

RAREST INTELLECTUAL WITH PERSONAL AND INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

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It is rare nowadays to come across people of unflinching and unquestionable integrity. It is even rarer to find in such people a strong sense of personal and intellectual honesty that demands that they interrogate their own actions and arguments with as much sincerity as they turn on others. And it is rarest of all to find such people engaged in public life, where they would constantly have to face the possibly unhappy consequences of such honesty.

Dr K. Balagopal, the eminent human rights activist whose untimely death has shocked a very wide range of people across India, was one such extremely rare person. While there is much else that can be said to praise him (such as his extraordinary commitment, his patient persistence, his personal courage, his completely selfless attitude to the causes he believed in and the simplicity of his manner of living) it may be that this special kind of honesty was at once his finest and most inconvenient attribute.

At first sight Balagopal appeared to be a quiet, gentle person, straightforward and modest in discussions, warm and approachable to people from all walks of life. But while this appearance did not deceive, it also belied an internal spirit that was almost fierce in its commitment and unswerving once he had decided on his particular plan of action. Despite all the superficial gentleness, he was not easily swayed and was definitely not cowed by threats of any sort, even when the threats came from all and opposing directions.

But being influenced by intellectual arguments and logical reasoning was another matter. Throughout his tragically brief life, Balagopal showed that he would form and change his opinions and make decisions on actions based on intellectual understanding that he then subjected to the most rigorous and continuous tests. Perhaps this was the result of his academic training and practice, which clearly put a premium on logical thinking.

Balagopal was first of all a mathematician. He received a doctorate in probability theory at Tirupati and then taught mathematics at the Kakatiya University in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh. That was when the university was itself a hotbed of political activity, and when organic intellectuals were being created and refined by constant interaction with other students and teachers, activists, artists and local people. The growth of very radical left movements such as the Naxalites (now Maoists) was counterbalanced by attempts by the police and state authorities to contain them through blatantly repressive measures.

In the early 1980s, Balagopal along with the eminent lawyer Kannabiran set up the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) which took up cases of fake encounters and unlawful detainment of often innocent people. His involvement in such activity grew to such an extent that he left his academic job and devoted himself full-time to human rights work. He even took up the study of law, so as to be able to practice in court and defend those who had been unfairly accused. He argued hundreds of such cases, usually taking no money from his mostly poor clients.

But by then he was already uncomfortable with what he saw as the one-sided approach of the APCLC, which was largely focused on state repression rather than the violence wreaked by the Maoists which was often equally if not more destructive and irrational. He broke away from the APCLC and created a new group, the Human Rights Forum, and such was his moral authority that a large number of activists from across the state joined him.

The Human Rights Forum continued and expanded the work to cover not only victims of police abuse but also those terrorised by the Maoists, victims of caste violence, those displaced by infrastructure development and the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), and tribal families who were being denied their land rights. There were endless legal cases and almost constant pressures. But Balagopal was indefatigable in his energy and unflagging in his commitment.

He was extremely disparaging of the violent tactics of the Maoists, which he saw as counterproductive, even as he continued to point to human rights violations by the state government. He therefore earned the disapproval of both sides, achieving the distinction of being kidnapped by a vigilante group suspected of having links with the police, as well as being criticised by the Maoists. This attitude towards

violence did not mean that he was unaware of the complexity of the issue. A recent article of his ("Beyond violence and non-violence") noted that the attraction of violence arises from the difficulty? And even marked lack of success of making the state pull back on any major policy in any major sphere through the standard peaceful means of protest. But he also recognised that localised violence did not achieve much either, other than perhaps altering some local socio-political power structures. Indeed, he noted that it was surprising, in more than four decades of the Naxal movement, how little it has been able to stall or reverse in terms of major policies. According to him, this is partly because "inflicting major political defeats or reversing trends of unequal or destructive development is not on their agenda. Yet it is also true that even if they tried they would not know how to go about stalling such decisions or forces. To put it simply, you can hold a gun to a landlord's head but SEZ or the Indo-US nuclear deal has no head to put a gun to".

This was not the only problem with violence that he identified: perhaps an even greater issue is that it is necessarily crude and blunt, whereas the intelligent exercise of power is subtle, as is capitalist rationality in general. To fight these requires equal or greater subtlety, as well as intelligence and different and more creative strategies of mobilisation and agitation. Of course various features combine to make strong and peaceful mobilisation difficult and therefore "tempts honest activists to look for short cuts, ranging from armed action to public interest litigations. But there are no short cuts".