

THE COLD WHITE LIGHT OF TRUTH HAS JUST GONE OUT

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When you grow up in Hyderabad, there are shadows that you grow up under. These are shadows that nurture you – give you the courage. First, Balagopal was a phenomena. We heard about him. Never saw him. In some part because he was in Warangal, not Hyderabad. That's where he began to be known, politically. A mathematics lecturer, who was deeply committed to revolution. His writings began appearing in the press and the incisiveness of each word he wrote was striking. He never minced words. There was a clarity in his writing – especially his early writings — that was absolutely rare – a kind of illuminative capacity so well described by the Brechtian idea of “the cold white light” of truth. That was Balagopal.

Fiercely honest. Armed with the toolbox of Marxist theory that he had mastered even as he mastered Stochastic Environments, he taught many of us to think. By the mid 1980s, the legend was visible In the making. As the General Secretary of the APCLC, he guided the organization through the severe period when the NTR government had mounted an all out attack against Peoples War. Balagopal himself was arrested under TADA in the mid 1980s on trumped up charges of murdering a sub inspector. The repression was so great that there was a choice to be made and he did it without fear or furore. He gave up his professorship and moved full time into politics.

When he decided to distance himself from the Naxalite movement, it was something that came from an intense period of self reflection. His critical essays that signalled his departure and a new beginning were incisive and moved a generation into thinking about the future of left politics in Andhra, if not in India. The mathematics professor turned himself into a lawyer – and he was there at the service of the people.

Balagopal was not a friend. His reticence made it difficult to judge what he thought of you. He was not a mentor for he said little. He offered no personal

advice. He just told you things as he saw them – not pushing you one way or the other. And yet, I can say, that there hasn't been a stretch of time of any significance in my life, when I haven't thought about him.

Every few weeks, something would happen and I would think of something he had written, something he had said, something about the way he led his life. In the wake of Babri Masjid, he wrote a piece in EPW that even today comes to mind – whole paragraphs from it. I think it was that early moment of neo liberalism in India – and here I was reading an article on communal strife and came out feeling that the future of capitalism in India had just been mapped. There have been moments of deep political confusion over the last decade, and often at those moments, I would ask myself – “so what would be Balagopal's analysis of this?” I would search to see if he has written anything recently – reading him, brought back clarity and a resolve.

A few years ago I met him consistently over the period of several months. I needed some advice on the legal twists that a campaign had taken and I would go to visit him. Each time I would go to meet him; I would walk in with some trepidation: “Will I be disturbing him from some more important work?” because he was always at it – never off. “Will he talk much?” I would ask myself. And then, I felt, I had discovered a secret. I began to see him just after he returned home from court. He would be home alone with his young cricket crazy son. Prabhatha would be lighting up the apartment with a rapid fire series of transformations from one cricketing persona to another. Vasanthalakshmi, his wife, he knew, would come home soon from her day at work as a journalist. And he would cook dinner. Something, I felt, was different about him when was cutting vegetables. He would talk more freely suddenly, in the context of that moment where he was just involved in caring for those immediately around him. After that I would joke with people. “If you want Balagopal to talk, get him when he is cooking” I would say and laugh. He was not a friend. He was not a mentor. But he was simply put – an inspiration and a compass – like I have not known.

And how is it, that many like me saw him this way. He started out as a beacon whose very stature as a teller of truth gave us courage. Even after he moved away from the Naxalite movement, his stature only grew. The sheer breadth of work he did made him that bearer of crystalline truth. He not only wrote for the popular press. He not only practiced law. He not only contributed theoretical writings to

journals. He not only spoke at numerous public events. He not only served on fact finding teams and gave testimony. He did all this and more. Even with the rigorous schedule through the week, his weekends were always fixed.

He was out. Visiting this jilla or that village, this struggle or that community. There was rarely a weekend when he stayed home. It was popular knowledge in left circles in Hyderabad that if you wanted to see Balagopal you had to do it during the week, for come the weekend, he would board a bus and head out. This summer in Hyderabad, on a couple of occasions, I was supposed to go with him and a few others to visit different SEZ and other land struggles. Once to Medak, another time to the open cast mines in Karimnagar. Both times I missed the trip and I wonder now, what else I would have gained from a man who has already given me so much, if I had been there.

I just spoke with a friend, who had seen him just yesterday morning – Gita. Little did she know that it was the last she would see of him. He had agreed, sometime ago, to translate the book “Curfewed Nights” on Kashmir by Basharat Peer into Telugu. “How come you are not pestering me about it?” he asked Gita, the wry smile across his face. It was all important to him. Kashmir or Polavaram, Chhattisgarh or Polepally.

The cold white light of truth that guided several generations has just gone out.