papers. "But then I decided that mathematics is irrelevant to the real problems of the people of India and their struggles." It was at this juncture that he made plans to give up his career as a mathematician. In the second year he spent most of his time reading books on politics, economics, history and Marxism. In 1980, he resigned his fellowship at the Institute and decided to return to Warangal. As there was no opening at Warangal either at the REC or Kakatiya University, he gave tuitions in mathematics for a few months, and by March 1981 he joined the university as a lecturer. It was in these formative years that his destiny began to take shape and he soon found his life's calling when he got involved in the civil liberties movement.

In the mid-1980s four Telengana districts, Warangal, Karimnagar, Adilabad and Khammam, were witnessing furious efforts by various communist groups who were organising agricultural labour, tribals and students. "Though all these groups believed in violence like all communist parties do, initially most of their demands were within the legal framework of the Constitution and their method of struggle

was entirely democratic and legal," says Balagopal. Their demands were: i) implementation of the Land, Ceiling Act, ii) implementation of the Minimum Wages Act. iii) distribution of village wastelands to the landless, and iv) assurance of a decent livelihood to the tribals. The CPI-ML groups organised the rural poor into "mass organisations" to secure their demands which were either already enacted as laws, or were part of the directive principles of the state policy as enshrined in the Constitution of India. But what Balagopal saw made his blood boil. The Andhra government was all set to enact an unconstitutional act, the Suppression of Disturbances Act, to suppress the legitimate struggles of the rural poor in the state. "No less a person than Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, an ex-judge of the Supreme Court, has said that this Act violates Article 21 of the Constitution (which safeguards the right to life) with reference to Maneka Gandhi v/s the Union of India," says Balagopal.

Besides the Disturbed Areas Act, other brutal methods of suppression used by the A.P. state government are the fake "encounter" killings. Till the end of the Emergency, 450 naxalite activists were killed in a spate of "encounters". After a brief lull between 1977 and 1980, the killings started once again. "The latest tally is 55 killings in 1985-86 itself," says Balagopal. It was at this juncture that Balagopal decided to work for the protection of civil liberties in the state and joined the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) in 1981. He was elected the general secretary of the organisation in August 1983 at the 4th state conference of the APCLC held at Khammam and has given the police much food for thought ever since.

A regular contributor to *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Frontier* as well as Telugu weeklies *Srajana* and *Arunatara*, he has translated ancient Indian history into Telugu, published by the Hyderabad Book Trust. Talking of his writings, K.G. Kannabiran says: "His writings are a specimen of his personality and are an insight to his deep-rooted conviction for human rights. His articles entitled *NTR's rise and fall*, published in October 1984 and *Indira Gandhi: A political appraisal*, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1985 throw light on his ability to analyse."

Balagopal is modest when it comes to making a self-assessment. "None of my achievements are personal, especially in the civil liberties field. All of them belong to the civil liberties movement in general, and the APCLC in particular." However, with Balagopal in the lead, the APCLC has achieved many firsts among civil rights organisations nationwide. It has systematically documented the illegal detentions and torture of poor peasants, and the destruction of houses and properties of farmers under the guise of unearthing the sympathisers of extremists. Says Balagopal: "The estimate of money extorted from the villagers by the police under threat of implication in false cases and torture in Karimnagar district alone during the last four years runs into Rs 1 crore."

From 1983 to 1985 the APCLC exposed police lawlessness in the remotest districts of the state. "The APCLC has consistently opposed unlawful police violence, irrespective of whether the victim is a naxalite or an ordinary criminal," says Balagopal. The APCLC has reported 62 deaths in police custody since 1984, and has frequently intervened with petitions introduced from magistrate courts to the Supreme Court to elicit complete details of the killings. "In addition to police

violence," says Balagopal, "the APCLC has taken up cases of violation of people's rights, violence unleashed on the poor by excise contractors and landlords and the government's inaction in the face of periodic droughts and floods." The APCLC is currently preparing a writ petition urging the Supreme Court to treat the recurrent drought in Anantpur as a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution.

Government repression of the APCLC has largely manifested itself through harassment, beatings, detentions and frequent arrests of Balagopal. In his own words: "I was arrested five times and have been charged with seven criminal cases in the last three years. However, these arrests are not to be taken as a personal attack on me but on the civil liberties movement." He was arrested on January 23, 1985 and charged for distributing bombs to extremists and conspiring to kill police officials. He was released without any charges being framed after 18 days in judicial custody. He was arrested again on April 20, 1985 near Indervalli in Adilabad along with Professor Manoranjan Mohanti. According to an eyewitness: "Balagopal sat throughout the night and let the others rest."

