

REMINISCING THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF BALAGOPAL

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This condolence note for K. Balagopal, the eminent human rights activist who expired at the age of 57 from a cardiac arrest on October 8, 2009, is motivated by the feeling that the political man in Balagopal is often given a short shrift.

As with Marx, Balagopal had also undergone an epistemological break in 1993. So we had two Balagopals: the early Balagopal, the Marxist-Leninist who was an advocate of 'new democratic revolution', and the late Balagopal, who turned a 'liberal humanist'. I knew only the late Balagopal since 1994, politically, not personally.

The early Balagopal was influenced by the students involved in radical politics at Kakatiya University, Warangal in the 1980s while he was a teacher of Mathematics there. So he used to admit that his students themselves were his teachers. He gave up his secure job and became a people's lawyer and a democratic rights activist. Apparently, he came to be attracted to theoretical Marxism through an uncommon route, that is, through D D Kosambi's critique of the Bhagawat Gita. Balagopal himself had to bear the brunt of police atrocities that he opposed throughout his life. A serious assault on him by plainclothesmen in February 1992 in Khammam district soon after his arrest and release by the police was a well-known instance.

What was the social context of the shift in the ideological horizon of an intellectual like Balagopal? The romantic, idealistic phase of the Naxalite movement was largely over. The Naxalite/Maoist movement was now in an emergent state and as all states do, it 'arrogates to itself the legitimate monopoly of violence in society', as Leon Trotsky, the Marxist, had conceptualised and Max Weber, the liberal, had agreed with him. The mass base of the movement changed as revolutionary ideas percolated down to the lowest classes, and those hailing from the educated urban middle class sections and intelligentsia were unable to cope with the heightened levels of state repression. It is rightly said that at every

significant stage of a political movement, there are bound to be certain prominent drop-outs.

Balagopal pressed for the independence of the line of human rights movements which, he argued, should have autonomy from the militant people's movements.

Around 1999-2000, during a public talk by him in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), he had toed the line of identity politics by a multiplicity of non-class social groups. But he was open to criticisms from the floor, including the one from me that the issue of primacy among social contradictions and the notion of totality were completely sidelined in this perspective. Later on, we came to hear that he mellowed down his position by becoming an ardent critic of the lack of autonomy from the revolutionary party of the mass organisations, such as of women's organisations, anti-caste mass fronts, students' fronts etc.

Around 1999-2000, we came to access Balagopal's Telugu writing on the dark facets (cheekati konaalu) of the Naxalite movement, that is, on dundudukku (dadagiri/excesses) by the Naxalite movement, allegedly against the very social base they represent. The expression, 'cheekati konaalu' was much resented by many activists in the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh. This writing was translated to two of us by my co-activist with the Democratic Students Union (DSU) in the JNU. Subsequently, the translator himself gave me in Telugu the party publication refuting all these charges one by one and he admitted that these charges have been somewhat convincingly answered. The late Balagopal tended to view the violence by the neo-liberal State and that by the resistance movements (such as the killing of 'informers') on the same plane. In any case, issues related to the universal danger of bureaucratisation of people's movements have been brought to the fore by Balagopal. It is known how the Communist Parties in the erstwhile Soviet Union and China, which were supposed to be the vanguard of people's struggles, turned against their own social base and became anti-people in course of time. Notably, Balagopal spoke about a Communist Party which had not yet come to state power.

In 1993, the shift in perspective envisaged by Balagopal for the civil and democratic rights movement followed from his description of the dark facets of the Naxalite movement: He argued that playing a mediatory role between the state and the militant rights-based movements, the "human rights" movement should

try to expand the democratic space in society. He does not envisage a systemic change. Whereas the character of the system is determined by the coalition of classes that wield and exercise power, Balagopal's perspective does not seek to dislodge the coalition of classes in power nor does it visualise an overhauling of the system in its totality.

