

Human Rights Warrior, Lal Salaam

————— Anand Teltumbde, Author and Rights Activist,
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It has been difficult for us in the civil liberties and democratic rights (CL&DR) movement to reconcile the loss of Balagopal from our midst. Balagopal has been the face of this movement in Andhra Pradesh for over three decades and its integral component beyond it. The debate that ensued over some fundamental questions he raised about the conception of human rights in APCLC that led to his eventual break with it had created tremors beyond the boundaries of Andhra Pradesh. For many of us, I included, it had come as a shock that Balagopal, who more than any of us saw and suffered the vicious face of the State, could raise those questions. Some resisted to react adversely and chose to watch but some, prompted by ideological exigency, openly voiced their criticism and antagonistically declared that Balagopal abdicated Marxism. In Andhra Pradesh, expectedly it raised a storm. If it had not been for Balagopal, whose integrity and commitment to the cause of poor and oppressed humanity could never be questioned by even his worst detractor, it would have been simply devastating. But Balagopal not only withstood it all with his rocklike conviction but went ahead actualising it by forming, along with like-minded colleagues in the rights movement, the Human Rights Forum in 1998 and demonstrated that his commitment to CL&DR was unshakable.

When Balagopal studied in the REC, Warangal, I was a student of Engineering in VRCE, Nagpur and had a fair amount of connection with the radical student politics in the former. I however had not heard of him. The first time that I did was through some friends from Warangal when I was in IIM, Ahmedabad in 1980. I think we first met in 1984 at Hyderabad when he was already the general secretary of APCLC. It was he who reminded me of this meeting when we met years later in Bombay. Thereafter, we kept on meeting all over. After his dissociation with APCLC, there was a big gap in this although I occasionally called him up whenever I learnt about his controversial writings in the Telugu Press. The last year sort of compensated it, bringing us together thrice: first for the fact finding into the Hindutva assault on Christians of Kandhamal and in South Karnataka, second, for the meeting on political prisoners in Bombay and third for the observance of the 10th foundation day of the HRF, for which he had especially invited me to Warangal. Even after a gap of a decade, I found him the same Balagopal: intense, engrossed, austere, shy, serious and simple. He appeared as though over the last thirty years he did not even change his shirt and pants.

When we worked with Navjavan Bharat Sabha, we were immensely inspired by the Andhra Pradesh movement, which came alive through Balagopal's writings in EPW more than anything else. He represented the intellectual facet of this movement, as did Gaddar, its cultural and Varavara Rao, its literary. His incisive analyses of events, fearless exposes of the State's misdoings, and scathing commentary on the socio-political dynamics were as awe inspiring as his method of operating as a one-man army daring the might of the vicious State. He moved all over AP armed with a diary and a pen under the live threat of a police encounter, following the trail of human rights violations. Any information on any such happening propelled Balagopal to catch the next bus to the nearby place and disappear for days around the countryside facing the wrath of both the feudal forces and the police. He would work continuously for hours and days together until the task was complete, charged up only with cups

of tea and occasionally some food. Every report that he wrote with mathematical precision, robust logic and strong conviction challenged the establishment, perhaps more than the Naxalite guns.

We used to genuinely worry about him those days. Indeed, he was arrested several times by the AP police. He was attacked by ABVP activists in Karimnagar district 1984, kidnapped by the Khammam police in 1989, brutally attacked in Kothagudem in 1991 and even mauled in the presence of the National Human Rights Commission in 1993. None of this however deterred him from his resolve to fight for the rights of the struggling people. He defeated the establishment by refusing to pause even for a day. While talking to the media after being released by his police-kidnappers, he asked journalists to focus on the repression being unleashed on rural youth, rather than bother about him. When he was arrested in the Yadagiri Reddy murder case and slapped with charges under section 3 of the dreaded TADA, I remember, P A Sebastian of the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) had written a piece in the EPW (7 Dec. 1985) apprehending that he could well be hanged by the State. Such were the times in Andhra Pradesh and such was the concern for him from his friends. Balagopal carried through those tumultuous times courageously and tirelessly as the virtual spokesman of the PWG for the intellectual audience. He wrote prolifically and competently defending the PWG. His early writings in *EPW* and their compilation edited by Hargopal published in 1988 stand testimony for his combatant style in the best Marxist tradition.

Therefore, when Balagopal raised the question of human right violations by the PWG, it came as a bolt out of the blue for everyone who knew him. He began questioning the arbitrary acts, intimidation, extortion, murders, kidnapping, etc. indulged in by the PWG in the name of class struggle. Nobody could deny that such aberrations did take place or that they were not regrettable. In fact, on some occasions, that party itself had issued proactive

apologies for them. Nonetheless, it was difficult to swallow the logic that seemed to equate the crime of the State which committed it with absolute impunity as its legitimate right and the crime that it engendered in the process of countering it by its victims. When Balagopal argued that the Naxalites also committed violations of human rights, he was effectively propounding the legalistic notion of human rights, whereas the Naxalite struggle subsumed the notion of human rights based on justice, which he himself had practiced until then. There was this conceptual disconnect in the debate that ensued. The legalistic notion of rights, as the theory goes, essentially entails preservation of status quo whereas the latter, based on justice, is essentially transformative. It needs to be understood that rights have the potential to be used subversively or in defence of the status quo; they can be conservative or they can be revolutionary. They are thus essentially political; the depoliticized version of rights actually denudes them of their revolutionary prowess. It was in 1993 I think, that I had a brief telephonic chat with him to enquire about the controversy and had pleaded thus in the process. He listened quietly for a while and said that he would send me the translation of his Telugu article that was at the root of this debate.

