

## **BALAGOPAL'S LEGACY WILL LIVE FOREVER**

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A legendary human rights activist of India, K Balagopal, General Secretary, Human Rights Forum, died of a sudden heart attack in Hyderabad on October 8, 2009. He was 57.

I cannot believe that Balagopal is no more. He came to Delhi last month to address an important meeting launching a Citizen's Peace Initiative calling for stopping the cycle of violence and urging for a dialogue between the government and the Maoists. We had been in constant touch to carry this initiative forward. At a time when the government's military campaign against the Maoists has been escalated and the Maoist attacks on the police have also continued unabated bringing enormous sufferings to the common people in the tribal areas, Balagopal's leadership was most essential. The democratic rights community of India has lost an invaluable asset and India a rare intellectual who has contributed greatly to the progressive democratic thought of India.

Balagopal was the standard-bearer for many like me for the working in the human rights movement. Together with Kannabiran and Haragopal he defined the meaning of human rights challenging the mainstream ideas of liberals and Marxists. Civil Liberty above all was rule of law and therefore false encounter killings by security forces had to be exposed. From Andhra Pradesh to Kashmir to Manipur and Nagaland civil liberty groups took up this issue and today there is a significant opinion in the country that opposes false encounter killings. Even though such killings have not ended, but the impunity with which it was going on is today widely challenged. Balagopal's contribution to this campaign for civil liberties will be remembered forever.

For Balagopal while in the APCLC or in the HRF civil liberty did not have a narrow meaning, but included the common people's right to political, social, cultural and economic freedoms. He took up cases of atrocities against Dalits, against women, against minorities and against nationality movements as a part of

the civil liberty movement. The Andhra society has experienced a great momentum of creative transformation during the past three decades and people like Balagopal have contributed significantly to that process. India's democratic struggles for justice, dignity and peace have benefited enormously from his insights and leadership.

I have many memories to share. Let me just pick up one from our Adilabad experience. In April 1985 I was in a five-member team together with Balagopal, then the General Secretary of the APCLC, going to participate in a memorial meeting in Indravalli. The police stopped our vehicle and arrested us. We were in a lock-up for two nights. The first night I tried to humour the team continuously, but he would give a only suppressed smile at best. When I went to do my shaving the next morning and wondered why he was not shaving, he said: "Not under repression!" That night we were transported through the deep forest to a town for being produced before a magistrate. Past midnight in the deep forest I whispered to him: "Now we should be ready to be encountered and I am proud to be in your company here." He gave a big laugh and said: "You will be disappointed; these are not law and order policemen—these are court constables. Just wait; they will stop and serve you tea." Yes, indeed, half-an-hour later we were sipping hot masala tea in the wee hours of the morning in a forest dhaba.

We got bail the next day in the court. The case was withdrawn by the NTR Government on the initiative of many intellectuals later. Hundreds of people have had this experience together with Balagopal of facing repression together seeking to expose violation of human rights while upholding some human values.

Balagopal decided to break with the APCLC and formed the Human Rights Forum to insist on one issue—that the human rights movement had to be an independent political force to uphold human values. It had to challenge the state to abide by its Constitution and the laws and test all its institutions to prove themselves fulfilling their legal obligations. It also had to challenge those who struggled for a new order to respect human values. He relentlessly exposed the Army and police atrocities in J&K, the North-East, AP, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and elsewhere. He also condemned many incidents of killings by the Maoists inviting their wrath, but on many occasions the Maoists themselves regretted some of the actions. The recent incident of beheading of a police officer in Jharkhand, that must be condemned by all civil liberty forces, is a possible case of that kind.

Many of us had argued with him as to whether he was not defending abstract values of humanism while the struggling people had to contend with the reality of oppression and violence of many kinds. He proved his point not only by concrete analysis of existing conditions of the political economy and that combined with a most-sought-after people's lawyer's skill and a trained mathematician's precision but also by going into a deep philosophical analysis of the history of civilisation and how humanity had to constantly create conditions of peace and beauty for each and all. The readers of Economic and Political Weekly had some access to his insights and much more was available to the privileged readers of Telugu. For Balagopal the commitment to human values had to determine our strategy of work at every level. This will be the abiding legacy of the great humanist fighter for democratic rights.

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