

THE ETHICAL CRITIC

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I FIRST MET Balagopal in 1986 when I invited him to speak at the screening of an Uruguayan film called *The Eyes of the Birds* at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. The film's title referred to a painting made by a child for her incarcerated father. It had a tree with bright specks on it. The guards had confiscated her earlier painting because it contained birds: symbols of freedom. The child then told her father that the bright specks on the tree were the eyes of the birds!

Balagopal was then in virtual exile in his own country. He had been forced to abandon his first love – teaching mathematics. Balagopal had joined Kakatiya University as a lecturer in 1982, soon becoming involved with civil liberties work. In 1985, the Andhra Pradesh police took out a warrant against him for the murder of a police sub-inspector. He was then jailed for two months under the National Security Act. The charges didn't stick, but it was no longer safe for Balagopal in Warangal, where activists were soft targets for unidentified gunmen.

Balagopal had begun writing about police repression in Telangana in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1982, around the same time that he became general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC). He would travel to remote places by night bus to investigate police atrocities. Once he had the facts, he would wash the clothes on his back, put them out to dry and type his report at the nearest typewriter. He would then put his clothes back on and go to the newspaper offices to deliver the press statements. Reporters swore that his press conferences were the only ones that had anything worth reporting, though no chai and samosas were served there.

He was a man of economy. His extraordinary focus and single-mindedness intimidated most people and concealed his amicable nature. His passion for haleem during Ramzan and biscuits from the bakery near his house in Red Hills, the

endless cups of chai and the hours spent playing with his son: these were the few windows into Balagopal's ordinary human side.

Balagopal spent 26 years laying bare, with surgical precision, the manner in which violence impedes democracy in India, especially in Kashmir, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. In the 1980s he focused on exposing state violence. By the mid-1990s, when he broke away from the APCLC to form the Human Rights Forum, his critique had expanded to include radical violence. He later became a lawyer, arguing several cases on 'encounter killings'. As the youngest member of the Committee of Concerned Citizens, which mediated between Maoists and the AP government in 2004, I looked to Balagopal for clarity and courage and learnt from him to push thought and action to their limits.

One afternoon in 1998 my wife and I were at Balagopal's house. He was busy pounding away at his Remington and his six-year-old son Ajooba was equally engrossed in his 'work'. He was conducting an animated conversation in a make believe courtroom peopled by toy cars. One car was the big man named 'Your honour'. A thief was being tried. A policeman sent out to fetch his parents barked, "Thief's parents! Come inside." Here, Ajooba raised his voice to protest, "Your honour, this is wrong. The parents are already suffering because their son will be put in prison. It is unfair to hurt them more. Tell the policeman to stop." If more people could master the concept of ethical conduct that the child absorbed from his father, we can be sure that the eyes of the birds will shine even in the darkest hours.

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