Balagopal has also been a victim of personal assault. In May 1985, he was attacked by RSS workers at Jagtial bus stand in Karimnagar district with bamboo sticks. The police, however, dragged him to the station and interrogated him for an hour rather than arrest the real culprits. His last but one arrest was on November 16, 1985 within the space of a month of the murder of a civil liberties activist at the hands of the police (Dr. Ramanatham, vice president of the APCLC at Warangal, was the victim). In fact, Balagopal was reportedly abducted by the authorities from Hyderabad, outside the house of Kannabiran, an advocate, where he had gone visiting, and taken to Warangal. It was only after moving a habeas corpus writ that his whereabouts were known three days later when he was produced in the court and formally arrested — and that too under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act for conspiracy to murder a police official.

When Balagopal paid bail, he was once again arrested under the National Security Act (NSA) for having allegedly participated in a criminal conspiracy to kill two police informers on October 13, 1985 at a village in Adilabad. But the police had done its homework badly. "It so happened that on that day (October 13th), I was in Delhi and met many prominent persons and even addressed a gathering of students at Jawaharlal Nehru University. This forced the government to withdraw the NSA warrant." He was finally released on bail on February 16, 1986 after spending three months in Central Jail, Warangal.

A few days after this interview was conducted in mid-December 1986, Balagopal again disappeared. He had addressed a public meeting at the Press Club of Vijayawada on December 26, 1986 amidst a considerable police presence. Then, he is supposed to have boarded the Coromandel Express to Calcutta where he was to participate in the silver jubilee celebrations of the movement; he never reached. A habeas corpus petition was moved in the Supreme Court. It was feared that Balagopal was detained in Vijayawada itself.

After the murder of a DSP (Butchi Reddy) at Peddapalli in Karimnagar by extremists and the police killings of a civil rights worker named Jampa Lakshma Reddy at Algnur in the same district, Balagopal was once again being hounded by the police. This correspondent's last meeting with Balagopal was on December 24, when he interviewed him

extensively for over two hours.

THAT BALAGOPAL HAS EARNED FOR HIMSELF, as well as for the civil liberties movement in Andhra Pradesh, statewide if not (yet) nationwide attention is not an exaggeration. The APCLC has now broadened its crusading activities and taken up the cause against industrial pollution of residential areas in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Balagopal has a growing following among students, though by appearance he is not a very impressive personality.

After his November 1985 experience, Balagopal left Warangal and made Hyderabad his centre of activity. He has been suspended by the Kakatiya University after his arrest under the NSA and the Terrorism Act. He did not return to Warangal on the advice of friends as they suspected a threat to his life from the police. During his arrest in November 1985, the police ransacked his room at Warangal and took away about 600 to 700 volumes of books on mathematics. His mother, Nagamani, laments: "Balagopal spent most of his earnings on books. That was his only wealth. What use is it to the police now and why can't they return the books to him?"

Balagopal is a simple man. This correspondent visited many villages along with him and also visited his Warangal room. Except a few clothes and a chair, the only other objects in the room were his books. At Hyderabad he lives in a single room converted from a car garage into a rough shelter. He eats wherever he is offered food, whenever he can afford a meal. But there is no cessation in his civil rights work.

According to Dr. G. Hargopal, his former mathematics associate of Hyderabad university: "Balagopal represents a rare specimen of the middle-class which comes to the fore once in a while." Balagopal had told a gathering of students at Hyderabad University not to make him a hero. "If you make heroes of a movement, it is at the cost of the movement," he cautioned. Another one of his associates, however, contends: "Balagopal is a committed Marxist. In opposing a political system of violence and torture against human rights, Balagopal has become a terrorist, a supporter of extremist violence and a perpetual source of nuisance for law and order apparatus of the state." In fact, Balagopal stands accused of terrorist activity in two cases. In one he was granted bail by the high court. In the other, the state labelled him an absconder though he has been very much around and aboveground, carrying on his human rights campaign relentlessly — and in the open.

Balagopal says: "I am a Marxist in my beliefs and philosophy. The poverty of India and the denial of basic amenities of life to the poor is due to the fact that material wealth is controlled by a handful of people and the State. When the State helps the rich to become richer, this forces the poor to either become violators of the law or to organise themselves and agitate for a better life. In either case the State comes down upon them with a heavy hand and suppresses them. All the black laws perpetrated by the Indian Constitution are used to suppress the people. And what cannot be achieved by repressive laws is achieved by violating the Criminal Procedure Code and the Constitution of India. Thus the struggle for civil liberties becomes a part of the struggle of the poor and the deprived for a better life." **G**