

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE NEO LIBERAL ERA

K. BALAGOPAL: FROM APCLC TO HRF

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By the time I joined as a member of the city unit of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee in 1995, K.Balagopal was already a legend among the progressive students of the Hyderabad University. Whereas his writings in Economic and Political Weekly were guideposts in forming one's early political perspective, his interventions in the Telugu public debates on literature, movements, history or 'human nature' were topics of passionate debate among us. His diligent work in civil liberties movement, simple life style and insightful writings were a constant source of inspiration. It would not be an exaggeration to say that for a considerable number of Telugu speaking progressive students from rural and semi urban areas from Telangana, real political practice often boiled down to two options – to become a part of the ML movement in some way or take the next best option to at least join the civil liberties movement! I chose the latter and worked in APCLC and later in HRF till 2002. Situated as I was in the thick of post-Mandal, post-Masjid political debates and fresh from looking at Telugu cinema from a feminist perspective for an M.Phil, APCLC's receptiveness to issues of caste and gender was particularly appealing. Apart from taking a pro-Mandal commission stand, it had already incorporated 'violence against women' into its regular activity. The critiques by Dalit movement and the feminist movement in Andhra, while causing considerable turbulence within APCLC, managed to enter the realm of its core activity. Theoretically, it meant that 'non-state violence' by the family and civil society also constituted violation of rights, alongside state violence. Swechcha, APCLC's monthly magazine contained several reports of investigations into incidents of violence against Dalits and women all over the state, along with reports of custodial deaths and fake encounters. By that time, U.Vindhya, with the help of Visakhapatnam unit had brought out two reports on 'dowry deaths' in the state, analyzing the high court judgments in these cases. A booklet on how Brahmanism worked against the spirit of rights had also been brought out by then. K.Balagopal led the small cluster of people within the organization who welcomed

such critiques, though his own writing on the trajectories of women's entry into Maoist movements (or his critical review of *We Were Making History/Manaku Teliyani Mana Charitra*) continued to incite passionate debate in the pages of *Arunataara* and elsewhere!

The work of APCLC was not confined to the issues of violations in family, caste society or by the state. Liberalization policies had begun to affect the fate of public sector industries in Hyderabad by early 1990s. With several of them facing closure, Hyderabad unit of APCLC conducted fact-findings into these closures, meeting workers' unions, laid-off workers, visited factories and submitted memorandums to the Board of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR) that was formed to look into closures. Investigating the pollution of the river Musi that runs through the city, caused by industries surrounding Hyderabad, we got to know that the then Telugu Desam government sought to clean and beautify its surroundings by displacing the people residing alongside river Musi. A prolonged agitation ensued, with protests, dharnas, arrests, petitions in the courts, surveys of the area etc. However, the work of the Hyderabad unit was not particularly unique. Wherever there was an active district unit, local issues ranging from crop destruction by elephants to factional violence in Rayalaseema were becoming part of the civil liberties work. As the General Secretary of the organization, Balagopal not only played a great role in this expansion, but also encouraged the district unit members to write in *Swechcha*, and to bring out special publications on such issues. He constantly alerted the members to refrain from using political rhetoric in the place of analysis in speeches or in writing. He urged us to expand the activity beyond police and state violence and to work diligently, honestly. His phenomenal output, in terms of activity and writing was a source of inspiration and bench mark for many.

By mid 1990s such a 'spreading' of civil rights activity into the 'non-state' realm had already led to a debate about its priorities and focus within the organization. It came to a head with K.Balagopal's essay in *Chikati Konalu* (a book that sought to review the contribution of 30 years of ML movement in the state), that critiqued the anti-democratic violence by the ML parties in the state. It was decided that the organization would have a comprehensive discussion on its perspective, at the end of which voting was proposed to settle the following questions: should its priority be the state violence? Should it be autonomous from the political movements?

Does its autonomy mean the space to criticize their undemocratic tendencies?
What should be the agenda of an autonomous civil liberties movement?