He had repeated his "central thesis" even in his talk at India Islamic Centre in New Delhi on August 4, 2009, that is, in the meeting with the key slogan, "Stop Militarisation of Democratic Space": Militant movements from the Maoist/Naxalite movement to the nationality movements of Kashmir and the North-East of India kill mostly those who belong to their own social base than their enemy forces. Further, he made a sharp - rather mathematical - distinction between the Maoist movement as a movement representing the aspirations of deprived sections of people on the one hand with the Maoist movement as a movement fighting for state power, on the other. He supported the former and disowned the latter. He did not seem to believe that capturing state power could be among the genuine aspirations of the downtrodden. He was, however, consistent in defending revolutionary and nationality movements in our country against their containment through a purely militaristic approach, as he did during this meeting as well. Speaking of the Maoist movement he said: 'The state should not deal with an issue arising out of poverty and deprivation from merely a militaristic angle.' The Human Rights Forum which he initiated after quitting the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) was consistent in upholding the rights of the human person from Telengana and Chhattisgarh to Kashmir and the North-East of our country.

On the corridors of the India Islamic Centre in New Delhi on August 4, I asked him if the overall level of violence does not come down when there is a rights-based political movement (as argued by Prof Haragopal and others). He asked me to clarify and I said that when there is no such political movement, there is, often a lot of violence by mafia elements, a lot of social violence against those at the lowest rungs of the social ladder like Dalits, Adivasis, etc. He said it is very questionable and shot back: 'What happens when the movement withdraws from a region?' I tried arguing with him that this may be considered only as the specific situation in Telangana today. He gave me a prejudiced look and was not willing to discuss it further. He went away saying: 'Not now; may be some other time.'

Unfortunately, I cannot now look forward to having the pleasure of a lively discussion with him anymore.

After the same meeting on August 4, I also overheard him saying that high-flying intellectuals do not often have the necessary touch with the ground reality; their views are often generated through google searches. As a human rights activist, he always made it a point that his analysis and his opinions were well-grounded on the concrete situations of the day. His write-ups in the Economic and Political Weekly should bear sufficient testimony to this.

An incident in early 1996 at the JNU may be recalled. A public meeting on Kashmir with respectable speakers like the late V.M. Tarkunde was blocked by a frontal organisation of the ABVP and there was serious tension on the campus. At night, there was a talk by Balagopal at Ganga dhaba. He said that the nation is not just the map; it is primarily its people. He gave graphic descriptions of the human rights violations indulged in by the Indian security forces in Kashmir. The ABVP was put completely on the defensive and some of them, who were howling him down during the whole of his talk, were chased away by students after a passionate speech by the next speaker, late Chandrasekhar Prasad, the then JNU Students Union President.

To illustrate the high intellectual calibre of Balagopal as a pro-people intellectual, we paraphrase something from his writing on the cultural basis of the Hindutva movement in our country:

At the cultural level, there are myriad resentments in a society like India. Someone may enjoy privileges in some respect or the other, however lowly he/she may be in relation to the totality of the system. This becomes the basis for harbouring “a little enemy of equality” in each of us. In the absence of a thoughtful political response from the democratic forces, these resentments/frustrations could create a popular base for Hindutva fascism in our country. The “core world-view” of Hindutva has “a pre-ordained structure of differential status and privileges” and the concept of dharma (literally meaning, duty) consists of “living by the rules that govern that location”. So Hindutva becomes attractive to all those who are sick and tired of the claims of the underprivileged for equity and justice. (K. Balagopal 1993: “Why did December 6, 1992 Happen?” in Communalism: Towards a Democratic Perspective, All India Peoples Resistance Forum, New Delhi, December, pp. 24-25)

We do believe that it is in the best interests of radical transformation and the people of our country that there is a dialectical appropriation/rejection of the political line of Balagopal rather than letting this line pass away with him. The mainstream media has joined the state in India in a conspiracy of silence on the loss of this highly regarded public intellectual. Indeed, his demise is an untimely loss in the days of state-sponsored counter-insurgency operations like Salwa Judum and when the neo-liberal state in India, presided over by the likes of Chidambaram, is increasingly pursuing a militaristic line of containment of the Maoist movement and any other democratic dissent, whenever an opportunity arises. May we join the peripheral voices that pay homage to Balagopal who has earned our respect by espousing the genuine democratic aspirations of the people in our country?

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