

## **BIDDING ADIEU TO A COMRADE**

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MY first encounter with K. Balagopal (who passed away on October 8) was on the pages of Economic and Political Weekly. Sometime in 1980, in that journal I had done a review of the recently published *The Mandate of Heaven* by Nigel Harris, where I expressed the view that for the sake of survival Mao prioritized the need for constructing a nation state (with all its coercive features) over the basic objective of equitable distribution of resources, workers' control over industries, and a democratic and egalitarian society, thus leading to the degeneration of the Chinese communist model. Soon after, I was assailed by a rejoinder in EPW which upheld the Maoist perspective – with a lot of impassioned and empirical arguments. The writer was K. Balagopal. I met him sometime later, in New Delhi, and was struck by his unusual ability to combine objective studies at the micro level with masterly theoretical conceptualization at the macro plane.

It was this combination of abilities that enabled Balagopal to emerge as an outstanding leader in the civil liberties movement in India. Whether as the general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), or as a member of any fact finding mission investigating into police brutalities in some other parts of India, or as a speaker at national conferences on human rights, or as a lawyer (during the last one decade) demanding punishment for the perpetrators of 'encounter killings' – Balagopal indefatigably campaigned for the rights of the poor and the oppressed.

What made him invaluable to the Indian civil liberties movement was the courage of his honesty, run through by a vein of rational skepticism. The courage stood him in good stead during the two distinct phases of his involvement in the civil liberties movement – from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, and from 1998 onwards. His skepticism was not of a passive pessimistic nature, but rooted rather to that favourite dictum of Marx – *de omnibus dubitandum* (doubt everything) – which required courageous challenging of prevalent dogmas and practices. It also

often lent a touch of sarcasm to his presentations which infused life into what otherwise would have degenerated into dreary arguments.

Balagopal was steadfastly honest in both the different phases of his involvement that I referred to above. During the 1980s and early 1990s, politically committed to their cause, he remained consistent in defending the PWG (People's War Group – the Naxalite organization in Andhra Pradesh), and often approved of some of their practices (which some of us in the national civil liberties movement took exception to). An equally frank self-introspection led him towards the end of the 1990s to question the methods of the PWG, and break away from the APCLC, which he headed at the beginning), since it remained silent on the violation of human rights by the PWG. In 1998, with a few friends, he set up the Human Rights Forum in Andhra Pradesh through which he initiated a regular process of investigation into rights violations – both by the state and the Maoists. Quite predictably, he invited upon himself persecution by the state and abuses from his erstwhile comrades in the CPI(Maoist).

The image of Balagopal as a human rights champion often tends to overshadow another role of his – that of an academic. He taught mathematics at Kakatiya University in Warangal for four years. Apart from introducing D.D. Kosambi to Telugu readers, he wrote extensively in Telugu on literature and history. He made a major contribution to the literature on the political economy of Andhra Pradesh with a special focus on the changing class relations in the state's agrarian scene. His deep concern for the oppressed was not limited to their economic distress, but also their intellectual growth. In one of his last commentaries on the state repression of the Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh, he cried out – '...many if not all of the lives that are being lost at the hands of the police... are lives that the oppressed can ill-afford to lose. They are the organic leaders of the class, who have adopted a political path of their choice. ..It is not every day that the oppressed produce such elements from amongst themselves... The daily loss of such persons is a sacrifice the oppressed cannot be called upon to put up with indefinitely'.

Let me join many others, and clench my feeble fingers into a Red Salute to a departed comrade.