

A Memory to be Lived

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In one of my last conversations with Balagopal, in reply to my query about what it has been like building the Human Rights Forum (HRF), as they completed 10 years, he replied that though the organisation had a presence in most of the districts of Andhra Pradesh, there was generally a decline of idealism. There was an unwillingness to launch and nurture struggles. In a more reflective mood, he later added, for movements to survive, we need some degree of innocence. It is this innocence that Balagopal seems to have well preserved with integrity, for himself. He had the rare courage of giving an issue all he had, yet make a starkly realist reading of what it is turning out to be.

The fact was that the degree of his own involvement with an issue or an organisation or a movement in no identifiable measure influenced his analysis. He combined a keen intellectual inquisitiveness, patient enough to bear with the open-endedness and the fluidity of ideas, and ideals that any theorist requires, with a single-mindedness of an activist. He combined a resolve to walk all the way in search of that distant goal, with an anxiety to achieve what is best possible in the here and now of politics; he seemed to have overcome that enduring gap in radical protest politics between following the trails of the unknown or yet-to-be-known with the unflinching commitment to one's own beliefs; he lived what he talked; he combined the distant public with the most intimate of personal; he seemed to have practised the insurmountable of contradictions with élan, an ease that almost made it invisible, that one would certainly miss unless one keenly followed the man himself.

Source of Inexhaustible Energy

What made Balagopal more than the civil rights activist that the world knows is a complexity that has to be caringly peeled out from the reams that he tucked in, within himself, so that he did not stand

out, but looked as ordinary as is possible. His relentless pursuit of this ordinariness that did not come to him naturally revealed to the world as much perhaps as it also hid. I had once asked him, as if he had a key to the world tucked within: "Where do you get these inexhaustible energies from?" only to be greeted with a smile that is difficult to forget. A smile that warmly welcomed you to live it for yourself. This invite, seems to very briefly speak of a self that was intractably inverting the social logic as we know it.

He was, perhaps, attempting to combine a passion for details with an informed detachment; to contribute to a process without the self itself requisitioning anything from it. The effort itself carried the traces of the dispensability, and as much of a struggle not to become a site but amorphous enough so that our attention remained on the task next on hand. His anxiety was to formidably deal with power in all its forms without giving it the slightest opportunity to consolidate around himself. He seemed to have internalised this till it came naturally to him. He lived this in all its spatial and temporal dimensions. His attitude to suffering made it look that it can be felt differently. His unwillingness to slow down was as much about his concern for the growing forms of violence, from state initiated to the more insidious ones, as it was about making sure of the absent self that seemed to be patiently waiting to make a comeback, just in case. Practice, in its most elementary sense for him meant this double-edged effort that can only but be tireless and incessant.

His mission of unsettling the darkest sides of power was invariably combined and carefully crafted with the most finest, intimate and affable of human selves. He once wrote, "to condemn oppression is to condemn at least a little bit of oneself".

Balagopal believed that "an exclusively critical attitude is useless as a guide for any transformative – as distinct from critical – activity excepting the seizure of power by force". For himself he reserved

the most stringent of standards. He was at his virulent best in offering scathing criticism when the odds were high and consequences grave. The willingness to pay the price was alone capable of absolving one from the negativity (and the accompanying self) hidden in the act of criticism, resonating a classical Gandhian moment. He was all alone in the forefront in naming police officers in Andhra Pradesh involved in extra-judicial violence and in demanding that murder charges be framed against them, in pointing to the hidden role of mafia, mercenaries appointed by the police, and their nexus with land mafia.

He wrote some of his masterpieces against Chandrababu Naidu and Y S Rajashekar Reddy, when they were riding high on power, before the dust had settled and the powers that be looked capable of unleashing the worst, with the added possibility of escaping under the cover of the din. The fear of the possibility of his death in the most unnoticed of fashions was something that gripped me on many occasions, as much due to the kind of "Constitutional State" that we have, as because of his very own resolved attitude towards death, almost matter of fact and nonchalant.

