

## Remembering Balagopal

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As a university student, involved with the civil liberties and democratic rights movement in the late 1990s, it was impossible to have not heard of Balagopal. Discussions over endless cups of tea eventually veered towards the use of violence in revolutionary movements. Some of us, enamoured by different shades of theoretical positions that advocated armed struggle as a legitimate mode of resistance, wondered the efficacy of humanist positions that asked for an ethical position on violence. It was all over the grapevine that Balagopal had begun to talk of ethical positions and we wondered if there was a catch to it.

I met him several times in Delhi in the 1990s. His imminent arrival into the city was announced with a sense of awe. He would stop by Delhi on his way to Kashmir or some other part of the country, where human rights violations had taken place. It never seemed odd that he would be the moral centre of what was called a “joint fact-finding” team to these areas. “Balagopal and so-and-so are on their way and will reach tomorrow afternoon”, someone would announce at the weekly meetings and soon enough, discussion would meander towards ethics, humanist philosophy and our role as advocates of the civil liberties movement. Even in his absence, Balagopal's latest article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* would remain the fulcrum of the

discussion. Funnily enough, none of this would come to the surface when Balagopal did finally arrive - most often to an address in north Delhi - and patiently herd together the most eclectic bunch of people who comprised the team that was to visit whichever part of the country that had witnessed yet another tragedy that was in danger of being forgotten.

I had the opportunity to be part of one such fact-finding team to Bihar in 1998. This was almost a month after Dalits were massacred in Laxmanpur-Bathe in Jehanabad district. He spoke little during the journey but that was just the way he was. As I busied myself in understanding the political landscape around Gangetic Bihar, I could not help but notice the kind of questions that Balagopal would ask villagers affected by upper caste violence. "What is the minimum wage in your village?" he would ask. Upon getting a response, he would ask again: "What was it before?" These questions seemed innocuous until I realised that there was a reason he was asking them. Intellectual sensitivity and finesse were not part of my social skills. I simply wanted to know if the Maoists were helping the poorest of the poor. I wanted to know if the justice delivery system could be cranked up a few notches so that we could get even with those who wielded authority mercilessly.

Balagopal was onto something different. More than the others, he knew how difficult it is to have pointed answers to complicated questions of power. Those we spoke to in the Dalit tolas (localities) in the villages around Gaya, Patna and Jehanabad, had to live with their caste enemies, long after we had gone back to the safety of our university classrooms and hostels. They refused to answer our questions that demanded a direct answer to their powerlessness. Instead, they patiently answered all the questions that Balagopal asked. "Yes", they replied, "wages had increased in the past few years". Where the landlord was wont to pay them two handful of grain for a day's work, they now received more and the payment was usually in terms of money. It did not strike us as odd that Dalit labourers were drawing a

minimum wage in the heartland of upper caste oppression. In fact, it did not strike us as important at all.

Much later, over the warmth of a cup of milky tea and under the sepia-tinted light of a flickering 20-watt bulb and inside the unkempt room of the dharamsala where we were staying, he would explain the reasons why he asked the questions. Ever so gently, he would explain the need to understand the nuances and layers that made oppositional politics a dynamic and learning experience that in turn made resistance possible. He threw questions about monetisation and market relations at a time when they seemed irrelevant. I mean, what difference did it make that agricultural workers were being paid a wage instead of being paid in kind? When asked, he would delve further into his vast pool of patience and explain the absence of markets in the areas that we had visited and wonder if the Dalit families were mobile enough to take the money and shop in smaller towns that were far away from the village.

I never got around to asking him his views about revolutionary violence and there seemed no need to as well. His views had been expressed several times over in journals and articles. When we did meet, there was no time to wrangle over political positions and points of view. I was far too selfish in my desire to soak up more knowledge from him, than to figure out if he had seen the revolutionary light. Yet, he made it clear that we could hold different positions: on the nationality question in Northeast India, for example, and yet remain committed to the civil liberties movement in our respective parts of the sub-continent.

It is therefore with the weight of coincidences that I find myself writing this note for him. I spoke to him four days before he died. Some colleagues had been arrested in Imphal, where the State security forces had run riot and killed two persons in broad daylight. I was driving back to upper Assam after a long conversation with colleagues in Guwahati about what could be done. Everyone agreed that we ought to get Balagopal to organise a fact-finding team and visit Manipur. So, I called. He mentioned

how busy he was with his legal practice and with the land laws in Andhra Pradesh. While agreeing for the need for a fact-finding to Manipur, he also expressed his inability to be a part of it. He did say that he would ensure that the matter was followed up. Four days later, I woke up to a mail from another friend in Geneva that simply said that he was no longer with us.

As I try and conclude with some semblance of brevity about what his absence will mean to us, I wrestle with notions of loss that we have inherited from others. I am not sure if there is a way to sum up what he meant for an entire generation of people but I do know that he changed the manner in which we engaged with political issues in India. There was no “catch” to his position. It was merely the logical outcome of his engagement with the complicated world of Indian politics. Back in Assam, we too, are learning...

