

## **SALUTING A REVOLUTIONARY**

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11.10.2009; Kafila

On hearing about Balagopal's passing, so many emotions go through my mind - perhaps the most selfish thought of them all is that the conversations I have been having with his writings in my own work in the last few years, will never be held in person. Having known him as long as I can remember being political, my earliest memories of him were of this extremely quiet and intense person who would often come to our house, barely look around, let alone interact much. Those were the early memories where we would often have activists come to our house but I had little realization of what it all meant. Years later, at the founding conference of Progressive Students Union in 1993, I remember meeting Balagopal again (this time knowing what he meant to the left progressive movement yet trying to reconcile that image with my own lack of interaction with him at home). I cheekily asked Balagopal whether he remembered who I was, whether he remembered his comrade's daughter who he had met over the years mainly in the domestic sphere, I don't actually remember what he said, but being the truly democratic minded individual, he did acknowledge the moment, laughed and never forgot after that...

When I was in college in the early 1990s in Delhi University, it was both an era of tragic political events and also one of the most vibrant periods in left student political history and Balagopal's influence in that political space and time was crucial. The 1992 destruction of Babri Masjid led to an unprecedented mobilization around the issue—hundreds of students marched in the university, intense discussions took place in the hostels and rallies, it was a key moment in DU.

There were other massive campaigns: on sexual harassment and for a safe campus; on DU's discrimination against students from the North East; against fee hikes and liberalization. So many left student groups were visible at the time: Democratic Students Union (DSU), Progressive Students Union (PSU), Progressive Democratic Students Union (PDSU), Students Federation of India (SFI), and All Indian Students Association (AISA with even comrade Chandrasekhar at DU briefly). All

these campaigns led to the expansion of each organization all across DU from Arts Faculty, and Miranda to Shyamlal and Sharaddhanand college. While votes are a crude way of determining support, the combined left panels for Delhi University Students Union elections for the first time in the history of DU in 1994 garnered about 5000 votes. The vibrancy of activism and intellectual discussions on a range of issues made political growing during the phase unforgettable.

All these campaigns in the 1990s saw alliances that had seldom happened before between feminist (Gender Study Group) and revolutionary left groups; and between the different shades of red. While JNUites often claim to be the bastion of left student politics, during those years, one saw a parallel intensity in DU. Discussions on not just the traditional left questions: the Mode of Production debate – semi colonial/semi feudal or capitalist; parliamentary/mass based politics or armed struggle occurred but the different alliances and campaigns made sure that questions of class struggle were understood in relation to gender, caste, communalism and autonomy questions (campaigns for Uttarakhand and the North East continued). The presence of PUDR (raising questions of custodial violence, land rights and democratic rights), Saheli (linking gender with larger struggles) and host of committed individuals formed the supportive network around these vibrant left student movements. The untimely death of another civil liberties intellectual and activist in the 1990s Subba Rao (another figure, along with feminist civil liberties activist Sudesh Vaid, also a part of my growing up) and his spectacularly political funeral with red flags and revolutionary songs made that tragic moment for many of us a decisive one and we struggled to find our own political trajectories. And in these formative periods, among the crucial individuals outside of Delhi whose intellectual, activist and personal support sustained this effort was Balagopal. From his articles in EPW, his speeches in meetings, he was a legendary figure in Delhi activist circles as much as in Andhra (and undoubtedly elsewhere) and for many of us politicized during this period, Balagopal stood for something that many dedicated human rights activists/intellectuals found difficult to do: to respond to changing realities and not hesitate to unflinchingly argue against even the (revolutionary) stream – from within – if that is where his analysis of realities took him.

It was a testament to his engagement with not just issues of class, but gender, and caste that when I was in Hyderabad in 1997 trying to do some research on women

in the ML movement, some of the feminist friends asked me to specifically meet Balagopal. I remember being both nervous of speaking to him and enthralled with the experience. One of the most memorable moments of my life: I had always been profoundly affected by his brilliant speeches, his writing – the precision, the logic and the passion of the quiet/intense kind – and in that conversation, it translated itself as easily into an extremely lucid explication of gender and caste in relation to the ML movement. I can't believe that it was the last time I ever conversed with him. Over the last few years as I read his work more systematically, and as I have struggled to come to my own understanding of State, violence, democracy, it is Balagopal, (apart from Kannabiran, Haragopal and others) who has helped me understand many of these ideas. For me it is not just his sharp incisive analytical abilities that stands out but his notion of civil liberties as a consistent struggle for equality, justice, dignity and social transformation in a people centric democratic manner that is powerful.

His analysis of state power in the essay “[Beyond Violence and Non Violence](#)”, for instance, illustrates his incredible ability to articulate complexity to strategize revolutionary practice.

*Violence may be good or bad, necessary or unnecessary, but it is always crude. Intelligent exercise of power, on the other hand, is subtle. So is capitalist rationality, in general. It is sometimes but not always crudely oppressive...It speaks in a dozen tongues, each offering a limited rationality, while the totality is hidden behind layers of opacity and subterfuge. Its lies require intelligent nailing, and its logistics requires subtle handling to immobilize it.*

For someone from Andhra having seen the worst kind of state violence in his life as an activist lawyer, it is his ability to see beyond the crudely oppressive, to the subtle nature of power that forces us to think, strategize and regroup accordingly. An unflinching commitment to theorizing, writing, fact finding, cause lawyering and representing the seamlessness of these identities, I am honored for the privilege of having known Balagopal in so many different ways, directly and indirectly, and hope this becomes another moment for all of us who admired him, loved him, respected him from near and afar to salute our dear comrade and to recommit ourselves with whatever our own lives allow us to do.

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