

THE PASSING AWAY OF A HERO: GOODBYE BALAGOPAL

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A sense of irony is the only way for me to describe how I felt when I heard about Balagopal's death. Ordinary people leading ordinary lives die of heart attacks. And despite the simplicity with which he led his life and interacted with people, every time one met Balagopal or heard him you always knew you were in the presence of someone extraordinary. Whenever he left after any meeting, Balagopal left you a little scared about whether you would ever see him again. As a result of the position that he took- against the violence of the state as well as the violence of the Maoists, you were always left with the lurching fear that any point of time, you would be given the news that Balagopal had been killed in an encounter.

At the same time it is perhaps not surprising that despite living a life which was scripted towards a violent death, it was only appropriate that his death transcended any partisan act of violence. Film maker Deepa Dhanraj captures the essence of Balagopal when she describes him as a 'moral force' whose authority emerged from the integrity with which he led his life and the courage with which he stood by his belief. If Balagopal was a regular anti violent activist or a pacifist, then there would have been nothing surprising about his stance on violence, and to argue for the importance of non violence would hardly be an act of courage. But for someone who had spent a better part of his life in struggles, and in battles against the impunity of the state, the commitment to an ethical position on violence becomes a deeply ethical choice of bravery.

In an ironic way Balagopal could be seen as a true inheritor of the Gandhian legacy, of leading a particular kind of life, and through such a life aspiring to change the world around you. In an interview with Janam Saxi, Balagopal once stated "The Indian constitution has had a habit, right from its inception, to destroy democratic values completely in practice without any recourse to laws. This has grown very much recently. The apparatus of the police is the chief machinery for this destruction. The duty to safeguard democratic values from these limitations is a very important duty..... While performing this duty it is of no use to as the

question in this form: is there or is there not at least a bourgeoisie type of democracy”. I can think of very few who followed this duty with the same kind of clarity, conviction and humility as Balagopal did.

The first time that I met and heard Balagopal was in a workshop organized by PUCL in Chennai. I was a young student, and like many young students, whether of the revolutionary or the conservative variety, my main attribute was a nonchalant cynicism. Curiously Balagopal began by speaking of his initial love for mathematics. He did his bachelors, his masters a PhD and even a post doctorate in mathematics, and spoke with immense fondness of his obsession with abstraction. He then moved on to his encounter with various peoples movements and struggles, and his descent from the world of pure abstraction to the very material world of injustice and violence. For those who have heard Balagopal speak and have been amazed by his clarity of thought and analysis, you cannot help but think of how his love for mathematical precision clearly survived in a very different form.

It was one of those moments when you felt you just had to drop everything and follow this man. In a world where the epithet of hero is just too generously used, I can safely say ‘Balagopal you were a hero in the truest sense of the word to many of us’.

And at the same time I cannot help but feel that perhaps this descent from the heights of abstraction to the very ordinary and fragile business of activism is also what marked Balagopal as different from most activists. An abstract transcendental idea of rights was certainly not something for Balagopal, and yet he did not allow himself to be so immersed in the reality of struggles so as to forget any kind of moral claim that may be made of a movement. In [an article on moving the debate beyond the terms set by the binaries of violence- non violence](#) Balagopal argued that “To say that one should not be dogmatic about violence may be morally a little unsettling but it is a defensible position even without adopting a relativistic attitude towards the preciousness of life or a casual attitude towards one’s moral responsibility for injury caused in the course of a struggle”.

There will be a lot of time for us to think about ways in which we learn from his life and work, but for the moment let us spend sometime remembering the man who would be found standing outside a meeting venue selling books and

pamphlets before he proceeded to go to the podium to make the most insightful speech you were likely to hear. Let us remember the man who when told that finally Justice Pasayat had retired, remarked that it was unfortunate that his decisions would not be retiring with him, and let us remember him most importantly in the days to come when violence and non violence will be offered to us again to choose, as though it were a real choice. Goodbye Balagopal, we will miss you immensely but thank you for giving us the freedom to not have to make false choices.