

K. BALAGOPAL: A MEMORY TO BE CHERISHED

V.Geetha

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At first it seemed a huge, obscene lie, the news of his death. It did not seem possible—he had been busy as always the weekend before, at a human rights convention in Ananthapur, to mark 10 years of the Human Rights Forum, the organisation he and others started in 1998. That had become a pattern almost, that he would leave for the districts in the weekends, to enquire into rights violations—land grabbing by the state or private agencies for special economic zones; hazardous open cast mining, farmers' suicides, health issues in adivasi communities...

Balagopal was not just another civil liberties man: a brilliant mathematician who gave up his academic vocation for a public life, a public intellectual, alive to ethical doubts and concerns, yet committed to being political and accountable in the here-and-now of history, he sought to link thought, action, consciousness... For many of us, the manner in which he lived his life was as important as what he said: he was like a moral compass that you turned to, to check your own political orientation and direction. Without intending or wanting to, he became a keeper of social conscience. In this sense, it was a great public life, but nevertheless one that mattered to many, in the intimate and silent corners of their hearts and minds.

For nearly two decades, Balagopal had worked hard and argued much to deepen and broaden our understanding of democracy in this country —precept and practice came together in his work as he wrote, took up legal cases, organised fact-finding missions and called attention to the darker aspects of state power and authority in India. His civil rights work acquired great visibility in the early 1980s, when he was General Secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC): those were the years of the infamous encounter deaths, which ended the lives of several idealistic Communist militants belonging to the erstwhile People's War Group and their supporters in rural and tribal Andhra. During those years of the 'long knives' and draconian laws, he faced threats to his life, was kidnapped by a vigilante group widely believed to be linked to the State Police, arrested on a

trumped-up charge of murdering a sub-inspector ... He survived all that, and during the end of that period, around the mid-1990s, began to write of the importance of thinking about rights violations in a broader and more expansive context.

WHILE agreeing that state violence against its citizens and the impunity with which it was often carried out was the worst possible threat to democracy, he called attention to rights violations in other contexts. Structured inequality, whether of caste or gender, he argued, was as much a source of these violations. Further, he reasoned, the reactive violence of Communist militants as well as the spate of killings that the latter carried out in the name of carrying out a 'class' war often ended in the deaths of vulnerable citizens or minor state functionaries, even as it left intact the real and material structures of state power. He argued too of the importance of democracy, of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution—for these had come about as a result of people's struggles and movements, and rights groups had to learn to defend these hard-won historical legacies.

During this period, he wrote on other things as well—the late 1980s and early 1990s saw him respond critically to Gail Omvedt's articles on the Shetkari Sangathana (in the *Economic and Political Weekly*). His insistence on retaining a radical class approach to the politics of the Indian peasantry helped bracket and problematise Gail's novel approach to the unequal relationship between the country and the city. However, he was no dogmatist. In the course of thinking through the ethics and politics of Communist violence, he asked deep and searching questions about Left politics and theory. He drew upon theories in psychology, existentialism, and ruminated over the human condition as such, as he attempted to square the ethical imperative that lies at the heart of the socialist imagination with the sometimes violent political practice of the Left militants.

Meanwhile, there was work to be done: Kashmir and the North-East were causes that took him away regularly from Hyderabad. His writings on Kashmir, dispassionate, wry and acute in their analysis of the Indian state and Army, and the complicit role of Indian journalism in rendering murky, everyday news from the Valley, were unparalleled. He took to studying other movements, especially the anti-caste movements in western and southern India, and produced, as was his wont, stunning observations on the caste order: caste, he noted, is a production

relationship, defining your access to goods and resources, limiting, restricting your choices, until you actually fought for them.

This rich medley of ideas have since come to inform his many concerns, and for the past year and more have helped illuminate—for many of us—the continuing anti-people and pro-capitalist stances of the Indian state, the role of pro-state, vigilante groups such as the Salwa Judum in stymieing dissent, as well as the hugely problematic use of violence by the Maoists, especially in contexts where popular mobilisation is possible and capable of challenging authority. In one of his latest articles on violence and non-violence, he noted that it was important not to be dogmatic about the use of violence; equally, it was necessary to be alive to the limits of violence, about what it could achieve in the face of capitalist rationality and state terror. He did not counsel a simplistic pacifism, rather he spoke of the importance of mobilising people, of creating agitational movements...

And this is how perhaps he would like to be remembered: as one committed to radical popular protest, who at all times wished to examine the ethics of such protests, wanting to constantly test precept against practice as well as the other way around.

(A slightly abridged version appeared in The Hindu)