

Amit Sengupta



# This is not the end, turn on the light

And this was not only what he wrote with amazing lucidity and academic rigour, especially on violence, or the predicaments, incompletions, irrationalities and contradictions of the armed struggle of the Maoists, or the many stoic, non-violent indigenous and people's movements all over contemporary India. It was also the meticulously documented reports which he and his committed colleagues of the HRF brought out regularly, from Kashmir to Kandhamal to Kashipur



That good people die so young is as true as god does not exist. It is a fact that anti-Christ rules the world and brutality, suffering and perversion is the normative doctrine of the day. And since myth is not reality, reality is replete with abject pain. Because this man was larger than both myth and reality, and he never glorified his pain, and he never pretended to be god.

In a world, a contemporary context, and in India, where the tyranny of the tyrant and the tyranny of the mediocre is so routinely relentless, boring and infinite, when a man with qualities so intrinsically unique and yet compassionately collective, actually passes by and passes away in quietness, it seems like a sudden end of a brilliant and moving mainstream-offbeat cinematic narrative without



## GUEST COLUMN

the obligatory 'the end'; when the lights of the 'exit' start flashing. It is in this contradictory moment of tangible tragedy and loss, that one reopens old wounds still simmering, with both the idea of justice and the idea of optimism, in symphony, like an ode to joy written by a genius classical musician which he himself can't hear. In that sense, Balagopal was all that was complex and intertwined in this totality of dogged search, the idea of humanism, compassion, justice, hope, utopia, realism, combined with the melody, rigour and symphony of classical music.

One should have heard Balagopal speak, in a dialogue or in a public meeting, his softness of tenor and lucidity of coherence, equally matched by the emphasis, confidence and courage of a man who is critically aware of not only his mind's inner working, but every minute and meticulous detail of the subjects he would discuss, like a mathematician who is also a musician. That is why, his invisible and almost intangible presence in time, space and human gatherings, the amazing absence of self-indulgence, even the humility, stoicism and austerity, living in basic poverty, was like that of an unassumed, uncaring air of solitariness, not carried as an 'socialist' baggage, but a natural, transparent, continuous, moment of modesty.

Amid this external realm of expression or subtlety, indeed, was always hidden a steely mind of extraordinary resilience, dissecting reality on the side of humanity and justice and rationality, with the cutting edge brilliance of a life trained in sacrifice as well as the quest for a new world. A world where suffering is not the scaffolding, nor injustice, or mindless and organised violence, in the collective cobwebs and traps of everyday human life.

That is why it is impossible to locate Balagopal in the ritualistic prison house of either an obituary, or a condolence message. That he should not have died, that he should have lived, is not a lament. It is a historical necessity. His body of work is still incomplete, in word and in deed, in theory and praxis, in subjectivity and objectivity, in language and silence. His history is incomplete, and so is

ours without him. The millions of people in the margins, in the resistance, they might know him, or know him not, but his departure is a stark absence, you can touch it in the cold with a banner or a slogan or a book. One memory, one hundred ideas of despair and hope.

And this was not only what he wrote with amazing lucidity and academic rigour, especially on violence, or the predicaments, incompletions, irrationalities and contradictions of the armed struggle of the Maoists, or the many stoic, non-violent indigenous and people's movements all over contemporary India. It was also the meticulously documented reports which he and his committed col-

## Needless to say, Balagopal critically, coherently and consistently op- posed the one- dimensional glori- fication of violence unleashed by the State and the Maoists

leagues like VS Krishna of the Human Rights Forum brought out regularly, from Kashmir to Kandhamal to Kashipur, with such intense objectivity and regard for facts and correct information, pooled together in a crafted narrative. Hence, no one could even hint of the possibility of these reports being an expression of propaganda or didactic politics, or a figment of biased imagination. They were like facts stated with absolute authority and precision – facts that the establishment hated.

In that sense, this civil liberties and human rights movement was as much archival documentation and higher research of grassroots resistances and organised State or State-

sponsored repression, as much as an open declaration of war against the State. The war of non-violence and truth in the face of bestiality and untruth.