The best of his dark humour was pristinely kept for this. He once told us he had kept a scenic place over the Krishna river from where he would jump to death, if he were to contract a terminal disease (knowing well that his lifestyle would guarantee him nothing). His liberation from the tyranny that death can unleash on the living was part of his being, and complete. The script of his liberation was deeply aware of the momentariness and transient nature of the present as part of the long duree of history that had the capacity to eerily equalise everything. His amiable willingness to stand alone when needed and be lost in the background was so easy in his world that it almost merited no attention. Being part of mass movements and leading an untiring public life, he seemed to have yet managed to enjoy the spaciousness of anonymity, impatient with adulations and dodging image traps, often amused at the self-propelling tendencies and instrumental attitudes that look legitimate since the ends we fought for were so ideal, so

much a part of the organisational culture all around us. In being careful not to trespass into a space where others could grow, learn and think for themselves, he often withdrew in order to stand together rather than imagining himself standing for others. Critical engagement, he believed, was more dignifying than the consensus of patronage. In retrospect one feels, radical beliefs are as much a part of the collective social context we construct as is an individual effort that needs to set its own norms that it would unfailingly follow, independent of the consequences it invited. It seems to be imperative to internalise at least some norms and practice them for themselves, otherwise there seems to be no known way of translating the social and sustaining it at the level of the individual.

Mannerisms

Balagopal seemed to have believed that certain forms of solitariness went beyond the bourgeois notions of privacy, and without a self that was resolved with itself, its promise to be part of the long march of radical protest would more often than not end abruptly and inexplicably, leaving more despair and cynicism than it would be otherwise. In a society plagued by relations of patronage and dependence on leadership that is expansive enough to reduce the bulk of us into legitimately mute spectators his was a demeanour that was almost mistaken for being indifferent. There was a sense of brevity and minimality to the way he did things, the way he flung his arms around himself while making the most pungent of comments, and the way he delivered his public lectures, and we are told the way he argued his cases in the court. People often very strangely felt intimate and intimidated, elated and neglected in a single moment friendship and togetherness with him was not constrained by mutuality and ties of obligation but enriched by compassion for those not known to you. A compassion that was not based on a contract but one that surrounded you to secure your dignity, that stayed with you, and within you. His abstruse mannerisms were a comment on the need to look for new ways of being.

The inverted and invisible world of

Balagopal had everything to do, and was inextricably linked, to his politics and growing ethical concerns about those politics. It was not a practice that glorified sacrifice but it was indeed a sacrifice that glorified practice. A practice that believed that unless the complexities of structures are not reduced to simple and knowable values they not only fail to become part of the manifold experiences and lived practices, but create a distant public, only to reappear as opaque structures that wield insurmountable power.

Balagopal punctured the political with the personal and the intimate, and the latter with simplicity and modesty. He was known to leave appointments with ministers if they failed to keep their time and kept you waiting if he had to tend to his son. He would have plenty of jokes about himself, his compatriots, and especially, about those with a “cult status” in public life; he would have the keenest eye for detail when you expected it the least. In this mosaic, he championed new causes where the old did not suffice; sensed the need to protect what has been achieved (language of rights, rule of law, constitutions that promise social justice, among others), and fostered all that is fascinating and fragile including lifestyles, and culture.

I still vividly remember his trip to Kolkata when I had invited him to come and visit the university I was then working at. Soon after his talk, he left for a long walk for about four hours since he liked the leisurely conversations at public places in the city (as against his staunch dislike for Delhi, where he said he could not stay for more than a day since everything was loud and in-your-face!), it was quite something for someone who was himself impatient with long conversations. It is as important to cherish what is good here and now, as it is to struggle against that the ugly impoverishment all around us. Otherwise, struggles themselves could suffer the poverty of positive energy needed for rebuilding themselves. He believed that “this rebuilding has wrongly been seen as a direct continuation of the struggle against injustice. This notion that the force that is necessary to destroy unjust social structures will by itself lead to the reconstruction of society on a just basis...has been sufficiently

proved an illusion by the happenings of this century”.

Abrupt Life, Abrupt Departure

Balagopal, as in life, made his point in the way he left. His death was abrupt and his task seemed incomplete (if at all there can be anything complete for a life such as this). And the grief undoubtedly tough to overcome for a long time to come. But in grief I was not alone, nor was it restricted to the organisations and individuals he interacted with in the course of his activities, not even limited to the scores of groups and communities that got ameliorated through his tireless activism. It poignantly seemed to have engulfed all those who hardly knew and had only heard of him. It was intriguing to see friends who otherwise seemed to have not known him personally, complain of a loss that was inexplicable even to them. Individuals from various walks of life, who have written to Telugu dailies over the last week, shared the way their lives and world around them had come to a standstill. As Velcheru Narayan Rao wrote, “there seemed to be utter darkness in broad day light”. Balagopal, so to say, had no constituency, though he had politics. This sense of loss seems to be as much for what he did as the way he did. His memory needs to be lived over and over. The world that was within him is now ours, and is the world we need to build. While radical politics will have to pause and look to intensely learn from the man, his life and his philosophy, scores of struggles need to move quickly in order to find ways of suspending all instrumental attitudes, sectarian claims and an undue privileging of ends over means, for he demonstrated that it is possible to do things differently.

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