Several senior members contributed papers for this discussion, along with a small group of women members of which I was also a part. Printed in the form of a book *Perspective pai Charcha*, these papers were distributed to all the members and district wise discussions ensued. Balagopal's paper was central to the debate. In his clear and incisive style, he argued for an autonomous human rights movement, with its central agenda as 'increasing the democratic space for the articulation of rights of people struggling with different forms of dominance'. He contended that such a movement should not only defend the rights of activists from organized political movements but also of those could not articulate their issues and suffering in the language of rights.

As APCLC had units in 23 districts, nearly 15 meetings took place with a few districts combining their discussion. Balagopal not only attended every meeting to explain his position to several angry, argumentative and hostile members who were clearly upset with what they saw as 'his abdication of Marxism'. With incredible patience and unmatched knowledge of the doings of the ML parties in the villages of Telangana he would face the members' questions and outbursts. His presence considerably tempered the tone and tenor of discussion of my group's paper seen as 'feminist'. This long debate culminated in his resignation as the General Secretary of APCLC after 15 years and the consequent formation of Human Rights Forum with 32 other members. Among these 32 members, 10 were women.

Human Rights Forum started with a clear agenda of expanding the domain of rights activity in the state. Along with violence against minorities by the Hindutva forces, it was the arena of 'development' that began to be seriously thought about. The first publication of HRF was a critique of Vision 2020, a document that Chandrababu Naidu, the darling of World Bank in AP had produced. Looking back, I think that this critique alerted the democratic movements to the urgent need to re-imagine human rights in the era of neoliberalism.

It asked three key questions.

One, what happens when every progressive agenda of the movements – gender, small peasant, caste – gets incorporated into the agenda of the government through

special schemes so that what remains is to only ask for 'implementation of these schemes?

Two, what happens when every possible natural resource in the state begins to be imagined as a source of profit –making which the state has every right to make use of in the way it likes, leaving aside the imperatives of social justice and constitutional framework of directive principles?

Three, what happens when 'public interest' gets redefined to include 'profit making' for the government and corporate capital, wherein interests of marginal farmers, users of common land and other spaces get subordinated to the interests of the former? How should one begin to think of 'human rights' in this new context?

Over the last ten years social, political and economic changes in Andhra Pradesh have proved Balagopal's suspicions (shared by others in HRF) right. HRF has begun to work closely with several local movements against 'development' projects in the state. It has begun to articulate what rights or denial of right would mean, for instance, in the context of Special economic zones, where the state and the corporate capital join forces to exert pressure that is perfectly legal. Balagopal has also written extensively about the bankruptcy of political language in articulating peoples' concerns in the state, where all the political parties largely share a consensus on development, welfare and what the people deserve. The tradition of learning from the other struggles and expanding the work of rights continues(d) to thrive.

For me, Balagopal embodies the best of democratic cultures that many movements in Andhra Pradesh have produced in the course of last thirty years. He was sensitive and diligent in documenting the suffering of ordinary people; firm, persistent and fearless in demanding their rights from the state; rational, sharp and critical in arguing with the society on behalf of the victims; open, committed and democratic in building an organizational culture. Apart from his immensely rich critical writing on literature, history, politics, movements and culture of Andhra Pradesh, his singular contribution has been to build a democratic and open human rights movement. As such he continued to inspire those of us who developed critical perspectives that are not centred on rights.

While he did not necessarily agree with the political trajectories of different movements, he worked towards incorporating their ideals into the human rights movement. Such a reflexive practice not only enabled different sections of people to enter the debate on 'universal and abstract rights' from their particular locations, but also helped in the establishment of a rich human rights culture and traditions in the state. Today, we have Saakshi, a Dalit human rights network and Civil Liberties Monitoring Committee, a Muslim civil liberties organization active in articulating and fighting for the rights of Dalits and Muslims in A.P. In a sense, it is difficult to imagine any of the contemporary democratic movements in the state that was not touched by his presence and practice.

And also to think of Balagopal outside the context of these very movements!