Needless to say, Balagopal critically, coherently and consistently opposed the one-dimensional glorification of violence unleashed by the State and the Maoists, and the hard-line factions of the underground MCC and party unity which had merged recently with the original underground outfit: the Communist Party of India (People's War Group) – then locally called in Andhra Pradesh as 'Piwa'. This he could do with a nonchalant lucidity, because he had truth and history on his side.

This was because he himself was beaten into pulp, then almost assassinated, chased by the invisible and visible death squads of the Andhra government even as he took on the 'encounter regime' of Andhra in the 1980s and 1990s, along with legal luminaries like K Kannabiran and others, with a rock like solidity and fearless defiance. Those were the days of the APCLC, the legendary civil liberties movement, with strong support base in various dimensions of the civil society, which even the State and the media could not ignore. So solid and irrefutable was their work on human rights violations. This was till the sectarians within the Maoists ousted Balagopal and others from the APCLC in the late 1990s. No wonder, this same organisation became rudderless, faceless and without credibility.

They saved so many lives, young lives, from police encounters, they risked their lives to redefine the idea of the Naxalite and mass movement, they consistently argued for a rational dialogue, for a 'massline' instead of the 'class annihilation' line, that even the hardliners within the Maoists had unqualified respect for them. Balagopal stood unanimously with the marginals and worked for them unilaterally and collectively so that they would achieve empowerment, equality, social justice and true freedom from exploitation, hunger and injustice. This doctrine was in synthesis with his constant argument that violence is counter-productive, that killing for killing, by the State





and the Maoists, is a vicious and bloody loop with a spiral which can only become an uncontrollable hyperbole of absolute dogmatism and irrationality, and of course, more brutality, in revenge or for a 'cause', either way, getting rapidly perverted and alienated from the 'massline'. He said that this nonlinear stream of mindless violence must give way to political engagement and dialogue, because this is not the only struggle. There is the struggle for gender justice and women's empowerment, against globalisation and the new political economy of the corporates, against feudal tyranny at the grass-roots, against communal fascism. And let us not for a moment forget, that this massive ocean of accumulated suffering and tragedy and resistance, this relentless theory and praxis, is for a better world, a different world, a rainbow with many colours of dreams and realism.

Balagopal was a lawyer and a human rights activist, but he was also a man of letters, and Andhra was then the epicentre of the movement, in the forests, streets and universities,

in theatre, media, literature, in the academia, in the richness of philosophy, in the revolutionary bondings with resistances of the world like with the legendary Zapatistas of Mexico. Hence, every word he wrote became a singular moment of debate, of enlightenment. Where else will you find an article on post-modernism written in a Telugu publication became a subject of mass debate, with points and counter-points? And this is when the entire English media ignored the debate, thereby highlighting their own illiteracy and ignorance.

So you can feel the raw and gutsy substances with which this classical brilliance was so resiliently shaped. You can take a knife and cut this cold absence, and you know that he is not there. But he is there, in this book, in that land where the line divides the feudal landlords and the landless slaves, in the impeccable script of the Mundas in Kalinganagar, in the suffering of the black bodies of adivasis in Kandhamal burnt by the sun and hard labour, in the bloody police state of Chhattisgarh where tragedy and

injustice is basically state-craft, in that report which will yet again be written on how the Indian state cares two hoots for the human rights of its citizens, especially on the margins.

Today, as I write this on a cold January night, the BJP-led Chhattisgarh state's goons have thrown sewage and eggs on a delegation led by Medha Patkar trying to meet the superintendent of police. They are resolute and non-violent. They want atrocities to stop, on all sides. They want democracy and fair-play, freedom for those imprisoned, the right to dissent, the right to be non-violent, amidst this bloody civil war of a ravaged landscape. They will not allow the people to be eliminated so that the corporates and multinationals can dig the treasures below the forests and the land. They will fight the fascists till the end.

That is why I say, this darkness must not overwhelm us, it should become a revelation. Because this is not the end. Turn on the light. That's what, I am sure, Balagopal would have done. With the quietness and silence of trained resilience. ■