While this differentiation of notions of rights could resolve the issue at a conceptual level, the issue raised by Balagopal may be seen as embedding larger dimension of weltanschauung of the movement. In the areas of its operation, the revolutionary party needs to assume responsibilities of the post-revolutionary incipient State, which is different from the State it is fighting against, and hence reassuring to the people that they should support the revolution. The notion of human rights based on justice is intrinsic to its fabric, which is predicated on expanding the democratic spaces within its domain. While class struggle cannot obviate violence, its predisposition to it reflected through excessive reliance on militarist strategy is erosive of these spaces, and hence injurious to its long term goals. I am not sure whether Balagopal meant this but in its revolutionary interests the PWG could proactively internalize this meaning for itself.

Unfortunately, its self-righteous polemical disposal of the issue did not reflect this attitude.

The other issue of autonomy for the CL&DR organisations raised by Balagopal was more ticklish than the issue of violence. At the broader plane there cannot be dispute about its desirability as a strategic tool for a revolutionary party for preparing a broad mass base for itself. There is an obvious dilemma however: while the revolutionary party might seed its formation, the mass organisation could develop its own politics, which could be contrary to its own. This dilemma is resolved invariably by exercising control at the level of its structure itself. It blocks the natural growth of mass organisation and defeats its basic objective of developing a mass base and thence an important feedback mechanism for the party. The mass organisation therefore should be left to grow organically. The anxiety to have close control betrays the lack of confidence of party in its own politics. If its politics is useful for the masses, as it believes it is, it must be able to communicate it in a normal mass way. While this could be said in general, what prompted Balagopal to raise a specific issue of autonomy of APCLC is not known.

The fallout of the debate has however been characteristically unhealthy. Without focusing on the issues at hand, the labels got invoked and brandied. He was immediately accused of abdicating Marxism. After his more than decade long study and practice of Marxism, Balagopal reportedly expressed doubt about the adequacy of Marxist theory. To me, it is intrinsic to Marxist process to doubt and correct, as per the Marx's favourite dictum - *de omnibus dubitandum* (doubt everything). Marxism is not a fossilized creed. If it is to be kept alive as a live science of societal change, the Marxists need to constantly challenge prevalent theory and practice. So long as one believes in desirability of changing the world for majority of people and sincerely strives for it, these labels really do not count. Many self-proclaimed Marxists would disqualify to be 'Marxists' and many who would

not call themselves one, may indeed be true 'Marxists'. The over-use of such simplistic labels have only alienated people and degraded Marxism to be just another creed. It is only through the process of continual self review and criticism, that Marxism could be a live theory. If Balagopal experienced problems with Marxism, he could have been encouraged to explicate those problem areas and ways to overcome them. May be, he could make a valid contribution in that sphere. But declaring that he was no more a Marxist, he was easily transformed into the 'other', making it bliss to the enemy camp. The State did rejoice at these sad developments, as seen in the AP police buying off his writings critical of the PWG.

One of the last fora of the CL&DR organisations that Balagopal participated in was a meeting at Mumbai on the proposed demand for the unconditional release of the political prisoners. This demand was shared by most rights group in view of the increasing incidence of incarceration of political activists on trumped up charges just to curb the dissident voice. Balagopal strongly opposed it as he saw that it did not differentiate between the prisoners of conscience and those who have committed crime. His point that every crime could be rationalized on the basis of some politics could be conceded but then every political dissent was also being transformed as a deadly crime by the State. The latter was more dangerous for democracy than the former. No State ever punished anyone just for dissent. British had not hanged Bhagat Singh for his opinions but for a criminal charge they fabricated for the purpose. Although the fact remains that most political prisoners incarcerated in jails are there merely for their opinion, everybody carries a heap of trumped up charges. In such a situation Balagopal's disagreement sounded amiss. He issued a detailed and well argued note on behalf of HRF explaining his disagreement. In the prevailing context, this demand still can make a strong human rights statement and should be reconsidered by the CL&DR organisations respecting HRF's dissent.

Balagopal's sudden disappearance from our midst is being deeply felt by all of us. He would be greatly missed for his incisive analyses, courage of conviction and articulation of counterpoints as well as for his indefatigable activism and role modeling. His discordant viewpoints in recent years may not have been agreed to by most of his friends, but none would doubt his commitment to the cause of human rights. Balagopal will remain as one of the greatest human rights warriors in history. His memory will continue to inspire future generations of activists and elicit my Lal Salaam for all time!

